

How Can I Support New Christians? Availability and Sensitivity

John 4:31-36; Luke 10:1-4; Matthew 28:16-20, etc.

We're concluding our series based on the Christian Life and Witness Course, with a second look at how we can *support new Christians*. We'll be dotting around the Bible today, but let's start with three short, related readings from John 4:31-36, Luke 10:1-4 and Matt 28:16-20.

[Read John 4:31-36; Luke 10:1-4; Matt 28:16-20]

John 4:31 Meanwhile his disciples urged him, 'Rabbi, eat something.'

32 But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.'

33 Then his disciples said to each other, 'Could someone have brought him food?'

34 'My food,' said Jesus, 'is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. *35* Don't you have a saying, "It's still four months until harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. *36* Even now those who reap draw their wages, even now they harvest the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.

Luke 10:1 After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. *2* He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. *3* Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. *4* Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

Matt 28:16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. *17* When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. *18* Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *19* Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *20* and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'

[Pray]

At the GodZone Camp, I finished my talk with a question. It's a very important question to me, personally, because it's actually the question that God used to initiate *my* call into ministry. But we *all* should consider it because it can open a door to understanding our hearts. And the question is this: "At the end of your life, for what would you like to hear Jesus say, 'Well done'?" Or, to put it another way, what part do you want to play in the growth of God's Kingdom?

In our first reading, Jesus made a startling statement about what sustained his earthly life: "My *food* ... is to do the will of him who sent me and to *finish* his work" (John 4:34). Even more than by physical food, Jesus' life was sustained by his resolve to complete the work of salvation that his Father had given him and that he had co-conceived. And he *did* finish that work. On the cross he announced, "It is finished" (John 19:30). He did *everything* necessary to achieve our salvation. But, not *all* his work is yet complete. In Acts 1, Luke refers to his earlier Gospel as the record of "all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach *until* the day he was taken up to heaven." In other words, he continues to work in heaven. The work of *salvation* is complete, but the work of *sharing* this great news and making *disciples* is not complete. That work Jesus continues to do, primarily through his Church. So, I wonder, is *our* food likewise to do the will of him who sent *us* and to finish his work?

Jesus went on to quote a popular saying, the meaning of which was surely that it was not yet time to act: "It's still four months until harvest." But Jesus challenged the application of that saying to the harvest of souls: "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are *ripe* for harvest" (John 4:35). Now, Jesus was describing the situation in Israel in his day – witness the crowds that flocked around John the Baptist and then Jesus himself. I don't believe we can *automatically* assume that *all* fields are always *ripe* for harvest – though there is always *some* harvest to be had everywhere at every time. But I believe that the fields *are* ripe for harvest *now* in the UK, helped in part by all the uncertainty in the world from Covid, to the Ukraine, to the cost-of-living crisis, to governmental chaos and more.

But, in Luke 10:2, Jesus added a sobering truth: "The harvest *is* plentiful ... but the *workers* are *few*." That is a pitiful situation!

Followed to its natural conclusion, it means, at best, that some people will have to *wait* to encounter Jesus and, at worst, perhaps even that they may *never* hear about him, or may fall away from faith for lack of nurture. Jesus has a solution to this problem: “Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Great! All we need to do is pray, and God will raise up others who will do the work! Only, Jesus’ next words rule out that option: “Go! I am sending *you ...*” (v.3). We are not to pray for workers *instead of* ourselves, rather for workers *alongside* ourselves. Note also, it won’t be easy (“I am sending you out like *lambs* among *wolves*”). So we must rely on God (a lesson taught to the disciples by the instruction to take nothing with them). Lastly, note the urgency of this work (such that they were to greet no-one on the road, lest they be distracted from their task).

So, are you willing to answer Jesus’ prayer? You might say, “But, my faith isn’t strong enough!” Yet, in Matthew 28, Jesus didn’t wait for his disciples to have unshakeable faith – he sent them out to make disciples in their mix of worship *and doubt*. Apart from anything else, the success with which he would bless their efforts would itself quicken their faith and reduce their doubts, as it will for us. For we do not go in our own authority – or we would certainly fail. We go in *Jesus’* authority – Jesus who has been given *all* authority in heaven and on earth. And *he* promises to go *with* us always, and so grant us success as he deems fit.

And he calls us not to make converts, but disciples. Converts respond to the good news of Jesus with enthusiasm. They may pray a prayer of commitment or in some other way indicate their belief in Jesus as their Saviour. Converts become *disciples*, and increasingly mature and fruitful disciples, by obeying Jesus’ commands. Hence, he commanded his disciples to baptise converts and to *teach* them to obey his commands (Matthew 28:20). That includes, but is certainly not limited to, his command to make disciples. And I believe there is no greater joy than helping someone to grow as a disciple of Christ.

So, *how* can we support new Christians to grow as disciples? Two key principles: availability and sensitivity.

1) Availability: What does God want from us?

Jesus does specially gift some people at evangelism, and it is wonderful to see them at work. But Jesus is far more concerned about our *availability* than our ability. He is perfectly able to equip

someone who is willing. What he can't (or rather won't) do is *make* willing someone who is equipped, but stiff-necked. He will call us, cajole us and challenge us – and he *can* be pretty persuasive! – but he won't ever *force* us into making disciples for him. He wants our *willing availability*. Like Isaiah, whom God first reassured of his forgiveness, and then called. Isaiah 6:8: "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'" And having experienced God's unmerited forgiveness himself, Isaiah was *willing*: "Here am I. Send *me!*" Is that your response to God's call for workers to harvest the ripe fields? "Here am I. Send me!"

Ultimately, I believe our answer to that question will depend upon what or *who* is at the centre of our lives. In Philippians 2:21, Paul observes the sadly, all-too-common reality: "everyone looks out for their *own* interests, not those of Jesus Christ." For many, the centre of their lives is their own *self*. That is contrasted with Paul's own attitude, shared in Philippians 1:21: "For to me, to live is *Christ* and to die is gain." Who is at the centre of your life? Jesus or yourself? If we are available, Jesus will make us able.

2) Sensitivity: What do the new Christians need?

But that does not mean that we should not improve our skills in this vital task of nurturing new faith. And we will improve if we are *sensitive* to what new Christians *need*. So what do they need? How can we effectively walk alongside them as they start out in the faith?

a) Feeding (1 Pet 2:2-3; John 21:15-17)

Firstly, they need *feeding*. They need help to know God better, primarily through understand his Word, the Bible. But don't start with Leviticus, or Zechariah, or Revelation! At the end of John's Gospel we read of Jesus' triple restoration of Peter after he had denied him three times. Jesus' threefold commission for Peter is particularly interesting: "Feed my lambs"; "Take care of my sheep"; "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). How do you feed sheep? You take them to a good field or a hay stall and let them graze for themselves. But how do you feed lambs? Ideally you take them to their mother for milk, but if that is not possible, you suckle them with a bottle. Perhaps Peter remembered this conversation when he wrote to new Christians, "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual *milk*, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation" (1 Pet 2:2).

New Christians need feeding with the simple truths of the gospel. That's why those who go forward at the God Loves You Tour will be given a booklet that explains some basic Christian teachings and contains a copy of John's Gospel. Because, if you want to teach the good news about *Jesus*, it's always good to start with the books that most clearly describe his life – the Gospels. Alongside this, the follow up adult Discovery Course looks at the following core headings: "Jesus Christ: his person and work; Salvation; Assurance; The Bible; Prayer; The Church; The Holy Spirit's indwelling; Adversity; Witness; and Proper Perspective." Basic milk, not complicated solid food – that is for later. Helpfully, new Christians are usually very hungry to find out about Jesus – they *crave* this milk. Which is great news if we are seeking to help them to grow because we don't have to make them interested – we just have to give them the milk they crave!

b) Protecting (1 Pet 5:8; 2 Pet 3:17-18)

Secondly, new Christians need protecting. Why? Because they have a new enemy, who would like nothing more than to destroy their trust in God before they get started. Peter warns his readers: "Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Pet 5:8-9). Quite often, new Christians face struggles of one sort or another. Often that is pressure from without – sickness, trouble at work or at home, financial pressures, or even persecution from family or friends.

Tragically, sometimes in *Church* too, they meet the older brother before they know the Father's embrace! We all need to reflect on our attitudes and priorities if that is not to happen here. What if the new Christian sits in "my" seat? What if they *talk* through the worship or answer aloud the questions in the sermon? What if they speak out a prayer, like one new Christian prayed where my friend was ministering: "I just [expletive] love you Jesus; you're [expletive] amazing"? Would they encounter gracious, encouraging welcome, or the hard stare or critical comment? New Christians need *protecting* from anything that Satan might use to destroy their faith!

c) Training / Guiding (1 Pet 1:15-16; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Gal 4:19)

Thirdly, they need gentle training and guiding in the ways of God, such that over time their behaviour conforms more to Jesus'

behaviour. For, as Peter says, in our verse for the year: “just as he who called you is holy, so *be* holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16). That is Jesus’ goal for all his disciples, and therefore this call must be a part of our discipling of new Christians. But there is a wise balance to be struck between gently correcting them ourselves and simply praying that the Holy Spirit will convict them of necessary change. Often the best way is to allow God’s *Word* to do the correcting. As Paul says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

Two of my favourite examples of good training and correction are the married couple, Priscilla and Aquila – not least because our minister prophetically preached on their ministry at our wedding as a model for our own ministry! In Acts 18, while Priscilla and Aquila were looking after the church in Ephesus, an itinerant preacher arrived called Apollos. He was a gifted speaker, who had the gift of the gab and a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. But as they listened to him Priscilla and Aquila realised there were significant gaps in his knowledge of the work of Jesus and especially of the Holy Spirit. But they didn’t stand up and rebuke him, or even criticise him on the door on the way out of the church. They invited him back for some lunch. They shared fellowship with him and built a relationship with him. And then they gently “explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26). They invested in him to mentor him. And as a result, when they later sent him on his way to a different Roman province, his ministry was a great success. That is what can happen if we invest time sensitively in new Christians’ growth!

3) How can we support new Christians?

So how can we support new Christians? And what can help us?

a) Get involved (Matt 28:19)

Firstly, get involved. “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations ...” (Matthew 28:19). Be a part of it, even if your part is primarily making them feel welcome in the church. But, if you’ve invited someone to the God Loves You Tour, it would be great if you are *more* involved in their follow up. Meet up with them and ask them how they are getting on with the Living in Christ booklet. Ask if they have any questions. If you don’t know the answers, just tell them you will find out, and go back to them when you have.

b) Let them learn from your life (Mark 3:14; 2 Tim 2:2)

Secondly let them learn from *your* life. That's what Jesus did when he called his disciples: he called them first simply to spend *time* with him. They watched him and listened to him, they asked questions about what they saw and heard. And then he gave them the opportunity to try out what they had seen – like with the 72 he sent out to share the good news of his coming in Luke 10. So sensitively pass on what you have learnt along your journey.

c) Start with one (John 1:40-42)

Thirdly, start small – start with *one*. Remember Andrew? What did he do when he met Jesus? He went and told *one* person, his brother Simon Peter, and invited him to come and meet Jesus too. Much later in his life he preached to *many* people. But he started with one.

d) Team up (Luke 10:1)

And lastly, team up with others. It wasn't accidental that Jesus sent out his disciples in twos. He did so, so that they could be company for one another, encourage one another, protect one another, and cover for anything that the other left out of their explanation about Jesus. So, if a couple of you have both brought people to the God Loves You Tour, why not get together as a small group and talk about how they are finding their new faith? That way it is less intense, and the new Christians can be encouraged by knowing someone else who is at a similar point in their journey of faith.

But above all, what matters most is your availability, and your sensitivity to the needs of the new Christians you are encouraging. With those two attitudes, God can and will do great things through you and me. Amen?

**[Pray
Offer opportunity for prayer ministry]**