The Birthing Process – How to be a Good Midwife

The Western Model of Spiritual Birth

The following characteristics seem to be typical of how westerners think of the spiritual birthing process. Most of them probably arose as an over-reaction to Catholicism:

- It tends to be **theoretical** and cerebral. The emphasis is on the ability to repeat the correct doctrine.
- It is **instantaneous** – hence the 'born again' language. Yet we all know that transferring loyalty takes time – from an Islamic/Hindu/Buddhist/secular system to a Saviour.
- It is **individualistic.**

This model works well in a 'Christianised' culture – as it is in the USA and as it was in the UK up to the 1960s. This culture is increasingly being broken down and so this model is increasingly ineffective. Sadly much of the evangelism among those from other cultures still uses assumptions and methods that were developed for work among nominal Christians.

Inadequate Conversion

James Engel reported the following (EMQ April '90):

- Gradual conversion is the most common manner in which those with little or no prior exposure to meaningful Christian background come to faith in Jesus.
- Gospel knowledge doesn't become efficacious until there is some grasp of the **implications** of the truth in the context of life goals, felt needs and basic motivations.
- There is no distinct decision per se as is usually found in extended problem solving. Rather there is a gradual change of allegiance. An overt act such as a verbal prayer or going forward at a meeting is **not** normative in salvation and can be highly misleading when it is interpreted as signifying salvation.
- The process of making disciples begins before conversion, proceeds through the conversion process and is unending as the new believer grows in faith and maturity.

The probable reason why so many apparent believers from a Muslim background backslide and fail to grow at all in their love for the Lord Jesus is that they are 'still born'. They never were 'born again' to begin with. This is our failure!

Healthy Birth

In the birthing process there are **four** elements:

- Faith in Jesus
- Repentance
- Baptism in the Holy Spirit
- Baptism in water

The last is not essential as the other three are. But it is an important outward and visible sign of what has occurred inwardly. As such it is very helpful. Let us look at each of these elements:

Faith in Jesus

As our friends are coming out of a background of generations of false teaching, it takes **time** and careful **teaching** to bring them to a place where they have enough understanding to sustain a new direction of love and allegiance to the Lord Jesus. It takes **time** to clear away the rubbish of wrong concepts of God, of Scripture, of sin and of Jesus.

Teaching needs to start at the beginning with Genesis and to focus on God's progressive revelation of Himself – i.e. in whole passages of Scripture. Avoid jumping from verse to verse all over the Bible.

From Genesis, move on to Moses and the law and sacrifice. Go through the great Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. Study Matthew or Luke especially looking at Jesus, the Kingdom of God and Jesus' call to forsake all else and follow Him. All this needs to be put in **story** form.

Repentance

The key roots of sin in our friends' lives need to be cut off as they come through the birthing process. This is an area where are often weak. We emphasise faith and neglect repentance. Both are necessary.

Examples of repentance:

- **Zacchaeus**: He repented of stealing from the poor and returned the money fourfold. (Lk. 19:1-10)
- **New believers in Ephesus**: They repented of their occult practices and accordingly burned their very valuable occult books. (Acts 19:18-19)

Notice that in both cases repentance involved public restitution demonstrating their sincerity.

How do we teach a Biblical view of sin and repentance? One helpful method is to go through the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20) and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) in detail. As you go through these passages carefully with your friend you can help him/her identify the roots of sin in his/her life. You can then work through this and decide an appropriate form of repentance and restitution. In this way he/she knows exactly what he/she has **to do** in order to follow Jesus.

By now your friend is beginning to realise the meaning of the Lordship of Jesus over all aspects of life. He/she is beginning to see that following Jesus involves a constant life of repentance, apologies, confession and brokenness. All this involves counting the cost. But obedience in this area gives the opportunity of victory over sin, assurance of forgiveness and the joy of knowing the approval of Jesus. Jesus always linked repentance and joy!

Often the process takes some time. Repentance is often costly and involves accepting shame. This **is** very costly in honour/shame cultures. What if the process stops through an unwillingness to repent? Then your focus should be on prayer and a renewed focus on Jesus (the faith aspect) and what He has accomplished. Especially look at Mt. 11:28-30:

"Come to Me all who labour and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Don't push for an untimely birth. Allow the Holy Spirit to do His work of convicting of sin.

Finally, it is **essential** to apply the same demanding standards of holiness and repentance in our own lives. Failure in this area causes a failure in our witness to the liberating power of the forgiveness of sin.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit

This too needs to be taught. It is a wonderful counter-balance to the negative aspects of repentance and restitution. Our friends need to **experience** the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Experiences and signs of the Holy Spirit vary a great deal, but they are all accompanied by:

"… a pouring into our hearts of God's love through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Rom. 5:5)

Our friends experience an amazing sense that they are **accepted** and loved by God. Rom. 8:15-17 says,

"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ – provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him."

Many of our friends come from cultures where religious **experience** is prized – whether on Hajj or in Sufi meetings or just at Friday prayers. Sermons are not often directed to the mind, but rather to the emotions. Have you ever seen Shia on the tenth day of Muharram? It is sheer emotion that causes them to cut themselves with knives.

So without a deep subjective experience of God's love, of having peace with God and of God's Fatherly care, prayer and worship are impossible. Solid faith and repentance lay the foundation of being filled with the Holy Spirit since the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey. (Acts 5:32)

Teaching followed by the laying on of hands and a simple prayer of faith opens up the way for Our Father to send the Holy Spirit into the believer and bring about regeneration and all the other precious gifts that the Father wants to give to us His children.

Baptism in Water

This issue always creates a lot of questions such as when and by whom? I would like to cover this briefly.

When? Soon! Long delays, a long period of probation etc. are not Biblical. It is wise to put new believers through some basic course (8-12 weeks).

By Whom? By local believers if at all possible. Baptism is into **a family**, so the new believer needs to be introduced into a group. However, Acts 8:26-39 does give us a Biblical exception.

What is Discipleship?

- ***"Teaching the next generations"*** (Deut. 6:1 ff.)
- Carrying out the plan of God – read God's instructions to Joshua in Josh. 1.
- Training a small group – Mt. 10:1-15

Discipleship is the process of reproducing in someone else what the Spirit of God is doing in you, in such a way that they are enabled to reproduce it in a third generation.

In other words it is training someone until he/she is able to train others and actually does so.

What are the goals of a discipling ministry?

Among other things, it is to see emerging a people who are living on the basis of **Biblical priorities**. These are defined in John 17 as:

- Progressive commitment to Jesus
- Progressive commitment to the Body of Jesus (i.e. the church)
- Progressive commitment to the work of Jesus in the world

Each one of these is really important. Over emphasis or lack of emphasis on any one of these will lead to imbalance.

What is the process of discipling?

Among other things there is a basic emphasis on **training in small groups**. In such discipleship groups the new believers can learn how to study the Bible, how to pray and how to worship and praise the Lord.

In small groups they learn how to relate, share with one another and support one another. Their commitment grows both to one another and to the wider Body of Christ. The small group also forms the basis of their witness and service in the world.

Is discipleship carried out primarily in one-to-one situations or is it primarily a group process? Is it generally an inactive process or a participative process? Is it a one-way structured lecture/programme? Is there accountability for life-change as well as for knowledge? Is there accountability for passing on what has been learned?

Who is competent to disciple another person? In other words, is discipleship for those who have reached some specified level of 'maturity' or education or is it the responsibility of any believer who is one step ahead of another? Who is responsible for seekers and the birthing process? Does this include the newest follower of Jesus? What aspects of body life are the responsibility of each member of the body as opposed to the sole responsibility of the more formal leaders? Who is responsible for reproduction and when do they start being responsible?

All these questions (and many more) need answers! What you will tend to find, as you go through the process, are all the harmful patterns and precedents you have created in the previous phase or stage!

I want to emphasize again that when it comes to reproduction of discipleship **modelling** has far greater impact than the **content of teaching**. No matter what is taught about the various Biblical truths, if the modelling of that truth doesn't support and illustrate the teaching, then it won't be effective!

So the discipleship of new believers is affected by all the activities you have carried out from the very beginning of the work. It is affected by how you pray, how you are trained and how you prepare yourself, how you form your identity in the culture, how you do evangelism, how you live an incarnational lifestyle, how you form 'church', how you prepare leaders and so on.

So discipleship as an aspect in the process can't be separated out from the whole. As you apply Biblical patterns and expectations, effective discipleship will happen. The spiritual life is intended to be one in which each one of us is responsible to pass on that which we have received. ***"Freely you have received, freely give!"*** (Mt. 10:8) ***"From those to whom much has been given, much will be required."*** (Lk. 12:48) The parable of the talents is all about this principle. (Mt. 25)

This whole process looks something like a mother duck (Jesus) leading a procession of ducklings. In one sense, only the first duckling is following the mother duck! The second duckling is following the first and so on. No one of us is "fully mature" having attained to the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ. (Eph. 4:13) But each of us needs to say, as Paul did, ***"Follow me as I follow Christ."*** (1 Cor. 11:1)