

ON BEING A SPIRITUAL PARENT

Parents watch in amazement as their daughters and sons grow. Infants turn into toddlers and children into adults as the intricate processes of maturity unfold.

Follow up – being a *spiritual* parent – is like this, too. It is watching in fascination as God uses you to help a believer who is young in his or her faith to grow.

Perhaps you are a parent with two or more children. If so, you have learned that in certain respects all children are alike. As babies, your children all needed to have their diapers changed; they all needed milk. They slept a lot; and as they grew they learned to exercise and play.

After seeing this with your first child, you did not have to discover it again with your second. You weren't surprised in the least when the second one wet her diapers or cried when he was hungry.

Does this mean you found a pattern for raising children that you have used identically with each child? Of course not! Your children do have common, basic needs which you have met in more or less the same way with each. But you have also learned that each child is unique. Each as required *person, individual attention* from you. Any child must have this in order to properly mature.

So it is in spiritual follow up. There are basics every new believer in Christ needs. You don't have to wonder about whether she should read the Bible. You don't have to determine whether he needs the support and acceptance of other believers, or whether he should pray. To really mature, she needs all of these, no matter who she or he is.

But the new believer also will have distinctly individual needs that must be met in distinctive ways.

Follow up means meeting all these needs for young Christians – and then teaching them how to meet their needs on their own. Follow up is bringing individuals to spiritual maturity as disciples of Jesus. And as Episcopalian pastor Sam Shoemaker reminds us, "disciples are hand-tooled, not mass-produced."

The apostle Paul was a diligent, effective laborer in follow up. The Bible reveals patterns in his efforts. In his

letter to the church in Philippi, Paul wrote, "He [meaning God] who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" [the day Jesus returns in glory] (Chapter 1, verse 6).

In this work of follow up, Paul knew that God is the chief laborer. God himself completes the work in a soul that begins when God's Spirit generates new birth.

But in his work God uses people. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11-13 of a dynamic process in which those with certain spiritual gifts prepare God's people for service – the end result of their service being Christlike maturity for all believers. So this process of maturing, which we call follow up, or discipling, actually involves all Christians. The whole church, laity and ordained ministers alike, has a part to play.

How unwise it would be for parents to raise a child in isolation! Without exposure to neighbors, schoolmates, teachers, and others, a child's development would indeed be shortchanged. Likewise in spiritual growth, new believers need help and stimulation from many other Christians.

But along with the fellowship of believers, a new Christian also needs personal, one-to-one attention. She needs help from someone. The heart of follow up is one person working with another.

Paul told the Colossians that his goal was to help believers attain perfect maturity in Christ. "To this end I labor," he said, "struggling with all God's energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Chapter 1, verses 28-29).

How did Paul expend the energy God gave him? To what were his efforts directed? According to his own testimony, he toiled not simply to win converts, but to help them reach maturity in Christ.

Paul reminded the church at Corinth of his personal care for them. "Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (First Corinthians 4:15). Paul was their one spiritual father.

Who can have this privilege of being a spiritual parent? It can be yours. Follow up is not accomplished by programs but by people. God acts through us. As E. M. Bounds put it in the 19th century, "Men are God's

method." In follow up, we are working with God in the ministry of developing better people.

What do you need to know and do to become an effective follow up worker?

The place to start is with yourself. *It takes a disciple to make a disciple.* Are you growing in Christ? Do you desire to follow Jesus and mature in him? Do your plans and activities reflect this desire?

Be a pacesetter. The apostle Paul wrote, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (First Corinthians 11:1). We are called to live the kind of life that encourages those around us to strain a little harder to follow Christ more closely. We are meant to be role-models.

Some of those we help may be highly gifted persons who the end will accomplish more for God than we ever will. But they will never push out front unless we set the pace for them in the early years of their faith. We must be in the race ourselves if we are to help them run to victory.

You will need a tool in follow up – the Scriptures. A new believer who quickly learns the value of the Bible as the norm for her life will have discovered the key to spiritual growth. Paul knew this, and told the church at Thessaloniki that he thanked God they had accepted God's word "not as the word of man, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (First Thessalonians 2:13).

If you not only teach young Christians from the Scriptures, but also teach them to consistently get into the Bible for themselves, you will have made the greatest single contribution to their lives that you can make.

New disciples must learn to read and study the Bible intelligently, to memorize and meditate upon its texts, and to apply it to their lives daily. This will keep them centered on the Lord. It will bring them back to the great mine of spiritual resources, to the place where God's promises are found.

Realize also that follow up begins with your own evangelism. You can follow up new believers who have been led to Christ by others, or help those who have Christians for a longer time. But an even greater thrill comes when you personally lead someone to Jesus – a

neighbor, a coworker, a family member – and then help that person become grounded in the faith.

Therefore, as you share Christ with others, as you explain the gospel to them, as they openly respond to Christ, and as you lead them in a prayer of repentance and faith – remember that your responsibility does not end there. This only the beginning of a work that must be advanced by means of follow up. If God leads you into the spiritual battle of leading others to the Savior, God will also guide you in caring for them and helping them grow.

Your goal for their growth is spiritual maturity. The measure of this maturity is Christlikeness. Paul told the believers in Galatia that he was “again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (Chapter 4, verse 19).

To the Christians in Ephesus he described maturity as “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Chapter 4, verse 13). This “taking shape” of Jesus in a sinner’s life should be the aim of all follow up.

God’s unwavering purpose is that every Christian be conformed to Christ. The apostle John wrote confidently that when Christ returns, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (First John 3:2). Paul said that “those God foreknew, he also predestined to be *conformed* to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29).

Christlikeness does not mean conformity to a certain pattern of behavior you may think of as being Christian. It does not mean mechanically memorizing Bible verses or having a daily quiet time or attending church. Such activities are surely involved in the process of becoming Christlike. But they are means; they are not the end. The real test of Christlikeness comes in the stresses and strains of everyday life.

How does a spiritually mature person act? Think again of the illustration of physical parenthood. First, a mother and father will want their children to develop a philosophy of life, a worldview, by the time they reach adulthood. They will want them to have a defined point of view toward themselves and others that is accurate and trustworthy, and provides a measure of stability.

Second, they will want them to make intelligent, assured decisions, adequately determining what is the right thing to do in difficult situations.

Third, they will probably desire that their children choose good marriage partners and rear healthy, happy families.

The spiritual counterparts to these are 1) a stable belief in, and understanding of, the Scriptures as the basis of faith and the standards of life; 2) the wisdom to discern between good and evil; and 3) the capacity for spiritual reproduction – producing new generations of disciples of Jesus.

Spiritual growth is a matter of time and practice. In Hebrews 5:14 we read that solid food – the deeper truths of God’s word – is for “the mature, who by constant *use* have *trained themselves* to distinguish good from evil” Everyday experience and effort will be required to develop a lifestyle that conforms to biblical ethics.

You can help a young believer in this by encouraging her to make a stand for Christ in what may seem to be the “little things” of life. Taking care of these today will allow her, or him, to act in faith on bigger issues tomorrow.

Jesus intended his first followers to spread his gospel so that others would believe. “My prayer,” he said, “is not for them alone [his disciples]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message” (John 17:20).

Disciples making other disciples is God’s pattern for disseminating his presence in the world. This work requires mature Christians who can reproduce their own faith in Christ in the lives of others. Follow up is hard work because it requires that you give your life to someone. It means opening yourself up to close scrutiny by a young believer.

As you reveal your life to them, you may fear your weaknesses will be uncovered. You may think, “Maybe I should close the door now.” But if you do, your follow up will end. You must bring these young believers you’re your home, into your heart, and allow them to see that Christ’s presence can be manifest in a sinner’s life.

Go places with them, listen to them, talk to them, think with them, pray with them. Follow up is not done by something, but by someone – not by a method or a system, but by you.

Prayer, of course, is a key to this. Effective follow up is really the work of God and the Spirit of Jesus. You are

God's instrument to help accomplish *God's* purposes in the life of *God's* child. As the apostle Paul said to the new Christians in Corinth, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow" (First Corinthians 3:6).