

## **Keeping the New Convert: What Can the Church Do?**

*“No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back,  
is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)*

The New Testament is clear, coming to the knowledge of the truth and then turning back into the world, or even looking back longingly at the world, is ruinous to the new saint and is hard to recover from. Newborn Christians have many things vying for their attention to draw them away. Satan is in a frenzy to recapture what he has lost. (Rev. 12:13-17) New obstacles are thrown in their path and many of the old issues begin to tug ever harder at their heart. Added to all of this there is the fact that the Biblical knowledge possessed by the new saint is likely insufficient to fend off Satan. (Eph. 6:13-17) It is indeed a perilous time.

Considering that the situation of the new saint is so perilous, we can certainly see the wisdom in God’s plan that we meet with one another weekly and work diligently to strengthen one another. (Heb. 12:12-13) God has established an assembly for good reason. We are in this together! Every time we study with someone here in Mauriceville and they decide they want to obey the gospel, we always take time with them before going to the water and count the cost with them. There are great responsibilities they are about to take on and they must be willing to make the commitment to get busy and to give up whatever they discover from study that is contrary to serving Him. We emphasize that they are entering into a relationship, not only with Christ, but also with their new family of believers. As with all relationships, the responsibility goes two ways. While we count their cost with them, it is important that we count our cost of winning souls in the first place. There is much for us to do and to give up as we help strengthen the soul that has been won.

Much time is spent in the Lord’s churches considering how best to bring souls to Christ. Many plans have been developed over the years for how best to present the gospel to the hearers we encounter. While the gospel remains the same, the way people listen and interact varies with time and culture. It is wise to consider how best to reach people. However, we must also recognize that the same is true with strengthening individuals after they have been baptized into Christ. We should be constantly considering how best for the church to strengthen them and honing our skills in doing so. If we lose saints to the back door as quickly as we bring them in the front door, there is a serious problem with our method. While some of it can be attributed to people whose heart was improper going back into the world (Matt. 13:18-23), that does not account for it all. While the tendency may be to defend our current method because it is ours, if we are truly concerned with the problem we will evaluate all angles, even the ones that may not show our method in the most flattering light. While it may be painful to do so, it is worthwhile as souls are at stake! The considerations that are requisite to a church keeping new converts can be summed up in three ways: counting the cost of

keeping new converts, preparing the culture of the local church for keeping new converts, and enacting a practical plan for keeping new converts.

### **Counting the Cost of Keeping New Converts**

The effort of finding and teaching the lost is as enormous as it is important. When someone comes to the truth of the gospel and counts what it will cost them, there is a cost paradox. On the one hand they are able to “take the water of life without cost” (Revelation 22:17), but on the other hand they must “first sit down and calculate the cost” (Luke 14:28) of becoming a disciple lest they fail before they begin. This paradox is reconciled in that John means that there is no worldly fee to becoming a saint while Jesus means that there are personal idols, agenda items, and behaviors that we must give up if we are to successfully follow Him.

As teachers of the gospel, the local church must count its cost also. While on the one hand we have the gospel to give freely to anyone that will listen, there are various things that we must be willing to give up and costs that we must pay to accomplish this vital work. This means there are costs to winning the convert and costs to keeping the convert. Much expense is put into winning souls. Yet that expense will be for naught if we are not then paying the cost to keep the convert. We will sum these costs up in three ways: time, money and heart-ache.

#### *Time*

Keeping and grounding new converts requires an enormous amount of time. Steve Jobs once said, “My favorite things in life don’t cost any money. It’s really clear that the most precious resource we all have is time. As it is, I pay a price by not having much of a personal life.” Steve Jobs recognized that time is precious because it is a limited resource. He loved working on computers and other gadgets, the largest cost being his time. A moment could only be spent in one way. The apostle Paul explained it this way: “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.” (Eph. 5:15-16)

Keeping the new convert has a great cost in the form of time for the local church. While we may envision our time as a local church being spent simply worshipping and being with one another, the reality is that much time is spent in efforts encouraging and exhorting the new convert. It is tedious, time-consuming labor. It means giving up time to prepare the saints for this work. It means giving up time to ground the new convert through teaching. It means giving up time to help the new convert deal with the baggage they have brought from their previous life. This cost of time increases as more new converts are made.

Many times local churches find that new converts quickly fall away. While many reasons external to the local church may be brought up, the problem often lies with the church not realizing the time that would be necessary to keep the new convert. Time has to be invested in these new souls. It is indeed an investment as a soul is spared from the fires of Hell, but it is costly with regard to time nonetheless.

In addition to counting the cost of time, we must also count the cost of time in one method against another possible method. In any work we aspire to complete, we must consider the benefit relative to the time. Much time is wasted by individuals in front of televisions, computers, and other recreational activities with little to no benefit being gained. While this may be sad for the individual and a conversation about stewardship may need to be engaged in, it is tragic for the local church. The church must be aware that time is of the essence. Everything we do must be done with the realization that time is a limited resource. There is only so much time for a local church to work with a new convert. If the most is not made of the time with the new convert the evil days will likely claim him. What this means for the local church is that not only must we be willing to invest the time in helping the new convert, we must also consider how best to spend that time. Investing a large amount of time in an effort that is not really accomplishing the goal should be abandoned in favor of a better method that will get the same result with less time or that will get better results with the same or less time.

In the past we have tried various methods of grounding new converts here in Mauriceville. We have used thirteen lesson studies, four lesson studies, home studies, and bible class studies to name a few. These were all experimented with in an effort to count the cost of our time and make the most of it that we possibly can. Time is a precious resource. May we count its cost carefully as we consider how best to keep the new convert.

### Money

Everyone knows that the apostle Paul said that “money is the root of all evil”. Of course this is not true. Paul’s words were actually, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Tim. 6:10) Not only is it love of money rather than money itself that is the problem, but Paul also explains that it is only “a root”. There are many roots of evil, Paul is merely pointing out one of the many.

While saints recognize that this is what Paul was saying, many times we act as though the misquote of Paul’s words is the truth. As though money is inherently wicked. Saints tend to not want to discuss money issues, especially with regard to winning and keeping souls. Somehow this has become anti-spiritual or worldly. However, the New Testament speaks frankly about the need for funds to carry out the Lord’s work. Much of 2 Corinthians is Paul encouraging the saints there to follow through with the monetary gift they had promised. It costs money for a church to organize efforts in teaching the lost. It costs money for a church to carry out the required assemblies. It costs money for a church to ground and keep new converts.

We must always remember that maintaining a large bank account is not the work that Jesus has given to us. We can not write Him a check for the balance on the last day. The funds we collect are for the purpose of being righteously, wisely, freely, and cheerfully spent on the work that Jesus has given His church to do. Thus when we

spend money on materials or buildings or teachers we are really spending money doing the work of Jesus.

As a church grows it will require increasing funds to carry out the increasing work. The church in Jerusalem understood this. They did not split the work up or try to limit the growth, rather they cheerfully brought funds to the apostle's feet to take care of the work that was there. (Acts 4:34-37) Many times saints have a problem with the cost of a facility, materials, or a preacher. However, it is important to think about these costs with regard to the benefit gained. If a new building that can accommodate an additional 200 people costs one million dollars, what is the benefit? That is a cost of \$5000 per additional soul. Is a soul not worth \$5000?

Not only is there a cost of money in keeping new converts, there is also the need, as with our time, for the church to count how best to spend the money in its efforts to keep the new convert. Maybe that million dollar building can be avoided, our existing facility can be updated for half that amount to accommodate the 200 additional people, and the remaining five hundred thousand dollars can be spent in developing teachers and materials to better accomplish the work. We must not become so focused on one thing that we want to do that we do not consider other possibilities that may gain us more fruit for the same monetary investment. There are only so many dollars that a church has to spend. May we count its cost carefully as we invest in keeping the new convert.

### *Heart-ache*

Keeping new converts also has an emotional cost of the saints involved and the local church as a whole. A church must be prepared for the fact that keeping new converts is a gut-wrenching endeavor. As much as we want things to go smoothly with the new convert, they seldom do.

I have had the pleasure of working with the church in Mauriceville for nearly eight years at this point and I am greatly impressed by their love for one another and for new saints that are won. They tenderly care for them and really get into the trenches with them as they try to help the new convert to begin fighting the good fight. In my eight years here I have seen the church grow from a little over 100 souls to over 200. Through that growth we have witnessed much rejoicing with the souls won and much sorrow at souls reclaimed by the world. Yet the rejoicing with the souls won outweighs the sorrow of the souls lost in the minds of these good brethren.

Many times churches simply think of the good times. They remember the rejoicing and forget about the sadness as a mother quickly forgets her labor pangs. (John 16:21) Other times churches are paralyzed by the pain. A local church succeeds in winning a soul only to discover that it often requires much heart-ache to keep the new convert. Sadder still is the fact that many of the new converts will not be kept. When Jesus gave the sower parable in Matthew 13 He identifies three out of four hearts that will not remain. In Mauriceville we have had a much better rate of retention than this. Of the 60 people we have baptized in the last three years we have retained 45 for a retention rate

of 75%. While the rate is good relative to what often happens in churches, it still means that 25% go back into the world causing a great deal of heart-ache to the good brethren here. This is not to mention the heart-ache that the church goes through with the 75% that are kept.

Paul spoke of the turmoil involved in the growth and maintenance of churches. After listing off the many persecutions and problems he endured in his service to Christ at 2 Corinthians 11, Paul concludes the list by saying that “apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” Thus when there was heart-ache amongst the brethren the apostle felt it also. No doubt we can hear the heart-ache as we read of Demas deserting the apostle at 2 Timothy 4:10 due to Demas’ love of the world exceeding his love of Christ. Indeed there is the great cost of emotional turmoil for the church as it works to keep the new convert. The cost is worth it just as it was for the apostle, but it is cost nonetheless. May we count that cost, not so we can avoid it, but rather that we can be prepared for it.

### **Preparing the Culture of the Local Church for Keeping New Converts**

Keeping converts, as with winning converts, requires the church to be of a certain culture. If a church is just beginning that culture can be developed as the church grows. Often times we find a church that has been in existence for a long period of time but it has either never developed the necessary culture or it has been lost to time and circumstance. Certainly the New Testament speaks to this. John writes to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2. What was the problem Jesus had with them? They had left their first love. Their culture had shifted. It would seem that the things they are commended for are related to withstanding false doctrine. From this we can conclude that their first love was likely winning and grounding souls. They needed to maintain their love of the gospel in its pure form while reviving the original culture they had, a love of the lost.

If a church is to win souls and then keep the ones that have been converted it must have an intense awareness of how it is viewed by visitors, who is present in its various discussions and assemblies, and where these individuals are spiritually. There is a right time and right way to deal with all circumstances. The church needs to be aware of who the new converts are among them and be careful in all things with regard to them. The church likewise must learn how to interact with these individuals so that they are protected in their weakness and nurtured to maturity.

### **Being Careful in What They Say**

James is clear in chapter three that the tongue can be an exceedingly dangerous thing. “So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!” (James 3:5) He goes on to explain the peculiarity of the tongue in that it defies nature. A spring will only produce good water or bad water. The tongue, however, can produce blessings and curses from

the same opening in the same breath. It is due to this ever present danger that he begins the discussion by saying that “we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.” (James 3:2)

As the church works with new converts, it must be aware of what is being said, how it is being heard, and how it is being received. Paul told the Colossians at 4:6 to “let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.” Through these words the apostle makes clear that there are fitting words and fitting moments and fitting ways of responding to each person. Some statements that may be perfectly fine to make in some company may not be what is best in other company. How sad for a new convert to be lost due to careless words being unfittingly spoken.

I once knew of a situation where a person had been recently baptized and was attending a Bible class with other saints during the week. The new convert had an issue that the evangelists and shepherds were working with them to overcome. The Bible class veered off topic during a session and the problem the new convert was struggling with became apparent. Rather than the discussion being directed back to the topic at hand and the problem being dealt with in a more appropriate setting, the new convert was reprimanded before all present provoking them to unnecessary anger. The words spoken to the new convert may have been true, but were not necessarily fitting for the time and circumstance. The church must be aware of new converts and always be on the alert so that the truth is spoken in the way that is most fitting.

No doubt this is disconcerting to some. Should we not be able to speak the oracles of God? (1 Pet. 4:11) Certainly we can and should. Yet Paul admonishes the Ephesians at 4:15 that they were to be “speaking the truth in love”. Part of accomplishing this is to do as he told the Colossians and let our speech be with grace, fitted to the hearer. This is not to say that we compromise the truth, but rather to deliver it in a way that does not hinder the amazing grace that is found in the saving words of life!

We can look to the apostle himself and see how he always considered the listener when he spoke. Paul told the Corinthian church to consider how it conducts the assembly lest a visitor think they are insane. (1 Cor. 14:23) Paul gave the peculiar sermon in Athens starting with words engraved on one of their idols. (Acts 17) Paul had an attitude of adapting himself to the hearer as much as he was able and was permissible under the authority of Christ that he might win and keep souls. (1 Cor. 9:19-23) The church must develop a culture of carefully selected words if it is to keep the new convert.

### *Being Careful in What They Do*

Paul explains to the church at Corinth that they must be careful lest their actions cause a weak saint to stumble. The specific issue he deals with in 1 Corinthians chapter eight is eating meat that has been sacrificed to idols. It was a non-issue for the saint

who is strong in the faith. The meat was nothing more than meat to those saints. But what of the new convert who is struggling to leave the idolatry in which they have been ensnared their entire lives? It would take time for their heart and conscience to catch up with their intellect. Thus Paul tells the church that they must be willing to give up eating such meat if it means keeping the weak saint from stumbling. Their actions could effect the faith of the new convert!

Certainly this is the case still today. While we may not encounter this exact circumstance in our culture, similar issues can be pinpointed. In all things we must carefully consider who is with us and what their struggles are. As the culture of the church toward new converts is developed it is important that we are careful in all we do.

The church must carefully consider where the new convert is coming from and what they are struggling with. These considerations must guide the church's actions. Teaching that is pertinent to the new convert must be delivered. Situations that may lead the new convert into temptation must be avoided. It would not serve a new convert well who is struggling with alcohol addiction to be invited to dinner at a restaurant that also serves alcohol. Avoiding these misguided attempts at encouragement must be engrained in the minds of the church.

New converts can be terribly frustrating. They often have huge problems they are dealing with. Satan is pulling at them fiercely as he tries to drag them back into the muck and mire from which they have escaped. It is natural for the church to become frustrated as it witnesses the struggles of the new convert. Yet the church must be prepared for such so they handle it in a way that is fitting. If we are to keep the new convert they must be tenderly guided through these struggles. Even after they have come forward asking for prayers or forgiveness a number of times. Lest we forget, Jesus Himself explained to Peter that we must be willing to forgive our brethren as often as they ask. (Matthew 18:22) If a church is not careful in their reaction to the struggles of the new convert, it can easily turn them away by letting its feelings of frustration take control. Our actions impact the new convert.

### *Being Careful in What They Believe*

The local church must have a culture of sound doctrine. This means knowing how authority is established and being able to apply it in all situations. This means having a solid grasp of the faith. This means loving the truth and treasuring it in its heart. Often times there is misunderstanding of scripture or error that is widely held in the mind of the saints that becomes apparent as they struggle to ground the new convert.

So often new converts are harmed by well-meaning efforts and intentions of brethren who simply are not well-grounded in the truth themselves. The individual remedies this through Bible study. The local church works to remedy this through solid instruction from the evangelists and shepherds from the pulpit and in the Bible classes.

If we wish to keep new converts we must carefully prepare the church through sound teaching. This means that our pulpits need to be well-organized. A plan should be in

place. Rather than the weekly whim of the evangelist being expressed in the pulpit from week to week, a plan should be carried out. The plan should be ever advancing the mind of the church in unity and knowledge.

There is great danger in causing a weak brother or sister to stumble. Jesus says that “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” (Matthew 18:6) It is terrible to cause a weak one to stumble through wickedness, how much more so to do it out of nothing more than ignorance! The church must be guided in sound doctrine so that it might be careful in thought and able to guide the new convert in the proper way when the opportunity arises.

### **Enacting a Practical Plan for Keeping New Converts**

Much academic discussion can be engaged in with regard to keeping new converts. However, what it really comes down to with the local church is a practical plan. A plan that is laid out in advance, simple to understand, and is able to be carried out by the members of the local church. Successful churches as with successful people consider their goals in advance and consider how to accomplish them. Many of my personal goals will not really affect much if they are never realized, but the goals of the local church are a matter of life or death! The local church must do things well with regard to all things, especially in its efforts to keep converts. May we never approach this vital work haphazardly. Here are five considerations in formulating a practical plan for keeping converts.

#### *Proper Organization*

The scripture declares that the local churches had shepherds and deacons leading the work. (Phil. 1:1; Acts 14:23) In following this pattern, we insist that local churches be led in the same way rather than by a man-made pastor system, board system, or hierarchy. Yet, we must be careful of having simply positional leadership. John Maxwell defines this as “people follow you because they have to”. (John Maxwell, *The 5 Levels of Leadership*) The shepherd is appointed, but in name only. The seasoned Christian follows them because they are a shepherd in Christ’s church, but the new saint has developed no such allegiance.

The main problem with leaders who are leaders in position, or name, only is that they are not truly doing what Christ has defined their role as being. The local evangelists are to organize efforts to reach the lost (II Tim. 4:1-2), but instead are completely tied up in short time doing follow-up studies with new converts. The shepherds are to strengthen the weak and tend the flock (I Pet. 5:1-4), but instead are completely tied up with physical concerns like how much money is in the account, what color the carpet should be, and if we should purchase a new copier. The deacons are to tend the physical needs of the church (Acts 6:2-6), but instead do not know what to do and are waiting for every instruction from the shepherds. In short order the evangelists no longer have time to win souls, the shepherds do not have time to tend the souls that



are won and growth stops and decline sets in. Souls are never won that could have been with more effective leadership and souls that were won are lost as they fall through the cracks. We must carefully examine not only the positions and qualifications, but also the tasks these positions entail.

The ancient Christians understood well the responsibilities of the shepherd in tending the flock, especially those that are weak, new converts. It was the shepherds who took up the charge of grounding new converts, as the New Testament orders. This would be a lengthy work, usually around three years. Clinton E. Arnold writes in his “Early Church Catechesis and New Christians’ Classes in Contemporary Evangelicalism” the following:

“When we begin to examine the sources of the early Christian catechumenate, we discover that it often took place over a three-year span. The *Apostolic Tradition* reflects the practice of instructing them for a span of three years: “let the catechumens hear the Word for three years” (17.1). A three-year period is also attested in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (8.32.16) and the *Testamentum Domini* (3.3). Clement of Alexandria also alludes to a three-year catechumenate (*Stromata* 2.18).”

It was no small effort on the part of the shepherds. They were to dedicate the time necessary to ground these individuals. Without solid leadership that was organized and performing the responsibilities that had been given the work would have been impossible. The preacher could not then, and can not today adequately provide what is needed alone. He must be dedicated to the work of teaching the lost and be able to trust that the follow-up grounding will be taken care of by the shepherds.

The proper organization of a local church is something that takes much effort and time. It is not enough that we have men installed who wear the title of shepherd or deacon or evangelist, we must have men who are acting within those positions as the scripture outlines. When a church grows into proper organization where the evangelists are organizing and leading efforts to teach the lost, shepherds are organizing and leading efforts to establish the saints, and the deacons are organizing and leading efforts to tend the day to day affairs of the local church, we will find that more lost souls will be won and a higher percentage of the new converts will be kept.

### *Doing Things Well*

The new converts of our day and age largely come from a different pool than did those in the days of the apostles. They were winning souls who had never heard the name of Jesus before. Blank slates. Yet today we find that we more often than not must unteach denominational error before we can reteach the pure gospel. Thus our new converts are not often a person that has never set foot in a church before. Rather they have witnessed the denominational idea of what church is. As a result they look for rock bands and praise teams and parties, etc. All things that a church has not been given authority by Christ to do and are detrimental to the well-being of a church.

Sometimes a soul is won, but they can not handle the difference between the denominational concept of church and the scriptural concept. They may linger for a time, but they are then lost back to the error they left. No doubt this is tragic and heart-breaking to the church. It even leads to churches having an attitude of “no one is interested in the purity of the gospel any more”. Of course this attitude is incorrect, but it is an accurate representation of how a church may feel from time to time.

Other times when a new convert is lost it can be chalked up to internal causes. While we are not in the business of putting on a show or a production, we have been called to do what we do well. Paul wrote at Colossians 3:23 that “whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men”. No doubt this is true of our labor in this physical world as Paul is addressing the relationship between servant and master. It is also true that whatever we do it should be done with the same attitude.

Sadly many churches do not consider the visitor or the new convert in how they function. The church spends more time on announcements that mean nothing to the visitor and very little if anything to the new convert than it does in prayer. The church does not provide adequate parking and seating for the new converts being won. The church does not consider the new convert in what is being taught. The church does not properly organize its worship so it is done decently and in order. (I Cor. 14) The church does not have teachers who are presenting well-organized and digestible lessons. The new convert gives up and leaves and the church simply blames their lack of faith and moves on. While the lost new convert will certainly have to answer for departing, the church will also have to answer for its part in the matter.

It is easy for the well-seasoned saint to write off these things as unimportant. I have been a Christian now for 23 years and have been part of the Lord’s church my entire life. If I go to a place that has rambling announcements, inadequate parking and seating, and disorganized preaching I am very forgiving. After all, as a well-grounded saint I am there to worship my Lord and increase in understanding. I have eyes that are trained to look past the issues for the good that can be found. I might even have eyes that are blinded to noticing such things just from being a part of the Lord’s church for so many years. But make no mistake, a visitor to our assembly does not see things as we do. For example, Harold Comer addresses the parking issue on page 40 of his “Biblical Evangelism” in this way:

“Parking is one of the first areas that tell visitors that we don’t covet them. Full parking lots irritate and drive visitors away. How do you respond to a full lot at the grocery store?

We need clearly marked visitors spaces near the entrance. There should be enough spaces so that visitors who normally come at the last minute will always have a space. Those empty spaces say we really care about you.”

Brother Comer recognizes through many years of collecting data that such things we may deem as insignificant really matter to the visitor. Carrying this thought further we must remember that in some ways the new convert is not far removed from a visitor.

They have not been a part of the church for years and as a result things being done poorly stand out to them and can be an obstacle to them greater than we may acknowledge at the start.

A dear friend of mine who departed this life early had a favorite saying. "If something is worth doing it is worth doing right, the first time." He understood that it is not enough to do it right, it is easiest and best to just put in the effort to do it right initially. Certainly this is the case with the new convert. We need to carefully do things well. We need to continually hone what we do so that we are ever reaching new heights. We need to do it immediately lest a new convert be lost before we decide to do things well.

### *Follow-Up Material*

We use single presentation methods of teaching the lost at the church in Mauriceville as this was the pattern in the book of Acts. Solid follow-up study is crucial as the knowledge of the new saint is very limited. While counting the cost with the individual prior to baptism we get a commitment from them to study with us weekly for six weeks after baptism from a book entitled "Firmly Rooted" that we wrote for this purpose. A follow-up study book is easy to write for most any preacher and adds a nice personal touch to the studies. There are also many study books that can be purchased that suit this purpose well.

One of the strengths of the single presentation teaching method is that studies are easier to set because the initial commitment is low. You are only asking for an hour of a person's time. The same is true of the follow-up study. Five or six lessons is far easier to commit to than thirteen or seventeen. In the end six solid lessons that are heard are more valuable than thirteen that are never heard because the study wanes.

However, it is also important to note that these few lessons should be seen as emergency teaching. When someone goes to the emergency room, the doctors are only concerned with what must be done immediately to stabilize the patient. More follow up care is necessary to address the issues that may inhibit the individual from remaining in stable health or from healing properly. Thus it is with the new convert. We have selected six lessons that we feel the new convert needs to hear immediately to stabilize them in the faith. But if we stop with those few lessons and then plant them in an adult class that is focused on the meat of the word, those new converts will likely languish as they try to digest a diet for which they are not ready. The Hebrew writer explains that "solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." (Heb. 5:11-14) The writer deals here with saints who should have been at a point where they were able to accept the solid food, but instead had lapsed back into infancy languishing on an improper diet. Their souls were in peril as a result. It is just as perilous to the new convert to languish as they try to digest solid food, not receiving the milk that they need.

Hippolytus wrote "Apostolic Tradition" in 215 AD. A large part of this writing deals with a training plan for the new convert, called the "*catechumenate*". Those that were

being trained were called, “*catechumens*”. In it he argues for the new convert to go through a three year training program with the following words:

“Let catechumens spend three years as hearers of the word. But if a man is zealous and perseveres well in the work, it is not the time but his character that is decisive.”

It is important to mention that by this point in church history this training period took place before the individual was baptized, which is clearly a departure as we find believers being baptized in the same hour of the night in the New Testament. (Acts 16:33) Yet we can learn two important points from Hippolytus: the early saints took grounding new converts as a vitally important part of the work of the early church and it took continued, planned effort over a long period of time to accomplish this vital task. Just as Hippolytus recognized, some may take more time than others, but all must receive the milk they need over whatever time is necessary for them to progress to a more substantial diet.

The emergency follow-up material and the extended grounding material can be presented in a number of ways. We tend to do the emergency sessions throughout the week at the student’s convenience and the extended grounding sessions during the Bible class period when we assemble. However and whenever we choose to present the follow-up material, it must be through unbreakable appointments. In times past we have tried to assign a thirteen lesson study to thirteen different teachers so that they could become experts in teaching that lesson to new converts. We also thought that it would be a good way for the new convert to become acquainted with thirteen different members and their families. The problem became scheduling. The teachers felt they could reschedule if the appointment did not fit their schedule. The result would be that the study would fall apart and not happen. Thus however we choose to organize the sessions, it must be with the teacher’s understanding that they must be available. If the student calls to reschedule that is fine. The teacher does not have that luxury. They must conduct the study or find a replacement teacher that can keep the appointment.

Whatever material we choose to use for those emergency sessions and for the extended grounding sessions, it is important that we use something. A follow-up study is going to go much better when we go into it with a plan. It keeps the study leader on task, reduces the risk of introducing topics earlier than the person is ready to hear them, eliminates rabbit trails, and is comforting to the new convert to have a plan. It is also good that they have the book to refer to and study from throughout the week and even to look back to after the study concludes. If a person would prefer to just use the Bible in study, that is a good thing as well, but a simple sheet with a lesson plan on it and passages that will be considered will still make the study more likely to succeed.

### *Community*

Acts 2 demonstrates to us that there was a strong community established upon Pentecost. They were seeing one another in some capacity daily. (Acts 2:42, 46-47) While the schedules of today prohibit large-scale daily interaction, the need to have community is still our responsibility. Local churches can do this in a number of ways

such as a daily Bible reading that the church does together, a daily note from the church's social media page or email, organizing monthly home Bible studies, or encouraging members to simply call to check on new converts, to name a few. The new saint needs to be a part of the community of believers, but also feel that they are a part.

It is not enough to tell a new convert that they now have a new family in Christ. They must be incorporated. Sometimes we may exclude new saints without even realizing we are doing so. This is not just something to be left up to chance. Organized effort should be in place to help the new saint build relationships with others. Just because an opportunity has been announced does not mean that the new saint understands what it is, that they are invited, and that they are welcomed. The new saint needs to be approached for a while and specifically invited to the various opportunities brethren are organizing.

Probably one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament that demonstrates this idea of community can be found at Acts 12:1-17. James the apostle has just been martyred by Herod and Peter is in prison and likely the next to die. Things no doubt looked bleak for Peter as far as continuing on in this world. Yet when we get to verse 5 we find that "Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God." Although the wicked ruler Herod had one set of plans for Peter, the Lord had another set of plans. The prayers of the saints and the power of God was greater than the wicked plans of Herod. The very night that Peter was to be brought before Herod he is miraculously released from his prison cell by an angel of the Lord. Verse 12 explains that Peter went to the house of John Mark's mother, Mary. It was here that "many were gathered together and were praying."

These saints were not fair-weather saints. These saints were not Sunday only saints. These saints were a community of believers. They came together whenever possible and whenever needed. They felt personally the loss of Peter each and every one. It is this type of community that we should be working to emulate in our present day local churches. A church that not only worships together, but works together and prays together and takes meals together, etc. as we find the early church doing in places like Acts 2 and Acts 12.

Christ designed His church to be something that encourages and exhorts all the members to love and good works. (Heb. 10:24) If we bring in new converts and do not incorporate them into the community, they will likely fall away as they miss out on much of the encouragement. While it is true that some encouragement and exhortation takes place during the assembly on Sunday, the reality is that the bulk of the encouragement work takes place throughout the week. The contact with them needs to be continual, meaningful, and purposeful.

### Tasks

The new saint desires to be a part of what is happening but can often have a hard time finding their place on their own. The church needs to find something for the new

saint to do. The church in Mauriceville has identified ninety-two different tasks that the deacons oversee that must be done on a regular basis for the church to function. As the church grows that list grows as does the size of the tasks that had already been identified. While many brethren feel that the only tasks are those that are witnessed in the public assembly, the truth is these just represent a small part of what must be done.

Paul tells the brethren at 2 Thess. 3:13 to “not grow weary of doing good.” It is important to note that this is true of established Christians as well as new converts. In reality the church at Thessalonica was likely only months old when this letter was penned. Thus many of these brethren to whom this letter was written were new converts.

Sometimes the new convert may be sold short because we do not believe that they are capable of much. The reality is similar to the child. We must never underestimate our children. They understand and are capable of far more than we tend to give them credit for. The new convert is the same. While they may not be in a place where they are going to be able to teach classes and such, there are certainly many other things that need to be done and can be done by the novice. The temptation may be to let them figure out what they can do, but in reality this is our responsibility. We need to see to it that they are busy doing all that they are capable of doing.

These tasks should be meaningful tasks. I have had the fortune of being able to teach my seven year old son's Bible class for a quarter. What an experience! What I quickly found is that they do not like busy work. They want to be doing something that means something. When they are expected to bring their Bibles and read their Bibles and memorize, they do those things and are proud that they have done it. While the temptation may be there to sell them short and just have them do coloring sheets, the wise teacher realizes that they can learn and do much and that is what they want. So what will we do with the new convert? Will we give them coloring sheets figuring that they can not really mess that up and that they can not do much more than that anyway, or will we give them meaningful tasks to do knowing that they may make mistakes as they go, but they will learn and be contributing to the whole?

One thing that a growing church quickly finds is that the work of the new converts is needed. The evangelist and a small core of strong brethren can accomplish many things. They can work hard and begin bringing in new converts. However, in a short time of being successful at such efforts it becomes apparent that there are not enough workers. More people need to be brought into the effort. This means giving new converts tasks that they are capable of doing and training them to do ever greater things as time goes by. A church that does not incorporate the new converts into the work will have a built-in ceiling to growth. That church will never grow beyond the scope of what the small core can handle.

The church as it strives to be properly organized needs to spell out these tasks that are expected of the deacons. The deacons in turn must seek out brethren to help them

accomplish these works. Thus it largely falls on the deacons to find something for new saints to do in helping him carry out his work. It is best for the deacon. It is best for the new saint. It is best for the work in that community.

### Long-suffering

God's word repeatedly tells us to be patient with the weak. (I Thess. 5:14) For whatever reason many times people who are divisive and sinful are tolerated because they are there all the time, but a weak person who struggles with attending services is "disciplined". Yet the words of the New Testament declare that we are to patiently strengthen the weak.

I knew of one circumstance where a person had the misfortune of being brought to Christ near the holidays. In ignorance the new saint thanked God during the closing prayer for the Christmas season and sending his Son. The preacher had to literally place himself between the new saint and the mob of brethren coming to correct the travesty!

As noted previously, the early Christians spent years patiently working with the new convert. Often the same three year period that the apostles received walking with Jesus and Paul received after his conversion. (Gal. 1:15-18) They were in it for the long-haul. It took a great deal of time and effort and understanding, but as children of God they were willing to dedicate what was necessary.

The easy thing is to run off the new convert with unreasonable expectations. They do not know how they should act. They do not know our customs and traditions. They do not know our way of dress and speech. They stumble and fall and are just generally a mess as they try and figure it all out. They are exactly what we should expect them to be! It is us that must be what Christ declares and the new saint needs! I am thankful for those that patiently taught me the truth and patiently helped me through my weaknesses. May we be the same for the new saint as we were once fortunate enough ourselves to have.

### **Conclusion**

It is hard work winning souls. It is even harder work tending to those souls. Yet it is a large part of the work that we have been called to do. No doubt the Lord has not called us to do something of which we are not capable. If we carefully put in the requisite thought and effort we can successfully keep the new convert by counting the cost, preparing the culture of the church, and enacting a practical plan.

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