

Assimilating and Transforming New Believers

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented to lay out the elements necessary in any plan for assimilating new believers into a local assembly and transforming them into committed disciples of Jesus.

*That we should no longer be children...but, speaking the truth in love,
may grow up in all things into Him who is the head...*

Ephesians 4:14-15

IT IS ONE THING TO GET A PERSON baptized and filled with the Spirit. It is another to get him assimilated into the local body. And it is still another to get him transformed into a committed disciples of Jesus. Each local assembly needs a deliberate plan for assimilating and transforming those who obey the gospel and receive the Spirit. Ignoring the needs of new believers will retard their spiritual development and inhibit the overall growth of the assembly.

Assimilating

The word "assimilate" means to absorb groups of different cultures into the main cultural body. Even though this word does not appear in the Scriptures, it accurately describes what happens when a newly-born believer grows from being a mere church-attender into a committed member of the body of Christ. It is important to understand that assimilation is not an event, it is a process. And it begins by making an organized effort to meet the basic spiritual needs of all new believers.

What exactly do new believers need?

New believers need the same thing new-born babies need. They need to be held and cared for by Mom, they need to be properly fed, and they need to start getting to know their Dad. This means they need to quickly form real and meaningful connections with other believers (the church is our spiritual mother); they need to

immediately be started in a Bible study where they can quickly become familiar with the elementary doctrines of the faith; and they need to learn to pray so they can establish a consistent devotional life. They also need to learn to praise God, not just in church gatherings, but also in their private devotions. Prayer and praise are key ways in which we relate to our heavenly Dad.

Colossians 2:19 speaks of holding fast to the Head (prayer and praise), from whom all the body, nourished (fed by the Word) and knit together by joints and ligaments (relationships within the local assembly), grows with the increase that is from God. This tells us that as God's people connect with one another, as they learn the Word, and as they pray and praise the Lord, God brings forth growth.

The book of Colossians further confirms these three key elements of growth. Verse 4:2 says, Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.... Verse 3:16 says, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.... And verse 2:2 says, That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love.... We observe the original Christians doing these things immediately after Pentecost.

Acts 2:42

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine (that is the ministry of the Word) and fellowship, in the breaking of bread (sharing and eating together, which knits the people together into godly relationships), and in prayers (the Greek word encompasses the ideas of both prayer and worship).

As they continued steadfastly in these things, what happened?

Acts 2:46-47

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house (various private homes), they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

When God's people do their part, He does His part —He produces growth, both spiritually and numerically.

How can a local assembly provide these things for every new believer?

An vitally important biblical venue for providing the key elements of growth to every new believer is home groups. Just like the church of the Book of Acts, God's people need to continue daily in the temple (that is our congregational

meetings) and from house to house (literally various private homes). Home groups are the ideal place for people to learn to pray, learn to praise, learn doctrine, and form close, caring relationships with other believers.

The leaders of home groups must understand the group's responsibilities toward new believers.

1. They must actively help them to establish relationships with other members.
2. They must teach and model prayer and praise. Helpful tools should be provided, such as *Building a Tabernacle of Prayer* (available at www.RoshPinnah.com).
3. They must see that every new believer is taught a Bible study, such as the *Pathfinders Bible Study* (available at www.RoshPinnah.com). This should include the study of core doctrines and should be followed up with a more advanced discipleship course, such as *Squarely Upon the Cornerstone* (also available at www.RoshPinnah.com).

Assimilating new believers will require implementing a deliberate plan to ensure that each one becomes established in prayer and praise, that each one quickly learns the key doctrines of our faith, and that each one builds strong relationships with other believers. This will not happen automatically. It must be planned and organized. Each local assembly must take deliberate steps to ensure that it happens.

Transforming

The word *transform* means to change the inner nature, the outward form, and the function of someone. Like, assimilation, transformation is not an event but a process. Unlike assimilation, it is an important biblical term. For example, 2 Corinthians 3:18 says that believers are being *transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.* ”

The word *conform* means to be of the same inner nature, outward form, and function of someone. In the Bible, the result of transformation is that believers would be *conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren* (Romans 8:29). In other words, all believers must change in their inner nature, their outward form, and their function to be like Jesus. This is what it means to *grow up in all things into Him.* ”

What do committed believers need in order to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus?

Romans 12:1-2

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

This passage tells us that two things are necessary for transformation to take place. The first is total commitment to God. This is what Paul meant by "present your bodies a living sacrifice." It is saying to God, "I no longer belong to myself. I offer myself to you. I will do whatever you tell me to do."

The second is a fundamental change in thinking. This is what Paul meant by "the renewing of your mind." It is normal for human beings to think from the human perspective. But to become like Jesus, people need to learn to think from a heavenly perspective. Colossians 3:2 instructs, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."

How do we establish a transformation process within our local assembly?

A biblical picture of transformation in a local assembly can be found in Ephesians 4:11-16. This passage tells us that all believers need the ongoing influence of the five-fold equipping gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It is through the operation of these gifts that God's people will be challenged to make a total commitment to Jesus and will learn how to think from a heavenly perspective. The objective of the ministry of these gifts is to equip all the believers to be able to do their works of ministry. As the body begins to minister, the results will be as follows:

1. The body of Christ will be edified (grow stronger and larger).
2. All believers will come to the unity of the faith (everyone will believe the same thing).
3. All believers will come to the knowledge of the Son of God (a relationship with Jesus based on truly knowing Him).
4. All believers will no longer be children (immature Christians) but will grow up into Jesus.

5. All believers will speak the truth in love.
6. All believers will be joined and knit together by what every joint supplies (by what every relationship contributes).
7. Every believer will do his share, which will cause growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

This is a portrait of the transformation process. Note that it begins by recognizing the whole team of equipping gifts that God has placed in the church and making sure that all believers are exposed to the ministry of these gifts on an on-going basis.

We have established five aims of our home groups. They are...

1. That each member would grow in their relationship with God.
2. That each member would grow in their personal Christian character.
3. That each member would grow in their relationships with the other members.
4. That each member would identify their gifts and find their place of service.
5. That the group would grow numerically and multiply into another group.

These aims form a biblical description of believers undergoing transformation. A person is transformed when he can say:

I am a worshiper.
I am a holy one.
I am a connector.
I am a servant.
I am a harvester.

This is what it mean to be like Jesus. This is what it means to grow up into Him in all things. We must keep in mind, however, that in addition to prayer, praise, knowing the Word, and living in godly relationships with others, believers also need to be equipped through the five-fold gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. This means that people need more than merely a pastor. Every apostolic believer ought to be seeking God for the restoration of these gifts in every local assembly.

Failure to Thrive Syndrome

God's initial objective for every born-again believer is assimilation into the local body. But this is only the beginning. His long-term objective is transformation into the image of Jesus. This involves growth, maturity, and ultimately fruitfulness. In other words, God wants every believer to thrive! The word thrive means to prosper; to flourish; to be successful; to grow; to increase in stature. This is the will of God concerning every true believer. But why do some never reach this place of maturity and fruitfulness?

In the medical world there is a condition called failure-to-thrive (FTT). It shows up early in infancy when a child's weight and height is far below what it ought to be. It can result in diminished physical, mental, and emotional development, often so severe that it can never be overcome later in life. It sometimes even results in dwarfism. One wonders how many of God's children there are sitting in our churches who are failure-to-thrive believers?

There are two distinct categories of FTT: organic and inorganic. Organic failure-to-thrive is the result of a physical problem in the child, such as a congenital defect or malfunction. This kind of FTT, even when detected early, is difficult if not impossible to overcome. The problem is intrinsic to the child rather than the result of external influences.

In the spiritual realm there are always a few who from the very beginning of their walk with God seem to be limited in their growth potential. These kinds of people simply need to be loved and accepted for what they are. Perhaps they are the kind Paul had in mind when he wrote, "Comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

If we are not careful, we can find ourselves putting enormous amounts of time and energy into people who, due to some inward defect, may not be capable of very much spiritual growth. When growth does not occur, we must not allow ourselves to become exasperated or discouraged. As Christians, we do not get the credit when people do well and neither do we get the blame when they end up lost, unless it is because of our own slothfulness and indifference.

Since in the natural realm organic FTT is fairly rare, we should be able to conclude that this is also the case in the spiritual realm. Yet there seem to be so many believers who have never developed into their full potential as fruitful soul-winners. Why? Statistics show that it is far more common to find failure-to-thrive brought on by inorganic causes.

Inorganic failure to thrive is caused by a disturbed relationship between a child and his or her primary care-giver, who is usually the mother. This is why FTT is also called maternal deprivation syndrome. The problem is usually that the mother has difficulty perceiving the needs of her children. This, whether we like to admit it or not, is an indictment of the Church, since according to Paul the Church is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:26). In many cases, sad to say, we have not been sensitive and effective care-givers to our spiritual babies.

The following list describes the characteristics of an FTT child. The information is out of a medical journal. Following each description of an actual child with FTT is the analogous spiritual description.

The Natural Symptom	The Spiritual Counterpart
The child's body is either stiff and rigid, unable to yield to cuddling, or is floppy like a rag doll. Whichever the case, it does not mold to the holder's body.	The believer is not moldable. He is either too stubborn and unyielding or to wishy-washy. He just won't receive and respond to the love of the church.
The child has difficulty eating, frequently vomiting.	The believer is not accepting the teachings of the Word of God, and even when he does seem to accept something, he later rejects it.
The child's sleep is frequently disturbed.	The believer does not have a peaceful spirit. He is restless and unsettled.
The child is excessively irritable.	The believer is excessively irritable.
The child shows irregularity in activities of daily living.	The believer is inconsistent in prayer, church attendance, and other spiritual routines.
Sometimes the child is passive and sleepy, not waking up for feedings.	The believer goes through periods when he seems to be completely indifferent toward the Lord and the church.
As the child gets older, he shows signs of social, motor, adaptive, and language retardation.	As time goes by, the believer shows few signs of spiritual development, but instead continues to be extremely carnal in his thinking and in personal relationships.
The child has very poor hygiene.	The believer isn't keeping himself clean. He is still carrying the stench of sin and wearing the filth of the world.

The child exhibits withdrawing behavior.	The believer is not forming strong relationships with the people in the church.
The child shows no fear of strangers at the age when stranger anxiety is normal.	The believer seems to have little regard for the fact that there is a devil who is roaming about, seeking to devour him.
The child exhibits minimal smiling.	The believer has no joy of the Lord.

The following list describes the characteristics of the mothers of FTT children. The spiritual analogies are so obvious that they need no elaboration.

1. Negative feelings toward baby even before it is born.
2. Makes no plans for caring for baby when it is born.
3. Indifferent to baby at time of delivery.
4. Makes no effort to establish eye-contact with baby.
5. Handles infant only when absolutely necessary.
6. Makes few spontaneous movements with baby.
7. Asks few questions about care of baby.
8. Sees baby as ugly or unattractive.
9. Displays disgust with baby's drooling and sucking sounds.
10. Is annoyed with diaper changing.
11. Holds baby with little support to head and body.
12. Does not coo or talk to baby.
13. Refers to baby in an impersonal manner.
14. Develops inappropriate responses to baby's needs, such as leaving alone for long periods, overfeeding or underfeeding.
15. Is convinced baby has a defect or disease even when assured to the contrary.
16. Makes negative statements regarding mother's role.
17. Believes infant does not love her and exposes her as an unlovable and unloving parent.

The following list describes the redemptive care giving to FTT children when they are taken from their mothers.

The Natural Symptom	The Spiritual Counterpart
Provide a quiet, unstimulating atmosphere.	Remove all pressure to grow.
Assign one nurse for feeding.	Assign one person to work closely with the person.
Provide food with sufficient nutrients for growth.	Teach the person a personal home Bible study.
Maintain calm, even temperament; be persistent.	Maintain calm, even temperament; be persistent.
Hold young child for feeding.	Stay in close contact with the person.
Talk to the child by giving directions about eating.	Closely supervise all reading and Bible study.
Maintain eye-to-eye contact.	Make yourself vulnerable and transparent to the person.
Establish a structured routine and follow it consistently.	Establish a structured routine and follow it consistently.

In 2 Corinthians 12:14-15 Paul wrote, "And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children. Parents are responsible for their children, not the other way around. Agape love gives without requiring anything in return. Thankfully, most human mothers practice this naturally with their children. But on those occasions when they don't, the result can be a child who is permanently stunted, never able to reach the stature he could have attained to if he had been properly loved and cared for by his mother.

Let's work hard to prevent having any more failure-to-thrive believers in our assemblies.

Note to the reader:

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