

8. Helping New Christians and Toddlers Begin Healthy Growth

When a physical baby is first born, that child does not know what it needs for healthy growth. The same is true for a new Christian and for Christians who have not grown properly. There are many comparisons between physical and spiritual growth. We have all seen Christians who did not grow properly and they are still very self-centered even though they have been Christians for many years. They will remain self-centered unless a more mature Christian becomes a spiritual parent to them. As we saw in our last topic, in Corinth they had many instructors but not many fathers - 1 Corinthians 4:15-17.

The great need of every new Christian is spiritual parents. For children who grow up in Christian homes, sometimes their physical parents also become their spiritual parents. However, for someone who becomes a Christian as an adult or is the first generation in their family to become a Christian, healthy growth will usually not happen unless there are spiritual parents to follow. In 1 Thessalonians 1:6, Paul, Silas and Timothy said to the Thessalonians, “And you became followers of us and of the Lord...”

New Christians, and Christians who have not experienced healthy spiritual growth, need spiritual parents who will provide them with at least three things:

First, new Christians and spiritual toddlers need love. 1 Thessalonians 1:7-8 says, “But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.” Paul, Silas and Timothy had provided the tender and loving care that a nursing mother provides for her newborn children.

Second, new Christians and spiritual toddlers need an example to follow. 1 Corinthians 11:1 says, “Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ.” Paul had said the same thing earlier in 1 Corinthians 4:16 when he said, “Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” Then Paul, Silas and Timothy spoke about the fact that they had given the Thessalonians an example to follow in 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, “You *are* witnesses, and God *also*, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” The early church leaders realized the importance of giving new Christians an example to follow.

Third, new Christians and spiritual toddlers need food to help them in their spiritual growth. However, many new Christians find it very difficult to understand the Bible. For that reason they need spiritual parents who will explain the Bible to them and answer their questions. Aquila and Priscilla give us a beautiful example of this in Acts 18:26, “So he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Aquila and Priscilla had been given an example by Paul as he spent time with them and answered their questions (see Acts 18:1-3) and so they heard Apollos and immediately recognized that he needed a spiritual parent to help him come to an accurate

understanding of Christ. Instead of waiting for Paul to return to Ephesus, they immediately took the responsibility to become spiritual parents to Apollos. The Lord wants each one of us to become spiritual parents like Aquila and Priscilla as we grow in our own spiritual lives.

Three needs of new Christians and spiritual toddlers to become healthy Christians:

Love

Example

Spiritual Food

In order to understand and help a new Christian or a spiritual toddler, we need to look at a Biblical profile of both the spiritual newborn and the spiritual toddler. True spiritual birth will always produce at least three characteristics in the newborn Christian. These are:

- the spiritual newborn has an attitude of repentance toward God - Acts 20:21
- the spiritual newborn has an attitude of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ - Acts 20:21
- the spiritual newborn gives evidence of possessing new life - 2 Corinthians 5:17

The fact that the conscience of a person has been renewed will often cause a new Christian to feel that he is even more sinful than he used to be. If you ask him if he has started committing new sins, he will often say, “No, I am not committing new sins but things that never used to bother me now bother me.” I assure the new Christian that his conscience is now working properly so that he can confess those sins and be forgiven and cleansed - 1 John 1:9.

When men sinned and turned away from God, Romans 1:19-32 tell us how spiritual darkness took control of their lives. Those verses show us the downward progression into darkness. The exact reverse will happen as we help newborn Christians begin to learn to walk in the light. Those reversed effects will produce the following reverses. There will be:

- A new view of God’s creation - 19-20
- A new attitude of thankfulness - 21a
- A renewed conscience - 21b
- A hunger for godly wisdom - 22
- A new sensitivity to the spiritual needs of others - 23
- A new desire to worship and serve the Creator - 24-25
- A new desire for godly living - 26-27
- A new desire to transform their thoughts and actions - 28-31
- A new desire to please God - 32

However, if a new Christian does not have a spiritual parent to help him learn how to put these new desires and attitudes into practice, his growth will stop and he will become a spiritual toddler. He will begin to view the Christian life as it is defined in Romans 7:14-25 where we see what happens when we try to live the Christian life in our own strength. The result will be that the person will develop the profile of a spiritual toddler described in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 13:11; Ephesians 4:14 and Hebrews 5:11-14. Those verses give the following description of a spiritual toddler:

- ◆ He acts like one who is not a Christian - 1 Corinthians 3:1

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- ◆ He is not able to understand the difficult teachings from the Word of God - 1 Corinthians 3:2
- ◆ He experiences envying, strife and divisions - 1 Corinthians 3:3
- ◆ His talk, understanding and thinking of spiritual things is limited - 1 Corinthians 13:11
- ◆ He is tossed to and fro by every false teaching - Ephesians 4:14
- ◆ He is easily deceived by false teachers - Ephesians 4:14
- ◆ He is dull of hearing spiritual truth - Hebrews 5:11
- ◆ He needs to be retaught the basics of Christianity - Hebrews 5:12
- ◆ He is unskillful in the word of righteousness - Hebrews 5:13
- ◆ His senses are not developed to recognize good and evil - Hebrews 5:14

Just as the physical toddler is very self-centered and selfish, the spiritual toddler is also self-centered and selfish. His focus is on My needs and My problems. In the physical life, a healthy child learns to grow beyond that self-centered focus and begins to think about others. The same should happen in the spiritual life. However, many Christians never get beyond this stage. Just like the newborn babe, in order to experience healthy growth, the spiritual toddler needs spiritual parents to help him in his spiritual growth. Hebrews 5:12 defines two key needs of the spiritual toddler when it says, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.” In this verse, we see that a spiritual toddler needs:

1. a spiritual parent to help him grow - love
2. the milk of the Word - food

Paul adds a third thing in 1 Corinthians 4:16, “Therefore I urge you, imitate me.”

3. a mature Christian to imitate - example

As you notice the needs of a new Christian and a spiritual toddler are the same. Both need a spiritual parent who will provide him with:

Love

Food

Example

Just as Paul said to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 4:15, we also have a lot of instructors but few spiritual parents. This produces a lot of spiritual toddlers who never grow beyond that point in their spiritual lives. As spiritual leaders we need to ask ourselves the question, “Who are my spiritual children that I pray for each day and spend time with each week to help them in their growth toward spiritual maturity?” May the Lord richly bless you as you serve as a spiritual parent to one or a few new Christians who need the love and example of a mature Christian to follow and who is helping them to answer their questions by helping them to find the answers to their questions from the Word of God.