

DRAWING THE NEW MEMBER INTO OUR FAMILY

Jesus Christ taught that conversion to God is like a new birth (Jn. 3:3-5). Upon that conversion we enter the kingdom of Christ and see it, but yet as infantile citizens. Peter in writing to new converts said,

“Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (1 Pet. 2:1-3).

There is a clear connection between our code of conduct with what we are feeding on. Tasting the gracious Lord and drinking the pure milk of the word enables us to grow as babes and sterilizes the soul from working malice, deceit, hypocrisy, etc. If babies are not fed appropriate nourishment, they physically suffer in the various stages of growth. Likewise it is true of the babe in Christ. Some babes lose their appetite for the word, stop feeding, and die.

However a part of this growth noted by Peter stems from tasting Christ in the connection that exists between the new convert and the rest of the family of God. Make no mistake about the kingdom; it is also described as a family. “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (Eph. 3:14, 15). The familial interaction that follows the new birth can be critical in one’s subsequent development as a Christian. So we ask the question, what may be done to help draw the babe into God’s family that he may pursue godliness?

1. *The local church should provide a diet suitable for a babe to draw near the family of God.*

The local family of God should provide teaching and preaching on first principles (authority, judgment, righteousness, sin, grace, repentance, hell, heaven, the church, etc.). While the church needs to provide a balance of meat and milk, if a new-convert class or first-principles class can be generated either at the building during meeting times or in a person’s home, it would suit the young in faith well. Along this line, if more spiritually minded families in the church would, take turns choosing a topic to teach the young convert, rather than expecting this to only be done by the preacher, it would not only establish the new convert in doctrinal soundness, but would also open up the family of God to him. “Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (Heb. 12:12).

2. *The local church should provide a stable environment for the babe to draw near the family of God.*

"Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times..." (Is. 33:6). "That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting" (Eph. 4:14). Contentious and challenging members do not promote growth or stability (Titus 3:9). There are some disputes we need not engage in! Paul also warned Timothy against the *idle talk* of some (1 Tim. 1:6). For example, derailing a Bible class contending that the creature which swallowed Jonah was a "big fish" versus "a whale" adds nothing to the Jonah story (see Matt. 12:40, KJV). This is not to suggest that we neglect contending earnestly for *the faith*, but causing a stir over a decision which the leaders of the church made in cancelling services due to hazardous weather, or striving to show inconsistency in the church for condemning Baptists for not practicing real baptism while we are not practicing the holy kiss is derailing and confusing to the young in faith. Those who are divisive in like things should be admonished and disciplined as per Titus 3:10, 11.

Likewise, members who are unfaithful in their attendance by replacing spiritual responsibilities with secular activities such as sporting events, band, school fund raisers and other such things are telling new converts that Christ and the services of the church do not taste all that good (Heb. 10:24, 25). The same could be said about members who promote worldly behavior. Brethren, there is a love which we as members of the body of Christ should not have (1 Jn. 2:15-17).

In contrast, a membership that is looking forward to the meeting times with joy and preparation will help draw a new convert into the family of God as an active member. When every part does his or her share, it causes growth throughout the body (Eph. 4:16). In addition to the weekly services of the church, we have a young people's class where a different Christian man will teach a lesson every other Thursday night during the school year. This not only causes edification to many other young folks, but it also helps develop leadership qualities which is so needed for young men.

3. *The local church should provide familial friendships for the babe to draw near the family of God*

"Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (Rom. 12:10). The early church was full of members who did things together. "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44). "Togetherness" existed in this church. The spirit of hospitality prevailed (Acts 2:45). We read that in addition to faithfully going to the temple for worship, these disciples broke bread from house to house (Acts 2:46). As in the natural family, so brothers and sisters in the family of Christ need to spend time with each other. One of the things that impresses this writer regarding the Indiana Avenue church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas is that it is not uncommon for young adults (the college-age Christians

as well as young married couples) to enjoy spending time with the young teenage or even preteen groups as well as the older. Unfortunately, many people get stuck in their own age bracket which is not necessarily wise or helpful.

4. *The local church should provide loving discipline for the babe to draw near the family of God.*

The church is the family of God. "Brothers and sisters" are words that define our relationship to one another. As in a family, a newborn grows and goes through the various stages of life. He often needs understanding, encouragement and support as he tackles new challenges which are considered easy for his parents, yet are great challenges for him (sleeping in his own room, walking, personal hygiene skills, various age related responsibilities, etc.). As children grow, they are expected to grow near to the heart of their parents (Eph. 6:1-4). In all these stages that come upon him, his parents assist and culture his growth. Even as his siblings play a part in his maturing we likewise do also in the family of God. We ought to recognize that babes are not to have the responsibilities of the mature (Jas. 3:1; Heb. 5:13, 14). Some mistakenly read this stage as a time to be permissive of wrong steps and tolerate sin with the, "he is only a babe" justification. If a child is standing next to a cliff where he could fall to his death, I doubt such an uncaring and relaxed spirit would exist. Peter rebuked and corrected a new convert who sinned, and so we should do likewise (Acts 8:18-24). Contrary to what some parents think, permissiveness is not an act of love but rather hate (Prov. 29:15; Prov. 13:24). Yet discipline should be clothed in patience and gentleness (Gal. 6:1; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). If these fundamental things exist in a congregation, we can expect the young convert to draw near the family of God and secure his heart, potentially growing into an elder, preacher or teacher (1 Pet. 5:10).

--Steven J. Wallace (01/08/2013)