

When I joined the NICS in the mid-eighties, it was called training. I have in front of me a list of training courses I attended in the first few years of my career: e.g. performance appraisal interviewing, policy formulation, and human aspects of management. Then the term ‘training’ went out of fashion; ‘learning and development’ was the new expression. But whilst the terminology might have changed, and the emphasis shifted from attending courses to applying knowledge and skills ‘on the job’, the essence of the activity remained unchanged, and its importance did not diminish. In this editorial I want to look at Learning (and Development) as found in the Bible. This subject should be of interest and relevance to all readers, irrespective of age or experience. After all, the familiar word ‘disciples’ means learners – those who are taught or trained. The sections below cover some important things to learn.

Learning the gospel of God’s grace

In Colossians 1, we are told (in verse 7) that the original recipients of the letter had learned the gospel from Epaphras. The day they heard it, they “knew the grace (loving-kindness) of God in truth”, verse 6. Up to that point they had been alienated from God, and were His enemies, verse 21. Yet now they had been reconciled to God “in the body of his (Christ’s) flesh through death”, verse 22. Christ has “made peace through the blood of his cross”, verse 20. Each of the Colossian readers had exercised “faith in Christ Jesus”, verse 4, and their lives had been radically transformed: they had been removed from “the power of darkness” into “the kingdom of his (God’s) dear Son”, verse 13. We each need to reflect on whether we have learnt of our natural alienation from God, and its serious consequences; and whether we have through faith availed of God’s grace in Christ and been reconciled to Him. If so, God has much more for us to learn, as we now consider.

Learning Christ, and to be like Him

The expression “learned Christ” occurs in Ephesians 4: 20. The teaching of verses 20-24, paralleled in Colossians 3: 9-10, is that the believer in Christ, one who has come to Him and been saved, has put off the “old man” (former self) which is “corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” and put on the “new man” (the new, regenerate nature) which “after God is created in righteousness and true holiness”. There are then listed a number of practical things that the Christian must not do, and ought to do. The complete list extends into Ephesians 5, and I recommend you read it. In this article I’ll take time to quote 4:32: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you”.

Having said “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), the Lord Jesus went on to say “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart”. Whilst the picture of the yoke implies submission, it also suggests walking in step with Christ. In this connection, it’s worth thinking about Philippians 2: 5-8.

Learning God’s word and His character

In Deuteronomy 5:1 Moses says “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them”. The psalmist in Psalm 119:71 writes “It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes”. This surely goes beyond the memorisation of the words of scripture (very valuable as that is), or a mental understanding of their meaning, to a real appreciation of their importance, including obedience to them. Through the prophet, God told his wayward people in Isaiah 1:17 “Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow”. In Philippians 4:9, Paul exhorts “Those things which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do”. The consequence would be: “the God of peace shall be with you”.

Learning contentment

Still in Philippians 4, in verse 11 the apostle is able to write “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content”. Negatively, this includes (verse 12) being abased – brought low – being hungry, and in need. In verse 13, he explains the source of his contentment: Christ, the one who strengthens him.

Let us now briefly consider **Development**.

Someone who has been in a post for several years will be expected to be much more proficient than a colleague who has only recently joined the branch or section. Similarly, there should be development or growth in our Christian lives. For example, in his first epistle John identifies three categories of readers: “little children”, “young men”, and “fathers”. The writer to the Hebrews had to rebuke those who ought to have been teachers, but themselves needed to be taught again the first principles (Hebrews 5:12). In Ephesians 4:14-15 Paul wrote “that we henceforth be no more children... but... may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ”. In the words of 2 Peter 3:18, may we “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ”.