

Do "Converts" = "Disciples"?

By Bill Oakes

Why do ministries keep beating their chests about new converts when the statistics show that hardly any of these converts are in the faith a year, two years, later?

I almost think we, the Church, waste the Kingdom's resources trying to convert large crowds all at once. Jesus had crowds following him all over, even leaving their jobs and going without food to hear him speak. (See Matthew 15:23) Imagine such a thing happening today in North America! In any industrialized nation?

But did these crowds become His disciples? According to the gospels, not too many did. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus repeatedly tries to keep the crowds down to a manageable size - so he could meet their needs AND teach them more effectively (see Mark 1:29-38 for one example). I wonder about the lesson in that for the Church today? We seem to be doing the exact opposite.

It is hard to read 1 John and believe that being "born again" is something that can happen in secret, which never shows on the outside of a person's life. Being born again is a spiritual reality that keeps on showing up in the convert's life. If nothing starts showing, what does that say about the reality of the person's conversion?

Is the great commission to win souls?

No. It is to make disciples and teach them to obey God's Word.

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

That takes more than an evening or a weekend to accomplish. I know that soul winning is the first and necessary step, but when it is the only step we

offer, even good seed gets choked out by the cares of this life. (Matthew 13:3-9)

Is this God's way or our 'better' way?

The Apostle Paul did not evangelize on a weekend. He lived for months, even years, in an area. He built churches from his converts. He shepherded them, nurtured them, corrected them, and fathered them in the faith. We need more of that and less of the 'walk the aisle' and repeat this prayer methodology.

It is reported that 9,000,000 people came to Christ through the **Jesus Film**. If that statistic is from a follow-up study of the new converts a year later, then FANTASTIC! However, all a conversion card, or count of people who walk the aisle, means is that someone went out to see this Jesus they had heard so much about. Just like the large crowds that followed Jesus, few of these supposed converts are becoming His disciples today. And John 6:66 says that even some of Jesus' disciples abandoned him when the going (Christ's doctrine) got too tough.

Is the Church guilty of spiritual abortion?

Strong words, I know, but think about it. Conceiving the new born is one thing. But if we then do nothing for them and with them or if we have no plan for their care and feeding, nurture and admonition, what is that? We abandon them to Satan, the ultimate abortionist, who does nothing but lie, rob, kill, and destroy. Certainly we are not obeying the Great Commission to make disciples and to teach them. Yet, the church gets all excited about the numbers of potential new borns instead of committed disciples.

Someone has said that we are counting the same conversions more than once; that people go to numerous meetings and raise their hand, and we count them each time. I wonder if we could count that person just once if we have not already saved every human being on the planet!

Boy, I wish that were true! I contend that we are not fulfilling the Great Commission with this evangelistic methodology. However, we are fulfilling Christ's prophecy in Matthew 24:24:

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

And for that we can REJOICE!

What is the answer?

We, the Church, must work together much better. The Church is too fragmented, even rebellious, when it comes to working in harmony. All activities within a city or town must be focused on the church ó either planting a new one or building up one or more of those that are there. Evangelistic crusades must be sponsored, supported, and sustained after the event by the local church(es). This is how Billy Graham did it so effectively.

Then, there must be discipleship after conversion. Without it the babe in Christ is in great peril! Every convert needs a pastor and needs to be taught ó usually taught things they do not want to hear! (Discipleship is confrontational and causes changes in a person's life.) Every church must understand what it takes to turn converts into disciples. Understands and is willing and able to do it.

We must tell people that giving their hearts to Jesus is only the beginning. I know that might "kill the sale" but it is the truth, the whole truth! Obedience to God's Word is a necessity of discipleship. That should not be hidden in the small print but part of the initial evangelistic call! It is not enough for Jesus Christ to be one's Savior. He must be **Lord** and **Master** too.