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From September 15–17, 2016, the International Fellowship of Adventist Mission Studies (the parent organization of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*) and the Swallen Mission Lectureships combined to sponsor “Discipleship in Context: Being All in for Christ in the Era of Social Media.” Most of the articles in this issue of *JAMS* were presented at that conference.

An emphasis on discipleship within the Adventist Church has often lagged behind the emphasis on evangelism and outreach. In recent years there has been a growing awareness that even though hundreds of thousands of people were joining the church each year, a large percentage were also slipping out the back door. In response to membership audits that quantified the problem (see Doss’ article), Adventist leaders have placed a higher emphasis and importance on retention and discipleship.

Traditionally the Adventist Church has won most of its adherents from other Christian denominations. Perhaps that is why little emphasis was placed on discipleship. Instead, stress was placed on teaching distinctive Adventist doctrinal beliefs. In recent years as the church increasingly reached out to Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, traditional religionists, and secular and postmodern peoples, the need for discipling materials and programs became more and more apparent.

Several articles in this issue share challenges of discipling people from one of the world’s religions. Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus come out of worldviews that are vastly different from people who have been shaped by biblical principles. Methods and approaches that were effective in discipling people with a Christian background are less effective in helping people from a non-Christian background grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ. This realization again reinforces the mission principle that one size does not fit every situation. Discipleship approaches and programs need to be tailor made for the various people and worldviews in our world.

I encourage you to read carefully Greg Whitsett’s article on discipling Buddhists. Many are finding that helping people from a Buddhist background commit their lives to Jesus Christ is the most difficult type of Christian work. Oscar Osindo’s article should also challenge us again to realize that a variety of approaches is needed even among people who share belief in a particular religion.

Bruce L. Bauer, editor
PAUL PETERSEN

The Word Behind You—Following God in the Old Testament

Introduction

We think in terms of discipleship because of Jesus. As Christians today it is impossible to approach the concept of discipleship in the Old Testament without already having the ministry of Jesus in mind.

This is true also because the terminology at first seems absent from the Hebrew Bible. The typical Hebrew equivalent of the Greek mathetes is talmid, a word occurring only once in the OT, namely in 1 Chr 25:8 about a novice in contrast to a skilled musician. So, in searching for an Old Testament background for the nature of the discipleship established by Christ, we cannot primarily look for verbal connections. Important concepts of a similar nature may, however, be present. Also in the Old Testament people are trained to become followers. Isaiah envisions the ideal future time when all children are taught or instructed by the Lord (Isa 54:13). Though reality and ideal hardly ever met, the Old Testament implies that there were sons and students in homes and/or schools, like the sons of the prophets. What those schools exactly looked like, we may not know, but I believe it would be wrong to limit the references to "sons" in a wisdom book like Proverbs only to the school in the homes. The term sons had in the culture of the day a broader sense, and it is only natural to read Proverbs also as a book used for maybe royal wisdom schools close to the court. Also, there were people who like the boy Samuel would hear and answer God’s calling with “Speak, Lord, your servant listens” (1 Sam 3:9-10). It could also be argued that Daniel and his friends faced a counter education by the indoctrination at the Babylonian court school, which then assumes that God has a goal and a plan for the proper teaching of his people.

While the situations and the concepts behind such teaching may not be completely identical with the discipling of the followers of Jesus, the
textual world of the Old Testament nevertheless provides a framework for New Testament discipleship, based on some common biblical premises in both theology and anthropology.

The Hebrew Bible was essential to the thought world of Jesus. What he said and did when calling his disciples to follow, at times had deliberate Old Testament references. The demands and responses in Luke 9:59-62, for instance, in my view obviously reflect Elisha’s dialogue with Elijah when called to follow (1 Kgs 19:19-21). So, there is good reason at a conference like this to ask the question, “and what about discipleship in the Old Testament?”

But accepting the challenge, where do we then, in lack of explicit discipleship terminology, find core statements, which can help us see how the Old Testament may prepare for the particular discipling ministry of Jesus?

The Shema

One singular text most succinctly presents us with a contour of a discipleship philosophy, namely the Shema (Deut 6:4-9). This is a foundational text for the Torah, but it incorporates a number of themes and perspectives which permeate the Old Testament as a whole. Speaking about “the heart of the matter around which everything else” in the Torah revolves, Patrick Miller states that “what Deuteronomy identifies as that center seems to me to be confirmed both by the rest of the Old Testament and by Jesus when he identifies what is the great commandment. It is the Shema” (Miller 1987:20).

It can be argued that other texts explicitly linked to the concept and practice of teaching, such as Proverbs, in particular 3:1-12 (Overlad 2000:424-40), are written in the shadow of this core text, which is also reflected in the narrative about the narratives about Samuel (Yoo 2011:119-21). Several other scholars have noted intertextual links between the Shema and other sections of the Old Testament, in general (Robert 1935), to Isa 51:1-3 (Janzen 1989:69-82), as well as to the New Testament (Gerhardsson 1996). It is therefore a natural place to look for and deduce concepts of discipleship in the Old Testament.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9 ESV)
A number of themes relevant for discipling are easily detected in the text. Among them are the total, radical commitment which springs out of the oneness of God; the principle of active learning, or learning by doing, related to the wholeness of human nature implied by a biblical anthropology; and the continuing combination of both individual and corporate perspective as exemplified in “heart” and the succession of generations, respectively. In the following, I will reflect on the theology embedded in the Shema with a view to its significance for the nature of discipleship in the Old Testament and its links to the New Testament.

The Calling

The Shema opens with the voice of God, “Hear, O Israel!” This imperative from shama’, to listen, from which the text is named, is theologically rich. It presupposes a God who speaks, and who has revealed himself and his will for the people of Israel. Humankind has not reached out for God, he comes near to us, and his word is no longer far away, it “is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it” (Deut 30:14 ESV), it is quoted by Paul in Rom 10:8 in a context which climaxes with the reference to faith arising from listening to the Word of Christ (v. 17). Similarly, in the gospels Jesus was the one who approached the disciples with his words of invitation, “Follow me!” (Matt 4:19). To God belongs the initiative of love and grace (cf. Deut 7:7). He is the one seeking.

The proper response to God’s appeal is the humility of the one who fears the Lord and thus has begun walking in the way of wisdom and learning (Prov 1:7), expressed by the voice of a child, like whom we should all be, “Speak, Lord, your servant listens!”

To hear implies more than accidental or superficial listening. Just as the Word of God is powerful and creates what it names, the process of genuine hearing leads to new life and obedience, for this sense is embedded in the word itself. When Samuel as a grown up prophet responds to and severely rebukes Saul, he speaks about God’s delight when his people listens to/obeys (shama’) the voice of God, and he claims that “obedience (to listen/shama’) is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). And when the Old Testament disciple is about to depart to the right or the left of the road, the promise is that the Word of God will sound from behind, “Here is the Way, follow it” (Isa 30:21).

The Theology: The Oneness of the God Calling

The Shema presents the nature of God, “the Lord Our God, The Lord is One.” The sentence has been translated in different ways (Moberly...
1990:209-215; McBride 1973:291-297), but my emphasis here is on the theme of oneness on which there is general agreement.

This oneness of God demands total loyalty. There is no other god (Deut 4:35, 39; 1 Kgs 8:60; Isa 45:5, 22), and you cannot worship any other (Exod 34:14; cf. Matt 4:10). Yahweh is God alone. In one other world religion, the radical nature of this commitment is named *islam*, from the Arabic word *salema*, a word etymology related to the well known Hebrew *shalom*, peace, total welfare. Monotheistic religions tend of course by definition to be ethically uncompromising, while polytheistic religions, just like modern pluralistic societies, often seem more liberal and morally permissive.

Also Christians are expected to submit, and evangelicals gladly sing, “All to Jesus I surrender.” Yet herein lies the unique Christian perspective, exemplified in the gospels by Jesus’ radical invitation, “Follow me!” (emphasis added). His disciples are to deny themselves and take up the cross (Matt 10:38; 16:24) and must be willing to suffer loss of all personal property, face public shame, humiliation, and death. Tax collectors are to leave their gains and benefits behind (Matt 9:9). If a person clings to their riches, they cannot enter the kingdom, so they must sell all and follow (Luke 18:22).

Luke’s report of the dialogue between Jesus and two potential disciples in Luke 9:59-62 contains in my view a deliberate play on the narrative about the calling of Elisha in 1 Kgs 19:19-21, a connection also noted by Parsons (2015:170). Contrary to Elisha, Jesus does not allow the potential disciple, who is called to follow, to return to bury his father, or another one simply to say goodbye (Matt 8:21-22; Luke 9:59-62). If you, like Elisha, leave your oxen behind and put your hand on the plow of the gospel, there is no looking back. Several scholars have tried to soften the seemingly harsh nature of the calling. The first disciple’s father may not yet be dead, “probably an idiom meaning my father is ill and frail; when he is dead, I will come” (Jefferey 2012:144). Or, the reference may be to the custom of a secondary burial which could only be completed after a wait of one year (Cane 1990:31-43). But the main point still is the radical nature of being a disciple. Elisha is not Elijah’s disciple in the same sense that the twelve are disciples of Jesus.

What is striking is that in the Old Testament, the demand to worship God alone leads to an evident hesitation in accepting any other master than God himself. This perspective is strongly emphasized by Rengstorff (1967:426-41) who discusses the terms against the background of the Hellenistic world with its masters and followers and concludes for instance that “the Old Testament prophets had no disciples” (427), or that there is an “absence also of the Master-Disciple relationship from the Old Testament” (426). Wilkins (2015:51-53) argues strongly against Rengstorff.
claiming that he confuses terminology with concept. To a certain degree, this discussion depends on semantics. If you call students of ordinary human teachers, whether at home or school, disciples, you find them in the Old Testament. Yet, in the absolute, radical sense of “disciple” used by Jesus, the Old Testament accepts only God as the Master.

This may lie behind the lack of discipleship terminology in the Old Testament, and it should caution Christians today who may speak about mentorship and discipleship within the believing community. As a teacher/pastor in any authority position, my pedagogical aim should always be to help students/parishioners to come to depend on God alone—never on me. But of course, also in the Old Testament, those who follow the voice of God, are impacted by their cultural environment, including their human teachers—for example the sons of Samuel followed the evil ways of the sons of Eli (cf. 1 Sam 8:1-5).

The main point here is that when Jesus in the gospels demands that people follow him, he is requiring what is a prerogative of God alone. The Son of Man becomes the object of such worship (cf. Dan 7:13-14), “all peoples will worship him,” in New Testament perspective implying his divine nature. Satan, the pretender to that position, appeals during the wilderness temptations to Jesus to acknowledge him as worthy of worship. In his refusal (Luke 4:8, the link to Dan 4 and 7 is more explicit in Luke’s gospel than in Matthew’s), Jesus may implicitly accept the divine role of the Son of Man.

Consequently, Jesus, for his disciples and for the early church becomes an object of worship, and to explain how Christians can be monotheists and still worship Christ as the Lord/Yahweh, Jesus was incorporated into the Shema in, for instance, John 17:2-3 and 1 Cor 8:5-6 (Waaler 2008), leading, of course, over time to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Anthropology: The Wholeness of the Community Called

The Shema addresses both Israel and the individuals in second person singular. The call is to the people, to Israel. At the same time it speaks to each of the children of God, who are to place the commands of God on the heart and teach each subsequent generation. The binding on forehead and hand likewise implies an individual appropriation. But the followers always live in community. The identity of the individual and the identity of the people are bound together. And while addressed to the people as a whole—“Hear, O Israel!”—the community consists of families, and the “discipling” or teaching to hear the Word of God and follow is entrusted to the families in their succession of generations.

In describing those called, totality is emphasized: You shall love the
LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. This cannot be separated from the previous line; it is the response to God’s calling and to his oneness. As expressed by Miller, “Here is that radically monotheistic insistence that the Lord Yahweh alone is God, and the oneness of this God merits the oneness of our devotion” (1987:20).

The mentioning of heart (leb), “soul” (nephesh), and might (me’od) should not be the cause for distinguishing between different parts of human nature; they are named together to indicate the complete person. And the emphasis of the sentence is in Hebrew on the initial verb, the action, in this case: You shall love the LORD your God with all that you are.

The wholeness is conditioned by loving. Where love is not present, human life is broken, both individually and corporately (Petersen 2015:235-48). Love is motivation and prerequisite for law and life. Miller points out that “law as torah means that we cannot think about or understand what law is except as part of a larger story” (1987:18). The wider context of the Shema is articulated at the end of Deut 6. When future generations ask for the purpose and content of the law and statutes given by the Lord, the answer is the story of redemption from the slavery in Egypt (Deut 6:20-25). This story introduces the Ten Commandments in both its Scriptural versions (Exod 20:2 and Deut 5:6), and God’s redemptive love, thus becomes the explicit motivation for and “encouragement to obedience” (cf. Deut 7:7; 10:12-13, and in NT, 1 John 4:19). This love, however, “is never nebulous or ill defined. Its specificity is identified in the Ten Commandments” (Miller 1987:19), the immediate reference for the “words” (debarim) of the Shema in Deut 6:6 being the Ten Commandments, spoken in 5:6-21, cf. 4:13.

Love moves with the Ten Commandments into the wider set of God’s statutes for a harmonic communal life, where care is taken for the needy and the weak, for the alien, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut 10:17, note how God’s love explicitly is presented as the context; 14:29; 16:11). The wholeness of the follower is defined also by social responsibility and intertwined with the harmony of the community. Discipleship covers all of life, both individual and corporate. The calling of the Shema thus governs my present life, but it also speaks to my future. My responsibilities as a follower extend to the generations to come. The wholeness intended by God covers not only social space, but also time.

The emphasis on wholeness or totality also comes to the fore in the reference to the exercises of daily life, to the teaching of the law when you sit or walk, when you lie down and rise up, through leisure time and work, by night and by day. Learning takes place when and by living. It includes both hand and forehead (just as, by the way, the counter law in
Rev 13:16). The dualistic tendency of Western anthropology to separate mind from matter, thinking from body, reflection from activity does not align well with the Shema. When following Jesus, you set out on a journey, a pilgrimage—you walk, exemplified in Paul’s exhortations, “Let us, therefore, walk” (Eph 4:1; 5:1).

The Choice—The Relationship between the Caller and the Called

The elements of hearing, acknowledging God’s oneness, and listening to his love story of redemption, all imply that in order to follow, the disciple has a choice to make. Miller speaks wisely about the fact that the law of God, the law of the Shema, persuades and gives reasons. It does not simply require blind, impersonal obedience (1987:19-20).

The discipleship envisioned by God is not a relationship of force, but trust. The follower is made free, is a disciple in close personal relationship with the Master, not as a copy, but as a new creation. Followers are encouraged to think, to study, to reflect and make decisions, and if they in that process are about to turn to the right or the left, their ears will hear the word from behind: “This is the Way, walk in it” (Isa 30:21).

Such freedom only exists in Christ. Genuine biblical discipleship, also in the Old Testament, springs from the reality of the presence of the Word of God among us, not far away, but in our mouth and in our hearts and thoughts (Deut 30:14) as we walk our pilgrim journey. In contrast to the transcendental ontology or ontological transcendence of God in Islam, the biblical God is also immanent. He is Immanuel—he is with us in a personal relationship created by redemptive love through which he has revealed himself. He is my kinsman and closest family, my friend (Isa 41:8; John 15:15), walking with me on my discipleship journey. Freely submitting, when following, we will hear his voice behind us and in humility respond, “Speak, Lord, your servant listens.”

Works Cited


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We live in a complicated, sick world full of deceptions. Genesis 3 not only explains how the beautiful paradise was lost by deception and lies, but also presents the terrible consequences of sin and how God reacts to the transgression of His command. Disobedience brought an avalanche of evil—seemingly starting as harmless but then breaking and tearing down everything that was beautiful, valuable, and profound. It was only a matter of time before this destroying force was plainly visible. It destroys all kinds of meaningful relationships and brings only complications, misery, suffering, and separation. What was originally very good was corrupted and marred by sin. Saying no to God is the cause of all evil. In Genesis 3 multiple consequences of sin are mentioned, but this article will focus on only two of them.

Satan made an offer to the first couple that seemed attractive and advantageous. He promised Adam and Eve that after eating the fruit from the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil that (1) their “eyes will be opened” and (2) and they “will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). How does one understand these two striking offers? Were they true?

**Opened Eyes**

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, the narrator states, as a matter of fact, that “the eyes of both of them were opened” (Gen 3:7). Yet, their eyes were opened in a different way than they had expected. It was a deception, because Adam and Eve actually lost what they had, and they realized that they were naked. Sin/disobedience opened the eyes of the first couple, and they saw what they did not see before—their nakedness. It means that they began to perceive the reality of life differently as they lost their innocence (3:7). Not only did they lose their garment of light
but after breaking their relationship with God, their very nature was corrupted. Their broken relationship with God led to the broken relationship to “self.”

When Adam and Eve saw their nakedness, they realized and felt for the first time in their lives a sense of shame and guilt. They felt miserable and experienced remorse of conscience (2:25; 3:7). Adam’s and Eve’s nakedness refers to more than a physical bodily exposure. Genesis 3:7 and 10 reveal that when God appeared in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were no longer physically naked, because they were covered with fig leaves (v. 7), yet Adam stated, “I was afraid, because I was naked” (v. 10). They were “clothed” but still naked. Thus, this nakedness was greater than a physical phenomenon. As a result of their broken relationship with God, their nature was broken, and their posterity would inherit that sinful nature, a nature corrupted by sin, with its propensities, inclinations to evil, and tendency to sin (Gen 3:7, 10; 5:1-3; 6:5). It means that every part of our being is corrupted by sin, the integrity of the whole person is lost, and cannot be saved without God’s gracious redemptive activity. For the first time, Adam and Eve felt that bitter burning inside of themselves. It was more than a sentiment of shame, because their cover made out of fig leaves could not help them. The term ‘erōm’ used in Genesis 3 denotes elsewhere in the Old Testament a shameful exposure of nakedness (see Deut 28:48; Ezek 16:7, 22, 39; 18:7, 16; 23:29), which they tried to cover with fig leaves (3:7). Victor Hamilton correctly clarifies their attempt as a self-justifying act: “Rather than driving them back to God, their guilt leads them into a self-atoning, self-protecting procedure: they must cover themselves” (1990:191). Their covering activity can be theologically characterized as “righteousness by works.”

The nakedness after sin signifies inner nakedness, being unmasked, a consciousness of guilt, total shame, loss of integrity, feelings of degradation, defeat, ruined innocence, and the disappearance of light. Gordon Wenham rightly asserts: “A more complete transformation could not be imagined. The trust of innocence is replaced by the fear of guilt” (1987:76). Hamilton describes their situation as the experience of shame, the loss of innocence, and guilt (1990:191). Sin deeply affected human nature and how people are human. After sinning, people did not become stones or automatons. Something remained from God’s image but it was shattered, and everything in humanity was marred by sin. Human beings were not able to save themselves. We are lost, broken, alienated, and condemned to death. Love for sin and inclinations to evil are now superposed on us and are an integral part of our human nature.

This act of distrust and unbelief made Adam and Eve afraid of God. They saw God with different eyes. Instead of enjoying God’s presence and
rejoicing in His Company, they hid from Him. Their disobedience caused by a broken vertical relationship with God resulted in their separation from God (Gen 3:10). They were hiding in shame, guilt, and fear. Consequently, all human beings are born with an alienated and antagonistic attitude toward God and are naturally afraid of Him (Eph 2:1-3). In order to change this misleading caricature of the true picture of God, people need to perceive His true loving character (Rom 2:4).

As the result of disobedience, Adam and Eve saw not only God and the reality of life differently but also their own relationship. The loving admiration for each other was exchanged with blaming each other for the failure (the horizontal dimension of life was broken). Sin traumatizes and alienates people from one another: “But something in them [Adam and Eve] and between them does die. Their sense of themselves and their relationship with each other is shattered” (Bartholomew and Goheen 2014:14) “Sin has undermined both the sense of self and the sense of belonging to another” (42). Sinners are blinded and refuse to accept their accountability for wrong behavior. Eve blamed the serpent for the seduction. Adam not only blamed Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit but actually blamed God because it was God who gave her to him. Self-vindication causes one to find fault beyond and not within oneself.

**Being Like God in the Knowledge of Evil?**

Does the biblical text describe the gaining of some esoteric knowledge after eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (like the devotees in the mystery cults) or is the meaning of this perplexing phrase another deception?

The serpent’s second offer is extremely shrewd, because he wanted to create a sense of feeling that they lacked something important, namely, that they did not possess a higher quality of wisdom, and that God had hidden from them the power to decide what was good and evil. Actually the sin/disobedience of Adam and Eve resulted in harming their sense of good and in losing their ability of discernment between good and evil. Satan promised that after eating from the forbidden tree they would “be like God knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). The divine statement in Genesis 3:22 that “the man [humanity] has now become like one of us” sounds like an affirmation of Satan’s offer. However, I need to underline that this seemingly simple declaration demands a reflective, deep study. The English and other translations, unfortunately, do not pay close attention to the grammar, context, and purpose of the original Hebrew text, because they depend on the Septuagint Greek translation that renders the Hebrew term “hayah” as “become” (ginomai) instead of “be.” The idea
of “becoming” in this particular context is foreign to the purpose of the text and does not do justice to the Hebrew thought. Such a translation and understanding is very problematic for several reasons:

1. A literal translation of Genesis 3:22 is as follows: “Behold, Adam [a man, i.e., humanity] was like one of us to know good and evil. And now he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever” (translation is mine). In harmony with this rendering is Young’s translation: “Lo, the man was as one of Us, as to the knowledge of good and evil.” According to this close reading of the biblical text, before eating from the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were like God in their capacity of making a difference between good and evil, namely to discern what was good and evil, but by sinning they lost this faculty, the sensitivity for detecting wrong and lies. When they crossed the boundary and engaged in evil, they lost what they had. It is true that Eve thought that additional wisdom would come to her by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:6). Nevertheless, she was not lacking wisdom, that is, the ability to distinguish between good and evil and the power to pursue what was good, but by choosing to obey the voice of the serpent instead of loving God, this dimension of life was distorted. Real wisdom means to know existentially only what is good, because “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). The knowledge of evil puts life not only in danger, but destroys what is good. By sinning Adam and Eve lost their freedom, the natural ability not to sin that they had prior to their fall. Ted Peters powerfully states: “The freedom we have lost is the freedom to live effusively out of the divine wellspring. Subsequently to this loss, freedom in God can no longer be understood as a birthright” (1998:27). The taste of evil destroys the capacity to discern between good and evil. After experiencing the flavor of disobedience, humans love sin. Adam and Eve now knew more, because they overstepped their limits and disregarded their own status as God’s creation, but God never intended that humans would possess this kind of knowledge, because by it they would lose moral discernment. Disobedience does not bring higher capacities, but destroys and takes away the valuable.

2. In order to express grammatically the idea of “becoming” instead of “being,” the verb hayah should usually be associated with the preposition lamed as in Genesis 2:9. However, our text has the verbal expressions of hayah with the same meaning as it is used in the immediate context, for example, in Gen 1:2; 2:18, and 3:1, 5, which describes consistently the state of being, the concept or condition of something lasting and permanent.

3. To be like God in knowing good and evil, does not mean to experience or do evil, because God does not know evil by experience. It has to be
stressed that God’s knowledge of evil is only “intellectual,” and never “relational.” Even though God had to deal with the real consequences of evil after Satan’s rebellion against Him in heaven, He has never experienced evil by doing it but only by reacting against it, because He is the *summum bonum*, the absolute good, and from Him comes “every good and perfect gift” (Jas 1:17). He is the Light, and there is no darkness in Him (John 1:4, 5; 3:19; 1 John 1:5, 7; 8:12; 9:5; cf. Rev 21:23; 22:5). Forbidden knowledge of good and evil is related to the experience of sin.

4. Adam and Eve’s ability for discerning between good and evil before sinning was not associated with the entitlement to decide for themselves what was right and wrong, because they were only creatures and totally dependent on God as their Creator and Law Giver. Good and evil are given realities, and the first pair should only have followed what was good. To decide what is good or evil is only God’s prerogative (Gen 2:16, 17), because He is the Sovereign Creator, the Law Giver, and the supreme Good. Thus, the ability to distinguish between good and evil in our post-sin condition is only possible on the basis of God’s revelation. Humanity needs the revealed, divine, codified law in order to know the difference between right and wrong. God’s instruction provides this crucial knowledge, which is the reliable compass for distinguishing between true and false values, something that is no longer within us. We need an external objective source of God’s revelation to know the real issues of life and follow what is right; people are entirely dependent on it for knowing God’s will. There is nothing inside of us to alert us to spiritual danger. Even our conscience cannot give this awareness unless it is purified and informed by the Word of God, and led by the Holy Spirit (Rom 3:20; 9:1; 1 Cor 4:4; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 3:9; Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 3:16, 21).

5. Eve was enticed to eat forbidden fruit, that is, to transgress and negate God’s explicit command, and it would be absurd to think that the first pair would gain the “desired” knowledge by experiencing disobedience. If humans obtained moral discernment by eating the prohibited fruit, this would be a contradiction in itself. It would be completely illogical, because then “humans would possess moral discernment by means of disobedience to the divine will” (Metteringer 2007:62, 63).

6. “The humans were created mortal but were destined for immortality” (48) on the condition of their trust and obedience. Instead of blessings and gain, for the first time the word “curse” appears in the biblical text (Gen 3:14, 17), thus demonstrating a close association between disobedience and sin. If humans do not cultivate the vertical dimension of life, they will live like animals (also created on the sixth day), and ultimately behave like brute beasts. Only God’s presence makes them humane and prevents them from living a wild life. “Human disobedience did not make
the humans ‘like the gods.’ Man is made from dust and ends as dust” (Mettinger 2007:26).

God’s Unmasking of Magical Deceptions

The biblical God is a living God, and His power is above all evil powers. Satan may try to deceive, but ultimately he is defeated by God’s moral power as in the case of the Egyptian magicians who were using divination during their encounter with Moses and Aaron in order to mislead Pharaoh. Exod 7:11, 12, says that Pharaoh summoned wise men and sorcerers, and these Egyptian magicians did the same things by their secret arts as Aaron did under God’s directions: “Each one threw down his staff and it became a snake. But Aaron’s staff swallowed up their staffs” (Exod 7:12).

They were also practicing divination during the first two of the 10 plagues and were able to imitate the first plague of turning water into blood: “But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts” (Exod 7:22) as well as the second plague: “But the magicians did the same things by their secret arts; they also made frogs come up on the land of Egypt” (Exod 8:7). However, it is stated that the magicians surrendered during the third plague: “All the dust throughout the land of Egypt became gnats. But when the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, they could not. Since the gnats were on people and animals everywhere, the magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of God.’ But Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the LORD had said” (Exod 8:17-19). In the sixth plague, according to Exodus 9:11, the magicians themselves were affected by the plague, and their magic, different tricks, and divination was proven to be powerless. “The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils that were on them and on all the Egyptians.” Thus, it was demonstrated that evil deceptions cannot stand against God’s sovereignty and authority.

The magicians in Babylon also confessed their inability to describe the dream and interpret it for King Nebuchadnezzar even though they constantly claimed that they were able to predict the future and mysteries of life. They openly declared that “no one can reveal it to the king except the gods, and they do not live among humans” (Dan 2:11). On the other hand, Daniel boldly proclaims: “No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (Dan 2:27-28a). The living God of Daniel made known to Nebuchadnezzar the future that will culminate in the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom at the Second Coming of Christ (Dan 2:44, 45).

In the New Testament one encounters a similar picture. Satan may
appear as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14), but Jesus and Paul warned strongly against deceptions that flow from this evil source in different forms (Matt 24:11, 24; Mark 7:21; Eph 4:14). The book of Revelation transparently unmasks many deceptions (Rev 13:13, 14). However, those who are led by God’s word and Spirit will recognize the truth and follow Christ wherever He leads (see Matt 7:21-24; John 12:31, 32; 17:17; Rom 8:14; Rev 14:4, 5). Nothing deceitful will be associated with the righteous as there is zero tolerance for deceit, because those who practice deception will not enter God’s kingdom (Ps 32:2; Zeph 3:13; Rev 21:27).

**Conclusion**

Sin and disobedience not only blinds but also steals from people what they already had. Both results are fatal and tremendously complicate our lives. People do not gain immortality by eating the forbidden fruit but instead they reap alienation and stubbornness. One of the terrible characteristics of sin is that sinners deny their real condition—signs of lostness are not discerned or accepted. Sin leads to the denial of truth about one’s own sinfulness and total dependence upon God.

According to Genesis 3, what may at first appear as very innocent and as a gain/profit is a clever and powerful deception. This is why people have to be constantly on guard in their everyday life. Jesus encourages: “Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36 NKJV).

Evil brought death, because the relationship with real life was broken by sin (Gen 2:17; 3:3, 19; cf. Rom 6:23). Adam and Eve would return to dust, the symbol of fragility and death: “Until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen 3:19). Death was not a primary theme in Genesis 2 even though it was mentioned by God (Gen 2:17), because the God of Creation is about life and plenty. However, Genesis 3 brought the tragic change as Walter Brueggemann fitly explains: Death “was not a threat but a candid acknowledgment of a **boundary** of life. But the boundary is now altered to become a threat. It is transformed into a terror which puts everything in question. It is not God, but the serpent who has made death a primary human agenda” (1982:48). Nevertheless, choosing God and cultivating a relationship with Him means to choose life and abundance (John 10:7-10).
Notes

1 According to the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionaries*, the word of the year for 2016 is *post-truth*, meaning we are living in the post-truth era.

2 Even after disobedience, God did not come to kill Adam and Eve, but instead (1) He calls them back to Himself (3:9); (2) He promises that the Seed will conquer and defeat evil; and (3) He provides graciously the skin garment of true righteousness (3:20). For the full exposure of the theology of sin with its consequences and God’s redemptive initiative based on Genesis 3, see my article “Genesis 3 as a Model for Understanding the Nature of Sin and Salvation.”

3 Unless otherwise noted, biblical citations are from the NIV.

4 Genesis 2:25 does not explicitly indicate in what manner Adam and Eve were without clothes, but the semantic range of *’arom* in connection with Psalm 104:1–2 suggests that the original “garments” of Adam and Eve might have been garments of light. This is a plausible suggestion, because Psalm 104 points out that God Himself is clothed with the glory of His light: “Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent” (vv. 1–2 ESV).

5 True wisdom means to have the ability to discern between good and evil and to follow only what is good as it is evident from two biblical passages: (1) 2 Sam 14:17, 20 speaks about the king’s ability of discerning good and evil (similar to the angel of God); (2) Solomon asks God for wisdom in order to have the capacity to “discern between good and evil” (1 Kgs 3:9).

6 About the use of the perfect in Hebrew and translation possibilities of the verb *hayah*, see *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (1910:309–313) and *Brown, Driver and Briggs* (1907:226–228).

If the meaning of “becoming” would be maintained in this text, then it should be interpreted as God’s statement of bitter irony or even as His sarcastic expression. The Lord God would then state that humans now think that they have become like one of Us (i.e., divine) in regard to the knowledge of good and evil. They would in their arrogance attempt to decide and define what was good and redefine evil, so God needed to guard them from the tree of life in order for them not to become everlasting sinners with a perversion of the true values of life. To be a sinner and live eternally is a concept full of contradiction per se, because the natural consequence of sin is death. Sinners cannot live eternally. Life is not a matter of magic, but a gift received in a constant dependence upon God, the unique Source, Giver, and Maintainer of life.

7 Tragically, the serpent/Satan could easily deceive and persuade Eve to disobey, but in contrast God Himself could not calm Cain’s anger, convince him to do what was right in order to avoid murdering his brother Abel (see Gen 4:5–8). The power of deception is bigger than one can imagine. This is why we need to stay on guard.
Works Cited


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Prophets, Wise Men, and Scribes in Matthew 23:34

The purpose of this paper is to explore Matthew’s discipleship ideal through the lens of Matt 23:34. By discipleship ideal I refer to that gospel character or characters whom Matthew intends to function as the primary typos for readers to imitate. Investigations into the nature of Matthean discipleship have typically focused on Matthew’s emphasis as a redactor, the disciples as characters or on discipleship-related language (Kingsbury 1978; Edwards 1985; Luz 1995; Donaldson 1996; Runesson 2008). Minimal attention has been paid to Matt 23:34. In Matt 23, Jesus addresses a series of seven sharp woes against the scribes and Pharisees (23:13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29). He criticizes their legal judgments in matters of oaths and tithing (23:16-24, cf. 5:33-37). Their external cleanliness and internal greed mark them out as full of lawlessness (23:28). Not only have they failed in matters of law, but they honor the prophets while taking part in the shedding of their blood (v. 30). They reflect their ancestors as the descendants of those who were prophet murderers (v. 31). They both misjudge the law and persecute the prophets. Davies and Allison note that the seven woes, which start with “halakhic disagreements and culminate in the murder of God’s messengers, mirror the plot of the whole Gospel, in which religious disputes lead to Jesus’ death” (1997:307). In this context, Jesus states that he will send them prophets, wise men and scribes (ἐγὼ ἀποστέλλω πρὸς ὑμᾶς προφήτας καὶ σοφοὺς καὶ γραμματεῖς), some of whom they will kill and crucify, and some of whom they will flog in their synagogues and pursue from town to town (23:34; Orton 1989:153-59). Jesus will send Israel alternative leaders to those of the scribes and Pharisees.

It is the thesis of this paper that this mixed group of prophets, wise men, and scribes represents Matthew’s discipleship ideal. Note that we are not dealing here with three separate concepts of discipleship (against
Schweizer 1974:140-51). Rather, we are dealing with a united but varied group that combines three different roles (Davies and Allison 1993:315). A reader familiar with the Old Testament will be quite aware of individuals who combined multiple roles. Moses was a lawgiver and prophet (e.g., Deut 4:44; 18:15, 18; 31:9). By the time of Philo, he had expanded his brief to that of king, lawgiver, high priest, and prophet (Philo, Mos. 2.292). Samuel combined the roles of priest and prophet (1 Sam 2:18-20; 3:1, 19-20). Jeremiah was a priest and prophet aided by the scribe Baruch (Jer 1:1, 4; 36:4; 8, 10, 13-32). Those who opposed him included a mixed multitude of priests, wise men, and prophets (17:17). In later traditions Jeremiah was viewed as a new Moses, someone who upheld the law (Allison 1993:55). Ezra was a priest and scribe (Ezra 7:1-6). By the late first century AD he was also remembered as a prophet (4 Ezra 1:1; see Metzger 1983:520). David Aune (1983:83) notes that from their first appearance in our sources, Israelite prophets such as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, combine “the characteristics of the holy man, the sage, the miracle worker, and the soothsayer” (1 Sam 9; 1 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 1:2-17; 6:1-7, 8-10; 13:14-21; 20:1-11). By the first century AD the distinctions between what might have originally been distinct roles had become thoroughly blurred. David Orton observes, for example, that scribes assimilated other functions, frequently replacing the prophets:

Thus Targum Jonathan to Isaiah 9:15 renders “the prophet who teaches lies” as the “scribe who teaches lies”: false prophet = false scribe! Similarly, for Isa. 3:2 “the judge and the prophet” taken into exile are in the Targum “the judge and the scribe.” “The priest and the prophet” who “reel with strong drink” (Isa. 28:7) become “the priest and the scribe.” (Orton 1989:55)

A parallel assimilation of literary genres occurred resulting in a blurring of the distinctions between law, prophecy and sapiential literature (Witherington 1994:75-116). This process cautions us against seeking to overly distinguish between the prophets, wise men, and scribes envisaged by Jesus in Matt 23:34. It is not my purpose to define these three different roles. Rather, my purpose is to demonstrate the significance of 23:34 in delineating Matthew’s discipleship ideal.

The Disciples as Poor Examples

For much of Matthean scholarship the disciples represent the members of a Matthean community in conflict with formative Judaism (e.g., Saldarini 1994:84-123; Sim 1998:31-62; Konradt 2014:355-67). In such readings the evangelist’s portrayal of the disciples serves to legitimate
the community’s identity and stance towards non-community members. Implicit within such readings is the assumption that the disciples reflect the community’s situation and provide a template or *typos* for the community to imitate. I have argued elsewhere that such readings are selective in their use of the text in that they tend to emphasize the positive characteristics of the disciples while deftly skipping over their multiple failings (Vine 2014:33-78). Others scholars, usually from a narrative critical perspective, have argued that the disciples function as a model of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Terrence Donaldson, for example, states:

> Within the story of Jesus, the disciples function primarily as a model of what is involved in being a member of Jesus’ “people.” Readers of Matthew’s Gospel learn what it means to be a disciple by following the disciple’s own story under the narrator’s guidance—that is, in identifying with them, in learning from their successes and failures, and, above all, in joining with them as they listen to Jesus’ teaching. (1996:41)

In broad-brush terms, the story of the Matthean disciples is one of a good start, a so-so middle, and a bad ending (Edwards 1997:141-43). Their positive start is found in the early chapters of the Gospel in the obedient response of Simon and Andrew, and James and John, to the call of Jesus to follow him (Matt 4:18-22). Throughout subsequent chapters the disciples are the beneficiaries of Jesus’ teachings and witnesses to his deeds. They are treated by Jesus as worthy to receive the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven in contrast to those whose hearts have grown dull, who hear with difficulty, and have closed their eyes (13:11, 15). As we progress further through the Gospel Peter emerges as the spokesman for the rest of the disciples. His subsequent successes and failures mirror and are mirrored by the successes and failures of the other disciples. This representative function has been amply described elsewhere and need not detain us further (Cullmann 1962:25-28; Nau 1992:133; Wiarda 2000:161-67). Peter’s ups and downs are numerous. He steps out of the boat and walks on water in 14:28-29 but then starts to sink under the waves when he sees the strength of the gale in v. 30. In 16:17, he confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but then rebukes Jesus for teaching the way of the cross (cf. 16:21-23). In 17:24-27, Jesus gently corrects Peter for presuming his position on the payment of the temple tax. In 26:33-35, Peter distances himself from the other disciples and promises never to deny Jesus. In verses 69-75, he crumbles under the sustained interrogation of a servant maid, a girl and then bystanders, and denies knowing Jesus. Unlike the Markan Peter, the Matthean Peter receives no rehabilitating post-denial mention (cf. Matt 28:7 and Mark 16:7; Collins 2007:797). The last we hear of Peter
is of him weeping following his denial of Jesus (Matt 26:75). Peter and his fellow disciples are decidedly “inconsistent followers” (Edwards 1985:52) or “fallible followers” (Malbon 2000:41-69) of Jesus. This brief description of the characterization of the Matthean disciples serves to make the point that the disciples are not intended by the evangelist to serve as the primary template for later disciples to imitate. While we may admire their successes and empathize with their failings, they do not serve as the ideal or *typos* for later followers of Jesus.

Where else might we look for Matthew’s discipleship ideal? Our first port of call might be those minor characters who typically but not always make one appearance and who embody one particular character trait (Williams 1994:189-225). In the case of Matthew the most common traits of such characters are faith or the need for mercy. Examples include a supplicant leper (Matt 8:1-4); a believing Centurion (vv. 5-13); the Gadarene demoniacs (vv. 28-34); the faithful friends of the paralytic (9:2-8); the believing woman with a hemorrhage (vv. 20-22); two blind men (vv. 27-31); a mute demoniac (vv. 32-34); a concerned Canaanite mother (15:21-28); a father of a possessed son (17:14-21); and the woman who anointed Jesus with costly ointment (26:6-13). Joel Williams asserts in his exposition of the significance of the Markan story of Bartimaeus that while “Mark initially encourages the reader to identify with the disciples, he also moves the reader to associate with other characters through the course of his narrative” (1994:151). Elizabeth Struthers Malbon similarly suggests that minor characters in Mark “extend the continuum of potential responses to Jesus in an open-ended way, providing implicit narrative comparisons and contrasts with the responses of the continuing or recurrent characters and providing a bridge from the (internal) characters to the (borderline) implied audience” (2000:193). These observations equally apply to Matthew. Such minor characters are often transparent in nature and offer the reader distinct character traits to imitate. It is, however, in the character of Jesus, that we find our primary and fullest ideal for discipleship.

Over the last 50-60 years many gospel scholars have shifted the focus of their investigations away from the historical Jesus and towards the Gospels as transparent representations of their respective communities (Watson 1998:197-207). For such scholars, the historical community rather than the historical Jesus provides a more viable and socially rewarding avenue for historical investigation. In recent years a number of British scholars have sought to resist this development. Richard Burridge (2004) convincingly demonstrated in his published doctoral thesis that the genre of the Gospels is that of Greco-Roman biography, albeit narrated with a heavily Jewish accent. The intention of such biographies or *lives*
was to present the reader with an exemplar to imitate. In the case of the Gospels this exemplar is, of course, Jesus himself. Richard Bauckham and others argued in 1998 for the Gospels as intended for an audience of all Christians rather than isolated communities. Their primary focus is on presenting Jesus to a wide audience rather than legitimating the position of a narrowly defined community. As a result of such work, there has been a renewed interest in focusing on Jesus as the central character of the Gospels, offered to the reader in the hope that he or she will choose him as an example to imitate, an ideal for discipleship (Allison 2005:143-44; Klink 2007, 2010; Bird 2010). It is in the context of these wider scholarly developments that I will argue below that the key to understanding the identity and mission of those described as prophets, wise men, and scribes in 23:34 is be found in Matthew’s characterization of Jesus himself. First a few words on the role of imitation in the ancient world.

Imitation in the Ancient World

Let us return to Matt 23. In this chapter, Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for failing to provide an example worthy of imitation in their capacity as leaders and teachers of Israel. Their key failing is that their deeds do not match their words (23:2-7; cf. Newport 1995:118-29; Turner 2015:312-17). In the ancient world students learned through comprehending a teacher’s words and imitating his deeds. In Hellenistic religions and philosophical schools imitation or mimesis supplemented oral discourse as the primary method of teaching (Malherbe 1986:34-40; Barrow 1996:18-19). The student or disciple learned through hearing his teacher’s words and imitating his deeds (cf. Jesus as a mighty prophet in deed and word in Luke 24:19). Concerning imitation, we find in the Pseudepigrapha the demand to imitate good men (T. Ash. 4:3) and the mercy of God (T. Benj. 4:1). Philo proposes Moses as the perfect king, lawgiver, high priest and prophet, a perfect model and typos for “all those who were inclined to imitate (mimeomai) him” (Philo, Moses 1:158-159). Josephus portrays Moses as the perfect example of one who seeks to imitate (mimeomai) the ways of God (Josephus, Ant. 1:19). Numerous other Old Testament characters are presented as suitable examples to imitate.

In Greek education children were taught the epics of Homer as a means of providing them with heroes they could imitate (Joyal, McDougall, and Yardley 2009:132-33). Similarly, Pliny extols the virtues of a “living model” (Pliny, Ep. 8.13) and Dio Chrysostom exhorts his readers to imitate, among others, clever artists (Chrysostom, Or. 4.83-95). In this context the good teacher sought to embody his teachings or philosophy in his actions thereby providing a living example for his students to imitate. The poor teacher
was one who shared his teachings but failed to provide a *bios* in harmony with his teachings as a template to imitate. Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for such a failure when he tells the crowds and his disciples to do whatever the scribes and Pharisees “teach you and follow it but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach” (Matt 23:3). It is a moot point as to which teachings of the scribes and Pharisees the disciples of Jesus should accept. Nevertheless, the scribes and Pharisees are imperfect exemplar figures who should, at best, be heard but not imitated. In contrast, Jesus informs his disciples that they are not to be called rabbi, for they have one teacher (ὁ διδάσκαλος) and they are all brothers (23:8; contrast 23:7). Nor are they to be called instructors (καθηγηταί), for they have one instructor (καθηγητής), the Christ (23:10). Jesus is to be their sole teacher in the sense that it is his words they are to heed and his deeds they are to imitate. It is not surprising therefore, to find the identities of prophet, wise man, and scribe in both the teachings and deeds of Jesus.

**Jesus as Prophet**

It is in the person of Jesus that we encounter the ideal for discipleship. The combined identity of the prophets, wise men, and scribes sent to warn Israel (Matt 23:34) reflects the Matthean Jesus’ own identity as prophet, wise man, and scribe. A review of the evidence will help establish this point. In terms of Jesus’ prophetic identity, a number of observations may be made:

1. Jesus was clearly viewed as a prophet by others. Matthew records, for example, the crowd’s declaration that “this is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee” (21:11; see also 16:14; 21:46; 68).

2. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus pronounces prophetic warnings and predictions (Aune 1983:171-88). In 11:20, for example, he reproaches the cities in which he had done most of his deeds of power because they did not repent (cf. 12:36). Many of his Son of Man statements relate to the future, such as his repeated warnings of his impending betrayal and death (17:12, 22; 20:17-19; 26:1-2, 24, 45). In chapters 24 and 25 he provides detailed prophecies relating to Jerusalem and the nations, and in chapter 26 he correctly predicts that the disciples would desert him (26:31-35, 56, 69-75).

3. Jesus viewed his own ministry and that of his followers as prophetic: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:12); “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward” (10:40). Jesus views his three days and
three nights in the heart of the earth as a greater example of the sign of the prophet Jonah’s three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster (12:39-40). As with his followers, he will die the death of a persecuted prophet (“shedding the blood of the prophets,” “murdered the prophets,” “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (23:29-39) (Turner 2015:151-75).

4. Jesus’ ministry parallels that of the prophet John the Baptist. John and Jesus both preach “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near” (μετανοεῖτε· ἤγγικεν γὰρ ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν, 3:2; 4:17). Initially John starts his ministry in a confrontational manner (“You brood of vipers! Who warned you of the wrath to come?” 3:3:7). This contrasts with Jesus’ early ministry in which he intentionally withdraws to avoid confrontation in order to avoid breaking “a bruised reed” or quenching “a smoldering wick” (12:14-21; cf. Isa 42:1-4). By the end of his ministry, however, Jesus uses terms reminiscent of John (“You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell?” (Matt 23:33). Matthew outlines in detail the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (14:1-12). This prefigures the arrest and execution of Jesus. In the words of Gary Yamasaki, “The narratee is prompted to see this depiction of John’s fate as a precursor of Jesus’ fate” (1998:132).

Jesus as Wise Man

The Matthean Jesus is also a wise man. In fact, he is argued by a number of scholars to be far more than a wise man. He is Wisdom itself. Jack Suggs (1970) and Celia Deutsch (1996:42-80) have both provided compelling treatments of those passages in Matthew that directly address Jesus’ identity as Wisdom. Ben Witherington has broadened and developed their arguments (1994:335-68). Evidence for Jesus as both a wise man and Wisdom include:

1. Jesus is the Teacher in a manner similar to both Wisdom and Solomon. In Proverbs, Wisdom is portrayed as the teacher who offers her knowledge and wisdom to both the simple, as well as to kings and rulers (Prov 1:20-30; 8:10, 15-16, 33; Murphy 1998:10-11). In Sirach 4:11, “Wisdom teaches her children and gives help to those who seek her.” In Sirach 4:24, Wisdom is compared to education. In Wisdom 6:14, she is portrayed as a sage sitting at the city gate, willing and ready to dispense advice. Ben Witherington, and more recently Anthony Le Donne, argue that throughout such traditions wisdom is universally associated with Solomon, the “son of David” (Witherington 1994:352-53; Le Donne 2009:106-10). In the Old Testament “son of David” serves in the majority of cases as an epithet for Solomon (cf. Prov 1:1; 1 Chr 29:22; 2 Chr 1:1; 13:6; 30:26; 35:3; cf. Eccl 1:1;
2 Chr 11:18). Only in late sapiential literature did it take on the nature of a title (see “son of David” in Pss. Sol. 17:21). Matthew’s dual emphasis on Jesus as Son of David (cf. Matt 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9; 15) and teacher indicate that the evangelist “set out to show that Jesus was the Son of David, like unto but wiser even than Solomon because Jesus was Wisdom in the flesh” (Witherington 1994:352). Note that “son of David” is also applied to Joseph in 1:20 with reference to his lineage and to the Christ in 22:42. For Matthew, Son of David evokes both wisdom and messianic associations.

2. Jesus understood his healings and exorcisms as the manifestation of wisdom. In non-canonical sources Solomon was known as a miracle worker and exorcist. His wisdom resulted in such abilities. Josephus, for example, recounts how God blessed Solomon with wisdom beyond that of his peers, a wisdom that manifested itself through his use of parables and similitudes and the ability to cure disease and cast out demons (Josephus, Ant. 8.2.5; Duling 1985). Awareness of these traditions is assumed by both the evangelist and his early Christian readers (cf. Matt 12:22-32; T. Sol. 1:1-9; 11:1-6) and complements rather than replaces Jesus’ messianic identity as Son of David. Jesus, as Son of David, heals two blind men in Matt 9:27-31, cf. 21:9. His healing of a demoniac in chapter 12, prompts the crowd to ask, “Can this be the Son of David?” (12:23). There is little justification for the dismissal by scholars such as Lidija Novakovic (2003) of possible allusions to Solomon or wisdom in these deeds of Jesus.

Further evidence that Jesus understands his own ministry to be a manifestation of wisdom is found in Matt 11. In this chapter Jesus contrasts his healing ministry with that of the prophetic ministry of John and concludes in v. 19, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (καὶ ἐδικαίωθη ἡ σοφία ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς). Clearly Jesus is referring to his own deeds, deeds undertaken by Wisdom. Davies and Allison (1993:264-65) observe a link between the deeds of Wisdom in 11:19 with τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Χριστοῦ “the works of the Christ” in 11:2. The Davidic or Solomonic question is not an either-or question. The hearings and exorcisms of Jesus as Son of David testify to his identity both as Wisdom and as the Messiah inaugurating the kingdom of heaven (cf. Isa 35:5-6; Matt 11:4, 5).

3. As Wisdom, Jesus reveals the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven that relate to God’s purposes for the last days. In Matt 13, Jesus uses parables to address those who have not been given the secrets or mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας τῶν οὐρανῶν, 13:11). In Jewish sources raœz is used in relation to secrets pertaining to the last days. In Dan 2:27-28, the equivalent Greek term in the LXX is μυστήριον: “Daniel answered the king, ‘No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or diviners can show to the king the mystery (raœzaœh; μυστήριον)
that the king is asking, but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries (ραζίς; μυστήρια), and he has disclosed to King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen at the end of days” (Dan 2:17-23; Davies and Allison 1993:398). Throughout this passage those who receive such mysteries are the recipients of wisdom (σοφία, 2:20, 21, 23) and are described as wise men (σοφοῖς, 2:21). In Matt 13, Jesus dispenses wisdom to the disciples relating to the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (13:11). Jesus treats his disciples as wise men.

4. Jesus was recognized for his wisdom by others. For example, his teachings astonish those in his hometown synagogue to the extent that they ask, “Where did this man get this wisdom (σοφία) and these deeds of power?” (Matt 13:54). Craig Keener affirms that in the ancient Mediterranean “divinely provided wisdom and the power to work miracles usually represented two basically distinct categories of ‘heroes’” (2009:395). Very few figures combined both categories. Josephus cites two individuals as having this quality, Solomon and Jesus (Josephus, Ant. 8.42-49; 18:63), testifying to the ongoing memory of Jesus as a wise man.

5. Jesus used wisdom terminology throughout his teachings. He contrasts a wise man and foolish man in 7:24-27 and wise and foolish bridesmaids in 25:1-13. He consistently uses short sayings and aphorisms typical of wisdom literature. Witherington (1994:158) argues that Jesus “presented himself as a Jewish prophetic sage, one who drew on all the riches of earlier Jewish sacred traditions, especially the prophetic, apocalyptic, and sapiential material though occasionally even the legal traditions.”

Jesus as Scribe

It has been a commonplace of Matthean scholarship to understand Jesus as a rabbi practicing scribal interpretation (Cope 1976; Westerholm 1978). Nuances within this position abound. In 1928, Ernest von Dobschütz portrayed Matthew, and by implication Matthew’s Jesus, as a converted rabbi and catechist (1995:27-38). In contrast, Orton rejected Matthew as rabbi and instead argued for Matthew the apocalyptic scribe (1989:171). Orton’s comprehensive study provides a detailed treatment of the disciples as scribes in Matt 13:51-52 and 23:34. His main omission, however, possibly because of his focus on Matthew and his community, was to link the identity of the disciples as scribes with that of Jesus as scribe. Jewish scholar Philip Segal has argued that Jesus was an anti-Pharisaic “proto-rabbinic halakhist” and charismatic prophet (2007:9). Lawrence Wills (2001) argues that Matthew’s use of precise antithetical parallelism indicates that he was a professional scribe of some sort. More recently, Chris Keith (2014:41-65) has argued on the basis of John 7:15 and Mark 6:1-6/Matt. 13:54–58/Luke
Evidence for Jesus’ scribal identity is as follows:

1. Jesus frequently interprets the Law and Prophets. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount he states his position with respect to the Law: he has not come to abolish it but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). In the six antitheses (or super theses?) he provides his own understanding of both written and oral laws (5:12-48). He summarizes the Law and the Prophets in 7:12 in a manner reflecting rabbinic use of universal statements (kelal; cf. Matt 22:34-37; Gerhardsson 1998:136-48). He makes a judgement on the payment of the temple tax in 17:24-27 and provides a midrashic explanation of Ps 110:1 in Matt 22:44.

2. Jesus is asked for and gives his opinion on a range of halakhic matters, such as table fellowship (9:11), fasting (v. 15), divorce (19:3) and Sabbath observance (12:1-8, 10). Often these discussions occur within conflict settings and serve to contrast Jesus’ emphasis on the weightier matters of the Law with his opponents’ emphasis on lighter matters (23:23).

3. Jesus understood his ministry as involving the training of scribes. At the conclusion of his parables discourse in Matt 13, he asks whether the disciples have understood his teachings. They answer, “Yes.” Jesus replies, “Therefore every scribe (πᾶς γραμματεὺς) who has been trained (μαθητευθεὶς) for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (13:52; Orton 1989:137-63).

4. Just as Jesus is more than a wise man, so too he is more than an interpreter of the Law. He is portrayed as the New Moses, reflecting his role as lawgiver as well as prophet. This has been cogently and convincingly argued by Dale Allison and as such need not detain us further (1999:15-16). Just as the Israelites were to heed the law given from Sinai, so too followers of Jesus are, as declared at his transfiguration, to listen to him (17:5).

Prophets, Wisdom, and Law in the Sermon on the Mount

The triple identities of prophet, wise man, and scribe are reflected in the teachings of Jesus. Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the teachings of Jesus throughout the first Gospel. As such, a few illustrative comments on the Sermon on the Mount will serve my purpose of demonstrating the extent to which the triple identities of prophet, wise man, and scribe are reflected in Jesus’ teachings. Numerous suggestions have been put forward regarding the genre and structure of the Sermon on the Mount (Goulder 2004:250-69; Betz 1985:1-16; Carter 1994:35-55; Allison 1999:7-25). The variety of these suggestions reflects the difficulties we face in determining the genre of Matt 5-7. Are these teachings actually
a sermon as reflected in its popular title? Are they prophecy? Legal teachings? A covenant? Wisdom literature? Poetry? The suggestion I would make is that in these three chapters we find a deliberate blending of genres. We encounter allusions to Old Testament prophetic, legal, and wisdom literature as well as to the respective roles of prophet, scribe, and wise man. In this sense we may assert that the teachings of chapters 5-7 represent both a fusion and a climax of Old Testament revelation, much in the same way, as observed by Richard Bauckham (1993:5), that John the Revelator presents his visions as the climax of prophetic traditions. Evidence for this assertion is uncontroversial but deserves stating.

First, the Old Testament prophets and their Jesus-era counterparts play a prominent role in the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, for example, may be read among other things as a description of the remnant of Israel. We encounter a people, whether ideal or real, prescriptive or descriptive, who are humble (Matt 5:3, 5), who mourn (v. 4), seek after righteousness (v. 6), are merciful (v. 5), and who are pure in heart (v. 8). These characteristics allude to Old Testament prophetic traditions relating to a post-exilic remnant who are similarly described as those who poor in spirit (Isa 61:1), who mourn (v. 2), are humble (e.g., Isa 11:4; Zeph 2:3), who seek after righteousness (Isa 51:1; Zeph 2:3) and are pure of speech (Zeph 3:13; Zech 8:16). In the Old Testament this remnant will take possession of the nations (Zeph 2:7, 9). Those portrayed in the Beatitudes will own the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3), will inherit the earth (v. 5), and will be called children of God (v. 9). Those described in the Beatitudes will be treated in the same manner as the Old Testament prophets. Followers of Jesus will be persecuted and reviled as “they persecuted the prophets before you” (v. 12). Many other parallels could be highlighted, such as those between the Beatitudes and Isaiah 61 or the warning concerning false prophets in 7:15 (Davies and Allison 1988:436-39). Such parallels lead Allison to conclude that Jesus is Isaiah’s eschatological prophet (1999:15-17). Clearly there are strong allusions to both prophecy and the prophets in the Sermon on the Mount.

There are also in the Sermon obvious allusions to wisdom literature. W. D. Davies lists, among others, Matt 5:13, 15; 6:27 as including “Wisdom” sayings of Jesus (1989:457-60). In chapter 6, Jesus warns of the dangers of pursuing money. Followers are to pursue treasures in heaven rather treasures on earth “where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” (Matt 6:9-21). The service of wealth (μαμωνᾶς) competes with service of God (v. 24). These warnings reflect a dominant motif within Wisdom literature. Eccl 5:10 states, for example, that “the lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth with gain. This also is vanity” (cf. Sir. 5:1). Jesus teaches on the necessities of life—eating,
drinking, and clothing (Matt 6:25-34). This echoes much in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes on the value, or often the limited value, of such pursuits (see Prov 12:27; 13:11, 22; Eccl 5:18-20). The end of the Sermon ends in typical Wisdom fashion, with a contrasting of the wise man who hears these words and acts upon them, the perfect student, and the foolish man who hears these words and does not act on them, the student who fails to imitate his teacher. Witherington identifies the following sapiential motifs as present in the Sermon:

beautitudes; metaphors meant to inculcate good works (5:16); the upholding of Torah and its commandments as an expression of Wisdom and righteousness (cf. Sirach 24); practical teaching on self-control in regard to both anger and sexual aggression; prohibition of oaths and revenge; exhortations to love of enemies, to almsgiving, prayer, and fasting; instructions on wealth, health, loyalties; nature wisdom meant to inculcate a less anxious lifestyle; prohibition of judging others, of profanation; exhortations to seek the right thing from God, obey the golden rule, follow the narrow path, avoid false teachers; and to maintain integrity in one’s words and deeds. (Witherington 1994:356)

Finally, in a general sense the whole of the Sermon on the Mount is an exercise in scribal interpretation to the extent that it responds to themes and motifs in the Hebrew Scriptures. A specific example, however, of scribal activity is found in chapter five. Jesus affirms the Law and the Prophets and condemns those who teach others to break one of the “least of these commandments” (Matt 5:19). The emphasis is on correct teaching of the Law and the Prophets, teaching being a scribal activity (Keith 2014:57). Jesus then compares what was said “to those of ancient times” with his own position (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). The prohibition to murder (5:21) is compared to the more pressing need to avoid anger or insult towards a brother (vv. 22-26). Jesus’ teaching, while constituting a legal ruling, reflects the oft-repeated prohibition in Wisdom literature against anger (cf. Prov 14:17, 29; 15:1, 18; 16:32; 22:24; 29:8). This illustrates the impossibility of making clear distinctions between legal and wisdom motifs in the Sermon. The prohibition against adultery is compared with the need to control one’s thoughts (Matt 5:27-30). Old Testament concessions on divorce are heightened through Jesus’ own ruling that lack of chastity is the only valid basis for divorce (Deut 24:1-4; Matt 5:31-32). The Old Testament prohibition against swearing falsely is broadened to include swearing in general (Deut 23:21-23; Matt 5:33-37). Jesus replaces the lex talionis with an appeal not to resist evildoers, to turn the other cheek and to give to anyone that begs from you (vv. 38-42). The saying “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy” is replaced with an appeal to love
your enemies and to pray for those that persecute you (vv. 43-47). In all these instances, Jesus is interpreting either written or oral laws and traditions. He is acting as a scribe.

These examples serve to illustrate the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is redolent with allusions to the Law, Prophets, and Wisdom literature and their corresponding functionaries of scribe, prophet and wise man (so Matt 23:34). Rather than read these different traditions as reflecting differing redactional layers or competing traditions within early Christianity, a less strained interpretation is to read them as a deliberate attempt on the part of Jesus to embody all Old Testament genres and roles within his teachings and deeds and, in light of Matt 23:34, in the ministry of his followers. His followers are to present a climax of revelation to those to whom they are sent.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have argued that the discipleship ideal is not primarily to be found in the characterization of the disciples with their glimmers of understanding interspersed among their multiple failures. Rather, it is to be found at those points in their portrayal that intersect with the identity of Jesus as prophet, wise man and scribe (e.g., Matt 13:54; 23:34). It has not been my purpose to discuss the role of this climax in revelation in precipitating judgement upon “this generation” (τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην), although this is clearly implied in subsequent verses (23:35-36).

One final question. Should we equate the mission of the prophets, wise men, and scribes sent to the house of Israel in 23:34 with the mission of the Eleven to all nations in 28:16-20? It may well be argued that two distinct missions are in view, one to Jerusalem and one to the nations. I have argued in this paper, however, for the close association between the three roles identified in 23:34 and the identity of Jesus himself as prophet, wise man and scribe. The call to “teach them all things I have commanded you” of 28:20 implies that the identity and mission of Jesus, including his roles as prophet, wise man, and scribe, is of fundamental importance to the mission of the Eleven. We may therefore conclude that Matthew envisages a mission to all nations undertaken by disciples who combine the roles of prophet, wise man, and scribe. Adventism has typically defined itself in prophetic terms (cf. Rev 19:10). Faithfulness to Matthew’s discipleship ideal requires that a corresponding emphasis be placed on our calling to be wise men and scribes. In this way we may intentionally serve as Matthew’s climax of revelation prior to the judgement of all nations by the Son of Man.
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Discipleship and Suffering: The Christian Response to Persecution

Introduction

Persecution of followers of Jesus Christ is happening around the world today. Sometimes it is hidden, but it is increasingly open, and the response of the international community is muted at best, and blithe indifference at worst. Reports from Open Doors USA, Voice of the Martyrs, the US State Department Annual Religious Liberty Report, and empirical evidence from around the world indicates that those who bear the name of Christ are suffering under increasing levels of hostility and overt persecution. Thus, to talk about a “Coming Storm” is in itself a Western-centric perspective when considering the existing storms raging around the world against Christians. And it is a humbling privilege as Western Christians to be associated with, and to be able to learn lessons from, the Persecuted Church of the 21st Century. However, as this article is written for Western Christians, the majority of whom do not experience overt persecution yet, this will be written from their perspective and for their benefit.

Why Is There Religious Persecution Today?

Open Doors USA (2016d) argues that when viewed from a human perspective, there are at least three possible answers.

1. Authoritarian governments seek to control all religious thought and expression (e.g., North Korea). Open Doors USA affirm that religious groups are often viewed as enemies of the state because religion generally calls for a loyalty to a higher entity than to the state itself.

2. Hostility towards non-traditional or minority religious groups (e.g., Mauritania). For example, Mauritania’s population is >98% Muslim, and hostility towards minority groups, particularly towards Christians, comes from these social actors more than from the government. It may be argued
that governments tolerate this social hostility, either to further to their own religious or political objectives, or to divert social hostility away from themselves to convenient scapegoats.

3. A refusal to recognize basic human rights, including Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief.” Open Doors USA affirms that in 1966, the United Nations developed the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 18 of the ICCPR focuses on four elements of religious freedom:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. (Office of the High Commissioner 1966)

Tragically, in many countries there is almost complete disregard for these UN declarations and agreements. Despite humanity’s best intentions, the 21st Century is already showing the most sustained levels of persecution of religious minorities in general and Christians in particular of the past 20 centuries. One possible reason why the various facets of international law are often ignored by different social elements in Islamic nations is the fact that from an Islamic perspective, the laws of humanity must cede to the laws of Allah. The laws of Allah will always trump, and if necessary, negate, any human laws not in harmony with Allah’s will.

The Current Reality of Persecution of Christians

As the 21st Century has progressed, the worldwide Body of Christ has continued to experience persecution in multiple countries around the world. If there were more martyrs for Christ in the 20th Century than in
the centuries from the apostolic church onwards combined, the 21st Century shows no sign of this trend of increasing violence towards Christians diminishing.

Freedom of conscience in general, and those who bear the name of Christ in particular, are under attack in dozens of countries and local communities worldwide. Christians are experiencing severe persecution around the world.

According to Open Doors USA, each month 332 Christians are murdered for their faith, 214 churches and overtly Christian properties are destroyed, and there are 772 forms of extreme violence committed against Christians—rapes, abductions, and forced marriages, etc. (2016b). Open Doors USA goes on to state,

Christian persecution is any hostility experienced from the world as a result of one’s identification as a Christian. From verbal harassment to hostile feelings, attitudes and actions, Christians in areas with severe religious restrictions pay a heavy price for their faith. Beatings, physical torture, confinement, isolation, rape, severe punishment, imprisonment, slavery, discrimination in education and employment, and even death are just a few examples of the persecution they experience on a daily basis.

According to The Pew Research Center, over 75% of the world’s population lives in areas with severe religious restrictions (and many of these people are Christians). Also, according to the United States Department of State, Christians in more than 60 countries face persecution from their governments or surrounding neighbors simply because of their belief in Jesus Christ. (2016c)

According to Open Doors USA (2016a), the worst 50 countries for Christian persecution in 2016 are as follows.

| 41. Kuwait | 42. Kazakhstan | 43. Indonesia |
| 44. Mali | 45. Turkey | 46. Colombia |
| 47. UAE | 48. Bahrain | 49. Niger |
| 50. Oman | | | |
Persecution is not an abstract concept. It means young Christian girls being raped at will by Muslims in Iraq, or abducted and forced into Islamic marriages in Egypt; whole communities being burned alive in Nigeria by Boko Haram; exclusion from public jobs and social discrimination in SE Asia; being beheaded along the beaches of Libya by ISIS; almost no access to any Christian literature, Bibles, or witness for those living under Sharia law in Mauritania; willful self-censorship by many in the USA who would otherwise suggest that a straight reading of the Qu’ran and Hadeeth indicates that Islam is not a religion of peace for fear of violent repercussions against fellow Adventists in Pakistan or Bangladesh by those who insist that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. (Does anybody notice the profound irony here?)

And it also means prosecution of service providers in the UK and the USA, and the imposition of crippling fines or informal economic sanctions from pro-LGBTQ corporations, for any who refuse to participate in the totalitarian LGBTQ agenda.

Thus, when talking about persecution, we are talking about real people like you and I, with families whom they love dearly, who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ, and who are paying today, as you read this article, for that decision in profoundly terrible ways. We are talking about the reality that as you read this document, our sisters in Christ are being raped purely for bearing the name of Christ, our brothers are being beheaded for the same reason, and it is only a matter of time before Christians living in the West will be experiencing such persecution.

Just before the 2nd Coming of Jesus Christ in the sixth seal of Revelation, Jesus reveals in the fifth seal that his true church will be a persecuted, martyred, and militant body. “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?’ They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed” (Rev 6:9-11 NRSV). Thus, while there will be persecution of the saints, God has established a limit beyond which evil and persecution cannot pass.

Who Is Our Enemy?

Adventists are blessed with incredible insights into the struggle between God and Satan. Our enemy is a real, literal, personal being, a fallen angel from the glories of heaven, who has engaged in relentless war against Jesus Christ and subsequently against his disciples.
According to Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:18), Satan is described in the Scriptures as the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Eph 2:2), prince of this world (John 14:30), god of this world (2 Cor 4:4), prince of demons (Matt 12:24), the hinderer (1 Thess 2:18), the accuser (Rev 12:9-11), liar and father of lies (John 8:44), angel of light (2 Cor 4:14-15), the tempter (1 Thess 3:5), a roaring lion (1 Pet 5:8-9), and a murderer (John 8:44).

Despite these fearsome titles, Satan is a defeated enemy. He goes around with great wrath, for he himself knows that his time is short (Rev 12:12). Jesus saw Satan fall as lightning from heaven to earth when the disciples ministered in divine strength (Luke 10:17-20). Jesus has promised us the same victory today (John 16:33). The Apostle Paul experienced this victory in Christ and wrote about it to the church at Rome (Rom 8:28), and the Apostle John promised Satan’s final defeat (1 John 3:8, Rev 20:10).

Yes, Satan is powerful and cruel and utterly evil, with no redeeming trait of any kind. Yet, we are not to be afraid. “Thanks be to God! He has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:57).

How Does Satan Attack the Persecuted Church?

Overt Attacks

Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:56) see in the New Testament that Satan used five external pressure sources to bring about overt attacks on the Early Church. These early strategies for overt attack are also manifest today. The five external pressure sources identified by Cunningham and Estabrooks are as follows:

**Civic rulers.** Pontius Pilate, Herod Agrippa (who murdered the Apostle James in Jerusalem, Acts 12:2), and Nero were the most obvious examples of civil rulers who persecuted the Apostolic Church. Modern-day equivalents would be Ceaucescu of Romania, Mao Tse Tung of China, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia, Fidel Castro of Cuba, the Iranian aytollahs, Kim Jong Un of North Korea, and the Politburo of the USSR.

**Religious leaders.** It was the Jewish priestly class who were most directly involved in demanding and pushing for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and Peter made it very clear to the Jewish audience at Pentecost about their portion of responsibility for Jesus’ crucifixion (Acts 2:36). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus’ most dogged opponents were the Jewish religious leaders, (the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes and lawyers), a theme which is particularly emphasized in the Gospel of John. Even with the resurrection of Jesus, and the eye-witness testimony of the Roman guards, the Jewish religious leaders paid bribes from the temple treasury to cover up the resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles records the Jewish religious
leaders’ persecution of the apostles, and the Apostle Paul began his career as a Jewish religious cleric seeking to destroy the Apostolic Church. Not all religious leaders were persecutors, for example, many of the priests were baptized after Pentecost, but the faithful stand of these individuals does not deny the greater reality, which was the implacable hatred of the Jewish priestly class towards Jesus and his disciples. Modern-day equivalents would be mullahs across the Muslim world who preach hate towards Christians and stir up mobs to attack Christians, their homes, and businesses.

**Business leaders.** These tend to oppose Christianity when it is perceived as a threat to their income levels or business models. Cunningham and Estabrooks identify the most obvious examples of business people persecuting the apostles as being the story of the possessed slave-girl whom Paul delivered (Acts 16) and the silversmiths of Ephesus (Acts 19). Acts reveals that the owners of the slave-girl were not concerned about spiritual truth per se, but primarily about the impact on their business of Paul delivering the slave-girl. “But when the owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities” (Acts 16:19). Modern-day equivalents would be the pro-LGBT businesses such as Pay-Pal, Apple, and the NBA.

**Mobs.** Cunningham and Estabrooks argue that when a powerful group in society cannot close down the Christian witness through legal methods, they may turn to “the street” to attack Christians and thus hide behind the anonymity that mobs provide. Crowds of the underemployed or religiously zealous can be swayed to violence through intemperate rhetoric, and the lure of spiritual gain, sexual violence or booty can act as a powerful force (in the crusades, potential crusaders were offered plenary forgiveness of sins plus the chance for rape, pillage, and booty). Modern-day equivalents would be the mobs who attack Christians in Pakistan and Indonesia, and the social media attacks in the USA on those who hold to biblical parameters for marriage and gender.

**Families.** Cunningham and Estabrooks delineate the simple facts of Scripture. Jesus experienced rejection from his own brothers and community of Nazareth (Matt 13:57, John 1:11). Rejection by a family member goes back to Abel’s murder by Cain (Gen 4). Jeremiah’s own family tried to murder him (Jer 12:6), and Jesus explicitly taught that accepting him may cause someone to lose their family (Matt 10:35, 36). Moving to today, it is incontrovertible to any involved in cross-cultural mission that many converts to Jesus Christ today face explicit and violent threats from their family and extended families, mostly in communities with a dominant religious group other than Christianity.

Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:60) go on to outline how Satan
attacks God’s church through the following overt ways: isolating Christians (e.g., through arrest, expulsion or enforced dispersion; creating conflict among Christians; attacks from local dominant faith leaders and faith groups/mobs; religious nationalism, in which Satan inspires civic leaders to try and force Christians to return to their “ancestral” or “former” religions or the pagan gods of their ancestors, all in the name of patriotism or nationalism; secular humanism, which proclaims tolerance but is profoundly intolerant of Christians and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ; anti-conversion laws; strict controls over approved worship centers; anti-blasphemy laws, often enforced by mobs rather than by the local judiciary; economic discrimination; martyrdom; abductions and forced marriages for Christian girls; upholding God-less ideologies; and neutralizing the Christian witness through closing all churches, closing all Christian institutions, and ministries, cutting off links with Christians in other countries, forbidding travel by Christians, closing access to financial facilities for Christians, and “re-educating” and indoctrinating Christians and their children).

Internal Attacks

Drawing on the experiences of the persecuted church, Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:29) argue that while Satan attacks the persecuted church in many overt ways (e.g., imprisonments, beheadings, physical assaults, etc.), he also attacks it via the following internal forms.

Pride. Pride was Satan’s own precipitating sin in heaven (Ezek 28.11-17), and his appeal to pride in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3.5) is a source of constant temptation for Christians today.

True guilt. Satan constantly accuses people in their own hearts of their known sins and confessed mistakes. Satan is often very successful in discounting the saints because he is reminding them of what is true—they are indeed saints with sinful pasts. Yet, according to Cunningham and Estabrooks, God has provided full forgiveness when there is confession of sins (2 Tim 1:9), with Ps 51 revealing the joy of forgiveness in David’s penitential experience following his sin with Bathsheba. Furthermore, according to Rev 12:11, believers counter and overcome the accusations of Satan in three ways: (1) by the blood of the Lamb; (2) by the word of their testimony; and (3) by their sacrificial love one for another.

False guilt. This comes when Satan accuses disciples of imaginary failures when they are facing persecution and they seek understanding of their current predicament. “Why” is a common question? Satan may respond with false answers, suggesting their persecution or present-day difficulties are the direct result of their spiritual failures. This is the burden
of false guilt that drains spiritual energy and accomplishes nothing. Satan wants people to concentrate on the past (false guilt) or the future (a debilitating sense of foreboding). Indeed, “God wants us to concentrate on the present, claim forgiveness for the sins of the past, commit the future into His hands, and live for Him in the present” (33).

_Fear._ It is natural to be afraid of many things. Many have unspoken fears, for example, of heights or sharks or speaking in public. Many also experience an existential fear about death and the manner of their death. There is a fear to speak up in times of persecution for fear the persecution will fall upon them personally. There is the fear of the unknown, or of how to respond in times of crisis. People can combat fear by remembering the following biblical understandings:

God is in control. He will only allow us to experience what He knows is best for us. We must trust Him as we’re encouraged to do in Philippians 4:6-7 and Acts 27:23-25. We are only pilgrims and strangers on this earth. Our real home is heaven. . . . We must be ready. (See Hebrews 10:32-39). God always brings good from evil as we’re told in Romans 8:28 . . . the enemy can only harm our bodies, not eternal condition (Luke 12:4-5). (Cunningham and Estabrooks 2004:37)

_Materialism._ “Satan subtly promotes the attitude that says money, property, possessions, physical comforts, as well as worldly fame and honor are the most important things in life” (43). According to Cunningham and Estabrooks, the prosperity we have is freely given to us by God and is indeed a blessing until it starts to dethrone God in our lives. Materialism is the attitude that exalts the material aspects of life over all else. “Not to say, “There is no God” but to say, “We don’t have any need of God” (43). Cunningham and Estabrooks recount the story of the church leader from Romania who lamented on this topic, “In my experience, 95% of the believers who face the test of external persecution will pass it, while 95% of those who face the test of prosperity fail it” (43).

The Process of Persecution

Dr. Johan Candelin, head of the Religious Liberties Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, studied how persecution begins and is manifest in countries around the world. He identified the following three-stage process leading to persecution becoming entrenched within a society (in Cunningham and Estabrooks 2004:72).

1. **Disinformation.** For Candelin, this may be initially passive and then active against Christians, often across the local media. Through various media outlets, “Christians are robbed of their good reputation and their
ability and right to answer accusations made against them” (72). This deliberate disinformation leads to discrimination.

2. **Discrimination.** This may be first passive, and then active. The hostile public opinion that results from disinformation leads naturally to discrimination. In Candelin’s analysis, Christians are relegated to 2nd class citizenship with inferior socio-economic and political status when compared with the majority groups in society.

3. **Persecution.** This may be first passive, and then active, and is the logical next step once the prior two stages are in place. “Once the first two steps have taken place, persecution can be practiced without normal protective measures being taken” (72). Persecution can arise from multiple actors, as described above, either with or without explicit consent and approval from the country’s rulers. In many parts of the world, “the accusations of the attackers turn the victims into the villains” (72). A classic example from history are the stages that led from the Kristallnacht to the Final Solution.

**Towards a Theology of Christian Persecution**

Jesus defined persecution using four verbs in Luke 6:22, “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame [reject] you on account of the Son of Man” (NRSV, emphasis added).

Cunningham and Estabrooks argue that it is clear that Christians are not persecuted randomly, but because all persecution of Christians is ultimately targeted at Jesus Christ himself (73). “Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me” (John 15:20-21 NRSV). Persecution happens naturally for disciples of Jesus Christ, because this world has first rejected Jesus Christ.

Jim Cunningham (2004:73) developed the “HEIR” persecution index to define persecution based on Luke 6:22. He outlines the HEIR acronym in general as follows:

- **H** = Hate (shut us down). Christians are hated because of what they believe, and are intimidated to cause them to lose hope.
- **E** = Exclude (shut us up). Christians are excluded to silence their witness in society.
- **I** = Insult (shut us out). Christian voices are systematically excluded from civil debate, and the motives of Christian ministries are impugned.
- **R** = Reject (shut us off). Open persecution is the natural conclusion of the previous three stages.
It is important to recognize in this HEIR framework that persecution happens long before mobs attach Christian churches and pastors are slaughtered in the streets. Persecution starts whenever forces in society seek to shut down the Christian witness and voice in the public marketplace. This is happening in 2016 in countries like Canada and the USA, where “Social Justice Warriors” are seeking to enforce unbiblical social constructs on societies through the use of bullying corporations and a sneering media environment towards Christians.

Cunningham goes on to argue that the Apostle Paul also indicated that those who are HEIRs in suffering for Christ will become HEIRs in his glorious inheritance. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Rom 8:16-17 NKJV). Thus, when Christians today experience hatred, exclusion, insults, and rejection, God promises they will become heirs with Jesus in his glory—a beautiful promise (73).

Jesus also spoke about persecution in the final beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt 5:10-11 NRSV, emphasis added).

A critical shift is now taking place in the Matthean Beatitudes. Up to this point, all the previous Matthean Beatitudes can be explained in OT terms, and each was perfectly expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ himself. We now come to the climax of the Beatitudes, and in these final Beatitudes personal loyalty to Jesus is openly introduced. As Jesus is the perfect exemplar of Beatitude-living, such personal loyalty to Him is the inevitable consequence of seeking to live out Beatitudes, particularly the final Beatitudes which deal with persecution.

At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that it is the “wise” who build their lives on his teachings (Matt 7:24-27). While the early followers of Jesus were persecuted because of their preaching, the record of the early church indicates that in putting the teachings of Jesus into practice they also presented a profound challenge to the existing socio-economic order (Acts 2-10).

Yet, to his persecuted followers, Jesus promised that he will be with them “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). And when brought to trial, he promised to speak for them, “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say: for what you are to say will be given to you at that time” (Matt 10:19). Furthermore, our response to the rejection of the world will determine our relationship with God. “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will
acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matt 10:32-33).

If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.
If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own.
Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. . . .
In the world you face persecution. But take courage: I have conquered the world. . . .
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 15:18-19, 33; 1:5).

Thus character is not formed in times of crisis—it is revealed for what it already is. Every decision today helps to shape our character for tomorrow. We prepare for persecution tomorrow for the sake of Christ by seeking by God’s grace to fully live and exemplify the Beatitudes and the other teachings of Jesus Christ today.

Anticipating Personal Persecution

In the West, the concept of tolerance now means that the only thing we may insist upon is that one must not insist on anything. Many believe it is wrong for a person to encourage someone who is on their own valid path to change to theirs. The postmodern world has no place for absolute truth, hence accusations in the West that the Bible is “hate literature” because it insists that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation (John 14).

The reality though is that it is Jesus Christ who is the focus of these attacks. Because this world and its various ideologies hate Jesus Christ and his unique role and claims, persecution is targeted at his followers. As Jesus said, “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also” (John 15:20). The question then is not only how do we respond to brothers and sisters living under persecution, but how may we best prepare ourselves for living under overt persecution?

This question of preparing for overt persecution is particularly important for Adventists in the West. Adventist eschatology reveals that in the end times, God’s faithful remnant will not be a triumphant, glorious, and well-received global movement, but will be a church militant, under severe economic sanction, enduring public and legal opprobrium, shorn of its institutions, tax-free exemptions, grants of land, access to banking, legal, visa, and financial instruments, and ultimately facing the death penalty for refusing to accept the Mark of the Beast.

Yet, the current modus operandi for the global Seventh-day Adventist Church relies on a benign banking, legal, tax, and political environment,
in which visas are issued on request, funds move globally without hindrance, tax benefits are actively sought and granted, and overt institutions grow and receive public applause.

Adventists in general, and Western Adventists in particular, must recognize and internalize the reality that the message entrusted to God’s end-time remnant compels us to prepare for persecution by learning the deep spiritual lessons from the Persecuted Church of the 21st Century, and to understand that the freedoms currently enjoyed in the West are merely a temporary and transient stepping stone to overwhelming legal, social, and financial pressures seeking to either force Adventists to comply with wider social mores, or be closed down as a public institution and as a public voice.

Adventist administrators face huge internal pressures from their constituencies to keep local Adventist institutions going. Pressures to maintain ongoing employment for Adventists, to support the tithe base, to maintain cherished facilities, and to pour funds into unviable institutions are huge. Woe betide any conference president who recommends the closure of a cherished academy or school to the local constituency.

This focus on maintaining current infrastructure and institutions ensures that Adventist administrators in the West are ignoring their theoretically primary role as spiritual shepherds, which would suggest they focus not on preserving the past (which in the form of Adventist institutions will one day be destroyed anyway by a hostile public environment), but on equipping and guiding the church spiritually for the coming storm.

Adventists and the Coming Final Persecution

How then can Western Adventists prepare for the coming storm? According to Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:7), one option would be to enter a bunker mentality, cower in fear, and lose any desire to be a blessing for the world around. Another option would be to buy properties in remote mountain areas and become “preppers.” Some may lash out in aggression, seeking via the political processes to enforce a “Christian” morality in each nation. Others may smile complacently, and say that these things must be, that persecution will shake the chaff (i.e., others) out of the church while leaving the true grain (i.e., me), so bring it on. And still others will have a speech that is harsh, critical, condemning, and aggressive towards the lost all around, when many of the lost are seeking a winsome, wooing, and winning manifestation of God’s love in their own community.

None of the above responses to persecution are legitimately derived from the Bible in general or the Sermon on the Mount in particular. A
more biblical approach, as argued by Cunningham and Estabrooks, would be to prepare for persecution in three ways, “Intellectually—I know it is coming. Practically—I have prepared my people for my imprisonment. Spiritually—I am ready for prison” (2004:7, 8).

The Holy Spirit reveals through the Apostle Paul the truth that those living through persecution are able to teach disciples living in the free world incredible biblical truths about what true discipleship means. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Cor 1:3-4 NRSV). Thus, Adventists in the West need to ask in humility and with profound respect of those living under persecution for the lessons they have learned so all may be better prepared for the anticipated global storm.

How Do We Respond to Those Experiencing Persecution?

First, slow down. “When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:12-13). When we sit with Iraqi Christian women who have lost their daughters to ISIS, and the silence of grief comes over the mothers as they grieve their lost daughters, like the friends of Job, we are called in like manner to sit in silence before such suffering. Slow down, be silent, affirm the victim’s right to grieve, and weep with those who weep. We cannot simply ignore the suffering of those who bear the name of Christ.

Second, speak up for those who cannot speak up. “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 82:3, 4). God calls his people to be a voice for the voiceless in their suffering and injustice, for example, signing petitions, writing to our representatives in Congress, etc. “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute” (Prov 31:8). We are not called to a comfortable middle-class Christian experience, assuming that because we are okay then everyone else must be okay. We worship God according to our conscience (Religious Liberty [RL] and the greatest commandment), and he in turn calls us to “love our neighbor as ourselves” (the 2nd commandment). Thus we cannot preach RL but be silent on segregated congregations or marginalized communities, or be silent on hungry children in our midst, or be silent while abuse victims sit in suffering silence in our pews,
or be silent while single parents struggle to survive from day to day. Precisely because of our RL spiritual birthright, we are called to speak up about and minister to those caught in human trafficking, police brutality, economic inequality, unsustainable debt, family breakdown, environmental degradation, moral chaos, and systemic social injustice.

Fourth, identify with the Persecuted Church whenever possible. “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (Heb 13:3). We are to offer practical support wherever possible, to educate ourselves about religious liberty, and to reach out whenever possible to those suffering for Christ.

In practice, there is much we can do: become engaged in Religious Liberty ministries; educate ourselves on Religious Liberty issues and trends; join the NARLA (www.religiousliberty.info); sign up for the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors USA newsletters; provide financial, emotional, and practical support for the families of prisoners of conscience; become active in the NAD’s refugee and immigrant ministry (www.refugeeministries.com); read the reports of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (http://www.uscirf.gov/); and pray... pray... pray—for those being persecuted, for prisoners of conscience, and their families.

How Do We Prepare for Persecution Ourselves?

The Seventh-day Adventist approach to eschatological persecution often tends to focus on the correct identification of the eschatological actors portrayed in Dan 10-12, Rev 12-18, etc., and on the trigger events and sequencing of key events such as the close of probation, Jacob’s time of trouble, and the little time of trouble, etc.

Open Doors, an evangelical group, focuses on spiritual preparation for when Christians personally experience persecution. Such spiritual preparation is laid out in the book they have published, Standing Strong through the Storm by Estabrooks and Cunningham, which represents a curriculum containing six key lessons relating to spiritual preparation for, and response to, persecution. These six lessons are as follows:

1. Sometimes you need to build yourself a cell. Be still, and know that I am God—Psalms 46:10 One Chinese church leader, who spent 23 years in prison, once said this to Christians who did not face persecution: “I was pushed into a cell, but you have to push yourself into one. You have no time to know God. You need to build yourself a cell, so you can do for yourself what persecution did for me—simplify your life and know God.” It is vital that we spend time with God, to grow in Him, so we are prepared to stand strong in the face of persecution.
2. God keeps secrets. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” Isaiah 55:8-9. There have been countless stories of persecuted Christians who have died without seeing the fruits of their labor. However, God knows all that has been and all that is to come. Our labor is not in vain, it is in His hands.

3. Weakness is a direct path to power. “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” 2 Corinthians 12:10. An Egyptian Christian reflected on the way he was treated when he converted to Christ: “In great suffering you discover a different Jesus than you do in normal life. . . . Pain and suffering bring up to the surface all the weak points of your personality. In my weakest state, I had an incredible realization that Jesus loved me even right then.” True empowerment does not come from human means, but through Christ alone. It often takes being at our weakest point to realize this.

4. Overcoming is greater than deliverance. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” Romans 12:21. Persecuted Christians, no matter what country they are from, do not ask us to pray that persecution would end, but rather ask us to pray that they stand strong through the persecution. They do not wish to be delivered from the persecution, but rather ask us to pray that they would be able to overcome the trials that they are facing in a way that is honoring to God.

5. Extreme hurt requires extreme forgiveness. “And Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ And they cast lots to divide his garments” Luke 23:34. A Christian widow from Iran said: “I only had hatred in my heart for my enemies who had murdered my husband. But one day a miracle happened. God taught me how I could love my enemies. . . . I had been praying for this, even though on the deepest level I didn’t want it to happen. Gradually, through a process of ups and downs, God answered this prayer.” The only way we can get through extreme hurt is by forgiving people as Christ did.

6. Prayer is the ultimate fellowship. “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” Hebrews 13:3. Many persecuted Christians often feel isolated and alone, since they are unable to fellowship with other believers. However, prayers from Christians half a world away have brought the same amount of encouragement that fellowship would have for these persecuted Christians. Prayer is vital—not only as a direct line to God, but as a way to encourage our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world.” (Open Doors USA 2016d)

How Do We Respond When Facing Persecution Ourselves?

The teachings of Scripture are clear—we do not respond to persecution.
with violence. The Apostle Peter, once a man of impulsive violence, was explicit in this regard. We do not return “evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9 NKJV). Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount also rejected violence on the part of his disciples “But I say to you who hear: ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you’” (Luke 6:27, 28 NKJV).

What then are some appropriate biblical responses to persecution? Cunningham and Estabrooks (2004:285-295) outline the following fourteen biblical responses we may consider:

1. **Fleeing**—when it is clearly God’s revealed will. Cunningham and Estabrooks provide the following biblical examples, given for our instruction. Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt when instructed by an angel to do so (Matt 2:13, 14). Jesus also commanded his followers to flee from one town to the next if they were persecuted (Matt 10:23; Luke 9:5). The Apostle Paul fled on a number of occasions from one town to the next when facing persecution (Acts 9:25, 30). He did not make fleeing a constant practice, but fled when it was necessary to save his life and ministry.

2. **Staying and enduring**. Cunningham and Estabrooks argue this was modeled by Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:41-52).

3. **Hiding**. Cunningham and Estabrooks describe the two Israelite spies who were happy to hide on Rahab’s roof while spying in Jericho. Many modern-day Christians are forced to either hide or hide others during times of persecution.

4. **Boldly remaining as the salt and light of the world**. This teaching of Jesus in Matt 5:13-14 comes immediately after his beatitude on the blessings of those who experience persecution. Salt preserves, and light dispels darkness. When Christians flee, their preserving and enlightening impact departs with them.

5. **Affirming a non-violent response**. Disciples of Jesus Christ place their pain and desire for vengeance in the hands of God, who knows everything and will one day execute perfect justice (Ps 43:1; Rom 12:17-21; Prov 25:21-22).

6. **By giving one’s life**. According to Cunningham and Estabrooks, “Martyrdom is described as a legitimate response to persecution” (2004:287), with Jesus revealing that a special crown is reserved for those who lay down their lives for their faith (Rev 2:10).

7. **Exercising legal privileges**. The Apostle Paul was willing to use his rights as a Roman citizen to defend himself, and also to appeal to Caesar for a hearing (Acts 22, 25). When there are legal difficulties for Christians, Christians can document incidents and ask the worldwide church for...
prayer and other support, for financial support for persecuted Christians, to serve as an advocate with government officials, and to help educate members about their legal rights within a given jurisdiction.

8. Not being surprised. The Apostle Peter explicitly counsels disciples to NOT be surprised when facing persecution. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified” (1 Pet 4:12-14 NKJV emphasis mine).

9. Rejoicing. In 1 Pet 4:13, there is a command to rejoice in sufferings, and the Apostle Paul commanded disciples to rejoice in all things (Phil 4:4). James also commanded people to rejoice in their sufferings for Christ (Jas 1:2, 3), and we are to be comforted by the beautiful promise of God in Rom 8:25, “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (NKJV).

10. Pray with thankfulness (Phil 4:6), including praying for fellow sufferers (Acts 12:5; Heb 13:3; Col 4:18) and our persecutors (Matt 5:44; Rom 12:14).

11. Refuse to be ashamed. “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter” (1 Pet 4:16 NKJV).

12. Refuse to retaliate—consider Jesus Christ in his passion.

13. Trust God that nothing can separate us from him (Rom 8:31-39) and that God will never allow persecution to become unbearable on a personal level (1 Cor 10:13).

14. Stand firm together with fellow brothers and sisters. When one part of the Body of Christ suffers, all the other members suffer (1 Cor 12:20-27).

Conclusion

The Scriptures portray an eschatological remnant that is neither triumphant nor comfortable. Rather, it is the church militant that survives through to the 2nd Coming, facing overt persecution from external actors, and riven by internal stresses between the wheat and the tares. Nonetheless, Jesus Christ gives a series of beautiful promises to those who stand faithful to the end:

“To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev 2:7 NKJV).

“He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death” (Rev 2:11).
“To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (Rev 2:17).

“And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’—as I also have received from My Father; “and I will give him the morning star” (Rev 2:26-28).

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels” (Rev 3:5).

“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name” (Rev 3:12 NKJV).

“To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev 3:21). Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!

Works Cited


Born into a pastoral family, Elder Conrad Vine grew up the UK. After graduating with a business management degree (1995), he served in the UK public healthcare system before God led him to ADRA in Central Asia, to the Middle East Union as Secretary-Treasurer, and to pastoral service in the UK and MN. Elder Vine has been serving as the President of AFM since 2011.
When speaking of the “Wesleyan Connection” it is in reference to the revivalism, evangelism, small group and pastoral nurture (mostly by lay pastors and visitors), and social relief or reform activities of the most notable Anglican para-church movement of the 18th Century—the Wesleyan Revival or the Methodism that was led by John and Charles Wesley and their lay and clergy associates.

Certainly, the most well-known leader of this British/Colonial Evangelical Revival movement was John Wesley (1703-1791). The Wesley brothers and their associates featured an Arminian perspective (emphasis on graced free will) and their movement became known as Wesleyanism or Methodism. While mostly recognized for their fearless, sustained itinerant evangelism, small group nurture, and the founding of the United Societies, or the Wesleyan Connection, the Methodists also made a very strong contribution to the wider Protestant theological developments, including the later teachings of Seventh-day Adventism. Though John Wesley never wrote a systematic theology (like Calvin’s *Institutes*), there was a sustained core to his theology around which revolved a number of key themes which he elaborated in oral and published sermons, commentaries on Scripture, published journals, occasional pamphlets, periodical articles, and numerous letters.

As already suggested, Wesley was broadly Arminian (following the “free grace” perspectives of Jacob Arminius—the late 16th and early 17th Century Dutch theologian) in his theological outlook, and thus he greatly accentuated God’s gracious initiative in salvation (prevenient grace), which elicits a freely chosen response on the part of the convicted sinner. Strongly opposed to the themes of irresistible grace, so typical of Calvinistic/Reformed Protestantism (whose monergism—where God determines all things—for Wesley, seemed to be an invitation to a do-nothing, passive religion), Wesley proactively proclaimed both justifying and sanctifying
grace in pursuit of his central theological theme—sinners are *pardoned* in order to *participate*.

His strong emphasis on the importance of sanctification and perfection led him to stoutly oppose any antinomian tendencies, especially those he perceived as coming out of the Calvinistic wing of English evangelicalism. While influenced by the classic Anglican doctrinal standards (especially the Thirty-Nine Articles, The Book of Common Prayer, and the Edwardsean Homilies), with their mild affirmations of the role of Christian Tradition (the famed *via media* between Rome and Puritan Protestantism), Wesley always sought biblical foundations for his theological convictions.

From an Seventh-day Adventist perspective, Ellen White did comment on Wesley in an affirmative but brief manner in a number of her published works (1911:598; 1900:78, 79; 1903:254; 1915:34; 1890:404). However, her only sustained treatment of his life, ministry, and theological convictions is found in *The Great Controversy* (White 1911b:252-264). After briefly reviewing the rise of Oxford Methodism (in both Britain and Colonial Georgia), Wesley’s struggles with legalism, his frantic search for “holiness of heart,” his evangelical conversion, and the beginnings of the English Evangelical Revival, Ellen White approvingly notes a number of his key theological emphases.

The lead factor for her was Wesley’s hard-won understanding (theological, ethical, and devotional/experiential) of the proper relationship between justification and sanctification: “He continued his strict and self-denying life, not now as the *ground*, but the *result* of faith; not the *root* but the *fruit* of holiness (emphasis in original). The grace of God in Christ is the foundation of the Christian’s hope, and that grace will be manifested in obedience. . . . Wesley’s life was devoted to the preaching [of] . . . justification through faith in the atoning blood of Christ, and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit upon the heart, bringing forth fruit in a life conformed to the example of Christ” (White 1911a:256). This exposition of law and grace was understood by her as the theological and practical center of Wesley’s teachings, around which all else orbited.

Other key theological planets in the Wesleyan solar system of grace which Ellen White affirmed were (1) universal election and free will (White 1911a:261) in clear opposition to the limited atonement and irresistible election doctrine of Calvinism, (2) prevenient grace (262), (3) the full affirmation of the authority of the “moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments” (262), and (4) the “perfect harmony of the law and the gospel” (262): “Thus while preaching the gospel of the grace of God, Wesley, like his Master, sought to ‘magnify the law, and make it honorable’” (264).

While Ellen White clearly expressed negative views on American Methodism (which dis-fellowshipped her and her family because of their
Millerite views) and the Holiness Movement because of their rejection of numerous doctrines held by the emerging Seventh-day Adventists, yet she was always affirmative of the core of Wesley’s theology, especially the main outlines of his teachings on salvation.

Thus, it seems safe to conclude that the most important, influential aspect of Wesley’s thought on Ellen White was the core of his theology of salvation which emerged in a setting of free grace and called for the response of human faith which inheres in God’s offer of grace (both justifying and sanctifying). While Ellen White did go on to reject Wesley’s teaching that sanctifying grace would lead to a moment of instantaneous perfection (in which original sin, with its inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil would be purged away before glorification), she was in essential agreement with the basic thrust of his teachings on transforming grace.

In fact, it can be persuasively argued that the Adventist doctrine of the “investigative judgment” (strongly affirmed by Ellen White) could only emerge in a setting mentored by the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition. If salvation is irresistible, as the fruit of God’s pre-determined election, judgment becomes essentially superfluous as there is no freely chosen response of faith to God’s offer of salvation. If God, however, seeks the freely chosen response of the faith of believers to his offer of grace, and our response can necessarily include either a reception or rejection of saving grace (both justifying grace, the “root” of faith and sanctifying grace, the “fruit” of obedience), then there is the strong implication that sinners are responsible to God and there can be a judgment according to works. And these works will witness to the balance of God’s justice and mercy in his just judgments of sinful humans who receive or reject his offer of salvation. While Wesley did not understand such a judgment as “pre-Advent,” he clearly taught a judgment of investigation for the professed believers in Christ at the end of the age.

While it is true that the theology of Ellen White is not exclusively indebted to any one of the major Protestant theological traditions (Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, and Anglican), the way in which Wesley understood the issues of personal salvation (and the closely related issues of election, free will, grace, heart-felt religion, law, sin, perfection, and judgment according to works) seems to have most profoundly influenced Ellen White. While not wanting to totally side-track other formative issues, such as theological method (Bible authority and its relationship to reason, experience, and tradition), Trinity, church organization, and Ellen White’s own Methodist-nurtured experience of conversion and sanctification, it appears that the heart of Wesley’s influence on Ellen White and subsequent Adventist theological developments came mainly through his expositions on personal salvation.
However, in addition to these theological concerns, it is also notable that both of Wesley’s parents, John and Susanna (nee Annesley) Wesley, were young adult converts to Anglicanism (and what follows is a digest of Collins 2003:11-28). In these changes of allegiance, they were going against a considerable theological background in Puritanism (Reformed British Calvinism), personified in both of John and Charles Wesley’s eminent Puritan grandfathers.

And it is also instructive that both of Wesley’s parents were not only deeply influenced by Arminian theology, but that they were also significantly influenced by the devotional and moral reform concerns of the rising Religious Society movements in the Anglicanism which they adopted in their early adulthood and were sustained by in a lifetime of ministry. So a conversion to the Arminian concerns of their adopted Anglicanism (after the spurning of their Reformed upbringing) was accompanied by an active participation in many of the devotional, literary, and social reform movements of the day. Thus, the emerging adult views of Samuel and Susanna Wesley on theology, spirituality, personal, and social ethics/reform were destined to strongly influence the directions of their two eminent sons—John and Charles Wesley—the key founders of Wesleyan Methodism in the 18th Century and the rise of their version of Methodism in both 18th and 19th Century North American Methodism.

With this brief biographical and theological background in hand, the key burden of the balance of this presentation is to spotlight how the Wesley brother’s theology informed their views and practices (especially John’s) regarding discipleship (and what follows is essentially a digest of Thorsen 2013:112-116).

The Wesleyan View of Discipleship

There was never a temptation to any isolated quietism in the practical divinity of the Wesley brothers and their movement. In other words, a life in union with Christ by faith in his atoning work would be evidenced by a life of devotional exercises, attendance at public worship in the local Anglican parish churches, sacramental observances (at least baptism and the Lord’s Supper) and a strong search for the fullest possible heights of character change. Thus, the Wesleyan Revival in its original intent, envisioned itself to be a supporting ministry of the Church of England, its preaching and sacraments, adherence to its doctrinal standards and worship rubrics, and an affirmation of its various ministries of relief, uplift, and education. Therefore, for the Wesleys to be a member of their United Societies, they also had to be a loyal and observant churchperson—all envisioned to be a part of normal Christian discipleship. And such discipleship began with
an earnest desire to live for the glory of God and be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Without earnest sanctification efforts, there was no effectual discipleship.

But John Wesley also saw the need of a special para-church ministry that included (1) public evangelism that reached beyond the boundaries of the church proper, and (2) the founding of the Wesleyan United Societies which featured mid-week fellowship in the gathered local societies. Thus, discipleship not only involved personal salvation and character transformation, local church attendance, and the celebration of the sacraments, but it also included the blessings of the special meetings of the local Wesleyan Societies that were intended to augment their church participation by involvement in what were called “classes” and “bands,” venues that afforded more intense mutual admonition and nurture and other groups that had been organized for special evangelistic outreach (such as prison visitation) and uplift help for the poor and needy. Wesley had a deep interest in such things as medical relief and the provision of seed money to help the poor to become entrepreneurial in founding small business enterprises. There were also special ministries for the visitation of the elderly, the shut-ins, and the sick. In fact, one friend of Wesley was reported to have said that it was almost impossible for him to sit still for a moment of conversation as he was so anxious to go off to visit some poor and needy elderly person.

The activities of the Wesleyan United Societies mostly consisted of participation in Wesley’s local Societies which featured mid-week gatherings for worship, prayer, and fellowship. It was probably analogous to the Adventist “prayer meeting.” But the local Societies also featured smaller groups called “classes” and “bands.” These were intended to facilitate more intensive group and personal discipline and were designed to inspire a deeper penitence for sin and a more profound devotion to Christian witness and other forms of uplifting service. So while public worship at the local parish church was greatly encouraged for the laity, the heart of the Wesleyan movement was the more intense group nurture in the local United Societies and their intensely nurturing classes and bands. If you were not active in these public and small group fellowship and service units, you were just not a good Wesleyan in either your lay or more professional, full-time public discipleship. To become a Wesleyan in the Evangelical Revival of both 18th Century British and American Methodism required not only intense group nurture, but also pressing demands for fruitful service for the average lay members.

But all of this was given leadership by not only the Wesley brothers, but also by a growing group of traveling “Lay Assistants” who functioned as regional evangelists and pastors. They were assigned by John Wesley
to annual appointments and their chief work was to consist of (1) public evangelism in their regional towns, and (2) pastoral care for the local Wesleyan Societies in their respective circuits. And the accountability levels were superintended by Wesley himself, especially through what became known as personal conferencing, and Quarterly and Annual meetings of the Wesleys with their lay assistants. And it was probably among these local, lay assistants that the greatest demands for intense discipleship were invested. To be “called” to such a ministry meant constant itineration (mostly on horseback), public evangelism (including street and open field preaching), and the nurture and discipline of their assigned local Societies on their respective regional circuits. And probably the most famous example of this “circuit” riding was the founder of American Methodism, the redoubtable Frances Asbury. So we can safely conclude that the demands for discipleship were quite intense for both the ministers and the lay participants in the United Societies and the fellowship provided by their local societies.

But such discipleship not only included lay and “ministerial” workers in evangelism and pastoral care, but also a growing network of “preaching houses” and ministries of relief—such as outreach and nurture to and for the poor and destitute, medical dispensaries (John Wesley’s medical handbook was called *The Primitive Physic* and functioned as a sort of “first aid” reference book for various healing nostrums), visitation of the sick, and entrepreneurial lending agencies to inspire small industries and prison ministries. Many of these varied ministries were administered by not only the Wesley’s and their itinerant assistants, but also by a growing group of financial and facilities managers called “stewards.”

So to become a Wesleyan (for both the lay and full time “workers”) in the 18th Century Evangelical Revival, in Great Britain and England’s North American and Caribbean Colonies, required some sober reflection and deep commitment to serious religious devotion, Christian fellowship, evangelism, social reform, and charitable relief. This was no path for the religious person who was looking for a more passive or relatively private “way” to the Kingdom of heaven. And only those who were deeply committed to a profoundly demanding version of the Wesleys’ “Free, or Responsible Grace” approach would thrive amidst the rigors of such an activist version of Christian discipleship.

**Notes**

1This article is adapted from the “Wesley, John” entry in *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (Fortin and Moon 2013:1263-1265).
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DENIS FORTIN

Growing Up in Christ: Ellen G. White’s Concept of Discipleship

The concept of discipleship was not a concept discussed in nineteenth-century Evangelical denominations. However, if we understand discipleship as the concept of how the church community mentors and helps a new convert to become a committed disciple of Jesus Christ, then we can find substantial material to discuss this subject.

*Steps to Christ* holds a special place in Adventist history and theology and is one of the most translated books of all times by any author. Its publication occurred at the beginning of a period of Ellen White’s ministry, from about 1890 to the early 1900s, when she published a number of books on the life of Christ. Shortly after the experience of the 1888 General Conference session in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when Adventist pastors and leaders passionately debated the concepts of righteousness by faith and how one is to live a life of faith and obedience, White felt convicted that Seventh-day Adventists needed to learn more about the meaning of salvation in Christ—not only to gain a better knowledge of salvation, but also to experience its renewing power, something she felt was immensely deficient in a young denomination that had become too legalistic (White 1984:433; White 1983:11).

In a little over a decade she and her editorial assistants worked on the manuscripts of five major books on the life of Christ: *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessings* (White 1896), a brief commentary on major sections of the Sermon on the Mount; *The Desire of Ages* (White 1898), White’s most popular work on the life and ministry of Christ; *Christ’s Object Lessons* (White 1900), on the parables of Jesus; and the first one hundred pages of *Ministry of Healing* (White 1905) in which she extols the compassionate healing ministry of Christ. Published in 1892, *Steps to Christ* was the first in this series of books and marked the beginning of White’s contribution to reshape the understanding of the Adventist experience of salvation in Christ.
Ellen White’s son and assistant, W. C. White, recalled that in the summer of 1890 some Adventist pastors asked her to prepare a small book on the themes of salvation to be used in their evangelistic efforts and sold by colporteurs. Over the years she had preached many sermons and exhortations on these themes, which were then published as articles in the *Review and Herald* and *Signs of the Times*. Pastors and evangelists felt that these precious thoughts could be helpful to those who sought the way of salvation and what it means to be a follower of Christ (White 1892; White 1933; Ellen G. White Estate 1935:1, 2; Poirier 1992:14-15). The little book could become a personal instruction manual on what we call discipleship.

Ellen White liked the idea and began to work on the project. Her assistant, Marian Davis, whom she called her “book maker” (White 1980 book 3:91; Olson in Fortin and Moon 2013:362-363), searched White’s books and articles in the denomination’s papers for suitable materials. The following summer (1891), White shared the manuscript with church leaders during a convention in Harbor Springs, Michigan, and Davis explained how the manuscript had been organized and compiled. “The brethren who read the manuscript were deeply impressed regarding its powerful appeal,” recalled W. C. White, “They were enthusiastic regarding its value and predicted great things regarding its sale” (Ellen G. White Estate 1935:1). Ellen White received suggestions for a title and *Steps to Christ* was adopted.

It is likely that the title of the book alludes to the story of Jacob’s dream in Gen 28 in which he saw a ladder reaching down from heaven to earth, with angels ascending and descending. The ladder allegory can be understood in different ways. In one sense, it can be seen as a representation of Christ as the Mediator—the only way to connect God and humanity by his life and death. Ellen White understood this ladder to be a metaphor for Christ who connects heaven and earth. Another way of thinking of the ladder is to consider it as symbolic of the journey through the life of faith—each step of the ladder representing an aspect of the process of salvation and of one’s relationship with Christ on the way to heaven. Katrina Blue in her recent dissertation describes how this theme of the mystic ladder was an important idea in Ellen White’s discussion of the believer’s union with Christ in the 1870s and 1880s, prior to the publication of *Steps to Christ*. The steps function as a metaphor for union with Christ in the process of sanctification and spiritual growth. The titles of the chapters do not represent an exact chronological or even logical order of steps in this relationship; but rather explain various aspects of the experience of salvation and spiritual growth and their interrelationship (Blue 2015:162-163).

Rather than an academic treatise on the doctrine of salvation, this little book reads as a pastoral exhortation and invitation to experience the
grace of salvation and a personal relationship with Christ. Given that so many sections of *Steps to Christ* came from personal letters to believers and churches and from sermons published in the church’s magazines, it is understandable why the tone of the book is so personal and conversational. *Steps to Christ* is similar to a pastor’s refashioned series of sermons: Ellen White makes very personal appeals to her readers about their experience of salvation in Christ. In this little book, her thoughts on salvation are practical and framed in the experience of a simple evangelical faith, and the second half of the book is truly a personal instruction manual on discipleship. Thus, I think it is a good place to start a reflection on Ellen White’s thought on the meaning of discipleship.

**The Theological Context of Salvation and Discipleship**

For many readers the title of *Steps to Christ* discloses immediately its heritage within a particular strand of Protestant Christianity—the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. Methodist theologians have described John Wesley’s orderly and methodical doctrine of salvation as an *ordo salutis*, the order or steps to salvation. Many of White’s thoughts in *Steps to Christ* are similar to some of John Wesley’s most famous sermons on his understanding of salvation (Collins 1989:12). The Methodist roots and affinities of Ellen White’s theology of salvation grew naturally from her Methodist upbringing but also matured in a nineteenth-century American context that favored a Wesleyan Arminian approach to conversion, salvation, and discipleship. The context is also highly personal and individualistic: the concerns of evangelists is primarily about the personal conversion of people and their personal relationship with Christ.

Much could be said about Ellen White’s thought on discipleship, but I will limit my comments to the theological context of her thought in *Steps to Christ* and hope this is most helpful. Her thought on discipleship is set within the theological setting of her theology of salvation and how one grows spiritually in Christ as a result of one’s experience of salvation. The outcome of this spiritual growth leads one to be a faithful witness of the grace of God in one’s life and for the benefit of one’s community.

The primary theological context of her thought on discipleship begins with the love of God—a concept that “is uplifted first, last, and all through” her writings, according to George Knight (1996:111). The first chapter of *Steps to Christ* is titled “God’s Love for Man,” a clear indication that God’s primary disposition in Christ is to save humanity, and all who believe will be saved by grace.

God’s work of grace is universal, as a result of Christ’s death on the cross, and prepares human beings to receive his offer of salvation. This
work of the Holy Spirit is universal, but God does not dictate or determine any particular response of the newly graced sinner. God’s prevenient grace is possible only because Christ’s sacrifice is for all humankind. Ellen White explains that the sinner does not need to do any work of repentance of his or her own before coming to Christ. In fact, it is Christ who is the source of every right impulse and who draws sinners to him. Therefore, “An influence of which they are unconscious works upon the soul, and the conscience is quickened, and the outward life is amended” (White 1892:27). “The heart of God yearns over His earthly children with a love stronger than death,” White further explains. “In giving up His Son, He has poured out to us all heaven in one gift. The Savior’s life and death and intercession, the ministry of angels, the pleading of the Spirit, the Father working above and through all, the unceasing interest of heavenly beings—all are enlisted in behalf of man’s redemption” (21; White 1979:64).

John Wesley emphasized that salvation is received in a person’s life through faith. The blessing of salvation is first of all a gift of God’s grace. At the beginning of his sermon “Salvation by Faith,” Wesley states, “Grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation.” One is saved by a disposition of the heart inclined toward Christ. To be saved, one must acknowledge “the necessity and merit of his death, and the power of his resurrection” (Wesley in Outler and Heitzenrather 1991a:40, 42). With Wesley, White understood humankind’s response to God’s offer of salvation and to the influence of the Holy Spirit as a crucial step in one’s journey with Christ. In order to be saved, humankind must respond by faith to God’s offer. “Christ is ready to set us free from sin,” she states, “but He does not force the will; and if by persistent transgression the will itself is wholly bent on evil, and we do not desire to be set free, if we will not accept His grace, what more can He do?” (White 1892:34). “The very first step to Christ is taken through the drawing of the Spirit of God; as man responds to this drawing, he advances toward Christ in order that he may repent” (White 1980:390).

For Ellen White repentance and confession are the appropriate human responses to God’s offer of salvation, and are closely connected to spiritual growth and discipleship. Once the Holy Spirit awakens one’s conscience and draws it to the cross of Christ by God’s love, a person can then respond with repentance and confession. Repentance, hence, is not a prerequisite in order to be loved by God. In fact, “repentance is no less the gift of God than are pardon and justification, and it cannot be experienced except as it is given to the soul by Christ” (391). It is the work of God’s prevenient grace, an outflow of his love that leads one to repent. It is not a work that we initiate or do.

Confession of sins, as a result of genuine repentance, is another step
toward Christ and a prerequisite for spiritual growth. God’s promise in Prov 28:13 is for all people; it is also a condition of salvation. “The conditions of obtaining mercy of God are simple and just and reasonable. The Lord does not require us to do some grievous thing in order that we may have the forgiveness of sin. We need not make long and wearisome pilgrimages, or perform painful penances, to commend our souls to the God of heaven or to expiate our transgression; but he that confesseth and forsaketh his sin shall have mercy” (White 1892:37). Hence, confession is part of the human response to God’s offer of salvation. Without confession of sins and one’s faith response there is no salvation. In 1890, she had already expressed, “Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone” (White 1979:19). “When the sinner believes that Christ is his personal Savior, then according to his unfailing promises, God pardons his sin and justifies him freely” (101).

Faith is therefore a crucial element of salvation. In his sermon “Salvation by Faith,” Wesley defined faith as “not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection” (Outler and Heitzenrather 1991:42). In a similar fashion, for White “faith is trusting God—believing that He loves us and knows best what is for our good” (White 1903:253).

White’s understanding of God’s work of prevenient grace on all human beings, his offer of salvation to all, and the need of humankind’s response to God’s offer is that of an integrated synergism. She believes God created human beings with free will, that prevenient grace restores the power of choice lost as a result of the Fall, and that God will not force anyone to serve him. Her understanding of this synergism between God’s prevenient grace and human response is Wesleyan Arminian. “In the work of redemption there is no compulsion,” she states in The Desires of Ages. “No external force is employed. Under the influence of the Spirit of God, man is left free to choose whom he will serve” (White 1898:466).

Repeatedly, and in different settings, she affirmed the prevenient work of God’s grace on the heart. “We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken the conscience than we can be pardoned without Christ. Christ is the source of every right impulse. He is the only one that can implant in the heart enmity against sin. Every desire for truth and purity, every conviction of our own sinfulness, is an evidence that His Spirit is moving upon our hearts” (White 1892:26; White 1958:391). But at the same time, she valued the importance of free will and the human response to God’s gracious offer of salvation—keeping in mind that this response is possible only because of God’s work of prevenient grace. “In the change that takes place when the soul surrenders to Christ, there is the highest sense of freedom,” she stated in The Desire of Ages. “The expulsion of sin
is the act of the soul itself. True, we have no power to free ourselves from Satan’s control; but when we desire to be set free from sin, and in our great need cry out for a power out of and above ourselves, the powers of the soul are imbued with the divine energy of the Holy Spirit, and they obey the dictates of the will in fulfilling the will of God” (White 1898:466; see also White 1892:43, 44, 47).

White’s thought on salvation also reflects her Wesleyan Arminian roots when it comes to justification and sanctification in the experience of salvation that immediately leads to spiritual growth and discipleship, but in some aspects she goes beyond Wesley’s thought. Categorically she affirmed in 1890, “justification is wholly of grace and not procured by any works that fallen man can do” (White 1979:20). Further, she added, “As the penitent sinner, contrite before God, discerns Christ’s atonement in his behalf and accepts this atonement as his only hope in this life and the future life, his sins are pardoned. This is justification by faith” (White 1979:103). Justification is therefore God forgiving the penalty for sins because Christ’s death paid this penalty on the cross, and the sinner’s status is changed from sinner to righteous on account of Christ’s righteousness being imputed to the forgiven sinner.

In the sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” John Wesley states, “justification is another word for pardon. It is forgiveness of all our sins, and (what is necessarily implied therein) our acceptance with God” (Wesley in Outler and Heitzenrather 1991b:373). Writing in her diary in 1891, and with words reminiscent of Wesley’s thought, White also declared, “pardon and justification are one and the same thing. Through faith, the believer passes from the position of a rebel, a child of sin and Satan, to the position of a loyal subject of Christ Jesus, not because of an inherent goodness, but because Christ receives him as His child by adoption. The sinner receives the forgiveness of his sins, because these sins are borne by his Substitute and Surety. . . . Thus man, pardoned, and clothed with the beautiful garments of Christ’s righteousness, stands faultless before God” (White 1979:103). For her, “justification is the opposite of condemnation” (104) and “however sinful has been his life, if he [the sinner] believes in Jesus as his personal Savior, he stands before God in the spotless robes of Christ’s imputed righteousness” (106; see also White 1958:389).

Sanctification and Discipleship

While for Ellen White justification is a divine declaration of forgiveness graciously given to repentant sinners, sanctification is the work of God’s grace in sinners to restore in them the image of God (1896:114). This work of sanctification is not instantaneous, but is “the work of a lifetime” (White 1900:65). In Acts of the Apostles, White also stated,
Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a lifetime. It is not gained by a happy flight of feeling, but is the result of constantly dying to sin, and constantly living for Christ. Wrongs cannot be righted nor reformations wrought in the character by feeble, intermittent efforts. It is only by long, persevering effort, sore discipline, and stern conflict, that we shall overcome. We know not one day how strong will be our conflict the next. So long as Satan reigns, we shall have self to subdue, besetting sins to overcome; so long as life shall last, there will be no stopping place, no point which we can reach and say, I have fully attained. Sanctification is the result of lifelong obedience. (1911:560-561)

This distinction and link between justification and sanctification are also found in Wesley’s sermons: one is either justified or not, while one is being progressively sanctified. Wesley explains that at the time a person is justified, “in that very moment, sanctification begins. . . . From the time of our being ‘born again’ the gradual work of sanctification takes place” (Outler and Heitzenrather 1991:373-374). For both Wesley and White justification and sanctification are also considered in relation to the righteousness of Christ and one’s readiness for heaven. Justification is imputed righteousness and entitles one to heaven, while sanctification is imparted righteousness and qualifies, or prepares, one for heaven (562; White 1895).

And this is where the concept of discipleship connects with Ellen White’s theology of salvation. While the use of the word discipleship was not a common occurrence in her time, the concept of discipleship certainly was. For Ellen White and other evangelical writers of the nineteenth century, discipleship was referred to under the synonyms of “follower of Christ” or “disciple of Jesus.” The concepts of discipleship, spiritual nurture, and faith development were subsumed under conversations about spiritual growth, sanctification, obedience, and character development. A true follower of Christ is one who daily grows in faith and obedience, who abides in Christ, whose character is sanctified by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 8 of *Steps to Christ*, “Growing Up into Christ,” White presents her understanding of sanctification and how one grows in Christ after being justified. Christian growth and sanctification are comparable to the life of a plant. As God first gives life to a plant when the seed germinates, it is also God who continues to give life to the plant as it grows. Never is the plant capable of making itself grow. So it is only through the life God gives that spiritual life is formed in our lives, and thus growth results (White 1892:67). “The plants and flowers grow not by their own care or anxiety or effort, but by receiving that which God has furnished to minister to their life. The child cannot, by any anxiety or power of its own, add to its
stature. No more can you, by anxiety or effort of yourself, secure spiritual growth” (White 1892:68). In order to grow, we are invited to “abide in Christ” for it is only as one is dependent on Christ that one receives power to resist temptation or to grow in grace. “You are just as dependent upon Christ, in order to live a holy life, as is the branch upon the parent stock for growth and fruitfulness. Apart from Him you have no life” (69).

To those who misunderstand that justification is by faith but sanctification is through human efforts, White states categorically that such an approach to spiritual growth will invariably fail. “Many have an idea that they must do some part of the work alone. They have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but now they seek by their own efforts to live aright. But every such effort must fail” (1892:69). Once we remind ourselves of Jesus’ words, “Without Me ye can do nothing,” all aspects of Christian growth are dependent on our union with Christ. “It is by communion with Him, daily, hourly—by abiding in Him—that we are to grow in grace. He is not only the Author, but the Finisher of our faith. It is Christ first and last and always. He is to be with us, not only at the beginning and the end of our course, but at every step of the way” (69). Such a moment-by-moment dependence on Christ for continued spiritual growth excludes the value of human effort. In fact, in harmony with her view of the depravity of human nature, which still remains a hindrance to spiritual growth even after conversion, she remarks, “The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God” (White 1958:344).

Ellen White’s doctrine of sanctification also addresses the presence of inherited sin in human life, sin as a condition and a power in the self. Regeneration, or the new birth, is the salvific strength of God made available to all who believe. It is the empowerment by the Holy Spirit to obey. This spiritual empowerment undoes partially the total inability we are born with; it provides enough spiritual vigor to allow us to overcome the most besetting human tendencies. The inclination to sin we have inherited (the man of Rom 7), with which we struggle, remains in the hearts of believers in Christ, but its power is no longer controlling their lives. As this statement in *Steps to Christ* highlights, a new power is given in the new birth.

If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact. While we cannot do anything to change our hearts or to bring ourselves into harmony with God; while we must not trust at all to ourselves or our good works, our lives will reveal whether the grace of God is dwelling within us. A change will be seen in the character, the habits, the pursuits. The contrast will be clear and decided between what they have been and what they are. (White 1892:57)
One of White’s best expressions of this spiritual regeneration to new life is from an article she wrote in 1901, shortly after arriving back in the United States after living for nine years in Australia:

There are those who listen to the truth, . . . and they repent of their transgressions. Relying upon the merits of Christ, exercising true faith in Him, they receive pardon for sin. As they cease to do evil and learn to do well, they grow in grace and in the knowledge of God. . . . The warfare is before them, . . . fighting against their natural inclinations and selfish desires, bringing the will into subjection to the will of Christ. Daily they seek the Lord for grace to obey Him, and they are strengthened and helped. This is true conversion. In humble, grateful dependence he who has been given a new heart relies upon the help of Christ. He reveals in his life the fruit of righteousness. He once loved himself. Worldly pleasure was his delight. Now his idol is dethroned, and God reigns supreme. The sins he once loved he now hates. Firmly and resolutely he follows in the path of holiness. (White 1930:73-74)

Another crucial step in growth is to daily surrender to Christ’s will and to keep our eyes fixed upon Christ (White 1892:70-72). In other words, we are to live daily in the presence of Christ, by the power of His Holy Spirit. Such a life brings about transformation of character and obedience. White is careful to balance the work of God’s grace in justification and sanctification and the role of human effort in the process of growth. As a result of the work of God’s grace in our lives, characters are transformed into the likeness of Christ’s character, and obedience to God’s law and to the gospel become part of our inner redeemed nature. “While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible, its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact” (57). One’s character reflects this transformation: “The character is revealed, not by occasional good deeds and occasional misdeeds, but by the tendency of the habitual words and acts” (57, 58).

As one’s character is developed in likeness to Christ’s character, obedience becomes a natural part of growth and of one’s faithful response to the gift of the grace of God. “Instead of releasing man from obedience, it is faith, and faith only, that makes us partakers of the grace of Christ, which enables us to render obedience. We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith” (White 1892:60-61; see also White 1958:398; White 1979:85-87). White stated to believers in Sweden in 1886, “true sanctification will be evidenced by a conscientious regard for all the commandments of God” and “a careful improvement of every talent, by a circumspect conversation, by revealing in every act the meekness of Christ”
“While we are to be in harmony with God’s law,” she wrote a few years later, “we are not saved by the works of the law, yet we cannot be saved without obedience. The law is the standard by which character is measured. But we cannot possibly keep the commandments of God without the regenerating grace of Christ” (95; see also White 1892:62).

This process of sanctification and spiritual growth is often invisible and imperceptible in one’s life; it is therefore misguided to speak of perfectionism or of the possibility to attain a self-exalted, sinless life on this earth. In fact, White gave a caution to those who preach perfectionism: “The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes” (1892:64). “So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us” (63). She clearly declared, “We cannot say, ‘I am sinless,’ till this vile body is changed and fashioned like unto His glorious body” (White 1888).

While it is clear in Scripture that works, even righteous works, do not merit salvation to anyone, there is still a valid biblical teaching about good works in the life of a disciple of Christ. It is faith in the merits of Christ’s sacrifice that leads to justification, and justification must and will invariably produce works in the life of the regenerated person. Ellen White affirmed this Protestant understanding of the relationship between faith and obedience.

White stated in a sermon in Switzerland in 1885 that “faith and works go hand in hand; they act harmoniously in the work of overcoming. Works without faith are dead, and faith without works is dead. Works will never save us; it is the merit of Christ that will avail in our behalf. Through faith in Him, Christ will make all our imperfect efforts acceptable to God. The faith we are required to have is not a do-nothing faith; saving faith is that which works by love and purifies the soul” (1979:48-49).

In Steps to Christ, White addressed two common errors regarding the relationship between faith and works. A first error encountered in some people’s experience “is that of looking to their own works, trusting to anything they can do, to bring themselves into harmony with God.” Such an approach to spiritual life, she concluded, “is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy” (1892:59-60).

A second error, that she qualifies as “no less dangerous,” is to believe that “Christ releases men from keeping the law of God; that since by faith alone we become partakers of the grace of Christ, our works have nothing to do with our redemption” (60). Those two extremes are refuted many times in her writings. “We do not earn salvation by our obedience; for
salvation is the free gift of God, to be received by faith. But obedience is the fruit of faith” (61).

In his sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” Wesley defines perfection as “perfect love.” “It is love excluding sin; love filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul” (Outler and Heitzenrather 1991:373). In another echo of Wesley’s thought, Ellen White spoke of the possibility of character perfection in one’s life. Commenting on the parable of the talents in Matt 25, she wrote, “A character formed according to the divine likeness is the only treasure that we can take from this world to the next. . . . The heavenly intelligences will work with the human agent who seeks with determined faith that perfection of character which will reach out to perfection in action” (1900:332). In fact, that perfection of character is a reflection of the loving character of God. As servants of God become more and more like Christ, they receive “the Spirit of Christ—the Spirit of unselfish love and labor for others.” As a result, she concluded, “Your love [will] be made perfect. More and more you will reflect the likeness of Christ in all that is pure, noble, and lovely” (68). George Knight comments that Ellen White thus “ties her discussion of Christian perfection to the internalization of God’s loving character in daily life” (1996:126; see also Knight 2008:156-169). As mentioned above, no one can claim freedom from temptation and sin in this life since this is what sinful human nature entails, yet the goal of the Christian life, of a disciple of Christ, remains the same: to reflect Christ’s character. Russell Staples recognized the similarities between Wesley’s and White’s thoughts on perfection and holiness, but he adds that White’s thoughts in Steps to Christ fit into the genre of the Methodist Holiness tradition, while avoiding the distortion and excesses of that tradition. White frequently mentioned “holiness” and “purity” in Steps to Christ as the standard for Christians (Staples 1991:23).

**Practical Counsels**

Chapter 9 begins the second part of Steps to Christ with a series of practical counsels on five aspects of spiritual growth and personal discipleship: service, growth in the knowledge of God, prayer, what to do with doubts, and, finally, praise. In chapter 9, Ellen White presents a simple, yet straightforward, invitation to Christians. As Jesus lived His life on earth to bless and minister to others, never to satisfy his own needs, so the Christian’s life should be witnessing to the work of God’s grace in one’s life.

Service becomes an outflow of the love of God in one’s life as Christians participate also in the lifelong work of sanctification. Many unnoticeable and often unexpected blessings will be the outcome of a life of witnessing for Jesus. The effort to bless others will result in blessings upon
oneself and “every act of self-sacrifice for the good of others strengthens the spirit of beneficence in the giver’s heart” (White 1892:79). In the end, such selfless service draws the believer ever “more closely to the Redeemer of the world” (79). In one of the strongest possible connection with the concept of discipleship she states, “The spirit of unselfish labor for others gives depth, stability, and Christlike loveliness to the character, and brings peace and happiness to its possessor” (80).

In chapter 10, Ellen White offers some practical advice to Christians on their spiritual journey through life. Still in the context of the spiritual growth of the believer, and as part of explaining the lifelong work of sanctification, White speaks of how one is to receive a better appreciation of God’s faithfulness and presence. The major part of the chapter is dedicated to the knowledge of God we gain from a study of the Bible. “God speaks to us in His word. Here we have in clearer lines the revelation of His character, of His dealings with men, and the great work of redemption” (1892:87). Through its stories and narratives of the lives of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and disciples, the Bible provides invaluable lessons that give God’s people instructions and courage for our lives on earth.

In order to spiritually grow and advance in sanctification, White recommends also a number of practical devotional practices. She invites her readers to dwell and meditate upon the life and ministry of Jesus, and to contemplate heavenly themes. Such practices will provide the believer with growth in the reflection of Christ’s character. “There will be a hungering and thirsting of soul to become like Him whom we adore. The more our thoughts are upon Christ, the more we shall speak of Him to others and represent Him to the world” (1892:89).

Chapter 11 on the privilege of prayer is one of the better known chapters of Ellen White’s writings in which she gives this classic definition: “Prayer is the opening of the heart to God as to a friend” (1892:93). In the preceding chapter, White explored how the Christian can acquire a better knowledge of God “through nature and revelation, through His providence, and by the influence of His Spirit, God speaks to us” (93). In this chapter, she continues this theme by exploring the role of prayer in one’s spiritual life. Prayer is an essential element of God’s plan for the spiritual growth of the believer. It is a crucial devotional habit, and not a mere optional practice. Her practical counsels are also simple. She invites Christians to pray in community, to benefit from the prayers of others, to pray in the family home, and in private. There is no time or place when it is inappropriate to pray. Prayer is to be part of life. But what stands out most in this chapter is the picture of God’s character that White presents. God is a friend, a loving Father, intent on listening to the prayers of His children, whatever they may wish to share.
As in the nineteenth century, Christians today still have doubts, questions, and skepticism when it comes to many ideas expressed in the Bible. While for Ellen White, Christianity is a revealed and reasonable religion, she also understood that at times faith must precede reason and that not all occasions for doubts can be removed from one’s religious experience. “Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith” (1892:105). She assumes that doubt is destructive to one’s faith in God and in the church. For her, doubt is a spiritual issue in the great controversy between good and evil. Chapter 12 is filled with pastoral advice for new Christians, and for those who have questions. White did not encourage a blind faith, or a faith where no questions could be asked. She knew that life is sometimes difficult, particularly when troubling questions are not answered. It is from her own experience that she speaks and offers these counsels. Her response is an invitation to personal faith and trust.

For the most part, chapter 13 on praise and rejoicing is a pastoral exhortation on the benefits of positive thinking. Jesus is again set as the example for the Christian. As Christ did not dwell on His difficulties and temptations, so is the Christian to live consciously in the presence of God and refrain from unnecessary conversation about negative feelings and circumstances. Focusing on such darkness “is harming your own soul” and will inevitably stifle one’s relationship with Christ (White 1892:119). “If you choose to open the door to his [Satan’s] suggestions, your mind will be filled with distrust and rebellious questionings” (119).

On the other hand, positive thinking, dwelling on and rejoicing in the blessings of God, will have a powerful influence on one’s own religious and spiritual experience. And even more so on the lives of others who witness the believer’s response to life (117). This approach to life is also part of the process of character sanctification and preparation for eternal life. We can look beyond life’s perplexities and difficulties, to what is to come, and dwell on the promise of a new heaven and new earth in the company of God and holy angels, and all the redeemed (126).

**Conclusion**

This little book *Steps to Christ*, published 125 years ago, is a brief summary of some aspects of Ellen White’s theology of salvation and understanding of discipleship. In her discussion of the personal and intimate spiritual growth of a Christian, she reveals many similarities to John Wesley and Methodism and hers is also a religion of the heart as one experiences a spiritual transformation in union with Christ. According to...
Staples, White articulates in her writings “a Wesleyan synthesis of divine sovereignty and human responsibility” (1991:64). Many other aspects of Ellen White’s thought on discipleship should be explored, in particular, the role of the church community in one’s spiritual growth. Just as crucial are the role and influence of parents, of the family, of schools and teachers, of pastors, of a faithful devotional life, and of an active life of witnessing of the grace of God in one’s life. All these aspects of a Christian’s life environment are crucial elements of her thoughts on discipleship and how one becomes a true follower of Christ.

For further exploration of her ideas on discipleship and spiritual growth, I recommend her book on the New Testament parables of Jesus, Christ’s Object Lessons, and the compilation of a series of articles from 1881, The Sanctified Life, a little book in which she sets out the examples of the prophet Daniel and the apostle John as illustrations of true disciples of God. But before that I would invite you to reread Steps to Christ.

**Notes**

1“The ladder represents Jesus, the appointed medium of communication. Had He not with His own merits bridged the gulf that sin had made, the ministering angels could have held no communion with fallen man. Christ connects man in his weakness and helplessness with the source of infinite power.” (White 1890:184). In 1884, she wrote that the dream of the ladder is the gospel given to Jacob. White, “The Vision at Bethel,” (White 1884). Strictly speaking the comparison between Christ and Jacob’s ladder is an allegory.

2This section is adapted from my article on Ellen White’s theology in The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia, 248–258 and the historical introduction in the forthcoming special edition of Steps to Christ (Andrews University Press, 2017).

3Only a few brief studies have been done comparing both authors’ views on salvation, and a thorough study of the two authors still remains to be done. See (Whidden 1995), Michael Davey Pearson mentions a few similarities between Wesleyan Arminianism and Ellen White in his dissertation, “The Sin Against the Holy Spirit in the Writings of G. C. Berkouwer and Ellen G. White: A Comparative Study and Ethical Implications” (Pearson 2014); Ronell Ike Mamarimbing, “A Comparative Study on the Understanding of Christian Perfection in John Wesley and Ellen G. White” (Mamarimbing 2008); Alberto Ronald Timm, “A Short Analysis of the Book ‘Steps to Christ’ in the Light of John Wesley’s Theology” (Timm 1991); Russell Staples, “The Wesleyan Roots of Adventist Spirituality” (Staples 1988). In this paper Staples posits that White’s theology in Steps to Christ is closer to the American Methodist Arminian and Holiness tradition, with some currents of thoughts drawn from the nineteenth-century revivalist movements.

4For a more extensive summary of Ellen White’s thought on perfection, see Whidden 1995:119-156.
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Toward a Biblical Model of Discipleship:
A Case Study of the Willow Creek Community Church

BOUBAKAR SANOU

Introduction

In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus set the agenda for the church. In a sort of farewell speech, he said to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

This call to disciple all nations has been interpreted and applied differently over the centuries. Today, there is a renewed emphasis on discipleship in many Christian circles. This paper looks at the Willow Creek Community Church’s seeker-sensitive approach to discipleship and then draws some implications for developing an effective discipleship model.

The Seeker-Driven Model of Discipleship:
The Story of Willow Creek

Founded on October 12, 1975 by Bill Hybels and friends, the Willow Creek Community Church is a non-denominational Christian church located in South Barrington, Illinois. According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, Willow Creek Church is the third most influential church in North America with a weekend attendance of about 25,000. Only the Lake Wood Church, Texas (43,500) and the North Point Community Church, Georgia (30,600) have a larger attendance.
Bill Hybels and friends started the Willow Creek Community Church with the following vision: “A weekly seeker service that would provide a safe and informative place where unchurched people could come to investigate Christianity further” (Hybels and Hybels 1995:41). Since their passion was to see unchurched people become followers of Jesus, they designed programs and facilities accordingly to meet the needs of those seeking to further explore Christianity. “The church’s leadership believed the approach would attract people searching for answers, bring them into a relationship with Christ, and then capitalize on their contagious fervor to evangelize others” (Branaugh 2008). As such, their approach was highly program-oriented and culturally up-to-date.

With its emphasis and success on attracting large numbers of congregants, Willow Creek has helped shape the ecclesiology of many church leaders in the last four decades. Although they are not giving up their seeker-sensitive approach, Willow Creek Community Church now gears “its weekend services toward mature believers seeking to grow in their faith” (Branaugh 2008). This shift in their approach to discipleship was influenced by the result of a three-year process study between 2004 and 2007 focused on how congregants at Willow Creek were growing spiritually (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007).

The goal of their study was “to find evidence of spiritual growth in people, and then figure out what types of activities or circumstances triggered that spiritual growth” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:19). Based on Matthew 22:37-40, they defined spiritual growth as “an increasing love for God and for other people” (19, emphasis in the original). They embarked on their study guided by three hypotheses (31):

Hypothesis 1—There is a migration path for spiritual growth based on church activities: the more people are involved in church activities (small groups, serving, Bible study, midweek services, and weekend services), the closer they grow to Christ.

Hypothesis 2—The most effective evangelism tool is a spiritual conversation: putting an increased emphasis on spiritual topics combined with the use of multiple evangelistic styles would increase their congregants’ desire for personal evangelism.

Hypothesis 3—Spiritual relationships are a key driver of spiritual growth: deep spiritual relationships in the context of small group meetings can trigger spiritual growth.

Then they tested their hypotheses by analyzing 6,000 surveys completed by people who attend Willow Creek, 300 surveys completed by former members of Willow Creek, 5,000 additional surveys completed by congregants at Willow Creek and six other churches across the United States, more than 120 in-depth one-on-one interviews with people on their
spiritual lives, study of Scripture, books, and articles on spiritual growth and human development, and consultation with experts in the area of spiritual growth (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:23). Six key discoveries were made as the result of this three-year-process study (33-60):

1. **Involvement in church activities does not predict or drive long-term spiritual growth.** Although the study showed some increase in spiritual behaviors (e.g., tithing, evangelism, and serving), there was very little correlation between levels of participation in church activities and spiritual attitudes (increasing love for God and for other people). People with greater involvement in church programs did not express a greater love for God than people who were less involved in the same programs. Thus, involvement in church activities alone made no direct impact on spiritual growth.

2. **Spiritual growth is all about increasing relational closeness to Christ.** In other words, it is only as people draw closer to Christ that they will begin to see changes in the way they live their lives and experience an increase in their love for God and for other people.

3. **The church is most important in the early stages of spiritual growth.** The research found that the role of the local church in helping nurture a growing relationship with Christ shifts from being the primary influence to being a secondary influence as people move along the following spiritual continuum: Exploring Christianity—Growing in Christ—Close to Christ—Christ-Centered. As people mature in their spiritual journey, “the church becomes less of a place to go for spiritual development and to find spiritual relationships, and more of a platform that provides serving opportunities” (42).

4. **Personal spiritual practices are the building blocks for a Christ-centered life.** As the role of the church decreases during the later stages of spiritual growth, it is personal spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, journaling, solitude, study of Scripture) that become the driving force behind a person’s growth in their relationship with Christ. Thus, “an authentic Christ-centered life is fundamentally the result of a strong commitment to a growing personal relationship with Christ” (45). There is therefore no more need for the church to continue handholding people who are moving along in the later stages of the spiritual continuum.

5. **A church’s most active evangelists, volunteers and donors come from the most spiritually advanced segments.** According to the research, “as people grow spiritually, they demonstrate increasing faith through their actions. The farther along they are on the spiritual continuum, the more they express their faith to others and donate time and resources to the church” (45). Although an increased participation in church activities does not automatically equate to spiritual growth, the more a person grows in love for God and other people, the more that person becomes involved and committed to serving, tithing, and evangelizing.
6. More than 25 percent of those surveyed described themselves as spiritually “stalled” or “dissatisfied” with the role of the church in their spiritual growth. Those stalled in their faith journey were in the early-to-middle stages of spiritual growth and were wrestling with either addictions, inappropriate relationships, emotional issues, or lack of prioritizing their spiritual lives. The dissatisfied group included people from the more advanced spiritual growth segments who appeared completely aligned with the attitudes and behaviors related to a Christ-centered life and also exhibited all the signs of full devotion: they regularly attended weekend services, participated in small groups, volunteered at church, served those in need, returned their tithes, and were diligent in their personal efforts to grow spiritually. While 25 percent of the “stalled” were considering leaving the church because of significant barriers to spiritual growth, 63 percent of the “dissatisfied” were considering leaving the church due to their dissatisfaction with the church not doing enough to keep them on track (hold them accountable and keep them challenged) or helping them find a spiritual mentor.

Implications for Developing an Effective Discipleship Model

What does Willow Creek’s seeker-sensitive model teach us about discipleship? What implications can we draw from their objective evaluation of their approach to discipleship? Before doing that, it is essential to have a clear biblical understanding of who a disciple is. My survey of discipleship literature (Wilkins 1988; Hull 2006; Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014; Hirsch 2006; Harrington and Absalom 2016; Melbourne 2007; Barna 2001) revealed three essential dimensions of every effective discipleship model. They were rational, relational, and had missional dimensions.

The rational (learning) dimension of discipleship is where a believer intentionally learns from Jesus. In its original context “disciple” (mathetes) referred to “someone who was either an apprentice in a trade or a pupil of a teacher” (Harrington and Absalom 2016:20). That person would attach himself to a teacher for the purpose of acquiring both theoretical and practical knowledge (Brown 1975:484). The stress of the rational dimension is on the need for a continuing transformation and growth even for those who have already become disciples. Since “teaching” in Matt 28:19 is an ongoing process, the rational dimension of discipleship refers to “a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith” (Blomberg 1992:431). However, the goal of this continuing learning is not to impart knowledge only but to rouse total commitment to Jesus (Wilkins 1988:159).

The relational (community) dimension of discipleship develops in the
context of a supportive community where accountability can take place. For the apostle Paul, being a disciple was not synonymous with only accepting an abstract propositional truth about Jesus. For him being a disciple of Christ was about learning from Jesus and modeling out in life what a person knows about him. In his writings there is a constant invitation to imitate him as he imitates Christ. To the Corinthians he writes, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Thus, “discipleship not only involves what a Christian does on behalf of Christ but also how the disciple represents Christ in the World” (Melbourne 2007:10).

The missional (sharing of one’s faith) dimension of discipleship is concerned with understanding the call to “Make disciples” (mathēteusate) in Matt 28:19 as essentially a call to engage in mission and duplicate one’s self. This is the primary command of the Great Commission and it must remain the primary responsibility of the church in every context. Mission in the context of the Great Commission is more than a call to share the gospel with those who do not know Christ. It is a call to disciple the nations (people groups) by going to them.

Hence, the New Testament uses the word disciple to indicate a relationship with and total commitment to Christ. This relationship with and commitment to Christ comes as the result of being changed by constantly growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18), living a life of total submission to his lordship (Phil 3:8), and helping others begin to trust and follow Jesus (2 Tim 2:2).

Below are eight suggestions for developing an effective discipleship model that takes into consideration all the essential components of discipleship.

1. Prioritize personal commitments to developing a growing relationship with God over participation in church programs alone. Although involvement in church programs may influence spiritual behaviors, the fact remains that it is God alone who transforms the human heart. Hybels admits that in the case of Willow Creek, “the church and its myriad of programs have taken on too much responsibility for people’s spiritual growth” (2007:4). The goal of any approach to discipleship should not be to keep church members busy by a plethora of activities, but rather to help them embark on a quest for a growing relationship with Christ (John 15:1-8). Also, the weekly worship gatherings should not be the main focus of discipleship. Discipleship is not pulpit-centric. Dallas Willard rightly observes that “one of the greatest contemporary barriers to meaningful spiritual formation into Christlikeness is overconfidence in the spiritual efficacy of ‘regular church services.’ They are vital, they are not enough, it is that simple” (2002:250). To be effective, the impact of worship services and other church programs needs to be extended to people in every stage in the spiritual continuum;
challenging them and suggesting to them practical ways and tools to take the next step in their spiritual journey.

2. **Do not make numbers the only standard for measuring success in discipling others.** Membership and church attendance are not sufficient measures as to whether or not people are becoming more like Christ in their spiritual journey. The health of a church “is not just about the numbers. It’s about the movement of people toward Christ, toward deep love for God and genuine love for others” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:8). Bigger is not always better. Quality should be preferred to quantity alone. Our motivation should be to see hearts grow and not to simply see numbers grow. In discipling others, the How many? and Where are they spiritually? questions need to be addressed together. While the How many? question helps evaluate the statistical impact of an activity, it is the Where are they spiritually? that will help measure the spiritual impact of that same activity. In discipleship numerical growth and spiritual growth are not two separate agendas. Both belong to the same agenda. It is the misunderstanding of the correlation between evangelism and discipleship that “has given rise to churches that produce large numbers of converts with little depth, converts who could hardly be called disciples of Jesus Christ. . . . Conversely, there are also many churches that emphasize great teaching and theological depth but fail to see God use them to bring very many, if any, new believers to faith in Christ” (Rainer 2016:11). A biblically-faithful approach to discipleship seeks to find a balance between attracting numbers and at the same time helping those numbers grow to maturity in Christ.

3. **Balance any seeker-sensitive approach to discipleship with a concern for all the congregants’ spiritual growth.** Although “all churches should remove as many barriers as possible for seekers, yet there’s no need to focus entirely on them” (Hull 2006:257). Thus, cultural relevance, biblical coherence, and spiritual growth across the board need to go hand in hand in every discipleship-focused congregation. People need to be comprehensively taught all that Jesus commanded (Matt 28:19) and not primarily what they want to hear or what they feel good about. This is important because whenever the primary energies of a congregation are spent on a well-crafted production of programs solely focused on meeting the needs of people who are still exploring what they believe about Jesus and Christianity, then only secondary energies are left to help both those seekers and the other congregants grow in their spiritual journey. Sometimes, it becomes very challenging to help the religious explorers who are used to big event gatherings to find God in other “less significant” gatherings if the church programs somehow already communicated to them that God is found and experienced only through sophisticated weekly programs (Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen 2014:78).
4. **Approach discipleship as a life-long process.** Being a disciple of Christ is a lifelong process, not an event in time. It is about “becoming a disciple rather than having been made a disciple” (Hull 2006:35, italics in the original). As a process of becoming Christlike, “discipleship isn’t a program or event; it’s a way of life. It’s not for a limited time, but for our whole life. Discipleship isn’t for beginners alone; it’s for all believers for everyday of their life” (24). Since “the path to spiritual maturity is not correlated to age” (Hawkins and Parkinson 2007:33), every church member needs to be constantly challenged to grow in their love for God and other people. The fact that the role of the church in helping nurture a growing relationship with Christ decreases as people move along the later stages of the spiritual continuum should not lead to a congregation total disengagement toward the spiritual welfare of those along those stages. Adequate attention and resources should be available to people at every stage of the spiritual continuum to help them remain growing in Christ.

5. **Make spiritual mentorship an essential component of the process of discipleship.** Since the call to “make disciples” (mathēteusate) in Matt 28:19 is essentially a call to duplicate one’s self, mentorship is inseparable from discipleship. A mentor is defined as someone who is committed to a healthy spiritual relationship with another person for the purpose of mutual accountability and growth in Jesus Christ. A good biblical model of spiritual mentoring as discipleship is found in 1 Thess 2:7-13 where discipleship is portrayed as a process of spiritual parenting. Spiritual mentoring as discipleship can help achieve four things: a long-term commitment to the spiritual welfare and growth of believers, personal attention to believers’ spiritual growth needs, modeling a spiritual walk with God to mentees, and the teaching of biblical truth. Beside the formal church programs, spiritual mentors should be available to share their spiritual journey and experiences (both positive and negative) with others. This type of spiritual relationship can help keep both the mentor and the mentee on track as they become accountable to one another. It can also help address some significant barriers to spiritual growth.

6. **Give due consideration to spiritual disciplines in the process of spiritual growth.** Spiritual disciplines refer to deliberately self-imposed spiritual habits for the purpose of nurturing spiritual health, thus fostering spiritual growth and maturity. They constitute concrete expressions of our decision to place ourselves before God for him to change us into his likeness (Calhoun 2015; Whitney 2014; Dybdahl 2008). Spiritual disciplines help us check our spiritual life for toxins (Groeschel 2012). Examples of spiritual disciplines include the study, memorizing, and meditation on Scripture, journaling, prayer, fasting, service, etc. A word of caution about the practice of spiritual disciplines is that it does not automatically result...
in spiritual growth. By opening our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the cleansing power of God’s Spirit and truth, spiritual disciplines place us before God where genuine transformation can only take place.

7. **Approach mission as disciples making other disciples.** By commanding his disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19), Jesus was basically telling them “to make more of what they are themselves” (Wilkins 1988:162). The primary focus of a congregation should not be on what happens at its facilities. Although we find the “Come and See” method of evangelism in the New Testament (John 1:39), the church was mostly expected to go out, mingle with people, and sow the seeds of the gospel. The emphasis on “come and see” puts the responsibility on individuals to come and hear the gospel rather than on the church to take the gospel to them (Hirsch 2006:275). “When Jesus delivered the Great Commission, he revealed God’s plan for his church as well as for individual disciples. He charged the church to go to the world, because the world has no reason to go to church” (Hull 2006:254). According to the parable of the lost sheep, it is the church, not the unchurched, who are supposed to be the “seekers” (Luke 15:1-7). As such, “we are not to wait for souls to come to us; we must seek them out where they are [because] there are multitudes who will never be reached by the gospel unless it is carried to them” (White 1900:229).

8. **Strive to become a genuinely welcoming and loving congregation.** People were irresistibly drawn to Jesus because of the unselfish love and concern with which he treated them. In the same way, sincere and loving Christian communities can become fertile ground where people grow in their relationship with Christ. Since “the strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a loving and lovable Christian” (White 1909:470), it is right to say that it is believers and not programs that are the most effective bridges to Christ. As a loving community, the church becomes not only a true reflection of Jesus Christ but also an answer to Christ’s prayer for unity among his followers (John 17:11, 20-23). While life has become so politicized around ethnic, racial, and national identities, the church, through genuine and loving relationships between its members, is able to irrefutably show our fragmented world that “a community of diverse persons can live in reconciled relationship with one another because they live in reconciled relationship with God” (Van Gelder 2000:109).

**Conclusion**

The primary command of the Great Commission is to make disciples among all people groups. This paper has argued that church attendance, programs, or revenue are not the only dimensions to be considered in
measuring success in accomplishing the Great Commission. A biblical perspective on discipleship indicates that ministry success also relates to the spiritual quality of congregants’ lives (Barna 2001:95). Therefore, seeking to provide comprehensive spiritual nurture to religious explorers as well as to believers should be the top priority of every biblical approach to discipleship. This was Christ’s model of discipleship as expressed by Ellen White, “The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (1909:143). We can be confident that such an approach “will not, cannot, be without fruit” (144).

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Introduction

One of the key postulations of Christianity is that there is an inherent link between becoming a Christian and being a disciple. For many, the church is seen as having been called into existence for the purpose of making disciples, and only as it undertakes this endeavor is its original commission fulfilled (Burrill 1996:22). But the identification of a “link” between becoming a Christian and being a disciple implies that there is a difference between the two. While some go so far as to assert that it is not possible to be a Christian unless one is also a disciple (Bonhoeffer 1959:45-46), others have drawn the distinction between believer and disciple to highlight a major dilemma facing contemporary Christianity. Mark Brown, for example, contends that “the Church is teaching people how to become Christians, but not disciples” (2012:2). This distinction can be useful in that it highlights the dual focus in the Great Commission: first, to make disciples, and second, to teach them to obey Jesus’ commands (Matt 28:19-20). The distinction can also be characterized as the difference between making disciples, and growing disciples.

A Christian disciple can be defined as one who follows Christ in order to learn from him, live like him, and grow more like him (Taylor 2013:10-11). The emphasis is on the development of Christ-like characteristics over time. The primary means by which this is seen as occurring is through a close and personal relationship between the disciple and Christ. “In this relationship, one is to be constantly learning more about the person, while at the same time living in subjection to that person. The person being discipled is never completely discipled, but [is] always in the process of being discipled” (Burrill 1996:101).
Zerbe (2013:4) argues that the true meaning of discipleship is found within the notion of Christian citizenship, where a person finds an identity that transcends all prior notions of personal identity. The Christian faith is thus viewed as a “dynamic loyalty” operating within all arenas of life and cutting across all other citizenship identities; being “sometimes in harmony with them [and] sometimes in conflict with them” (Zerbe 2013:8). Cherry (2016:198) contends this process will be evidenced through a sense of “transcendent purpose,” where a person moves beyond the horizon of one’s own interests and desires, to that of the Master’s.

This development of Christian faith, being centered around a relationship with Christ, appears to be an intangible and ostensibly beyond scientific measurement. Marking (2005:38) argues, however, that faith is defined by our choices and actions and is far from abstract in its daily-life application. Waggoner (2008:10) contends that God designs a radically different lifestyle for those who choose to follow him and that this change is inherently observable. This idea also echoes the thoughts of Ellen White (1898:57).

That regenerating power, which no human eye can see, begets a new life in the soul; it creates a new being in the image of God. While the work of the Spirit is silent and imperceptible, its effects are manifest. If the heart has been renewed by the Spirit of God, the life will bear witness to the fact. (57)

This belief that the impact of the Holy Spirit on a person’s life can be measured in a quantifiable way has led to the construction of various instruments for the purpose of identifying the growth that is occurring. At times these have been created for the purpose of attempting to gauge the spiritual condition of a group of believers. In other instances, the focus is at the individual level with the instrument designed to promote personal feedback and reflection. In the context of this report, the development and use of such a tool may be an effective way to substantiate or refute Brown’s (2012:2) contention that the Church is not teaching people how to become disciples; at the very least, it holds the potential to identify key areas where resources are needed to support and grow disciples in their walk with Christ.

Existing Frameworks for Measuring Discipleship

Tools that currently exist to measure discipleship are generally based on a self-report survey utilizing a selected response, Likert-type scale. Each is based on a particular framework reflecting a distinct understanding of what discipleship looks like and thus what it is that should be observed and measured. These frameworks in turn dictate the type of questions
asked and the categories of feedback provided to participants. The following paragraphs briefly summarizes and analyses a number of these existing frameworks.

The *Summit Point Discipleship Assessment Test* (Styron 2004:58) suggests seven key areas of growth that can be measured: *willingness to follow and obey Christ, identification with Christ, willingness to grow and learn, total surrender, ongoing relationship with Christ, growing in Christ-like character and evangelism, and victory over sin*. The assessment is a pen and paper instrument of 72 scrambled items based on a six-point Likert scale. Response categories range from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, with no neutral response option. A scoring guide is provided, allowing participants to calculate a final mark in each of the seven areas. Styron admits that there was “an insufficient pool of test respondents to permit conventional statistical analysis to be applied” (72). While it is thus not possible to determine the psychometric properties of the instrument, field-testing was carried out within seven different church groups (on six separate occasions) with the ensuing feedback providing numerous revisions both to the instrument and to the self-scoring procedures. These multiple pilot trials assisted in ensuring the construct validity of the instrument (62). Specific information is not provided as to the method for sample selection, though from the details provided the best description (as is common to most tools covered in this review) would be that of convenience sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:155).

The *Anatomy of a Disciple Self-Assessment* (Taylor 2013:44) is based on a multi-layer model where *humble-submission* is placed at the center. The layers within the model are represented as *The Core* (humbly submitted, biblically formed), *Choices* (sacrificially generous, morally discerning, relationally healthy, personal choices) and *Compassions* (intentional blessing, culturally engaged, inclusive community). The instrument consists of 144 questions containing theme and recurring theme grouping (non-scrambled). The assessment originated from and was tested at the Well Community Church in Fresno, California, with approximately 900 attendees completing the assessment (M. J. Alanis, January 21, 2015, email to author).

Overall results from the trial were reported as positive, though a few constructs demonstrated non-normality. “These [constructs] were primarily in the area of believing, which seems reasonable that such results would be distributed higher given the religious beliefs of the church” (M. J. Alanis, January 21, 2015, email to author).

The *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples* (TGFD) framework and online assessment tool (Together Growing Fruitful Disciples 2014) is the result of a collaborative initiative between the General Conference of Seventh-day...
Adventists and Andrews University. It contains four central pillars: Connecting (with God, self, family, church, and others); Understanding (spiritual growth, nature of God, sin and suffering, redemption, restoration), Equipping (being discipled and discipling others in connecting understanding and ministering); and Ministering (personal vocation, friendships, community service, stewardship, evangelism). The online questionnaire consists of 63 scrambled items predominantly utilizing a six-response Likert scale (never true through to always true), though in places a scale with three responses was used (very little or not at all, some, very much or a lot). Following the completion of the online assessment, a summary of results is published under each of the 21 subheadings (within the four key pillars). Opportunities are provided for individuals to “learn more” and to determine a course of action based on their assessment results. In addition to the full 63-item inventory, a short-form 20-item inventory has been constructed by the authors, with a self-scoring facility. Information on the testing of this instrument was not available at the time of writing this report.

The Growing in Discipleship instrument (Pratt 2014:1) is a model based on five key areas: Connecting, Worshipping, Growing, Sharing, and Serving. It purports to utilize key themes, approaches, and terminology from the following four sources: TGF (Together Growing Fruitful Disciples 2014), Gracelink (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015), Ben Maxson’s program: Steps to Discipleship, and the iFollow Discipleship Resource (North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists 2010). No formal testing of the instrument has been carried out.

The Transformational Discipleship Assessment (Geiger, Kelley, and Nation 2012:223) bases its approach on eight attributes it considers will be consistently displayed in the lives of mature believers: Bible engagement, obeying God and denying self, serving God and others, sharing Christ, exercising faith, seeking God, building relationships, and being unashamed (transparency). This online assessment contains 82 scrambled items and upon completion provides a printout of “achievement” in each area along with a list of the lowest scores within each category. Answers by the respondent are recorded on a five-point Likert scale with a neutral response provided as option 3. No information about the testing of the instrument is available.

The Christian Life Profile Assessment Tool (Frazee 2005:6) is a discipleship kit designed to enable churches to assess beliefs, practices and attitudes within 30 key competencies. The tool formed the basis for the Willow Creek Church Reveal Spiritual Life Survey.

The Follow Discipleship Roadmap (North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists 2010) is based on the first Value Genesis Report (Benson and Donahue 1990, 1) and is designed to be a spiritual assessment tool for use by both individuals and groups. Although a theoretical framework
is not outlined, the items cover areas such as: social justice, community engagement, faith in Christ, personal devotions, generosity, helping others, and faith sharing. The online questionnaire contains 38 scrambled questions that respondents rank on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from Never True to Always True (no neutral selection). Upon submitting the completed questionnaire, personal results are correlated with the iFollow discipleship curriculum with computer generated results suggesting a number of lessons to pursue. Over 100 lessons in PDF and PowerPoint format are available, with a small number being automatically selected based on the responses provided. While the instrument is based on the Value Genesis project of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, the application to the iFollow discipleship curriculum has not been validated (Dave Gemmell, January 24, 2015, email to author).

The Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI) (Hall and Edwards 2002:341) consists of two primary dimensions (Quality of Relationship with God, and Awareness of God) and six subscales: Awareness, Realistic Acceptance, Disappointment, Grandiosity, Instability, and Impression Management. "The quality dimension of the SAI was designed to assess different developmental levels of relationship with God from an object relations perspective" (342). For the purpose of testing the instrument, a total of 79 items were administered to a sample of 438 subjects from a private Protestant university. These items were initially subjected to an exploratory factor analysis (oblique rotation using direct oblimin). To test the overall model a confirmatory factor analysis was performed using Amos to test the fit of the data. The completed instrument contains 54 questions within six scales. Reliability analyses confirmed good internal consistency (alpha) for all scales.

In examining the tools resulting from these frameworks, it was noted that few had been tested to determine the psychometric properties or the reliability of the scales within the instrument. This is considered an important process in ensuring that the instrument is measuring what it purports to measure and that the results are valid and reliable (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:180-184). Thus within the current study the testing of the instrument was considered an important part of the development process.

The Current Study

The current project was initiated in response to a commission by the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, to investigate the nature of Discipleship (see Hattingh et al. 2016:156-171). The project brief included the development of an instrument whereby the attainment of discipleship could be measured within an Adventist context.
After considering the various options available for constructing an instrument, a self-report survey design was selected. Survey methodology allows the collection of large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time, using well-defined terminology and questions that can be reproduced by different researchers at different times, thus producing results that can be compared and contrasted (Hartas 2010:258). Research conclusions can be supported by large data banks, providing the ability to generalize the findings (within given parameters), and the capacity to determine the degree of confidence associated with a particular set of findings (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:256-257).

The first part of this project involved a study of discipleship within scripture, an examination of the writings of Ellen White on discipleship and a review of current literature within this area. This data was complemented by a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with 28 leaders within the South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists and 12 Adventist leaders from other parts of the world (see Hattingh et al. 2016:156-171). From this, a definition of discipleship was formed and a model for expressing visible aspects of discipleship was developed (see figure 1).

![Figure 1. Working model of “The Growing Disciple”](image-url)
The initial model became the foundation for the development of survey items. Key terms and concepts associated with the four dimensions of the model guided and assisted the researchers in developing sets of questions that addressed key concepts in multiple ways. Over 100 items were initially proposed; over time this was refined to 80 for reasons described below.

**Survey Construction**

There is a long standing acknowledgement that care needs to be taken with the wording of survey questions/statements, due to the significant impact that even relatively minor changes can make on the understanding of respondents and thus to the accuracy of the data collected (Lavrakas 2008:657). Numerous principles have been suggested by researchers as the means to accomplish this. These include the need for brevity, clear and unambiguous question, avoiding the use of double negatives, with each question or statement seeking to only measure a single idea (Muijs 2011:43-44). Gorard (2001:107) stresses the need for the questions to have an explicit purpose, and further, to carefully avoid hypothetical situations, jargon, technical language, and ambiguity. Yet while there is a need for simple and clear wording, it is recommended to adopt a relatively formal style throughout the survey as this is considered helpful in ensuring respondents take the questions/statements seriously (107). Each of the above mentioned principles were considered when constructing the survey instrument for the current study.

Though a number of methods exist by which respondents can provide answers on survey instruments, it has been found that selected-response or “forced choice” items, improve consistency, make data tabulation easier, and enhancing the ease of data analysis (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:256). The Likert scale is the most widely used scale within survey research, and is considered the most straight-forward to administer (Dowling and Brown 2010:75, 76). In line with this, the current study initially selected a four-point Likert scale for measuring each item, ranging from *Strongly Agree*, to *Strongly Disagree*.

Agreement is not universal regarding the use of an “unsure” or “undecided” category. Some argue it is best omitted (Cox and Cox 2008:9-16) in order to ensure respondents commit to a particular degree of feeling about a given statement. It is posited that *questionnaire drift* may set in, with respondents using this category in place of making a decision about the given statement (Wilkinson and Birmingham 2003:13). Others however support the validity of a neutral response, arguing that without it, respondents may simply omit items, or select both *agree* and *disagree*,
if not permitted to answer in a neutral manner (Dowling and Brown 2010:76). The current study has not included an *unsure* category, requiring respondents to commit to either agreeing or disagreeing with the given statements.

**Sample Selection**

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011:143) suggest a number of factors that should be considered when selecting the sample for a study. These include sample size, representativeness and sample parameters, access to the sample, and the sampling strategy to be used. The target sample within the current study was Seventh-day Adventist Church members within the South Pacific Division. An online version of the survey (using Survey-Monkey) was selected as the collection method, with advertising occurring through a South Pacific-wide publication, in addition to communication at both conference, local mission and church level.

It is recognized that samples extracted through volunteer participation can be biased (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:160) with specific reasons why particular groups of individuals are involved more than others. It is likely within the current study for example that respondents living in areas where Internet access was not readily available (such as certain areas within the island-fields) may be under-represented in the overall sample of respondents. This may result in a sample that is not representative of the wider population, making it more difficult to generalize the findings (Bryman 2012:176-177).

**The Pilot Study**

A pilot study or test-run of a research instrument helps to ensure that the instructions and questions are clear, and provides an opportunity to revise areas of the questionnaire as needed (Gall, Gall, and Borg 2010:41). It has been suggested that pilot studies are ideally carried out with between five and ten subjects (Wiersma and Jurs 2009:198).

The current research carried out an initial pilot study using nine adults, representing a variety of ages and backgrounds. Information collected from participants included feedback on the following: clarity of instructions, clarity of questions, comprehension of key vocabulary and phrases, overall perceptions of the survey exercise, and level of difficulty to complete. In order to explore the clarity of statements, participants were asked to paraphrase, explain, and discuss a number of the statements.

Based on feedback obtained from the pilot study a number of changes to the instrument were made:
1. A number of survey items (n=23) were identified that were considered best answered using an *Always True* to *Never True* scale as opposed to *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. The survey was thus split into two parts, each utilizing a different scale.

2. The Likert Scale was altered from a four-point to a six-point scale.

3. Eight survey items were reworded to ensure the intent had greater clarity.

All participants completed the survey in under 10 minutes and found the instructions to be clear and unambiguous. Participants reported the survey items to be of good length and simply worded, allowing them to select responses quickly and easily.

**Testing the Instrument**

The resulting instrument (Growing Disciples Survey) contained 80 questions within two sections: the first 23 items asked respondents to rate how often they perceived something to be true (on a six-point Likert scale ranging from *Always True* to *Never True*). The remaining 57 items required participants to rate how strongly they felt about certain statements (on a six-point scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*). Following the collection phase, data were transferred to SPSS21 for analysis. Items 1-23 were coded as follows: Always True = 6, Almost Always True = 5, Usually True = 4, Sometimes True = 3, Seldom True = 2 and Never True = 1. Similarly, items 24-80 were coded: Strongly Agree = 6, Agree = 5, Slightly Agree = 4, Slightly Disagree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1.

A total of 200 people responded to the invitation to complete the survey. A small number of respondents left a majority of the survey incomplete and these were deleted from the analysis, leaving a sample of 185 to be considered.

The two sections of the survey were subjected (separately) to a principal components analysis (PCA). Oblique rotation was selected (Direct Oblimin); this being considered the most appropriate method when it is believed a significant correlation exists between underlying factors within the variables (Tabachnick and Fidell 1996:659-730). The following section outlines the PCA analysis and subsequent reliability analyses for each section.

**Analysis: Questions 1-23**

A PCA was performed on 23 items. The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .936, exceeding the recommended value of .6 (Kaiser 1974:31-36) and Bartlett’s Test...
of Sphericity (Bartlett 1954:296-298) reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix (Sig = .000). Four factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser’s criterion of 1 and in combination explained 65.81% of the variance. The scree plot was ambiguous and showed inflexions that would justify retaining either 2 or 4 factors. The results of a Parallel Analysis however revealed only three components with eigenvalues exceeding the corresponding criterion values for a randomly generated data matrix of the same size (23 variables by 185 respondents). The three-component solution explained a total of 60.72% of the variance.

All three components demonstrated a number of strong loadings, with component 1 representing the concept of Spiritual Disciplines; component 2 Loving my Community; and component 3 Faithful Participation. Most items loaded strongly on a single component, though 8 items loaded on two components, with one item loading on all three components. In all cases the item was retained within the component with the strongest loading.

The internal reliability of each scale was tested to determine Cronbach’s Alpha (CA). The following table summarizes for each scale: the number of total items, items deleted in response to Alpha if Item Deleted, the final number of items in each scale, and the final Alpha value for each scale.

Table 1. Scale summaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Total number of items</th>
<th>Item/s Deleted</th>
<th>Adjusted number of items</th>
<th>Final Alpha for each scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Disciplines</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>No. 10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loving My Community</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithful Participation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.776</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following are the three resulting scales (with items listed in order of loading strength):

A. Spiritual Disciplines

1. I spend time reading the Bible each day.
16. I commit daily time to meditating on the Word of God.
2. Every day I ask God to send the Holy Spirit to guide me.
13. I spend time each day memorizing Scripture passages.
23. I ask God to be part of my life each day.
12. I sense God’s presence in my daily life.
5. I confess my wrong thoughts and actions to God and ask for His forgiveness.
6. What I watch and listen to shows that God is my first priority.

B. Loving My Community

19. I show patience and kindness to those around me, even when I am mistreated.
22. I confess to others when I have wronged them in some way.
18. I seek forgiveness from those I hurt.
4. I show love for my family by unselfishly trying to meet their needs.
3. My words and actions show my commitment to imitate Christ’s example, even when it is difficult.
20. I do my best for God in all I do.
14. By God’s grace, I forgive others who hurt me.
21. I seek God’s guidance for the decisions I make.
17. I do what God wants me to, even if it means I suffer hardship.
11. I am willing to accept advice and guidance from some other Christians.

C. Faithful Participation

15. I attend church each week.
8. I attend Sabbath School each week.
7. My loyalty to following Christ stays strong even when things go wrong.
9. I am willing to do what God asks of me.

**Analysis: Questions 23-80**

A PCA was performed on the remaining 57 items. The Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy, KMO = .939, and Bartlett’s Test showing significance (Sig = .000). Nine factors had eigenvalues over Kaiser’s criterion of 1 and in combination explained 73.76% of the variance. The scree plot suggested the possibility of 4 factors with a Parallel Analysis confirming the suitability of a 4 component solution. The four-component solution explained a total of 60.64% of the variance.
All four components demonstrated strong loadings, with component 1 representing the concept of Spiritual Identity; component 2 Serving My Community; component 3 Sharing Jesus; and Component 4 Spiritual Gifts. While most items loaded strongly on a single component, 10 items loaded on two components, with no item loading on more than 2 components. In each case the item was retained on the component demonstrating the strongest loading.

The internal reliability of the scales was tested to determine Cronbach’s Alpha (CA). The following table summarizes for each scale: the number of total items, the items deleted (in response to Alpha if Item Deleted), the final number of items in each scale and the final Alpha value for each scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Total number of items</th>
<th>Item/s Deleted</th>
<th>Adjusted number of items</th>
<th>Final Alpha for each scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual Identity</td>
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<td>76, 43, 36, 66</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving My Community</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>44, 50</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Jesus</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>77, 65</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.966</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Gifts</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.903</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following are the four resulting scales (with items listed in order of loading strength):

A. Spiritual Identity

67. God gives me the desire to obey Him.
51. I accept Jesus’ righteous, perfect life, as a substitute for my own sinful life.
25. Every Christian is called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.
75. I pray regularly for my friends and family.
60. I intentionally seek to connect with Jesus throughout the day.
64. I enjoy spending time in God’s Word.
46. I feel convicted by the Holy Spirit when I do wrong.
80. My faith in God has grown over the past year.
48. God answers my prayers.
34. I feel totally forgiven by God.
58. The Holy Spirit is at work in my life, changing me.
49. God has given me a personal experience with Him that I can share.
38. I regularly pray for people who don’t know God.
56. Christ lives in me.
27. The Holy Spirit provides daily guidance in my life.
26. My neighbors know that I am a Christian.
41. The people I work with know that I am a Christian.
32. God is living in me through His Spirit.
55. I feel a deep burden for those who don’t yet know Jesus.
69. I am able to explain the reasons for my faith in God if someone asks me.

B. Serving My Community

61. I look for people who are in need that I can help.
63. I make personal sacrifices so that I am able help others.
74. I willingly give of my time so that I can help others.

C. Sharing Jesus

57. I regularly talk with people outside my church family about my faith.
68. I regularly talk with others about my faith in Jesus.
39. I look for opportunities to speak about Jesus to others.
35. I invite friends to attend worship or small group gatherings with me.
79. I actively look for opportunities to share my faith with others.
29. I am currently developing significant friendships outside my church community for the purpose of sharing my faith.
62. I look for opportunities to talk with my friends about God.
78. I help my friends better understand what God is like.
31. I talk with other people about my faith in Jesus.
30. I use my spiritual gifts to share Jesus.
40. I look for ways to help others understand Scripture better.
45. I look for ways in which I can help other people build a stronger relationship with Christ.
73. I intentionally develop meaningful relationships with other Christians.
72. I actively try to help my friends grow stronger in their faith.
59. I encourage others to use what they have to serve God.

D. Spiritual Gifts

42. I see positive results from using the spiritual gifts God has given me.
54. Other Christians have identified and encouraged my spiritual gifts.

24. I am aware of the spiritual gifts God has given to me.

47. God opens opportunities for me to use my spiritual gifts.

52. I am regularly serving in a ministry within my church.

71. I use the spiritual gifts God has given me to help others.

70. I regularly contribute my time to the church I attend.

37. I encourage others to use their spiritual gifts.

53. I have Christian friends I can share my personal needs or struggles with.

28. I have Christian friends I share my spiritual journey with.

33. I help others to reflect on Christ’s life and teachings.

Thus a total of seven scales form the final survey instrument, with 71 items retained from the original 80. The items from these seven scales were scrambled in order to produce the final survey instrument.

The Seven Discipleship Scales

Scales were created on SPSS21 for the seven identified Growing Discipleship scales. Descriptive statistics were utilized to explore the properties of these scales. Boxplots revealed eight significant outliers that required further examination, resulting in the deletion of one case from the analysis (n=184). A comparison of scale means with 5% trimmed means suggest that remaining outliers were having little overall effect on results (<.1) (Pallant 2011, 64-65).

Preliminary Findings from Participant Responses

Though the primary purpose of the current study was to test the validity and psychometric properties of the proposed instrument, preliminary analysis was also carried out on data content. Five questions collected demographic information: gender, ethnicity, age, education and baptism status. Nineteen respondents did not provide demographic information (N=166). A slightly higher number of females than males completed the survey, with the highest rate of completion by those in the 45-64 age category. As expected, most respondents were baptized members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
Results

Within the current study, the seven scales created by the SPSS analysis necessitated a modification of the Growing Disciple model. While the four key areas (Godly, Reproducing, Obedient and Working) remained the same, some aspects within these key domains altered.

Figure 2. Final model of “The Growing Disciple”

The majority of instruments for attempting to measure discipleship have not been tested to determine the psychometric properties or the reliability of the scales within the instrument. It is possible that it is more convenient for those who develop models of discipleship to retain the adopted model as originally conceived and endeavor to keep survey items matched to this pre-determined framework. Within this approach, however, care must be taken to avoid claims regarding the reliability of scales and indeed that these instruments are measuring what they actually purport to measure (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011:200-201).

Limitations

A significant limitation of this study is that data were collected exclusively online. As previously discussed, it is likely that not all portions of
the Seventh-day Adventist membership within the South Pacific Division have equal opportunity to respond to an online survey. Certain areas of the South Sea Island fields have less than reliable or regular Internet access. Further studies using this instrument will need to be carried out in hard-copy form in a variety of places to provide further testing of the properties of the instrument.

It is also acknowledged that the number of respondents was not high. Though being sufficient to conduct a factor analysis, further studies will need to be carried out with larger samples in order to replicate these results.

Conclusion

This instrument responds to the need for validated survey instruments. Ensuring validity led to significant changes in the discipleship model, resulting in a reformed and more reliable discipleship model. Modifications in response to reliability testing also has some significance in the overall philosophy of the model. While disciples undoubtedly lead people to Christ, the model signifies that all relationships between disciples should be reciprocal, non-hierarchical, and mutually edifying. As mature Christians co-labor with new disciples, exercising spiritual gifts and acts of service in love, fruit is produced and the cycle of reproduction continues with and for Christ. With Christ as the Head of the Church (Col 1:18), all members are called to grow in him through discipleship (de Waal et al. 2015:38).

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A name sticks with us from birth until death, at least for most of us, and although we often have no control over it, our names can define us. Since 1880, there are more than five million historical references to popular names. Most names have a traditional meaning. What does your name mean?

In Acts 4:12, Peter stated “There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” This is a statement that came after the miracle performed in Acts 3:6 where Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” I can imagine some of the same people had heard Peter denying the Master, but now he was a true disciple. To understand what a disciple is, it is imperative to know who the Master is.

It is remarkable, even in traditional Christian cultures, the ignorance some have regarding the person of Jesus. Research conducted by YouGov revealed some amazing statistics about religions in the UK. For 20% of the British children, Jesus is a soccer player (Aragao 2014). A thousand British children were interviewed with most of them having no idea about who Jesus Christ is. Not only that, according to the results, less than half affirmed Jesus was the Son of God. The study showed that 25% of them believe that the shepherds found the baby with the assistance of Google maps (Webb 2014).

What does Christ mean to his people? In Acts 4:10, Peter stated that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. He is the Lamb to redeem them, a Brother to love them, a Friend to stick by them, a Shield to defend them, a Tower to secure them, and a Fountain to cleanse them. He is Bread to sustain them, Wisdom to guide them, a Rose to revive, a Star to direct them, and a Sun to shine on them. In Christ there is rest for the weary, food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty; grace for the needy, and salvation for the lost. We are washed in his blood, saved by his grace, clothed in his righteousness, and crowned with his glory.
Discipleship in the Era of Social Media

Being a disciple is to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and to follow him we need to understand who he is, and even more important, we need to find out who he is for us personally. The discipleship process is a personal experience. One cannot read a book or attend a workshop on discipleship and become a disciple. It does not work like that. “Knowing God does not come through a program, a study, or a method. Knowing God comes through a relationship with the Person. This is an intimate love relationship with God. Through this relationship, God reveals himself, his purposes, and his ways, and he invites you to join him where he is already at work” (Blackaby and King 1994:2). After accepting Jesus Christ’s invitation to follow him, a journey begins that will take a person to eternal life. “This is the eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent” (John 17:3). People can know Jesus if they allow him to be involved in their daily life.

Here we have something of a definition of eternal life. Really to know God means more than knowing the way to life. It is life. In this world we are familiar with the truth that it is a blessing and as inspiration to know certain people. Much more is it the case when we know God. To know him transforms us and introduces us to a different quality of living. (Morris 1995:637)

Malcom Gladwell describes the concept of channel capacity. “Channel capacity is simply our brain’s capacity to process information. . . . We can only handle so much information at once. Once we pass a certain boundary, we become overwhelmed” (in Rice 2009:105). Considering the amount of information available through the web and the volume of contacts and messages coming from social media, “we eventually cross a certain emotional line and become overloaded. The intellectual experience of this is called information overload” (Rice 2009:105).

In response to this information overload the church, in the last two decades, has often emphasized relational evangelism. It is “characterized more by [an] emphasis on sharing one’s faith than on teaching a system of doctrines. Friendship will be the primary tool for bringing men and women to Christ and into the church. Fellowship at a personal level will be more important than large personalities or organizations” (Sahlin 1990:21).

The starting point of this process is being with the Master and being transformed by him. Only after personally knowing and relating to Christ...
can God’s person be equipped and become a witness for him. It is also true that in being equipped, people become able to equip others. “He ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach” (Mark 3:14). “He closely connected His disciples’ state of being to their state of doing” (Samaan 2005:12).

How does this affect interpersonal relationships? “How will we make sure that the technologies we employ to serve people don’t actually prevent us from connecting with and loving real human beings? . . . I think we only grow to maturity when we learn to love at point-blank range, where the messy aspects of relationship can’t be avoided” (McMillan 2013). Therefore, friendship evangelism is not just a strategy; it is a way of living. Friendship is grounded on three things: talking, listening, and doing things together (Paulien 2003:12-15).

Spending time with people and developing close personal relationships is imperative. “To be someone’s best friend,” says Gladwell, “requires a minimum amount of time. More than that, though, it takes emotional energy. Caring about someone deeply is exhausting. At a certain point, at somewhere between 10 to 15 people, we begin to overload” (in Rice 2009:105). Fortunately, not everyone listed as a “friend” in our social media is a close friend. It would be impossible to keep up with thousands of personal relationships.

Gladwell illustrated this fact when he talked about the famous “Dunbar Number.” . . . If you belong to a group of five people, you have to keep track of ten separate relationships: your relationships with the four others in your circle and the six other two-way relationships between the others. That’s what it means to know everyone in the circle. You have to understand the personal dynamics of the group, juggle different personalities, ties, keep people happy, manage the demands on your own time and attention and so on. If you belong to a group of twenty people, however, there are now 190 two-way relationships to keep track of 19 involving yourself and 171 involving the rest of the group. That’s a fivefold increase in the size of the group, but a twentyfold increase in the amount of information processing needed to know the other members of the group. Even a relatively small increase in the size of a group, in other words, creates a significant additional social and intellectual burden. (Rice 2009:106-107)

The more social circles increase, the more socially and intellectually burdensome they become. “Of course, Dunbar’s research is now more than fifteen years old. It took place well before Facebook was a gleam in Mark Zuckerberg’s eye. How does his theory hold up today? . . . Sites like MySpace and Facebook could ‘in principle’ allow users to push past the limit. It’s perfectly possible that the technology will increase our memory
capacity” (Rice 2009:107, 108). It is easy to observe that the more contacts one has, the more superficial the relationships become. Trying to keep ties to hundreds of people will put in detriment the closest ones. Konnikova (2014) reports the effect of social media over Dunbar’s number stating, “The more our virtual friends replace our face-to-face ones, in fact, the more our Dunbar number may shrink.”

Kallenberg applies this to discipleship. “Technology is shaping our discipleship in ways we do not easily recognize” (2011:4). The cry for relevance in ministry leaders as it relates to technology in ministry has theological and biblical support. “The goal of sharing your faith with another person isn’t simply to broadcast information; it’s to be a channel that aids the Holy Spirit in His work of transformation” (Birdsong and Heim 2012: Loc 573).

Human beings have a great need for fellowship. When God created Adam, he said, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Human beings still have the same need for relationships. It is “recognition of the fact that most people come to Christ and into the church through the ministry of Christian friends or relatives” (Birdsong and Heim 2012: Loc 50). In spite of the great number of advantages modern life offers, people still have the same deep longing for meaningful relationships.

Jesus used the words “follow me” that became the principle of most social media technology. Discipleship is a process related to the concept of following. Jesus repeated several times, “follow me.” The Gospel Commission in Matt 28:19 to make disciples has implications in the physical world and in the online world. The development of new technology such as social media, mobile technology, and internet streaming have removed the boundaries of the physical world and have provided online communities spanning continents. Describing this new reality, Wellington (2016) says that “technology provides a powerful opportunity to engage in witnessing and evangelism within our local context and our global community which when shared through these mediums will germinate in the hearts of those searching for the good news.”

The church today has become a complex structure, whereas discipleship is often seen as just an act of joining the church. It seems that the discipleship model of Jesus was just the opposite. Jesus “called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8: 34-35). This teaching was so important that it is one of the few teachings of Jesus repeated four times in the gospels (Matt 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Today, many churches have inverted the model. Doing church is so complex and discipleship
has become synonymous with membership. To be a member in good and regular standing, one does not have to do anything. Just promise to abide by a set of principles and you are considered a member in good and regular standing.

Secular and postmodern people are not attracted to superficial religious practices. Paulien points out that secular people today have an urgent need for genuine relationships. They long for real relationships with real people who care enough to be honest as well as loyal. People today live noisy and distracted lives. They rush here and there, and relationships tend to be increasingly superficial. Committed Christians who are willing to enter into sensitive and authentic relationships with a selected number of secular people will find open arms waiting. As society becomes increasingly high-tech, the need for genuine relationships will increase. There will be a corresponding need for the caring touch, not so much physical as emotional and social. (1993:130)

**Evangelism or Discipleship: Which One Is More Important?**

Each church needs to be able to answer two questions: Is there a plan for making disciples? and Does this plan work? Holding an evangelistic series is much easier than developing genuine disciples. You can lead someone to Christ in five minutes, but it takes years to disciple the person. In reality, discipleship is a life-long process, for a follower of Jesus should never stop growing in their relationship with Christ. Two questions that need to be asked are: Is discipleship a follow-up program after the evangelism? Or, is evangelism part of the lifetime process of someone becoming a follower of Jesus?

Disciple-making requires long-term relationships and deep commitment. I interact with a few people who are trying to make a difference by doing something unusual and extraordinary. I personally meet with them at least once a year in person and very often on FaceTime twice a month. However, discipleship requires more than casual interactions. It requires a personal relationship built on regular time spent together. Discipleship is better done in small groups; however, it can take many forms since there is no cookie-cutter approach. The important thing is to help people grow in their faith on their spiritual journey as followers of Jesus.

The longer I pastor, the more I find myself in the middle of the evangelism vs. discipleship debate. Billy Graham believed that “evangelism must be our continual priority, and discipleship must be our goal” (in Atkinson 2012). The Great Commission was not “Go and make converts,” but rather “Go and make disciples.” There is no single right answer to the question...
asked earlier. They are both important. To be a follower of Jesus means that you, too, are called to be a missionary. Going on a mission is not an optional extra—an upgrade for the mature disciple. The greatest barrier to disciple making is the idea that you can be an Adventist without being a disciple. You can sit in church forever and never become a disciple of Jesus—a wide-spread problem in modern-day Christianity. “So the next time someone asks you if you’re an evangelism or discipleship guy (or gal), answer, ‘Both!’ and be proud of it” (Atkinson 2012).

The Great Commission is our mission. Our call is to make disciples. The disciple’s goal is to make new disciples. This is the process of discipleship, where the spiritual formation is enhanced by a personal relationship. This course of action is more effective in groups. Small groups can promote diversity by recognizing people’s differences. This can strengthen the group, providing “an environment in which people can learn and grow as they work and share together” (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard 1996:246). The disciple is an equipper whose heart has been wonderfully and meticulously shaped by God as a magnificent piece of work, a real masterpiece. “As water reflects a face, so a man’s heart reflects the man” (Prov 27:19).

The mission of the church is to announce salvation through Jesus Christ, because “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). The testimony of the disciples was so powerful, that the people “realized that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). In order to fulfill the goal of witnessing for Jesus, the primary function of local churches is to train their members as ministers, in order to reach out to the world and invite people to become new disciples for Jesus. “Every church should be a training school for Christian workers” (White 2002:59).

I have heard over and over again that everyone should be an evangelist. In reality, the biblical model involves a two-fold approach to evangelism. First, there is the responsibility to identify, equip, and mobilize gifted evangelists (with gifted evangelistic leaders taking the primary responsibility). Second, it is important to inspire all believers to live lives that would cause others to want to know more about the God they serve. “If all believers are leading the kind of lives that evoke questions from their friends, then opportunities for faith sharing abound and chances for the gifted evangelists to boldly proclaim are increased” (Frost 2016:5).

Jesus challenges his followers to go and make disciples. “God requires His people to shine as lights in the world. It is not merely the ministers who are required to do this, but every disciple of Christ” (White 1948:122). The Great Commission has been given to every disciple of Christ (Nichol 1980:5:557). In accepting Christ, we accepted this commission. “The
Savior’s commission to the disciples included all the believers. It includes all believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on the ordained minister. . . . The gospel is to be presented, not as a lifeless theory, but as a living force to change the life. God desires that the receivers of His grace shall be witnesses to its power” (White 1940:822-826).

Being a witness is not an option, how a person witnesses is. Witnessing is something that you have no choice over. Christians too often have focused on “witnessing” instead of being witnesses (Sahlin 2003:3). Ellen G. White also states, “Every true follower of Christ has a work to do. God has given to every man his work” (White 1962:232). As the apostles were waiting for Christ’s return, they “went forth with courage and hope, to do their Master’s work with fidelity. They knew that the most acceptable way of waiting for Christ was to work for him. It was theirs to direct others to the coming Lord, and to teach them to wait patiently for his appearing. This work was given to every disciple of Christ” (White 1969:263).

The greatest barrier to being Christ’s disciple is the tendency to remain in the default system (Willard 2013). This is the idea that one can be a church member without being a disciple, being an Adventist without being a disciple, that witnessing is just an option. To be a Christian is to be baptized, to become a member of a community of believers, and to continue the life-long process of becoming a witnessing disciple of Jesus Christ.

**Equipping Disciples**

For a long time, it has been understood and emphasized that the pastoral role in the context of Eph 4 is to equip the saints for their ministry (pastor/teacher gift). George Knight (2010) points out that “in Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts—when he noted that ‘some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers’ (Eph. 4:11, RSV)—he used a Greek construction that indicates the office of pastor and teacher was held by the same person.” According to Kidder (2009), “around the 1970s and 1980s, a new understanding started to emerge. Many book authors and pastors of megachurches started to see the role of the pastor as a chief executive officer (CEO/leader), who casts a vision and rallies and motivates people to carry on the new vision in a changed and healthy environment.”

However, I want to highlight another way of understanding Eph 4 that is aligned with both the biblical and original Adventist view that ministers should be hired to be equippers and church planters, and not hired because they are good performers. Allen Hirsch describes the fivefold test for spiritual gifts according to Eph 4 (Apostolic, Prophetic, Evangelist, Shepherd, and Teacher—APEST).
Ministry vocation is a mixture of personal identity, God’s calling, the Spirit’s gifting, and community discernment. We only really know ourselves and our ministry impact in relation to others. . . . Every person functions in unique ways. It is remarkable when a group allows each member to function out of their natural capacities, thus contributing to the overall movement, direction, and wisdom of a team. (Hirsch 2016)

Ephesians 4:12 is one of the most important Bible texts on the topic of equipping. The NIV states that spiritual gifts are given “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built.” In the previous verses, Paul describes the incarnation and ascension of Jesus as the assurance of the divine gift to humans in order to give them the ability to accomplish this important task. Some of the gifts are mentioned in order to exemplify how the saints can be “perfected” for Christian service. The word “prepare” (NIV) or “perfecting” (KJV) is the translation of kātartismōn. It is also translated as “equipping,” meaning “a perfectly adjusted adaptation; complete qualification for a specific purpose” (Moulton 1991:220). This word was used by Paul to describe his desire that the brethren be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:10).

Jesus used this word to mean the disciple “that is perfect shall be as his master” (Luke 6:40). The verb kātartizo appears in Matt 4:21 to describe the early disciples’ activity as fishermen, mending the nets. In Gal 6:1 it is used to express the restoration of those overtaken in a fault. The gifts were for the purpose of ‘mending’ the saints and uniting them (Nichol 1980:6:1023). This is the work Jesus wants to do in us: to repair, to restore, and to prepare us for a specific purpose. As Paul stated, his prayer was “for your perfection” (2 Cor 13:9), a complete adjustment, and completeness of character. “The edification of believers is another mission or function of the church. God, explains Paul, gave to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors (Eph 4:11) for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry (vv. 12, 13)” (Dederen 2000:549). Therefore, equipping believers can be understood as the primary goal in the ministry of making disciples.

The work of equipping is an intimate cooperation between God and believers in ministry. To give empowerment for the task, the Spirit added special gifts to individual believers (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11, 27-31; Eph 4:11). “These charismata, or gifts of grace, are not to be confused with the Christian virtues described as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23). They are apportioned by the Spirit to whom and as He wills (1 Cor 12:11). . . . They are intended to strengthen the believers in their faith and to enable them to perform their ministry in the church or among unbelievers” (Dederen 2000:552).
The work of the ministries or services includes “all types of ministry and serving within the church. The officers of the church are not to lord it over the flock but are to consider themselves servants. This is the immediate purpose of the gift” (Nichol 1980:6:1023). As a result, the church is to be built up numerically and in character. Spiritual gifts are given to help each believer find their place in the body of Christ. God gives his people spiritual ministry gifts to equip them for witnessing in the community and ministering within the church.

The followers of Jesus today are to seek these gifts just as earnestly as the Corinthians sought for them at Paul’s urging (1 Corinthians 14:1). These gifts, under the ministry of the Holy Spirit, will (1) equip church members for the work of ministry including winning people to Jesus, (2) build up the body of Christ, (3) lead into the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, (4) develop spiritual maturity in Jesus, and (5) sustain spiritual growth toward the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). (Rice 2000:637)

The Holy Spirit, who works in and through the believers, not only gives gifts, but also imparts the power to carry out ministry. Considering that God controls all these gifts, they must function in perfect harmony with his overall plan for the finishing of his work on earth. We can be sure that “all who surrender to Christ and become members of His church on earth, no matter what their nationality or social or economic status or intellectual attainments, have the assurance that the Holy Spirit will equip them with the ability to perform their Christian duties with a high degree of effectiveness” (Nichol 1980:6:772).

In one of his speeches, Martin Luther King Jr. once said that “if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live” (N.d.). Jesus Christ came to this world with a mission, “to search and to save the lost.” He sacrificed himself for us and died on the cross; his disciples follow his example by living and serving selflessly.

I often hear church pastors and lay evangelists say, “We are planning to have evangelism in the summer.” Phrases like that trouble me a lot. If the primary purpose of the Christian church is to help lost people become committed disciples of Jesus Christ and the main goal of the Great Commission is to make disciples, how can any church dedicate just a part of the year for the activity that is supposed to be its main pursuit? If they mean by that expression holding evangelistic meetings for reaping the spiritual harvest, then perhaps it makes more sense, for there is no theological or pragmatic reason for differentiating between public and personal evangelism in such an arbitrary way.

If the primary task of the church is to make disciples, then among the
many strategies that are out there, church planting has been considered the best evangelistic methodology and small group ministries the most effective tool for disciple making. The apostle Paul gives the theological foundation for disciple making in small groups through the message written to the early church (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12). He presents fellowship as a vital part of Jesus’ ministry, and small groups as the very place where the community among the disciples should take place. Therefore, small groups should not be a program but the foundation for the ministries of the church.

Other than Jesus, Paul is the only one who had more influence on the formation of the Christian church. He planted the majority of churches in Asia and wrote most of the New Testament. Following Jesus’ instructions to go two by two, he began his missionary journeys along with other disciples. “Paul and his company did not seek simply to disciple individuals but continually sought to reach the oikos of those they evangelized” (Nichol 1980:5:606).

Jesus challenged his disciples to review their own discipleship process. For more than three years of learning and sharing, their activities had been restricted just to the Jewish people (Matt 10:5, 6). Later, Jesus challenged them to undertake a greater work. In Mark 16:15, Jesus told his disciples to “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” This was in reference to the words of Isa 61:1-3. Their goal was to make disciples regardless of ethnicity or nationality, and to invite people everywhere to become Christ’s followers.

**Disciple Making and Mission**

When Jesus issued his striking order for world-wide ministry, his disciples looked back on their own discipling process that took more than three years of learning and sharing. However, their discipling process had been restricted just to the Jewish people (Matt 10:5, 6). Now Jesus challenged them to go into the entire world and preach the good news of salvation to all peoples. They were to go out of their way, approach people regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or faith, and invite them to become Jesus’ followers.

Even though the Christian church is God’s idea “the current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order” (McNeal 2004:1). The church was “organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world” (White 1911:9). Wherever God is at work there is organization and structure. People who want to be part of God’s plan but not part of an organization do not understand how God
works. “System and order are manifest in all works of God throughout the universe” (White 1994:26).

God is deeply committed to the success of his church organization, in spite of its imperfections. As Ellen White states, “I testify to my brethren and sisters that the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard. . . . He comes personally by His Holy Spirit into the midst of His church” (White 1994:15). “The first disciples went forth preaching the word. They revealed Christ in their lives. And the Lord worked with them. . . . the Holy Spirit was poured out, and thousands were converted in a day. . . . So it may be now. Instead of man’s speculations, let the word of God be preached. Let Christians put away their dissensions, and give themselves to God for the saving of the lost. Let them in faith ask for the blessing, and it will come” (White 1940:827).

By definition, the disciples became “fishers of men” (Matt 4:19). “The world is to be evangelized, not by men invested with ecclesiastical dignities and with parti-colored garments, but by men who have experienced the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and who are visibly endued with the power of wisdom, and love, and zeal” (Bruce 1963:523). The perpetual multiplying of disciples reflects Christ’s strategy for reaching the most remote parts of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The Great Commission with its emphasis on mission is rooted in the authority of the risen Christ, who commands his followers to make disciples, to baptize disciples, and to continue to teach disciples among all the nations. The whole concept of equipping is based on the reason why spiritual gifts are given. According to Acts 4:12, special abilities are given for the purpose of allowing God’s people to be equipped to do better work for him. The result is personal growth and the growth of the church in strength and maturity.

The equipping process involves both natural and supernatural aspects. God is the source, Jesus is the reason, and the Holy Spirit is the vehicle through which spiritual gifts are given in order to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4). The natural way to perform ministry is as follows: imperfect human beings empowered by spiritual gifts reach out to other imperfect human beings and minister to them.

**Retention Problem or Faulty Discipleship**

In recent years mainline Christian denominations in North America have lost one third of their membership. The total number of mainline Protestant adults has decreased by roughly five million from 2007 to 2014 (Lipka 2015). In the last fifty years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church
experienced a net loss of 39.25% of its baptized members, which represents over 13 million people. Research has shown that the people most likely to leave the church are recent converts and converts from public evangelism. Church leaders attribute the current situation to faulty discipleship. The foundational problem is superficial discipleship practices.

The “first sign of a culture at risk for ethical collapse, [is that] there is not just a focus on numbers and results but an unreasonable and unrealistic obsession with meeting quantitative goals” (Jennings 2006:17). It is true that numbers do matter. The shepherd knew exactly how many sheep he had and that is why he went after the one lost sheep when he noticed one was missing.

Christ’s method is still the best one. “Those who will study the manner of Christ’s teaching, and educate themselves to follow His way, will attract and hold large numbers now, as Christ held the people in His day” (White 1894, emphasis mine). Too often Adventists have been more concerned with attracting new members with not enough attention being paid to holding those baby Christians.

Culture Change for Mission

The Seventh-day Adventist Church will need to experience change in how it does evangelism, in how it disciples new members, and in how it equips its members for outreach. Change is never easy, especially in congregations that have years of tradition in doing things in set ways. Adventist leaders will need to understand not only the Christian disciplines but also the sophisticated science of leading change and leading organizations.

The Adventist Church needs to think about the message it is sending out. Is it sending a consistent and clear message to its workers and members? What kind of culture results when mixed messages or inconsistent messages are sent?

Clear communication of the organization’s values is indispensable for preserving the culture of any organization. As Quint Studer (2007) repeated, “What you permit, you promote.” The behaviors permitted in an organization soon become part of its culture. Nearly every company has a history of failed change efforts. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is no different. But now more than ever, organizations like our church need to know how to initiate change. Kotter (2012) suggests a need for a dual operating system—the traditional hierarchy, which enables organizations to efficiently manage day-to-day operations and a new agile network that can seize opportunities and take advantage of new possibilities. In this new network, Kotter’s original eight steps become eight accelerators. Only
a few organizations do this now, but eventually, all organizations will need to adopt this system.

To deal with an increasingly fast-moving world, the church must also understand how management and leadership differ and appreciate the value of each. This, more than anything else, is fundamental to leading change (Kotter 2012:26). Management deals with day-to-day operations of the church while leadership inspires participation in the mission of the church.

Leadership development will be indispensable for change to occur. I propose a spiritual leadership development program using the competencies of coaching. This approach has the goal to assist a person in reaching their full potential, and this can be achieved by equipping others. This alternative can be understood as a hybrid system profiting from the resources of a strong organization combined with organic unstoppable power (Brafman and Beckstrom 2006).

Coaching is another component of leadership development. Coaching means to come alongside people to help them grow, to help them to find out what God wants them to do (God’s agenda), and to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to see that the agenda becomes a reality (success). Every journey requires a good map or a GPS. This coaching process consists of three basic phases: who a person is, how the person does things, and what the person does. The first step, who a person is, has the objective of developing spiritual qualities through personal devotion, journaling, prayer, Bible reading, fasting, spiritual retreats, and Sabbath rest. It includes daily renewal, weekly rest, and quarterly retreats.

The second phase is how the person does things and has to do with engagement skills. These skills are enhanced through workshops and coaching a person in things like listening, caring, and challenging the status quo. People demonstrate that they are listening when they are able to summarize and paraphrase what has been said. Asking powerful questions is another way to facilitate dialogue and openness. A caring attitude is demonstrated by showing empathy, finding ways to unpack emotions, and affirming small successes and celebrating them. Challenging is probably the most difficult aspect of the engagement skills. Being able to name the truth of the matter and confronting situations when necessary is vital to the process of coaching.

The third phase of this coaching process is about what the person does. This has to do with executive skills, vision casting, understanding currently realities, strategic planning, and implementation. The general purpose of coaching competencies can help people recognize their potential and identify the obstacles in their lives.
Conclusion

For a long time, some have suggested that the Lord will bless any outreach initiative although Adventists have also emphasized the need to follow Christ’s method as the only one that “will give true success in reaching the people” (White 1942:143). However, White declares that “God has withheld His blessings because His people have not worked in harmony with His directions” (White 1948:18).

Jesus is the message. The Lord sent his messengers, and then he sent his Son. And Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21) to make disciples. In the end it will not be about what we have done, but about who we know, who we follow, and whose disciple we are. Discipleship and disciple making need to become central to the culture of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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The habit of reading the Bible through every year from cover to cover has provided some insights that I may not have picked up without this systematic approach. There are three groups of people that God identifies repeatedly. They are almost always mentioned together. God is intensely concerned about how his followers respond to these subgroups of humanity. I would like to call them God’s special trio. They are the foreigners, fatherless, and widows.

Foreigners, fatherless, and widows appear as a trio in 11 verses in the book of Deuteronomy. It is impossible to miss them when reading through this book. The first verse in which they are mentioned is Deut 10:18. God’s passion is clearly articulated, “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (emphasis added). How does God provide for them? In chapter 14 verse 29, God calls on his people to supply food for these individuals and emphasizes that by doing so, he will bless them in all the work of their hands. Every local city or village was expected to respond to the needs of the foreigners, fatherless, and widows who lived among them. God’s blessing was tied directly to how they responded to the needs of these groups.

God was very specific in his instruction concerning the treatment of his special trio. His people were not to take advantage of them, such as depriving the foreigner and fatherless of justice or taking the cloak of a widow as a pledge (Deut 24:17). At harvest time, they were not to thoroughly harvest their farms. They were to leave olives, grapes, and wheat available for harvesting by the foreigners, fatherless, and widows (vv. 19, 20, 21). A tenth of the harvest was to be given to the Levites as a tithe. From this tenth, the foreigners, fatherless, and widows were also to be cared for (26:12).

What intrigued me was when I came across this trio again in my
reading of Psalms, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi. Psalm 146:9 repeats the response of God found in Deut 10:18, “The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow” (emphasis added).

Many verses referring to God’s special trio come in the form of a warning—do not oppress the foreigner, fatherless, and widow. Jeremiah 7:5-7 puts it this way, “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.”

A brief survey of the Old Testament perspective on foreigners, fatherless, and widows indicates that these groups are a special focus of God’s attention. He expects them to be treated well (not oppressed) and to be provided for by his people. God’s blessing of his people is directly connected to how they treat these individuals.

**Foreigner**

I will explore further each of the three groups, beginning with foreigners. The NIV selects the word “foreigner” to describe this group. Other translations use the word “stranger,” “immigrant,” or “sojourner.” Leviticus 19:34 (NIV) provides an insight into what God is referring to: “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” The Hebrew word used in this passage is haggar which is from the same root word (guwr) used in Deut 10:18 and is best translated as sojourner. This rarely used English word means to turn aside and tarry for a definite or indefinite time. Biblically, this person was a newcomer who did not have rights based on birth (Brown-Driver-Briggs 2006). A biblical example of a sojourner is the story of Naomi and Ruth. When Naomi moved her family to Moab because of a famine in Israel, she became a sojourner in Moab. When Ruth, a Moabite, moved with Naomi back to Israel, Ruth became a sojourner. In today’s context, refugees or immigrants are familiar words that define groups of people that fit the meaning of the word sojourner (haggar).

From the inception of Israel, there was a mandate from God to respond with compassion to the foreigner. God shared his vision for Abraham and his descendants in Gen 12:3, “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The calling of Israel to positively impact the nations surrounding them was a unique one. “Although ancient Near Eastern law codes stressed protection for the widow and orphan, only Israel’s contained legislation for the resident alien” (Elwell 1996).
In our contemporary context, foreigners, and in particular refugees, are making headlines around the world. Desperate political conditions in Syria and Libya have created a monumental humanitarian crisis. It is estimated that 11 million Syrians have fled their homes since civil war broke out in March 2011 (Syrian Refugees 2016). In the first six weeks of 2016, 409 individuals lost their lives at sea in their attempt to escape. European nations face unprecedented challenges as they scramble to respond compassionately to the cry for help. Joe Millman, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) stated, “There are more concurrent crises around than we’ve ever seen at one time” (Batha 2016). It is not anticipated that this intensity will decrease anytime soon.

Complicating matters further is a legitimate fear that terrorists are infiltrating the refugees as they seek asylum. It is impossible to close a blind eye to the risks while trying to respond compassionately to the millions who desperately need help. It is not the purpose of this article to debate the political landmines related to the current refugee crisis, rather to present a case for a biblical response to this group that is part of “God’s special trio.”

If we examine the pattern established in the Old Testament, it is abundantly clear that God’s people must respond with acts of compassion. Every city was responsible to care for those within their territory. Applying that methodology today, it would become the responsibility of the local church and individual members to engage in ministry to refugees within their own community. Deuteronomy 10:18 clearly highlights the priority of providing for the physical needs with food and clothing. Additional ways to provide tangible help could be assisting with medical and dental needs, bed/blankets for the home, learning the language of their new country, orientation to the community, etc. Inviting a refugee family home for a meal would foster a relationship and heighten awareness of specific needs.

The Iowa-Missouri Conference has taken decided action to do something tangible for the refugees within their territory. They have established a refugee tuition fund that provides assistance for Adventist education to children of refugees (Iowa-Missouri Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016).

Seventh-day Adventists are an end-time movement with a mission to carry the Three Angels’ Messages to the ends of the earth. Could the influx of refugees be God-ordained?

God would be pleased to see far more accomplished by his people in the presentation of the truth for this time to the foreigners in America than has been done in the past . . . . As I have testified for years, if we were quick in discerning the opening providences of God, we should
be able to see in the multiplying opportunities to reach many foreigners in America a divinely appointed means of rapidly extending the third angel’s message into all the nations of earth. God in His providence has brought men to our very doors and thrust them, as it were, into our arms, that they might learn the truth, and be qualified to do a work we could not do in getting the light before men of other tongues. (White 1946:570)

Pastor Jimmy Shwe spent over 20 years living in a refugee camp. He is now a United States citizen and lives in North Carolina. Pastor Jimmy understands the significance of the above quote from the book *Evangelism*. Since 2011, he has been involved in helping to identify 43 Karen refugee groups in the United States. Today, there are over 2,000 Karen refugees worshiping as Seventh-day Adventists in the United States.

Are there refugees living in your city? To find out, visit the website: www.reachtheworldnextdoor.com. Click on the link “Make Friends with Internationals” and then “Find Internationals.” Perhaps your church could become a host to a refugee group and assist them as they plant a church. Experience has demonstrated that these groups flourish best when supported to begin their own ministry verses integrating them into the worship service of the existing Adventist church. If space is provided by the local church for them to conduct Sabbath School and church in their own language, they will flourish. The local church can respond to their physical needs and help them transition to their new home country. This is mission at its best.

**Fatherless**

The second group in God’s special trio is the fatherless. This group is close to God’s heart. As highlighted previously, the group referred to as “fatherless” appear 18 times in the Old Testament as part of the trilogy of foreigners, fatherless, and widows. The fatherless are mentioned an additional 23 times in the Old Testament. Perhaps the most well-known passage is Ps 68:5, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in His holy dwelling” (emphasis added). Psalms 27:10 sheds further light on God’s passion for the fatherless, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me.”

In the ancient Near East, the father provided the main economic support for his family. The loss of a father through death in war, accident, or disease placed the children and widow in a desperate financial situation. Second Kings 4:1-7 shares the hopeless plight of a widow who had the creditors coming after her following the death of her husband. The ruthless creditor was even threatening to take her two sons as slaves in order
to pay the debt. Elisha instructed her to collect vessels and pour the small amount of oil that she had into them. Miraculously the oil multiplied and all the pots were filled. She was able to sell the oil and pay off the creditor. Such highly vulnerable widows were to be cared for by God’s people. In this case, it seems that help had not come and God himself provided a miracle to care for the widow and her children.

Just as God placed the responsibility of reflecting his passion and coming to the aid of the fatherless in the Old Testament, he clearly indicates the priority for his followers today: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (Jas 1:27, emphasis added). According to the Christian Alliance for Orphans, 17.8 million children have lost both parents—double orphans, while 153 million children who have lost one or both parents. These numbers do not include children living in institutions (orphanages) or on the streets (On Understanding Orphan Statistics n.d.).

How can a Seventh-day Adventist directly impact the life of an orphan today? Two years ago during Christmas of 2014, our family decided to host two orphan brothers through an organization called Project 143 (Project 143 2016). The boys came to our home for four weeks to live with our family and enjoy the Christmas holidays. The experience was so transformational for our family we decided to host them again for eight weeks during the following summer. We have now hosted the boys four times and also visited their orphanage in Eastern Europe. They have learned English and one of our biological boys is communicating with them in their language. We are currently in the process of adopting them. Spending time with these boys caused me to wonder how two such amazing boys could be abandoned by their parents. They have such promise for the future, but desperately need a family who will love them and raise them to make a difference in this world for God. They come from what is considered the most secular part of the world. Praying, going to church, family worship, even the name of Jesus are all new concepts for them. It was exciting to see the transformation in their lives during their short time with us. The older boy, who was seven at the time, came up to me one Sabbath after hearing me preach and in broken English said, “I help for God.” Needless to say, I was overcome with emotion.

Perhaps you have an interest in doing something closer to home. Being a foster parent is another way to make an impact for orphans. This ministry for children should certainly be promoted in the local church. If this is not the right step for your family, perhaps you can be a support for someone who is fostering, by offering respite care. Respite means to provide a primary caregiver with a break. By hosting a child in your home for a few hours or over the weekend, you can give the foster parent much
needed rest and as a result not only help the child, but also help the foster parent do their job better. The same need is also present for single parents and their children.

Ellen White took the biblical injunction to assist orphans personally. She comments on her experience:

After my marriage I was instructed that I must show a special interest in motherless and fatherless children, taking some under my own charge for a time, and then finding homes for them. Thus I would be giving others an example of what they could do.

Although called to travel often, and having much writing to do, I have taken children of three and five years of age, and have cared for them, educated them, and trained them for responsible positions. I have taken into my home from time to time boys from ten to sixteen years of age, giving them motherly care, and a training for service. I have felt it my duty to bring before our people that work for which those in every church should feel a responsibility.

While in Australia I carried on this same line of work, taking into my home orphan children, who were in danger of being exposed to temptations that might cause the loss of their souls. (White 1958:34)

Note that it was God who instructed Ellen White to do this. Also, it was to be an example to others of what they could do. She clearly recommends that every church take on the responsibility of ministering to orphans. With the busy life that Ellen White lived, what an inspiration!

Widows

The final group of God’s special trio to be examined further is referred to as “widows.” In the Old Testament, widows and orphans are typically grouped together. One event precipitated the status of widow and orphan in a moment, the death of the husband/father. At that moment the future of the wife (now a widow) and children (now orphans) became very uncertain.

Jesus draws our attention to a broader ministry to widows in Luke 4:25-26, “But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the day of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarapheth, in the region of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow.” Elijah’s interaction with the widow of Zarapheth resulted in God’s miraculous preservation of the widow’s life and that of her son. The provision was for their basic need of food. God miraculously supplied oil and flour until the famine ended. In these verses, Jesus emphasizes that
there were many widows in Israel. The story of the widow of Zarapheth additionally points out that God’s care extended beyond the borders of Israel.

The plight of widows does not escape God’s notice, and it should not escape our notice either. Some women become widows while they still have children living at home, others become widows because they outlive their spouse who has died of old age. On average, women outlive men by seven to ten years. If a man marries a woman that is a few years younger, then the time spent in widowhood can be even longer. The loss of a spouse, having to care for a home alone, and feeling uncertain financially, all can create a very distressing situation. Ideally, children or other family members will rise to the occasion and provide the support needed. However, that should not be assumed. There are many ways that church members can respond with compassion and love. Inviting them to your home for a meal, helping them organize their finances, mowing their yard, doing odd jobs/repairs around their house, preparing food for them, adopting them as a “grandparent” for your children, taking them on family outings with you, etc. There may be physical needs, but we also should be in tune with the emotional needs. Local churches should provide social and spiritual opportunities for these individuals to interact with others who are facing a similar stage in their life. Beyond our own members, we should be reaching out to widows in the community as well.

Single Moms

Our society is impacted by another group that has many similarities to widows: single moms. This group is created by two cultural dynamics: divorce and unwed pregnancies, both of which result in children being raised without a mother and father in the home. Single moms represent a significant portion of society. The Washington Post made this observation, “Single motherhood has grown so common in America that demographers now believe half of all children will live with a single mom at some point before the age of 18” (Badger 2014).

Following are some startling statistics regarding single moms in America:

- Seventy-eight percent of the current prison population was raised by single moms.
- Children of single parent homes are 5 times more likely to commit suicide, and 10 times more likely to drop out of high school.

How has the Christian church responded? Only 1% of the nation’s 300,000 Evangelical churches have any type ministry for single moms.
Two-thirds of single moms do not attend church, which means their children are not there either (The Life of a Single Mom 2012-2015). The combined number of unchurched single moms and their children makes this segment of society the most likely under-evangelized/unchurched group in America. And yet this is a group with tremendous needs and potential high receptivity.

Ministering to Single Moms

How does the Seventh-day Adventist church do when it comes to ministering to single moms? Statistics are not available to know the exact percentages, but it is likely very similar to the 1% statistic cited above. Research indicates when the church makes an effort to connect with single moms in meaningful ways that it will bear fruit:

- Churches with single parent support groups are twice as likely to retain single parents in their church long-term.
- Churches with a single moms’ support program have seen a 58% increase in the number of single parents attending their church (The Life of a Single Mom 2012-2015).

One of the most innovative churches ministering to single moms in North America is the Church in the Valley Seventh-day Adventist Church in Langley, British Columbia. For the past 15 years, through their Acts of Kindness ministry (what they have renamed their Community Services), single moms in the community have benefitted in many ways. One ongoing ministry is that of changing the oil in their vehicles. This ministry is offered at no cost every six months. The church also offers free breakfast every school day for children from low-income families at a nearby public school. Most of these children are from single-mom homes. This ministry has been ongoing for 15 years. The church also takes donations of vehicles and makes sure they are in good running condition. They then select a single mom to provide the car to as a gift. The most dramatic ministry is Extreme Home Repair. Every year the church takes nominations from the community of a home that is desperately in need of repair. In most cases, the recipient is a single parent. The church partners together with the community for donations of material and labor and over the course of two weeks repairs and renovates the home at no cost to the single mom. You can watch videos and learn more by visiting AOK’s Extreme Home Repair.

Recommendations

Foreigners, the fatherless, and widows are representative of many
groups that are marginalized in society today. As a church, we cannot
ignore their plight. There are two New Testament passages I would like
to draw attention to in conclusion. The first is Matt 28:19, “Go therefore
and make disciples of all the nations.” It is not enough for the church to
open their doors in the hopes that these groups will show up on a Sabbath
morning. The first action in reaching the marginalized is “going.” Ellen
White challenges the church: “There is need of coming close to the peo-
ple by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more
time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The
poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved
comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled” (White
1905:143).

The next action involves “making disciples.” Discipleship is best mod-
eled, rather than preached. This will require an individual effort on our
part to deeply invest our lives into a handful of marginalized individuals,
who will in turn invest their lives in others. Discipleship is not a micro-
wave approach. The investment of time is required. As we engage person-
ally in the lives of foreigners, orphans, and widows, they will capture a
picture of what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus. As a result, their life
can be transformed for eternity.

The final verse I would like to highlight is Matt 25:40, “Assuredly, I say
to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you
did it to Me.” Without question, marginalized groups are ones that Jesus
highlights in this passage. Our actions of compassion toward foreigners,
orphans, and widows will truly make an impact for eternity. What burden
has God placed on your heart? What action will you take? As a church,
what tangible ministry will you engage in?

Works Cited


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Introduction

In this article, I revisit some strategies of discipleship in an effort to answer questions such as: Should we continue to remain apolitical, impartial, indifferent, or dis-interested in the “doings” of our church and world? I will argue for an interested and involved politics of discipleship; a strategy that takes a more active role in policy making for righteous causes simultaneously in the public square as well in the Adventist Church. I understand that the Early Christian Church dealt with binary dynamics of opposition to and from the power structures of the Roman Empire and the Judean establishment. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they worked for a multicultural independence, and at the same time, for a centralized and decentralized community of believers.

On the one hand, I am reading the signs of our times from the perspective of the theoretical and hermeneutical framework of critical theory and sociology of religion, not as a practitioner per se, but as a theologian and cultural critic, especially using the category of the return and visibility of religion and its rise in fundamentalism in the public square in liberal democracies and depoliticized societies where God has been pushed to the margins. On the other hand, I am reading as a South American Adventist minister working and educated in the North, and as a firm believer in our tradition of eschatological prophecy and its understanding of religious supremacy.

I argue that critical theory assessments and political theology (Inglehart 1997; see also Inglehart 1977; Hoogvelt 1997; Cavanaugh, Bailey, and Hovey 2012; Bauckham, 2011) of these issues should serve as a wakeup
call to Adventists in order to create a necessary awareness and at the same time revisit our strategies for discipleship. As a society, we are experiencing a pendulum shift from a liberal depoliticized practice that has shunned God and the efforts to enforce Christian values.

I plan to present some trends from the perspective of the sociology of religion, then to consider some of my views on the early Christian church, followed by a few conclusions.

I do not presume to be an expert in critical theories and cultural studies; thus, these are initial attempts to map out the political-religious situation of our time. However, I think it is wise to re-evaluate some premises concerning the return of religion to the public square. I will pause to describe some of these premises.

**Characteristics of the Hermeneutical Framework**

During recent years, scholars of critical theory, cultural studies, and sociology of religion point out that we should pay attention to how the pendulum effect may change Christian’s views, with the rise of fundamentalism in the Christian belief system. Sociologists warn that the “three interrelated practices [of]—capitalism, depoliticization, and secularism—have, then, continued to exert a most profound impact on Christianity because the countries of the world that are most secularist and most capitalist (and perhaps most depoliticized) are also those dominated by the Christian tradition” (Ward 2009:268). Therefore, some identify the call for a repoliticization of Christianity as a warning sign that the separation between religion and state will be destroyed. Ward further states, “In terms of modernity and its concurrence with the secular age, the separation of religion from the political inevitably encourages depoliticization. In fact, the more secular we are, the more depoliticized we will become” (268).

James K. A. Smith, editor of the series *The Church and the Postmodern Culture*, states,

> It could be argued that developments in postmodern theory have contributed to the breakdown of former barriers between evangelical, mainline, and Catholic faith communities. Postliberalism—a related “effect” of postmodernism—has engendered a new, confessional ecumenism wherein we find nondenominational evangelical congregations, mainline Protestants churches, and Catholics parishes all wrestling with the challenges of postmodernism and drawing on the culture of postmodernity as an opportunity for rethinking the shape of our churches. (2009:11)
Christian Smith argues that the secularization of America was not the natural result of modernization and the industrialization of society; rather, it was an intentional political process that worked to overcome and overthrow religious control over public knowledge. As a result, religion in general and the Protestant Christian church in particular were gradually put outside the public square (2003: 6, 7).

Gerard Alexander commenting on secularization and the role of religion states,

Sociological research on religious practice is complex. Common predictions about U.S. conservatism draw on the research tradition that identifies long-term declines in rates of individual religious belief and practice in increasingly affluent and educated societies. American secularization may lag Western European trends, but is widely assumed to be both under way and an inevitable feature of modernity. (2014:127)

And citing Christian Smith, Alexander states:

History, including twentieth-century history, has witnessed enough significant cultural swings over multi decade periods to suggest that insisting on unidirectionality seems analytically unjustified. Note that this is not to predict another Great Awakening or a reversal of the very gradual decline in American religious practice discernible across the postwar period. Rates of belief and practice could also fall more quickly over the next few decades. But there have been enough reversals and Great Awakenings, including ones that appear impacted by political processes, that it seems foolhardy to engage confidently in straight-line projections of continued decline. (2014:129)

Sociologists also state that the events of 9/11 became the Christian wakeup call for the return and visibility of religion, where “religion cannot be a matter of private convictions, for it wears an increasingly public face” (Ward 2009:264), and contrary to what it was before, shows a depoliticization of religion made by the liberal democracies to be “an inter-Christian affair” (264). They state that “Christian thinkers and politicians . . . ushered in secularism and pushed God to the margins of what mattered socially, culturally, and scientifically. God became at best a hidden hand, a concealed clockmaker, and at worst an irrelevance, a lingering superstition” (Ward 2009:264).

Recently, in an interview with David Brody, CBN News, the Republican Candidate for the presidency argued that the federal government has “taken a lot of the power away from the church. I want to give power back to the church because the church has to have more power. Christianity
is really being chopped; little by little it’s being taken away.” (Brody 2016). According to him, the bill passed during the Lyndon Johnson era restricted the participation of pastors and ministers in politics. As a result, Christianity has lost its power to influence society. His proposition is to allow pastors to speak not only in favor of Christian principles, but to get involved in secular politics without losing their tax exempt status. In reality, the goal fulfills the long desire of evangelicals to return the Christian church to a prominent, if not central role in political and social life in the United States of America.

Considering these characteristics, true discipleship must reveal who we are and how we relate to others (Hauerwas 1983:97). The church was given the mandate to preach the coming kingdom of God, therefore, discipleship must be interested because it is partisan, and it requires sacrifice, “leaving everything behind,” sharing and satisfying the needs of everyone. It looks for rewards because, it is interested in the salvation of others. Discipleship is political because “it does not bring peace but a sword” (Matt 10:34). It results in persecution for those who live as the Master did, rescuing people from oppression and offering physical and spiritual liberation. According to John Howard Yoder, “Theology is political—indeed, perhaps politics at its most raw—because we are treating ultimate power, authority, and jurisdiction” (1972:24).

These warning calls should preoccupy any church, especially ours, because of practices associated with capitalism and its methods of accruing money, and with secularism in regard to our self-understanding of eschatological and prophetic positions regarding the separation of Church and State. These warnings may limit our options and strategies for an open discipleship.

The Return and Visibility of Religion

I will mention some “events” that mark the return and visibility of religion, with some comments from the philosopher Jünger Habermas and Catholic theologian Hans Küng.

The well-known philosopher and “methodological atheist” Jünger Habermas, who has predicted the decline of Christianity as public religion, now “has been calling the attention to reclaim the value of religion and its role as source of commitment and responsibility in a society where the sense of justice, including all moral and legal regulation are disappearing” (Habermas 2006, my translation). He seeks to restore the notion of an equalitarian universalism and the moral emancipation of the individual conscience as contemporary inheritances of Jewish ethics and Christian ethics of love (Küng 2011).
Habermas stated in a recent interview, “Think of the economic calculation, which invades justice and undermines the criminal law. Think of the examples of the privatization of war, administration of prisons, power supply and the health system. The State leaves key elements of the protection of the public good to the [liberal] market. Everywhere, policy regulations, as well as legislative and moral, are disappearing and are replaced by calculations of benefits” (Habermas 2006).

Concerning the political triumph of President George W. Bush, Habermas speaks of alliances between evangelicals and Catholics in the United States that gave a great vitality and “new interest” to the Catholic Church and renovated religion in general. It seems to be easier for Europeans to distinguish the state of affairs than for their US counterparts. For liberal materialists and rationalists, the dialogues maintained since September 2001 after 9/11 between Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger or Pope Benedict 16th are a call to “nervous attention.” The dialogues of Habermas with the Jesuit School for Philosophy in Munich about faith and reason in a post-secular world are similar. Both dialogues have been published in Dialectics of Secularization (Ratzinger and Habermas, 2007) and An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age (Habermas 2010).

Georgetown University President, John J. DeGioia, in his introduction of Jünger Habermas in his presentation “Myth and Ritual” for The Berkley Center Lecture Series, Oct 19th, 2011, states:

In more recent years his work has sought more deeply to understand the position of religion and modernity, considering the rise of secular liberal states with certain kinds of religious participation particularly in the West, he recognizes, “indispensable potentials for meanings that are preserved in religious language, potentials that philosophy is not yet fully exhausted.” (2011)

Likewise, Rodney Pearson in the American Thinker Magazine states “Habermas believes that even for self-identified liberal thinkers, ‘to exclude religious voices from the public square is highly illiberal’” (2014).

Among Catholic circles these times of renewal have been received with great optimism. Priest Pablo Blanco, from the Universidad de Navarra, commenting on these dialogues, states:

We should not lose our identity, if we follow peace, “reciprocally we must cure our pathologies and the excess of fundamentalism, because the dreams of the reason produced monsters referring to Auschwitz and Hiroshima”. . . . The communicative reason of Habermas it is not a rationalistic one, as the modernity understood it, but it is a new reason. (2015)
Similarly, another front of these new sea-changes in the public square is the dialogue between the leading Catholic reformer and scholar Hans Küng, and the hierarchy of the church. In March 2016, *The National Catholic Reporter* printed an open letter to Pope Francis, discussing questions of discipleship and doctrinal position. Küng asks “Where are you leading this church of ours? . . . The reform will move forward with determination, clarity and firm resolve, since *Ecclesia semper reformanda*” (Küng 2016).

In the documentary “*Hacia una Teología Universal*” (*Toward a Universal Theology*), from the UNED—the only online university sponsored by the State of Spain—Hans Küng, Manuel Fraijó, and Mónica Cavalle, Catholics scholars, speak about the return of religion to the public square as “something that was unthinkable a few decades ago,” and “something that has political, social and public weight.” They see these developments as “unavoidable and urgent,” establishing a church that “will move toward a positive and humble church.” In addition, they state that “the history of philosophy has a double destiny, on the one hand, it cannot renounce the truth,” especially as a solution to “fraudulent wars for power, the fear to the ecumenism, and the ghost of fear for the Other.” The same is true concerning the liberal democracies and the fruit of modernity (and triumphalism, thus avoiding the future rise of fundamentalism. What is needed, they ask? “It is a genuine and mature spirituality and possible interreligious dialogue . . . someone may say that this is utopic and that never will be reached, especially for the historical truth” (UNED 2011).

I highlight these comments to stress the importance of reading the signs of our times as Adventists, especially when witnessing vital changes seen for the first time in the history of this country, such as Pope Francis addressing the US Congress in a joint session as the leader of “the largest religious body in this country.” The *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) states in its webpage that “approximately 23 percent of the U.S. population identifies itself as Catholic, *the largest religious body in this country.* “The NCR is the only significant alternative Catholic voice that provides avenues for expression of diverse perspectives, promoting tolerance and respect for differing ideas.” Similarly, adventurer Simon Reeves from the BBC in a program about discovering a revival of religious faith in China, “*Sacred Rivers: The Yangtze*” in 2014, recounts that in China, thanks to the economic development, there is a post-material society of an affluent middle class of more than 300 million people. In addition, to find what Communism or Capitalism were not able to give, people now are turning to religion. China today has more than 100 million Christians, and it is expected that in the next 30 years the Christian population will reach almost 400 million, thus “becoming the largest Christian country in the world” (Reeves, 2014). Other studies predict the change will occur in 15 years (Phillips 2016).
The World Has Changed

The world has changed in time and cultural space with its standpoints of difference and otherness. This should make people aware that the world is no longer what it was supposed to be, at least in terms of the uniform and universality. The strategies and institutions of the past may not allow the church to reach this world. Biblical theology or politics in general call for a re-evaluation of the power structures in our institutions and in the life of the church. This call is not a new one. George Knight wrote that “the only viable choice is to critique radically (yet rationally) the denomination’s structures, procedures, policies, etc.” (1991:8). Knight clearly presents as a plan of the devil the increasing hierarchical structuralism of the Church: “If I were the devil I would create more administrative levels and generate more administrators. In fact, if I were the devil I would get as many successful Church employees as far from the scene of action as possible. I would put them behind desks, cover them with paper, and inundate them with committees. If that wasn’t enough, I would remove them to so-called ‘higher’ and ‘higher’ levels until they had little direct and sustained contact with the people who make up the Church” (2000:14). Should these concerns and decisions at annual councils make us think of possible dangers of schism in our church?

Graham Ward defines “political” in the context of institutional variables that “define our relationship with the church as an ‘act that entails power’ experienced” in an (a) “act of subjection (an act that puts things into a higher key that favors the individual or institution that is acting), as (b) liberation (acts that deconstruct the hierarchy that is involved in subjection), or (c) maintenance of the status quo. Power in this sense is not an entity . . . but it is the social operation with respect to relations between people and the institutions to which these people belong” (2009:27; 2005:79-89, 96-116).

This definition reminds us that our decisions, strategies, presuppositions and life-styles in general in the church and outside are motivated by politically interested decisions. As “time is a social mode power” and “money an economic motive power” (Ward 2009:29), our relationships support our institutions with our tithes and offerings and with the gift of our time to the appointed offices and institutions they represent.

Disaffected democracies and institutions make members, pastors, and employees frustrated and alienated from their leaders and denominations. Representations of this issue may be seen in the so-called emergent churches, the non-denominational churches, the anti-congregationalism, etc. On the other hand, globalism reflects the diversity unappreciated by many for its disorder and lack of properness. There is no need for us to
follow these representations and nomenclature of neoliberals or post-ma-
terial citizens which are open to a new set of changes of acceptances of the
world that perhaps as Christians we are not able to accept. However, in
the context of the church, we must constantly review the implementation
of policies that govern the life of the church. Perhaps, the problematic is-
se may be that some of our leaders are still incapable of hearing or even
reacting to the decline and death of metanarratives and other categories of
our liberal democracies and post-cultural settings.

Every generation must recheck the situationalization or the life of the
church amid the changes in society and the renewal of implementations
for strategies to reach those who have not been touched by the message
of gospel of salvation for all, based on the almost universalist mandate that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom
10:13). The problem is not that we, the tenants of globalization, have been
entrenched in the camp of the church, or as Ward expresses it, “Globaliza-
tion is thus intimately bound to religion, its triumphal myths of salvation
for all, its promises of profoundly fulfilling what a human being yearns
for, and its metaphysics. It is therefore no coincidence that the contempo-
rary phase of globalization parallels the return of religion to the public
sphere in new, not necessarily institutional, forms.” I do not agree, how-
ever that “all postmaterialist values may be asserted and substantiated” (2009:79, the complete quote reads: “It also follows that awareness of the
masked theologies and metaphysics of globalization needs to be drawn
out and developed so that the postmaterialist values may be asserted and
substantiated”).

Our reconstruction of the changes in the world as we read and re-
contextualize the Scriptures shows that several non-negotiable principles
must be sought. The Scriptures call each individual as well as the institu-
tions that the church represents to repentance, renewal, and reformation.
The opportunity and invitation of salvation for everyone should not be
confused with the universalistic expectation of globalization or as Ward
puts it, “the triumphal myths of salvation” (79). Proselytism seen in terms
of absolute conversion and gaining new adherents, or “stealing sheep,”
must be re-focused. God is in control and he is the Shepherd of “other sheep
who do not belong to his fold” as well (John 10:16). Though the term of the
other may be confictive, we must trust that he is sovereign in regard to the
timing and circumstances and venues of how they will hear his voice and
come. There will be one flock eschatologically. We do not presume that
all of them/us will be all Christians, much less Adventists! That remains
in the Sovereignty of God, who says, “no one will snatch them out of my
hand” (John 10:28). Nevertheless, someone must still go in order for them
to hear. Are we to respond like “some of Jews who were divided because
of these words”? (John 10:19).
The whole postmaterialist thesis suggests that “their values change—orientated now towards quality-of-life issues such as human rights, personal liberties, community, aesthetic satisfaction and the environment” (Inglehart 1997:99-115; 1990) can only work as the premise states, “As a people moves out of economic instability, where basic survivor values such as food and physical security dominate, their values change” (Ward 2009:81).

The world has changed! With all the suffering in the world, some migratory policies are denying hope and thousands of individuals are killed for their faith; countries are closing their borders to protect the purity of their traditions and individualism. (The so-called decision of Great Britain of Brexit, seems like just one of many that may come up in succession). The instability created by the long-term positions held by leaders in our churches and institutions in different parts of the word reflect more of the same lethargic strategies, and suffocate the development of new leadership, thus avoiding natural growth and denying opportunities to young people, who are waiting and silenced. The upcoming US election carries with it terrifying consequences for the whole world—the threatening premonition of the deportation of millions and the fear of isolating others based on their beliefs from their own communities in a country which has heretofore opened the door to them. From indicators such as these, the question remains, should we continue to remain apolitical, impartial, indifferent or dis-interested in the “doings” of our church and world?

The easiest but sometimes most confusing and deceiving eschatological axioms that this is not our world, and everything will be destroyed, and the apolitical readings of otherworldly hopes still instill in us the hopes of a better world—out-of-this-world. However, we sometimes forget the request and grand commission of Jesus in his prayer, “I am not asking you to take them out of the world . . . they do not belong to the world . . . but I have sent them into the world” (John 17:16-18 emphasis added). Generally, we emphasize the first part about not belonging to the world and receiving protection from the evil one, but it may be argued that the central focus of the prayer is the great commission in Jesus’ request. “I am sending them into the world”—that must compel us not to remain impassive and silenced, neither for the politics of this world nor for the church. With this in mind we can liberate some reflections from the New Testament based on the life of the early Christian church, especially in the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

**The Early Christian Church Tenants and Challenges**

The New Testament church begins with the conclusion that “everyone
who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). In Acts, the church is not a hierarchical one. It is guided by the direction of the Holy Spirit in a world that is not obliged to serve either the power structures of the Empire or Judaism (Muñoz-Larrondo 2012:75-115; 117-175).

Some feel uncomfortable viewing the Apostle Paul as chameleon-like in his strategy, and with his views of how to discern and read the signs of his time, as someone who will become all things to all people:

I’m an apostle to you, though if to others I’m not an apostle, although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. 23 All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. (1 Cor 9:19-23, emphasis mine)

In the other group of morality and grand majority stands people like the well-known preacher Haddon Robinson (Henderson 2004:10), who compares the first century to our present reality. He states,

Christians today are not far from the first century. In effect, we live in a pre-Christian culture. The majority of men and women in our society have little knowledge of God. Christians are written off as political radicals who are devoted to bashing lesbians and homosexuals and who show no sympathy for woman carrying babies they had not planned. We lived with inhabitants of the culture which now approves an embraces lifestyle that [several] years ago . . . people condemned. We cringe at the way the media misunderstands and misrepresents us. . . .

Like Paul in the ancient world, Christians today must understand and adjust to the mindset of our neighbors. We must be willing to adopt to others people’s way of thinking in order to win them to the Savior. . . . It demands that we pursue uncomfortable questions: How do they think? What do they value? How do we accommodate to their beliefs without abandoning our own? What is negotiable and what is not? How do we speak to moderns so that they would understand?

The challenge of the Christian community post-resurrection is to proclaim the continuation of the kingdom of God under the dead and resurrected king. Of course they understand the kerygma of their proclamation, Jesus’ resurrection—when he ascended to heaven to receive
his glorification. However, questions of self-identity remain. What does it mean to follow Jesus? What are the values that will guide our interactions not only among ourselves but also with Gentiles? How will we react to the oppressive power structures of the Roman Empire?

The New Testament does not address these questions in a specific manner. It seems that the New Testament writers give a pastoral response to all of these questions and more. *Mathetes*, discipleship, is the language of pedagogy that Christ through the Spirit will guide you in all the truth (John 16:13).

Michael Green in the book *Thirty Years that Changed the World: The Book of Acts for Today* (2004) recalls several characteristics of the early Christian church in their lifestyle, methods, approaches, leadership, priorities, etc. (These can be summarized as dedication, enthusiasm, joy, faith, endurance, holiness, spiritual power, generosity, prayer, transformation, flexibility, wholeheartedness, and care for each other, and training by active discipling.)

Acts has been rightly called the *Gospel of the Spirit* by Justo Gonzalez (2001) while others still prefer to look for differences between the Pauline and Petrine churches. This gospel begins with the universalist maxim, quoting the Old Testament and the eschatological hope of the people of Israel that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). It is true that for Luke, as the author, this Lord of the OT corresponds to Jesus, as the only “name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (4:12); and that he is the “Jesus Christos—the Messiah of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (4:10).

Jesus is now “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36) who “God has made both *Kurios-Lord* and Christos-Messiah” (2:36). This bifocality of titles relates to each of the power structures that oppress the *ecclesia* of God, namely the Roman Empire and the institutions that defined Judaism in those days. It is in this bifocality that God does not show partiality (10:34) and “anyone who fears him is acceptable to him” (10:35). It is this group of people who have decided to follow him that he has chosen as witnesses to “preach to the people and to testify that he is the one man ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead . . . that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sin though his name” (10:42, 43).

I propose that the book of Acts as the *Gospel of the Spirit* presents several categories regarding discipleship applicable for the church of today:

1. *Universal acceptance regardless of necessary indoctrination*. The invitation is open to all without discrimination, even to those who are not doctrinally prepared to receive further indoctrination, as in the case of the apostle Peter who discriminated against Cornelius, “calling him profane or unclean.”
Furthermore, Peter still seems to be under the regulations of the oral law or Levitical concerns—“you yourself know that it’s unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (Acts 10:28) (Keener 2013:1786-1792). Likewise, the apostle Paul in his interaction with the Philippian jailer establishes this universal acceptance to anyone without much concern for indoctrination: “Believe in the Lord Jesus (κύριον Ἰησοῦν), and you shall be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

2. God works out his own plan independent of people’s witness. The sovereignty and independence of God shows people being moved physically from one place to another (Philip). Doubtful representatives such as former criminals and torturers (Saul-Paul) are chosen. God even listens to Gentiles contrary to the church and the functionaries of the institution (Cornelius and the circumcision party).

3. The Independence of the Holy Spirit. People under the influence of the Holy Spirit decided to work outside the boundaries of what the church as an institution allowed (speaking to non-Jews, Acts11:20). Contrast the duality of those who “spoke the word to no one except Jews” with those who “spoke to the Hellenist also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.” The Holy Spirit forbids Paul to enter some regions, and does not allow “the one sent to hear what you have to say”, to finish the same message, being interrupted with the outpouring of the glossolalia. As Peter will recall later, “As I began to speak the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning”—“giving the same gift that he gave us” (10:44; 11:15,17).

4. The church of God acts in coordination and differentiation at the same time in Jerusalem, Samaria, and Antioch. There is not a unilateral voice of God in one church or group. There is diversity in name and organization. There is no common name for the groups of believers: several names are used such as The Way of God, the Way of the Lord, the Nazarai, Christianoi, and the Hairesis.

5. There is diversity in allowing some to be re-baptized while others, such as Apollo, who is ‘boiling in the Holy Spirit’ (18:25, literal translation), remain unbaptized in the name of Jesus. Apollo is even encouraged to visit other churches in Achaia. Quite to the contrary, the twelve ignorant Ephesian disciples were obliged to be re-baptized. (Perhaps, this group is different than the Ephesians elders (presbuteroi) summoned to Miletus (Acts 20:17).

6. Submission to ecclesiastical authorities. Peter leaves Jerusalem in his self-exodus and disappears from the narrative in Acts in order for James, the brother of the Lord, to assume the leadership and decision-making. “I have reached the decision that we should not trouble” 15:19; “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to impose on you no further burden than these essentials” (15:28). Similarly, the Apostle Paul submitted passively before what I call the Christian Sanhedrin in front of “James and all the
elders” (20:18), in order to elucidate the accusations against him, “what then is to be done?” (20:22). Later he is found and arrested, his ministry is shut down, he is in need of defending himself in front of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and finally incarcerated and deprived of his public ministry to the Gentiles churches. As a good disciple who understands the incipient hierarchical relation in the institutional church, the Lukan Paul submits to the teacher-disciple relationship—though according to Galatians, none of the Jerusalem Council were Paul’s teachers. On the contrary, “they have contributed nothing to me” (Gal 2:6).

Interested or Disinterested

The motivations of our meritorious actions inform us in our politics of mission and discipleship. Do we have an interested or uninterested desire to win the confidence of our neighbors, relatives’ visitors in our churches, and friends? As Adventist Christians we have received the inspired counsel that we must first win the confidence of the people, and then invite them to follow Jesus (White 1959:143). Are we being dishonest when we try to win their confidence for the sole purpose of inviting them to follow Jesus? Some may question if this process is honest or dis-interested. Of course, we understand that this statement reflects the context in which we must serve the needs of the people through disciple-making. In this sense our service seems to be an interested one, not self-serving but an expression of grasping God’s love for anyone who demands such grace. Furthermore, discipleship is only dishonest if confidence-winning is done for the sole purpose of bringing people to the church for our own benefit.

On the one hand, our strategies of discipleship must emulate the early Christians who were not able to keep silent about what “they have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20), who “were chosen by God as witnesses. . . . he commanded us to preach these things” (10:41-42). On the other hand, there is always the tension of the meritorious reward, either in a temporal or eschatological appreciation. The gospels contain several instances where the apostles asked Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you, what will be our reward?” (Matt 19:27; Mark 10:28; Luke 18:28) or, in the astonished Markan version, “Lo! Behold, we are here.” Or the Lukan version, “we have left our own or ourselves” in order to follow you (τὰ ἴδια ἠκολουθήσαμέν σοι, Luke 18:28).

Jesus did not promise in vain with the hyperbolic subjective, “a hundred more times” or “many times as much” now in this time and in the age to come, the eternal life. Mark mentions the rewards, but also the persecutions, for those who have left everything. It is not surprising that afterward some of the disciples follow Jesus in fear (καὶ ἀκολουθοῦντες
ἐφοβοῦντο, Mark 10:32). Whatever the case, this seems to be a decent motive for discipleship.

Similarly, Protestants throughout history have encountered many problems with meritorious acts of service. The parables and narratives concerning the cost of discipleship in Luke 14 illustrate this issue, repeating Mark’s list of family members, and adding “carrying their own cross” and/or “giving up all possession” as conditions for those who want to follow Jesus. If they do not do so, “[they] cannot be my disciple[s]” (14:26). These alleged harsh requirements work as responses to the parables and stories of “those who want to exalt themselves” and perhaps to those who are always expecting a form of repayment even at the time of the resurrection, Jesus therefore invites the blind, the lame, and those who are not able to repay, “for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:14).

Likewise, the prodigal son, in a moment of grace and self-understanding, thought about the rewards of his home, his former polis, where he belonged: “How many hired-servants” (misthoi, a different word than douloi-slaves) “have abundance of bread in my-father’s home, [ἐγὼ δὲ λιμῷ ὧδε ἀπόλλυμαι, Luke 15:17] and I’m being destroyed or perishing here of hunger.” The desperate situation of this prodigal who does not belong to any polis or to any political entity that may guarantee his rights is now treated worse than an animal, wanting to be satiated or filled from their food (χαρτάζω), “but no one gave him anything” (Luke 15:16).

It is in this scenario of profound misery that his act of “coming back to his senses” (v. 17) allows and motivates him to get up, to resurrect again, thinking at the same time of the abundance of bread and the rewards of being considered in the hierarchical strata not as a son, but at least as a daily-hired servant, and of the conditions of his sins. “I have sinned against heaven and before you” (15:18). Scholars have doubted that there is real repentance on his part, especially because the technical words are absent in the text, with the exception of the declaration of his sins. It seems that the reward of the verb hartzο to be satiated to the fullest induces him to act. Whatever the reasons may be, even if they escape us, the parable is still about discipleship and its costs. It is the salvation of a human being who was treated worse than an animal and the salvific act or restitution—the one who is humbled will be exalted.

The action of the prodigal son is positive: ἀναστὰς πορεύσομαι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου, Luke 15:18, “when getting up, I will go to my father” (emphasis mine). This seems to be the eschatological resurrection of this individual. A comment generally forgotten in the translation is useful here. The word anastas -get up—is in the participial aorist active form, denoting not a future action as a future desire to be completed but quite the
contrary. It seems that the prodigal after this divine moment of grace that touched him, allowed him to come back to his senses or to himself. The reading should be, after getting up, he states, “I will go.” This phrase is repeated again in verse 20, καὶ ἀναστὰς ἦλθεν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα ἑαυτοῦ (Luke 15:20). Thus, the prodigal is inspired/converted before considering the rewards of his father’s house.

Some Conclusions

Ward invites us to consider, “From what place does theology speak how the cultures change? And what is the relationship between cultural transformation and religious practice such as the writing of theology?” (2005:16). It will be easier to leave those questions to missiologists and I do not pretend to have all the answers, however, as biblical and cultural critics, we should try to re-read our Bible in order to answer these questions from the perspective of our understanding of the early Christian church as we examine the NT. We cannot dissociate theological values and expressions of practices from the cultural times we live in. For this reason, the call for a reassessment of strategies and practices must demand our continual attention. Applications of theological principles and values which are obsolete and removed from our cultural time will not be effective in disciple-making. As Christians, though—not of this world—we are sent to transform people’s lives for a better world for today and tomorrow; so justice, equity, and Christian values must exemplify our daily walk with God.

If we are honest with our understanding of prophetic eschatological interpretation in the religious environment of the public square, we need to create more awareness and be more involved in defending and supporting the legislation of righteous causes. We must do as our former predecessors in Adventism did, who in their time fought for causes such as abolition, temperance, anti-US imperialism, and religious laws that separated church and state, such as Joseph Bates, (1792-1872); Alonzo T. Jones (1850-1923) and others like Desmond Doss (1919-2006). They were also committed to the ethics of non-violence and worked socially to organize and liberate people for a dignified life, such as demonstrated in the lives of missionaries to Peru, Ana and Fernando Stahl. Similarly, some of the latest Adventist voices advocating peacemaking, reconciliation, and the healing of the nations (http://www.adventistpeace.org/). These past and current Adventist voices have been and continue to raise their cries to a church—both leaders and members—that seems to be generally impassive to the call. For example, the curriculum for future pastors, the lack of effort to attract more majors to study political science, pre-law, and law, and the low
level of member participation in civic activities indicates little awareness of the need for involvement or a response to these voices. This apathetic attitude calls for a more interested politics of discipleship, in a simplified church structure, more like the early Christian congregation, which was guided by the charismata and the Spirit, and less institutionalized—well-organized but not highly structured or hierarchical—an organization that upholds the concept, “All questions welcome.”

In Acts 20:17-28 Paul states, “From the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring trials . . . I did not draw back from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house . . . for I did not draw back from declaring to you the whole purpose of God, . . . . You must shepherd the church of God which, He purchased with His own blood”or the blood of his Only one” (emphasis mine). The self-disinterested love shown in the cross was the motivation that led the early church to turn the world upside-down with the political message that the usurper king of the oikumene (inhabited world) was not Caesar with his temporal supremacy, but Jesus. In this manner, the faithful were not able to keep silent, (another translation of hupostelō), but they were subverting the decrees of the Empire by their adamant preaching of another king named Jesus, Kurios (Lord) and Christos (Messiah) who was available indiscriminately for everyone who wanted to believe, from every tribe, tongue, and people. The early Christians were God’s ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20) to a perishing world, offering hope, justice, and love, not only in the temporal dimension but also in the salvific dimension. Thus, as their descendants today, we must read the signs of our times and re-adjust our politics of discipleship.

Works Cited


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The Challenges of Adventist Discipleship

Introduction

The missional activity that stands out in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ is disciple making. Jesus called the Twelve and poured his very best efforts into them. When he ascended, the future of his church rested on their shoulders as he commanded them to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 28:19). Under the superintendence of God the Holy Spirit, disciples would make disciples until Christ returned a second time.

The working definition of a disciple given to the presenters in this conference is as follows: A disciple is one who experiences continual transformation toward the fullness of Christ (1) in a biblically faithful way, (2) in a culturally appropriate way, (3) at the deep, worldview level, (4) in personal spirituality, (5) in personal life style, (6) in family relationships, (7) as a member of the body of Christ, and (8) as a witness to others.

This working definition is very broad and comprehensive and the challenges of fulfilling it are great. Some challenges to making disciples are outside of the church and some presenters will discuss those that arise from specific cultural and religious contexts. My paper addresses some challenging factors arising from within our church and suggests ways to enhance our collective disciple making.

The Challenges of Mission among Varied People Groups

Table 1 illustrates the different levels of the challenge Adventists face in obeying Christ’s command to “make disciples” (Matt 28:19). Christians of all kinds make up about one-third of the world’s population and non-Christians two-thirds. Only God knows the true spiritual, heart condition of people in any group. But generally speaking, the threshold of belief...
and the learning curve of discipleship increases moving from “A” to “E” on the model.

### Table 1. World Population Distribution by Religions: Illustrating Levels of Discipleship Challenge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>SDAs:</th>
<th>Christians:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Children raised in Adventist homes with a high level of appropriate discipleship by parents, church school, and local church family.</td>
<td>0.83% of Christians; 0.27% of world’s population</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Other Christians with high levels of commitment, participation, and biblical literacy.</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Nominal Christians lacking commitment, participation, and biblical literacy.</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>66.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Secular, agnostic, atheistic peoples lacking religious beliefs, commitment, participation, and biblical literacy.</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Adherents of non-Christian religions having varying degrees of knowledge about and receptivity to Christianity. The “big three” are Islam: 22.4%; Hinduism: 13.7%; Buddhism: 6.8%; altogether: 42.9% of world population (Johnson and Ross 2009:6).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Tables 2 and 3 illustrate in different ways the spiritual journeys people make to mature discipleship. A person without prior knowledge of the Bible and Jesus Christ who experiences a rapid, miraculous conversion leading to baptism will nevertheless have a significant discipleship learning curve.

### Table 2. Discipleship Journey Illustrated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rebellion against God</th>
<th>Conversion and Baptism</th>
<th>Mature Discipleship</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absolute Need</td>
<td>Growing Receptivity</td>
<td>Young Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mature Faith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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- [Table 2. Discipleship Journey Illustrated](#)
Table 3. Modified Engel Scale Illustrating the Process of Discipleship
(adapted from Terry and Payne 2013:180)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>Experiencing a lifetime of growth in belief and behavior—maturing discipleship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Becoming fully incorporated into the body of Christ as a member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+1</td>
<td>Making a post-baptism evaluation of costs and benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Baptism, becoming a new believer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Repenting and having faith in Jesus Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Decision to take action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3</td>
<td>Recognition of personal problems and need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4</td>
<td>Positive attitude toward the gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-5</td>
<td>Grasp of the implications of the gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-6</td>
<td>Awareness of the fundamentals of the gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-7</td>
<td>Initial awareness of the gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-8</td>
<td>Awareness of a supreme being, but no effective knowledge of the gospel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Problem of Attrition

The 2016 General Conference Annual Statistical Report notes that more than 1 million people have joined our church each year for 12 years in a row (ASR 2016:2). In 2015, 1.26 million people became members to make up a total membership of 19.1 million at year’s end (ASR 2016:30, 2). In 2016 almost 100,000 people were baptized in Rwanda, alone, which is something to praise the Lord about.

Some challenges are visible in the numbers of members who leave the church each year. To be able to lead our members forward in the lifelong process of discipleship, the minimum requirement is that they stay within the fellowship of the local church. But starting in 2011, between 0.5 million and 0.75 million people have left the church every year (ASR 2016:5). This loss is in the range of 50% to 75% of the number who join the church each year. The lost numbers include members who have been members for varying numbers of years but do not include losses by death.

In recent years the General Conference Secretariat, through the Office of Archives, Research, and Statistics, has made good progress upgrading the stewardship of membership numbers. Membership audits have been completed in many unions, membership records are being computerized, and local church clerks are being trained. However, more progress is needed and some fear that the losses may be greater than those reported (ASR 2015:2). We do not have research data to know how many members remain one, five, or ten years after their baptism.

We all have personal anecdotes of high membership losses. When I was an MDiv student in a field school of evangelism in Colorado, we baptized 60, of whom only about 10 remained a year later. As a son of the church
I have heard expressions of regret over high membership losses in informal conversations, classrooms, and committees all of my life. In my observation, high attrition is a global phenomenon in our church. Those who have departed are not just numbers but baptized fellow church members who never became mature disciples. The tragedy is that they may have been immunized against the gospel by shallow conversions and minimal growth in Christ.

Let us be realistic. Some who start on the pathway of faith will step off the path. Some of the gospel seed sprouts but die quickly. Even Jesus Christ lost Judas Iscariot. Ananias and Sapphira lost their way soon after Pentecost. Some who fall away do come back and some will probably be in the Kingdom even if they never do rejoin the church. However, our high attrition rates seem intolerable and we need to hold ourselves accountable and under sacred obligation to those who go as far as the baptistery. We dare not assuage our consciences by rushing on with business as usual to baptize another million next year, with the full knowledge that perhaps 50% to 75% of that number will drop out next year. There is the additional challenge of those who stay in the church but do not continue to mature as disciples of Christ.

I don’t pretend to offer a complete formula to fix the problems. Neither do I imagine that we can make a change overnight. My proposal is that we need to make a paradigm shift, which by definition, is a lengthy process. To understand the shift we need to make, we must reflect on how the world has changed and ask whether the Adventist mission paradigm has adjusted appropriately to our times.

In the early days of Adventist mission in America, Europe, and Australia we evangelized fellow Christians who were often quite biblically literate and were already walking the discipleship pathway (“B” people in Table 1). The Adventist message was a value-added message that adjusted what Christians already believed. In the rest of the world, the early successes among non-Christians were among traditional tribal peoples who were spiritually open and teachable. In a country like Malawi, where Adventist work started in 1903, the first missionaries combined evangelization, church planting, basic literacy training, Bible study, and medical clinics. The people responded well, the church grew and developed, and Malawi now has over 400,000 Adventists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Distribution of World Population and SDA Membership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Americas and Sub-Saharan Africa</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Rest</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In 2015, after 140 years of global mission, 77% of the Adventist membership was located in the six world divisions of the Americas and sub-Saharan African (ASR 2016:4). The Adventist Church is a church of the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa. Most of its growth occurs in those six divisions and most converts come from other Christian groups (the B people of Table 1). However, the population of these divisions makes up only 26% of the world population. The other 74% of humanity collectively make up the least evangelized peoples of earth that the world church needs to reach with the gospel. The other 74% of the world population is dominated by C, D, and E people.

In America, Europe, and Australia where Adventist mission began, we find new realities. People who are at least nominal Christians are more secular and less biblically literate than they used to be. Furthermore, immigration has brought Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists and others to those communities. Thus, the task of mission in the West is no longer to merely adjust key Christian beliefs with a value-added message but rather to teach the very basics of Christianity to biblically illiterate nominal Christians or to those who do not confess Christ at all.

When pulling the religious and geographic pictures together, Adventist mission faces the particular challenges of the C, D, and E people who live everywhere in this era of globalization. Their initial threshold of conversion is higher and their learning curve of discipleship is longer than with the B people. At the same time, their spiritual hunger is more intense than ever and the church’s challenge is to offer a full meal of the bread and water of life and lead them to spiritual maturity.

**Defining Success in Mission**

Perhaps the first step in changing the Adventist mission paradigm is to consider how mission success is defined. To assess any activity, a definition of success is needed. Mountain climbers define success as reaching the top, Olympic swimmers want to touch the edge of the pool first, and auto dealers are successful when they sell cars.

Defining success in mission is one of the most challenging aspects of mission. Ultimately, eternal salvation is the measure of success but only God makes that assessment. On a lesser scale, the true measure of success is faithfulness to God’s calling and once again only God makes the assessment. People who are equally Spirit-filled and faithful in their work experience widely differing responses to their very best efforts. The challenge of assessing mission is complex because of the diversity among God’s servants, the many and varied tasks they are given, and the almost infinite variety of the cultural-religious contexts in which they serve.
In missions . . . much of what we do is “spiritual. Almost by definition, it proves difficult to know when we have done well, when we have done enough, when we have really finished a task. When have enough people come to Christ? When are believers mature enough? When are leaders adequately trained? And what about our colleagues who labor faithfully in less responsive or nonresponsive areas? How do we measure effectiveness and success? (Terry and Payne 2013:39)

In spite of the multiple challenges of assessing mission, there are good reasons to hold ourselves and each other accountable and to assess the effectiveness of mission endeavors. Most importantly, being effective in God’s mission potentially involves the eternal destinies of our fellow human beings. Individual believers need to hold themselves accountable and administrators who direct the work of others need good measures of accountability. The stewardship and management of mission funds requires good assessment of how they are used. Without assessment, the church risks performing great endeavors that end up being mirages of missional success.

In view of the challenges of assessing mission, the need to use multiple markers of success seems very clear. Using just a single marker of success for mission cannot be defended. Yet, that is what many Christians, including Adventists, have done. That single marker of mission success is baptism. There are other markers in the system like church plants, church attendance, local church membership size, tithe and offerings, and biblical knowledge. But baptism outweighs them all in functional significance. Thus, I refer to the current Adventist paradigm of mission as the Baptism Model of Mission.

The Baptism Model of Mission: A Single Marker of Success

There is unquestionable, unreserved biblical support for seeing baptism as a spiritual rite of passage with the deepest significance. Those who are baptized “have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

However, problems arise when baptism becomes the single marker of success in mission. The terminology of “preparation,” “reaping,” “follow-up,” and “retention” suggest that the punctilior, completed event of baptism is the goal of mission, rather than the lifelong process of discipleship. By implication, baptism is the main act and everything else is prelude and postlude. A large baptism automatically renders the evangelistic effort a success, no matter what the attrition rates may be. There are some critiques that can be made of the baptism model of mission. Adventists have
not intentionally adopted alien theological beliefs but our functional theology of mission may have evolved away from some deep commitments.

The theological critique starts with the theology of baptism. Adventists do not have a sacramental theology of baptism. In Roman Catholic theology the church is the reservoir of God’s grace that it bestows upon lost sinners through the sacraments. The sacrament of baptism saves the eternal soul from eternal hellfire. A newborn baby or an unrepentant sinner who is dying but has not been baptized is in urgent need of the sacrament of baptism to escape hell. The Catholic theology of baptism implies that the most important work has been done when a person has been baptized.

Among other things, the Adventist theology of baptism says that “baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit.” Adventists do not believe that the church bestows eternal life in the baptistery. The newly baptized person can and should feel secure in their salvation in Christ but from the church’s perspective the person is a newborn spiritual baby at the beginning of a lifetime journey. The church’s missional responsibility is to lead the new member toward mature discipleship (see Fundamental Belief No. 15 below).

Baptism symbolizes and declares our new faith in Christ and our trust in His forgiveness. Buried in the water, we arise to a new life in Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. By baptism we confess our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and testify of our death to sin and of our purpose to walk in newness of life. Thus we acknowledge Christ as Lord and Saviour, become His people, and are received as members by His church. Baptism is a symbol of our union with Christ, the forgiveness of our sins, and our reception of the Holy Spirit. It is by immersion in water and is contingent on an affirmation of faith in Jesus and evidence of repentance of sin. It follows instruction in the Holy Scriptures and acceptance of their teachings. (Matt. 28:19, 20; Acts 2:38; 16:30-33; 22:16; Rom. 6:1-6; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12, 13). (Seventh-day Adventist Church 2015:7)

A second and related theological critique involves sanctification. The baptism model of mission implies an emphasis on justification to the neglect of sanctification. However, Adventists emphasize the development of a truly sanctified, Christ-like life over one’s whole lifetime. Fundamental Belief No. 22 states that “we are called to be a godly people who think, feel, and act in harmony with biblical principles in all aspects of personal and social life” (9).

A final biblical critique of the baptism model of mission is that it does not mirror the ministry of either Jesus or the apostles. There is no record
that Jesus baptized his followers but the four Gospels are full of his disciple-making activities. At Pentecost an amazing 3,000 were baptized but Acts 2:42-47 gives a detailed description of how the congregation worked to attract new members and lead them to spiritual maturity. The great missionary Paul did not baptize many people (1 Cor 1:14-16) but invested himself completely in planting churches and making disciples who made other disciples.

There is also a practical critique to be made of using baptism as the sole marker of mission success. When success is declared at the baptistery there are some actual or potential unintended consequences that inhibit comprehensive mission and discipleship.

- Leaders place heavy pressure for large baptisms on pastors and evangelists.
- Pastors neglect their other work, do not develop well-rounded pastoral skill sets, and are promoted solely on the basis of baptismal numbers.
- Major funding is provided for methods with well-known high attrition rates.
- Converts are brought to the baptistery prematurely, without adequate preparation.
- Individuals are re-baptized multiple times for questionable reasons.
- The “follow up” after the main meeting is not adequately funded, planned, or staffed.
- “Preparation and “follow-up” ministries tend to be ad hoc, rather than systemic.
- Dropout rates are high.
- Those who drop-out are potentially vaccinated against future evangelization.
- Members become cynical about evangelism and negative anecdotes circulate about manipulative strategies.
- The assessment of the actual spiritual growth made by a newly baptized person is over-stated.
- Priority is given to understanding doctrinal beliefs while lifestyle transformation, family relationships, and integration into the local church family are neglected.
- The church defines its success as an unqualified failure among peoples where there are few baptisms.
- Priority is given to peoples where baptisms are easiest and least costly (A and B) and the least-evangelized (C, D, E) are neglected.

The solution is not to make vows to improve the old model but to take a bold step into a new model I call the discipleship model of mission, with its multiple markers of success in mission.
The Discipleship Model of Mission: Multiple Markers of Success

The discipleship model of mission has several characteristics. First, the model gives weight to familiar, well established markers like church plants, local church membership size, church attendance, tithe and offerings, church school enrollment, baptism, and member retention. The set of factors would yield a composite assessment that would be more comprehensive and accurate.

Second, the set of mission success markers is contextualized for each local region and local church. The local political, social, religious, historical, and missiological context guides the selection of markers. You can imagine how expectations and methods would differ between Nairobi, Cairo, Tokyo, and Boston. In some places a church that adds less than 100 new members a year may be seen as ineffective, while in other places a church that adds ten members in a year is highly effective.

Third, one universal that applies to all contexts is that keeping new converts is a top priority. Whether 10, 100, or 1,000 new members are added, their continued spiritual growth and maturation is a top priority. Church participation on the first Sabbath after baptism, after a month, after a year, and onward would be tracked.

Fourth, a variety of transformational ministries would address specific needs. For addiction problems of various kinds Twelve Step Programs would be offered. Topics like marriage, raising children, coping with grief, family finance, developing personal spirituality, and many more would be covered.

Fifth, the discipleship model sees baptism as one step on the spiritual journey that lasts a lifetime. To say it another way, discipleship is a process that has punctiliar events, of which baptism is one very important event. In this model the church’s missional engagement with the individual starts at birth, if the parents are members, or when the church first becomes aware of a person’s interest. From the point of first spiritual engagement the church ministers intentionally with the goal of guiding the person to mature discipleship over the remainder of their lives.

Sixth, the local church is necessarily the focal point of mission in the discipleship model. The pastor and lay leaders live in community with the membership and are best prepared to choose the set of assessment markers, plan and implement appropriate methods, and assess them.

Seventh, at the administrative level, leaders work with local churches in choosing assessment markers and applying them. Leaders collaborate with pastors and local churches to set regional assessment sets. Because the composition and context of every local church is different, a package of markers needs to be identified by local leaders and the pastor.
leaders can require the development of a contextualized set of markers for every congregation because one size does not fit all. The discipleship model does not imply a pastor-dependent church where the pastor must “hover over” the churches. The very nature of the model, with its many facets, requires full engagement by lay members.

Finally, numbers and statistics are used to track multiple markers in the discipleship model. However, because of the potential problems of excessive “number crunching,” other methods are recommended. Methods like journaling and ethnographic research can create data and records for the on-going search for the most effective means and methods of mission.

To illustrate some multiple markers of mission in action, mission could be seen as a success for individuals when:

• Children attend Sabbath School, Vacation Bible School, church school (where present), and enjoy good fellowship with each other and adults.
• Families participate regularly in church services and outreach and enjoy good relationships with the larger church family.
• Newly baptized members becomes integrated into the life of the church, participate regularly in church services, use their spiritual gifts in service and outreach, and enjoy good relationships with the church family.
• Members experience victory over personal issues of behavior or addiction.
• Members move into church offices with increased responsibility.

The congregation as a whole can be considered a missional success when showing markers like the following:

• Church services are appropriate for the age mix, educational level, and cultures of the members.
• Members are trained for service according to their spiritual gifts.
• The church follows the spiritual journey of its members and ministers appropriately to their needs.
• Members participate regularly in outreach.
• Outreach is appropriate for people groups in the community.
• The number of baptisms is appropriate for the general context and receptivity of the community.
• There is a low attrition rate for newly baptized members.
• The church has appropriate ministries in the community.
Conclusion

The multiple markers model produces a more nuanced, accurate assessment of the individual’s spiritual journey, the pastor’s effectiveness, and the local church’s effectiveness than the single marker model. The model facilitates a continual discipleship ministry to the members of the body of Christ. Most significantly, the discipleship model of mission changes the church’s perspective in a way that can enhance missional effectiveness among today’s least evangelized peoples.

Works Cited


Gorden Doss was born in the USA and grew up in Malawi. His service has been divided between Malawi and USA. Since 1998 he has taught world mission at Andrews University. He earned a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. His wife, Cheryl (Brown), is director of the Institute of World Mission at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. They have two married children and four grandchildren who serve in Egypt and Canada.
Tim would always sit quietly in the church as a first-born, obedient pastor’s kid. He did all of the things a “good PK” should do. He started to play the violin when he was seven years old. Two years later, however, he asked his parents to let him learn to play drums. When he was 12 years old, a rebellion hit and he began struggling; however, he still did things against his own will just for his parents, including attending church. At age 14, he started his own music band called “Fake City” with three other friends from his public school. They played Pop Punk music just for fun. His local Seventh-day Adventist church allowed them to use their Generations Family Outreach Center, but it almost seemed as if Tim was using music to get away from the church and himself in the world. However, God was about to interfere in a miraculous way.

Working with youth is an “unknown” variable that has puzzled researchers and church leaders for at least several decades. A number of research studies have been conducted to clarify the reasons why young people increasingly leave the church. The goal of the studies is to ultimately help reverse the trend. Yet in spite of extensive research “about half of teenagers who grow up in Adventist Families in North America have left the church by their mid-20s” (Sahlin 2013:24). Teenagers who left the church grew up in a world very different from their parent’s world. How can the Adventist Church reach its young people and more importantly, how can it disciple them to follow Jesus in the context of today’s culture? This article draws practical implications from numerous research findings and describes a few insights gathered from mission work among youth who grew up in the church and those outside the church in a secular European environment.
After some time Pavel, who played bass guitar in “Fake City,” noticed Tim was different than the other members of the group. He did not drink alcohol or smoke marijuana, and that got Pavel’s attention. He found out Tim was a Christian, and that the Family Outreach Center where the group played was a Christian endeavor. He wanted to know more. One day Tim came to his dad (the pastor) and asked if he could borrow a Bible for his friend, but he added “Dad, don’t talk or try to persuade my friend like you do with other people. Just let him read the Bible on his own!”

Discipling youth is a unique discipline in itself. When focusing on discipleship in other cultures or among people from other world religions, missionaries tend to be more open than when church members work with local youth. The youth in most Western countries are greatly misunderstood and underestimated. They are not just in a different culture, they live in a different world. As Leonard Sweet noted early in the new millennium, young people are less interested in copying existing knowledge and more interested in contributing something themselves, as they have different sources of learning. Often these sources of learning are, in fact, themselves (2001:12, 13).

Tim’s dad did not talk with Pavel; however, about a year later, Pavel reached out to him on Facebook. Pavel asked Tim’s dad for a meeting to talk about differences between various Christian denominations. At that time (around December 2010) Pavel had read the Bible and googled enough information to know that he wanted to follow Jesus and become a Christian—specifically a Seventh-day Adventist Christian.

Often we forget that young people process information differently. In the present “World Wide Web society,” there has been a massive shift in the culture and worldview of the emerging generation. Young people live in a different culture and world than do those Christians who want to teach them about God. Back in 2001, Sweet boldly claimed young people have built a new world from scratch apart from the church because the church refused to rehear the gospel in any other than the mother tongue of previous generations (2001:27-33). The gap between church and youth has only widened since then. Fifteen years later, the world is even more different and the church is still holding onto the ways of doing church in their generation.

Tim and Pavel passively attended the local church plant on Sabbath meetings in the Family Outreach Center. The newly converted Pavel, however, dreamed of reaching more young people—especially after he had learned about the purpose of the center. As a result, Pavel and some of his friends got involved in various outreach events, such as a Free Hugs campaign. They enjoyed themselves and had fun. They bonded together as they saw various responses of people coming in contact with Christ. Some people on the street looked at them suspiciously, but
those in nearby shops who had to work over the holidays appreciated receiving free hugs. This only inspired Pavel and his friends to want to do more!

Two recent studies among Seventh-day Adventist Pathfinders and other youth (Institute of Church Ministry 2015a and 2015b) showed that those who attend Seventh-day Adventist schools adhere much more closely to Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and the Adventist lifestyle than those attending public schools. This is great news, with one exception—children without any friends besides those within the church have a hard time relating to those outside their church world. Once they enter the world as adults, they either become “outsiders” (held hostages by a world that used to be), or they experience cultural shock, since they have to learn how to live in a very different world than they were raised in.

The youth leaders from several local churches of different denominations got together and planned a major outreach event. The event, entitled Exit Tour 2012, used preventive lectures in schools, popular music by foreign Christian bands, and incorporated the band’s evangelistic testimony. The Family Outreach Center supported this event because it was a meaningful way to reach out to young people in the local community. During school days the group visited local public high schools, shared music, and had fun. Then the students were invited to come for follow-up activities in the afternoons. They were also invited to a major Christian rock concert on Friday evening in a concert hall. Between the songs during the concert, the Californian Christian rock band shared testimonies about their faith and at the end of the performance, the young people were asked to give their life to Jesus and to pray the sinner’s prayer for the first time.

The huge gap between the old way of witnessing and this new approach easily causes many to feel totally disconnected. Teenagers in many cases are not leaving their faith in God when they step away from the church. However, the church does not make sense to them anymore. It does not feed their spiritual hunger. For them, attending church and coming to Christ are two very different things. They feel that the way the church interprets and applies the Bible through dogmas is obsolete. Jesus dwelt among people—he incarnated; however, local churches often fail to incarnate the gospel among young people in their communities.

At that time, eight students including Tim and Pavel formed a small group and started to meet once a week to talk about life issues and to inspire each other to grow spiritually. Soon after, in the summer of 2012, four of these young people were baptized and started to meet Sabbath morning to worship together as well. They also reached out to their friends and encouraged them to attend.

Experienced church planter Peter Roennfeldt shared during one of his lay-mission trainings/missional seminars in Europe this observation: Churches that set their primary mission focus on reaching their youth tend to end up losing their youth. However, churches that focus on living
out Jesus’ Great Commission and seeking to save the lost experience the joy of their young people joining them in their mission.

One of the challenges Tim’s local church faced during the youth outreach program was that the young people had grown away from a traditional church. Even the outreach church plant was not a place they could connect with—it was too small, too traditional, and there were not enough interpersonal attachments to the members of that body. The adults did not speak their language and did not use relevant ways of communication for the youth. Since the youth were holding great outreach events and there were dozens of their peers who were interested to learn more, the church leaders encouraged them to start their own church fellowship in the form of a youth cell church.

The church often falls short—particularly in terms of discipling young people. There is generally a great emphasis on education and passing on information in modern societies. Children and youth are bombarded with information every day, both in school and on all their devices. As a result, they are less likely to eagerly receive Bible information or to admire the beautiful logic of God’s Truth. Their spiritual hunger is more geared towards experiencing positive emotions, specifically that of unconditional love. They acquire information through threads of hopes, feelings, events, dreams, sayings, facts, observations, stories, and worries—simply through experiences of everyday life. As a result, ideas are prized “less for their content or ‘truthfulness’ than for their energy, vitality, joy, and their ability to tickle the soul” (Sweet 2001:66).

Youth Generation (the name of the youth cell church) developed its own leadership. After their Sabbath worship service, they orchestrated their own events. Sometimes on Saturday afternoons they might hang out in someone’s back yard swimming pool having fun together, while also allowing time to listen to a story from the Bible. Other times they might participate in street evangelism followed by a sleep over in the Outreach Center. For Christmas 2012, they visited homeless people, not only sharing food with them, but also their faith and literature as well.

Working with both church and secular youth in Central Europe helped the church I was working with get a grasp of what “genuine discipleship” requires. We found that discipleship among young people happened in so many ways that were way outside the comfort zone of typical or traditional churches. We initially drew inspiration from looking at Jesus—his actions and teachings. When he called his young disciples to his school, he invited them to be with him outside the “classroom” or “youth chapel,” beyond merely “business hours.” He did this so that they could connect with him personally, getting to know who he was, how he lived, and how he truly desired their good. It was his way to win their confidence and enter their private lives as one who passionately cared and who therefore was able to minister to their needs. He would take them to a wedding
party, to a banquet, out into nature; he was willing to spend leisure time with them. By creating a close-knit community he carefully prepared the soil of his students’ hearts.

As all of this was happening with the Youth cell group, the music band, formerly known as Fake City—including band members Tim and Pavel—was transformed and renamed itself “Home for Real.” Their mission also shifted from simply creating music to building bridges with secular teenagers. Although the music style was definitely on the edge (it was considered unacceptable by many Christians), the message of the songs was spiritual, reaching young people who were far away from the church and touching their hearts (notice the message in the lyrics of one of their songs).

Verse 1
The first floor in my home is based on trust, love, and friendship,
It cannot be broken, nothing is stronger than those three.
I’m gonna make it clear and I’m not done with it,
And I’m sure you wanna find out what it was that gave them the key.
Well, there’s no lock on the door up the stairs,
That leads you deeper than you ever wanted; I swear,
If you found this key I would welcome you in my home,
Accept my trust, my love,
My love with all my heart.

Chorus
I guess this is the time when falling for my closest friends is not a crime.
And everything I feel and everything I wanna give you,
Is my heart based on understanding and truth.

Verse 2
True love doesn’t need any deeds;
“But eyes are blind; one must look with the heart!”
You have a duty, you have to keep the promise,
Protect your home, beloved bros and sis!
It fills my life!
It makes my days, it makes me!

To listen to this song, check out https://youtu.be/RKtwrxcHWV8 You can find out more about the band, Home For Real, on Facebook: http://www.facebook.com/HomeForReal

Even when Jesus taught, he did not limit his teaching to just one closed space. He would teach his disciples in synagogue, in the Temple, out in the grain fields, and in all sorts of other unconventional spaces. One day he
taught on the shore and then, because there too many people, he jumped into a boat (Matt 13:2; Mark 3:9). He used parables so that people could better relate to his message. He picked up images “like a magnet does paperclips” (Sweet 2001:81), allowing his followers to learn by using all their senses. Paradoxically, his illustrations came from everyday life and yet they did not always make immediate sense and remained mysterious for most of the hearers (Matt 13:13-15). Jesus provoked people’s thinking, putting a bug in their heads so to speak, so that his words would stick in their minds and awake interest to hear more. His words appealed not merely to the intellect, but most importantly to the hearts of his listeners. Perhaps our post-factual culture, driven by emotions and likes, may need Jesus’ emotional appeal once again.

Clearly, God was able to use even the “wild” music in rock clubs where ordinary Christians would never go and where traditional and usual means of outreach would never have worked. One of the musicians in Home for Real left the band because he did not feel comfortable with the group following Jesus. (It must be noted that Home for Real received critiques from some of their Adventist peers; the band had to be reminded to remain focused on their mission and not to seek approval from the church, but only from God.)

If someone teaches the most intellectually sound lesson from the Bible but does not radiate God’s love and if the life of that person does not resonate with the words, few teens will stay around to listen and learn. If teenagers do not feel welcome, accepted, and connected again, they often will not choose to stay and listen. When teaching doctrines from the Bible, typical Christians use language that is often filled with abstraction and absolutes, and thus their words lose power to transform. The young generation processes information more through images than through words. Young people today also learn by a variety of sensory experiences: listening, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting, as well as thinking. Words for them are more powerful when connected with images, and intellectual concepts gain strength in their world when connected with a passionate experience. Using different media, both audial and visual, enhances their ability to remember and perceive the depth of ideas (provided these approaches are a means to ignite a passion for Jesus and are not an end in themselves).

The Home for Real band adhered to the so-called “Straight Edge” movement; the members were committed to no smoking, no alcohol, no drugs, no sex outside marriage, and to strict vegetarianism (List of People 2016). One may wonder why “Straight Edge?” Why not follow the less stringent teachings of the Bible or Ellen White? Perhaps they did this to offer a practical demonstration of a contrast with the lifestyle of most young people today. Just recently, one of them shared a story of how he became committed to paying tithe. Interestingly, he made a decision to
pay tithe because he heard an inspiring speech by leadership guru John Maxwell on a podcast. Apparently, although the youth was part of a Bible study group, he needed more time to “discover” biblical truth on his own, through another channel other than simply a church worship service or study group.

Researchers from the Barna Group have noted the following:

While Adventists seem to place great importance on outward behavior, such behavior is a poor predictor of their relationship with Christ. Time and again we hear from young adults who are deepening their relationship with Christ (and people in the church) during a time when their outward behaviors are not in conformity to the church. In many cases they will later become further committed to the life-style standards of Adventist doctrine, but only after internalizing them rather than conforming to them. (2013)

Over and over again the leaders of this youth outreach endeavor saw how the relational and emotional bond was the alpha and omega that allowed young people to be discipled. Two daughters of lay leaders in the local Adventist Church started to hang out with Youth Generation. They got involved and supported both the youth outreach program and the Sabbath meetings. Later on, these young women decided to be baptized. Joining them in baptism was another young lady who had become part of the group by visiting the Family Outreach Center for a preventive lecture on Sex, HIV, and Relationships.

One of the challenges youth outreach programs face is that older, fellow church members express their well-meant expectations in ways that communicate condemnation and rejection. Through Christ’s teaching and actions, Jesus conveyed God’s unconditional love. He came to save the lost and no one who came to him was (or is) rejected (John 6:37). Genuine discipleship is therefore empowered by acceptance. For young people, discipleship is more about experiencing love than about church doctrines. Discipleship requires time and a personal investment. It is messy and requires older members in the faith to be willing to get dirty by interacting with people’s lives that are broken and messed up.

One would expect the teenage children of the local Adventist Church to join their parent’s church when they decided to be baptized. However, as those two girls prepared for baptism they no longer felt connected with their parent’s church. According to their testimony, joining the youth cell group helped them open their hearts to Jesus and helped them grow spiritually. Because of this, their baptism was their public statement to join and become a part of the youth cell group. Three years later (in 2016), these young women are still actively involved: one is back in the local church of her parents, the other is with an outreach church, and the new believer goes to church once a month in a new location where she recently moved.

One of the lessons learned from this experience is that if the youth are...
allowed and encouraged to meaningfully participate in the mission and life of their church, they often have a much richer and more meaningful learning experience. Young people do not like to be considered a mission project; they like to be on a mission with us. Faith that remains a mere intellectual exercise is boring for them. Young people are attracted to faith in action, faith that works in the real world, faith that tangibly transforms their own lives and helps them live and love well. When graduation time arrived for Peter, Christ’s disciple, he was surprisingly not tested about his knowledge of doctrines, rather his test was about his character and love for Jesus (John 21:15-17). This is the authentic type of faith for which today’s youth yearn.

Although the Youth Generation adopted Seventh-day Adventist beliefs, their emphases and expressions were different. Learning about God was important to them, but not all of them were involved in deep Bible study or learning theological doctrines as one might have wished. In a survey, their highest ranked priorities for Sabbath were “to be with people I love,” “to feel God’s presence,” and “to sing songs and praises.” Unlike previous generations, they were finding their greatest inspiration during their worship service by a pleasant atmosphere.

We often forget that Jesus defined mission as a process of discipleship and vice versa—discipleship is made real through the process of mission. The means by which young people are discipled is by baptism (acceptance to God’s family) and by learning and following what Jesus taught (Matt 28:18-20). It all starts by simply belonging. In our work with secular youth, we have learned that discipleship begins prior to conversion, not the other way around. Discipleship involves participation in community prior to even beginning the conversion process—participation and experience prior to conversion; and even participation in mission prior to conversion (Stetzer and Putman 2006:102-104).

Due to transitions and transfers, Youth Generation no longer meets weekly but continues to connect and encourage the members through a closed group on Facebook. Some have joined existing local churches; others have been able to connect with local churches and are loosely connected with the group as their spiritual foster family. Pavel is attending seminary and studying theology (2016). Tim is actively involved in music ministry in a local church.

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“Discipline is the root of discipleship.” This statement is often heard in educational and parenting seminars. Most Western children, growing up with a binary thinking structure, learn very soon that doing what is right, choosing what is good, and following society’s ethical norms will make them good citizens. Western Christianity, whose values influenced Western societies, is often presented in similar terms: You are a disciple of Christ if you accept biblical moral norms and live according to them. Orthopraxy should match orthodoxy.

Christian missionaries took this approach to non-Western cultures, and among some ethnic groups have been successful in producing new Christians. But even in those societies where Christianity is a majority, few Christians can be called disciples from a Western perspective. A lack of discipline and missing major moral values leads one to question the results of the missionary endeavor among “second” and “third” world countries. This is evident in most Asian societies where Christianity is a minority, but also in the Philippines and South Korea where Christianity is a majority or a large minority. Thus, tens or hundreds of years of Christian discipleship among non-Western societies failed to produce the desired outcome. Under pressure from their local communities, Christian converts often returned to the traditional religion because of persecution or shame. In Lamin Sanneh’s words,

When someone wanted to become a Christian the missionaries told him or her that his or her customs were contrary to the gospel. The question was whether to give the convert time to abandon the customs gradually or whether to insist on abandoning them at once. Missionaries, who in any case forbade the customs and tolerated no compromise on the matter, insisted on converts immediately and totally severing their ties with the old way of life. It did not occur to the
missionaries that their converts were open to hostility and persecution by local people, until after the fact. (2008:221)

The Seventh-day Adventist Church announced recently that its worldwide membership is fast approaching 20 million. Although numbers are encouraging, the quality of disciples and the discipleship process raises some questions. Issues of integrity, honesty, or faithfulness made headlines from North America to South Africa. From academia to church life, and from communities to individuals, biblical values as understood by Western Christianity seem to have lost their importance. Lies and attempts to cover up moral lapses are occurring frequently. Even membership records have to be audited and numbers reduced drastically because of so-called “backsliding.” What happened to those who were proudly and previously announced as faithful disciples? Why do most church records indicate a high number of baptisms only to record almost the same number of missing members? What went wrong and what is the cause? This article analyzes the discipleship process in Asian contexts and attempts to understand the elusive disciple’s profile.

The Problem

Context of Discipleship. For many Christians, discipleship was mandated by Christ at the end of his earthly ministry (Matt 28:18-20). It is a clear commission which includes the steps to be taken. Baptism and teaching are to be offered to all nations. Jesus promised to be with the disciplers, his authority and power were available for their ministry, and his model was to be followed. Western Christians still take the challenge and go to teach and baptize. There are numerous discussions if teaching should precede baptism, or baptism should occur first. But there is almost no mentioning of the context within which both baptism and teaching should take place because of the diversity of the nations and their worldviews.

It is evident that little attention has been paid to the cultural differences in the discipleship process. Western missionaries have had a hard time recognizing the very different values the local people’s worldview is based on, and have often labeled them with derogatory terms. Their morality is judged based on Western values, and this often leads to conflict. Sherwood Lingenfelter describes this type of situation and the solution in beautiful terms:

People use their cultural values and systems to critique those who fail to live up to their rules, to judge and condemn based upon appearances, and to punish failure to conform by inflicting emotional and physical pain. Kingdom values, in contrast, employ the illogic of
grace. When we follow God’s way, we focus on loving one another and extending grace to our brothers and sisters in contexts where we have disagreements and conflicts with them. . . . Our relationships are then guided not by logic but by the illogic of love that flows from grace. (2008:50)

We should be aware that no culture is superior to another. All cultures have good and bad sides. As James Plueddemann noticed, “the image of God can be found in every culture, but the effects of our depravity are also evident” (2009:65). Humility in approaching a different cultural context is highly advised when discipling cross-culturally.

**Philosophy of Discipleship.** A disciple is considered a learner. Thus, the teaching side of discipleship finds its justification. However, from a Western perspective, teaching is mostly theoretical and offers intellectual knowledge. As Seventh-day Adventists, we have a set of doctrinal statements (regardless if these are 12, or 16, or 27, or 28) supported by the Bible. Often the goal of pre-baptism studies is to make sure disciples are able to memorize them or at least answer questions about them correctly. Public inquiry about these “fundamentals” is practiced as required by the Church Manual, for belief in the theological statements must precede water baptism. But this is a very weak model if one is concerned as to whether or not real conversion has taken place in the lives of the new believers (even the term “believer” indicates a mental acceptance in Western languages). Many Hindus, when asked if they accept Christ as a divine person and Savior, answered positively. However, such a statement did not include a rejection of other previously worshipped deities or an acceptance of Jesus as the unique Savior. Filipinos, who live in a Christian nation, confess Christ and declare themselves his disciples, only to go to the albularyo (witch doctor) when things go wrong in their lives. Seventh-day Adventist Christians are not excluded from such realities. Orthopraxy does not match orthodoxy.

**Theology of Discipleship.** Scholars and lay members alike look for discipleship models mainly in the New Testament. There are opinions that Jesus adopted the rabbinical model and accepted disciples because of the popularity of such practice. If discipleship is going to be called “biblical” it has to be a reflection of the whole of Scripture, including the Old Testament which is more than a “background” to the New Testament. In fact, the discipleship model that many Christians label as “biblical” has been widely practiced in many cultures, Greek and Roman included. However, the biblical model of discipleship is not only an intellectual educational process, but requires a real life change. It is not only passing on knowledge but also developing a relationship. From this perspective the discipleship relations of Elijah and Elisha, or of Elisha and Gehazi inform Jesus’ New Testament model.
From the beginning, God desired a discipleship relationship with the first humans, Adam and Eve. He met with them daily and shared with them his dominion and mission. Even after the fall, God continued to guide the sinful human race, providing the means for a relationship with him. The sacrifices on the altars, beginning at the gate of the Garden of Eden, all the way through to the Tabernacle and the Temple, and to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross reminded people of God’s desire for and an invitation to relationship. The covenant was intended to be the equivalent of the incarnation in the New Testament. When “Immanuel” was announced, the Jews understood the promise God made from the beginning: I will be with you and I will bless you so you could bless others (see Gen 12:1-3). The blessing was to be found in the relationship with the Master through an ongoing discipleship process. From this perspective, the so called Old and New covenants were only contextualized expressions of the original covenant between the members of the Godhead, illustrating God’s desire and provision of means for relationship with his children.

When Jesus called his disciples he did not invite them to come and listen to him during the day and then return to their houses afterward. He called them to follow him through thick and thin and to travel with him. Some disciples from the larger circles of Jesus’ disciples openly asked permission to come and see where he lived, implying the desire to live with him, not just listen to his teaching. In fact, the title of “sons” and “daughters” of God indicate the close relationship the Master desires to have with his disciples who are encouraged to call him Father. As people of God, we are not only keepers of the commandments but we also have the faith of Jesus, being on the same side of the Cosmic Conflict and sharing not only some theoretical principles but a relationship with him.

The authority of the disciple maker resides in one’s relationship to the Master. A discipler should also be a disciple since all are the followers of Jesus. Discipleship is a growth process that is passed from one disciple to the other “until the end of the age” (Moreau, Corwin, and McGee 2004). Paul’s request to Timothy, his disciple, was to pass on the teaching he received to other people who in turn will teach others (2 Tim 2:2). Discipleship is a multiplication process based on personal relationships.

**Implications of discipleship.** The cost of discipleship is not only theoretical, a change of paradigm, but very practical with life and death implications (Luke 14:25-27). In the context of the Cosmic Conflict discipling is the process of equipping warriors for God’s Kingdom. The relationship with Christ means so much that the disciple is ready to live and die for the Master just as the Master was ready to live and die for his disciples. As Walter Liefeld noted, discipleship requires total commitment on the part of the disciple, a reordering of life’s priorities (in Gaebelein 1984:313).
Discipleship requires not only obedience to the Master but willingness and a desire to grow and imitate Christ. It is more attraction than duty. Jesus’ disciples were easily recognized as having “walked with Jesus,” imitating not only his words, power, and miracles but also his character: “Everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). This means voluntary dependence on Jesus, sharing in his power, compassion, and mission.

Looking again at Matt 28:18-20 one should note that the discipleship process requires “going” before “baptizing” and “teaching.” It is only natural that Jesus promises to be with those who accept the challenge of discipleship and go to the ends of the earth. Discipleship and relationship are intertwined. Those who go often do it because the relationship with Jesus reordered their priorities. And even those who go without a strong relationship with Jesus as motivation return having experienced his presence and power. Baptizing and teaching are the natural result of his presence with those who are willing to go. People look to see if Jesus is in our daily lives, and as Jo Ann Dennett states, “Whatever our work, we are witnessing through our lives, attitudes, and behavior” (1998:36).

In summary, the problem with the current practice of discipleship in the Adventist Church comes from a solely theoretical understanding of the concept, an incomplete theological basis, a disregard of the practical implications, and from the lack of adaptation to specific contexts.

The Cultural Maze

Current results of Adventist mission are puzzling. Growth is not uniform geographically and missionaries who work in challenging territories cannot be charged with not having a strong relationship with Jesus. Quite the opposite. As a result, missiologists are looking into how teaching is done. Traditionally, missionaries employed the educational approach of their culture of origin. Unfortunately, after the departure of those initial missionaries, the local believers and church leaders continued to use the same methodology in teaching their people. Such practices have survived even after 100 years since Adventist work started in that particular territory.

Besides my teaching responsibilities and other mission projects, I also pastor a local church in the Philippines. The church is located inside the cone of a volcano and is situated in a prime location to reach the affluent people of Manila who have second homes in close proximity of the church. However, the church does not attract such people as expected. The church board looked at the factors that may impede church growth. One discovered factor was use of language. Church members prefer the sermon and
Sabbath School discussion to be in the local language, Tagalog. However, when it comes to hymn singing, although the Filipino *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* contains a fairly equal number of hymns both in Tagalog and English, the church members sing only in English. In spite of repeated attempts to convince them that Tagalog hymns are more efficient, the service continues to offer only musical expression in a foreign language. To complicate the picture, not all church members speak English, especially some of the older people. It seems that when it comes to hymnody, English is believed to be holier than any other local language. To complete the picture, the local unions and conferences are now requiring all their churches to replace the only song sung in Tagalog, the sending blessing anthem sung before dismissal, with the potpourri sung by the ad-hoc choir at the 2015 GC session in San Antonio, Texas: “Lift up the trumpet/We have this hope.” Although church members know these songs individually, the new arrangement that blends the songs is not familiar to them. But nobody wants to revert to the previous song because they look up to the General Conference and Western churches and evangelists and believe that whatever and however things are done in the West is always the best. Unfortunately, churches in non-Western countries copy indiscriminately what the Western churches are doing. Out of respect for church leaders, Adventists around the world are using methods and means improper for their own context.

Many church members and local leaders may recognize that such practices are inappropriate methodologies for their culture, but the respect for leaders is more important to them than adapting the form of their Christianity to the local culture. Every Sabbath our church neighbors hear music sung in a foreign language, and this is not attractive to many. Although the dream of many Filipinos is to live in the US, their cultural heritage is still very important to them so they make every effort to preserve it. As a result, such complex cultural issues restrict the church’s missionary potential. Very few seem to be willing to follow a God who speaks a foreign language or to become his disciple.

In many cultures, a close relationship is based on speaking the heart language. Lao, Chinese, or Vietnamese Christians not only do not want to sing in English, they cannot do so because in their political and social context it would be seen as lack of patriotism and even rebellion against the political party in power. The Christian church in China has to be Chinese, sing in Chinese, pray in Chinese, support itself with Chinese money, and consist of Chinese people under Chinese leaders. Anything that resembles a foreign culture is viewed with suspicion and results in the central government shutting down any foreign religion. So how can one become a disciple of Christ in the Asian contexts and be able to continue the discipleship process in local cultures?
Asian Cultural Values and Discipleship

Four Asian cultural values have a strong bearing on the discipleship process: family or group orientation, concern with face, seeking harmony and avoiding conflict, and (respect) attention to hierarchy (Yep 1998:74). Describing the Asian worldview, Paul Tokunaga also lists a variant of “situation centered” values: collectivity, duty and obligation, hierarchy, and deference (Tokunaga in Yep 1998:13).

Asians look for group achievement, not individual success. As a result, Asians are not recognized as primarily good leaders or managers. They are hardworking people, but defer leadership to those who are older and recognized as authority figures. Group orientation requires values such as humility and deference. Asians do not display an aggressive style and discourage competition, but the downside is that creativity is also not encouraged. Due to respect for communal fellowship, there is no self-promotion. Group orientation requires one to pay careful attention in the decision-making process, to others’ feelings, and the implications of the decisions on other members of the group. Decision making is based on duty and obligation toward the larger community, not on individual rights and privileges.

A potential disciple for Christ will have a hard time being the first in one’s family or tribe to join a religion that is not the traditional religion of that group/clan. This departure from the family religion is seen as a lack of respect, especially when the potential Christian disciple is a young person. One works for the entire family, speaks the same language, shares the same geographical and cultural space. Any “prodigal” is disowned and cast out, and in some contexts any member of the community may kill the person to restore the honor of the group, especially in Muslim and Hindu cultures. In such situations conversion is best not expected from an individual but as a group.

Saving face is a social mechanism for preserving the honor and dignity of the group. The identity of an individual is tied to the good name of the group. “Losing face in a group-oriented culture changes our identity” (Yep 1984:76). The direct result of preserving face is an exaggerated concern with proper appearance. Elmer notes that “living up to the expectations of one’s significant others tends to be the dominant value even to the point where morality, ethics, and right/wrong are defined by one’s dominant group or in-group” (2002:173). Westerners are worried about the lack of individual rights in Asian countries, such as in Communist countries. Communist leaders are more concerned, however, that the country’s image is not affected. For them the community is more important than an individual. Rights are not a concern for them as the duty and obligation
of each citizen is to praise the leaders and maintain the group’s face. Any criticism shames them, so they expect exaggerated respect shown to them as representatives of their country. If a person wants to belong to this group and enjoy its honor and its good name, they are expected to play the saving face game. They share in the group’s honor or shame.

The saving face game causes Asians to not ask questions or not ask for help; it is considered a shame to express ignorance, which is an acknowledgment of inadequacy. Asking questions places them in an inferior position, thus losing face. Most Asian disciples are affected by this deep seated value. When asked if they have questions they will not answer but stare into the ground or avoid your gaze. Some of them will say they understood the issue discussed in spite of not understanding or remembering anything. The saving face game requires an answer that will save not only their face but also the face of the one inquiring, so an answer is given that usually praises the teacher. For Westerners this is a clear case of being two-faced, an outright lie. How could such a person become a church member, a disciple of Christ? What is a clear moral failure for a Westerner is only a face-saving mechanism for an Asian.

When our family first arrived in the Philippines we were surprised by what seemed to be an exaggerated politeness of the local people. Nobody said no, the answers were always positive, and we were continually praised and shown respect. But soon we learned about the Asian face-saving mechanisms, and also how honor to your face is often paired with shaming you through gossip behind your back. People who often responded positively to an invitation to an event would not show up. We learned the hard way that the group’s face is more important than individual honor, and that words do not carry the same value as in the West. We also understood why Jesus emphasized the importance of deeds over words when teaching the parable of the sons invited to work in the vineyard (Matt 7:21; 21:28-31), and that it is more honorable to obey your group or family leader than a foreigner.

On the other hand, Asians often find it hard to volunteer, to be seen as “sticking out” of the pack; this would not be honorable for them, but would also question your leadership capacity in their eyes, since a good leader never asks for help. However, Koreans or Japanese are often proactive in sensing, anticipating, and meeting the needs or desires before someone even indirectly asks for help. The assumption is always present that others will respond without being asked. Mutuality is implied. To a Westerner, the lack of response among Asians seems offensive, and often you may hear conclusions implying laziness, lack of sensitivity, or even unchristian behavior. Too often the lack of volunteer initiative is taken personally by Westerners and the integrity or the Christian character of the potential disciple is questioned.
One of the major downsides of preserving face is its implicit effect of superficiality in relationships. In order to maintain honor and avoid any chance of shame, there is often no discussion about the weaknesses or the strengths of an individual. Counseling Asians is an oxymoron because even talking about, or, worse, admitting such weaknesses is unacceptable and shameful. As a missionary or evangelist, and even as a pastor, you cannot directly talk about sin. Few will ever accept such a shameful description of them. How do you communicate the need for repentance to disciples in an Asian context? How can you present the solution to sin when sin is not acknowledged, although everybody is aware of it? Can someone really be a disciple of Christ without admitting and confessing sin? Imagine the effect of books like *Steps to Christ* translated into Asian languages and distributed to local people: They are horrified by the prospect of losing face, and politely promise to attend further meetings but will never return. They will never be comfortable with a religion that requires them to lose face.

Saving face is only an emergency social mechanism to protect honor. But honor is not supposed to simply be maintained at the same level. Honor should be acquired constantly. Every social interaction is an opportunity to increase a person’s honor. An invitation to a party or even for lunch becomes an event where everyone can increase honor. The host may be honored by the status or the wealth of the guests, while the guests will return the honor by praising the host for culinary skills, for fashion design preferences, or anything else that might increase the host’s honor. Church attendance is not simply considered participation, but an occasion to praise the speaker, or the pastor, or local church leaders. Such praise creates an obligation to return the honor. In many non-Western cultures, any church gathering begins with a plethora of praising important people. “People grant leaders authority and prestige in return for provision and protection” (Georges 2014:22).

This honor seeking behavior is so deeply sated in the people’s worldview that they apply it to how they perceive God and the expectations attached to this perception. It is no wonder why, especially in non-Western countries, the prosperity gospel has become so popular. People expect God to honor them with wealth and health after they have brought to the church most of their possessions or money. Such expectations are often based on biblical texts, since God was not foreign to the honor and shame cultural values of people in biblical times. It is not surprising, either, that church leaders in Africa, Asia, or South America play the honor-increasing game by asking someone to write a dissertation in their behalf so they can get a higher academic degree, offering in return the honor of a higher organizational position. When such an exchange
becomes public, Westerners see only fraud and cheating, or lies used for saving face and attempts to cover up the whole affair. If church leaders practice these cheating games, Westerners ask, what about the morality of the disciples they report in their territories. However, in non-Western contexts morality is primarily defined relationally.

Conflict is avoided at any cost, since it will damage the reputation of all parties involved. Unless Asians have to defend or restore their honor, no public accusation or challenge is launched. In Sherwood Lingenfelter and Mayer’s terms, Asians adopt a non-crisis orientation, down-playing the conflict so it will not shame them (2003:70, 71). Such a conflict-solving strategy may aggravate the conflict when used in cross-cultural settings. Keeping quiet about an issue may be interpreted by Westerners as unwillingness to address that particular matter or a disinterest in a serious problem. This becomes vital when dealing with moral or ethical issues. If conflict cannot be avoided it is handled indirectly, through third parties and intermediaries. Accommodation and attempts to preserve face in such instances seem completely inappropriate approaches to non-Asians.

Even when Asians deal with preferences, non-confrontational approaches and negotiations are used in order to avoid embarrassment of the other parties. Committees often do not follow Robert’s Rules of order. For a long time people discuss only, there is no vote to follow. Finally, the oldest local leader, recognized as an authority figure, announces the decision, and everybody agrees. Often Westerners complain about such approaches that seem a waste of time. To missionaries, the whole process looks chaotic, not democratic, and is interpreted as childish. How can local believers and leaders be trusted if they do not show signs of maturity? However, the final goal of the entire process is to preserve harmony through consensus. It is better to have a large majority support the decision than have half of the congregation fight against it. For locals, time well spent is when a consensus is reached, and nobody is in a rush anyway. As Duane Elmer noted, “the strength of a process that involves everyone is that everyone helps make the decision” (2006:159).

Unfortunately, consensus is hard to achieve when ethnocentrism is involved. The discipleship process should include ethnic reconciliation. Asian history has seen too many wars and atrocities played in the name of race or ethnic superiority. Repressing emotions—especially in the group—is seen by Asian people as a sign of education and culture. But too often emotions are simply repressed and not healed. And shame requires violence or blood as revenge. Our request to the Holy Spirit to work out among us signs and wonders should begin with a sincere plea to see first ethnic reconciliation. This will be a powerful testimony to the power of God and the Christian church, demonstrating a God more powerful than
any ethnic god or spirit that keeps people apart in the name of tribalism. To be a disciple of Jesus is to serve people of all nationalities and color, without discrimination. A really changed heart will love unconditionally in spite of historical shadows. Discipleship should see hostility changed into reconciliation and forgiveness.

*Hierarchy* is implied and respect is due, even if it is done to preserve face. Asian disciples often submit to a superior, a master, a guru, a mentor, a professor, an elder, or a pastor. Even when noticing that there is a problem, disciples prefer to deny anything is wrong, keep quiet, or even say something that may be interpreted as an outright lie. Out of respect for hierarchy, Asians may not express disapproval against a mentor or offer a different opinion. The Western values of competition and egalitarianism in rights are missing in the Asian worldview. Hierarchy impacts relationships with others and with peers. As long as a person is a disciple, everything is all right. But when a person is called to a leadership position, such a person is often perceived as a traitor with many no longer trusting the person. Asians respect age in leadership, but they do not show the same respect to their peers since most of them are the same age or even younger. The General Conference emphasis on entrusting young people with leadership responsibilities leads to cultural tensions in Asia. People will not follow a leader if he is not recognized as worthy of honor according to Asian criteria.

A leader must always be an elderly person. When pastoring a Gypsy church, I noticed that members had a hard time when the district pastor encouraged them to elect a humble but active young person as a church elder. Out of respect for the district pastor, they finally agreed. However, the young elder was not followed unless he secured the approval of or consulted the previous elder who was the oldest male in the church. In Asian cultures, authority is not given by degrees, diplomas, or achievements. Hierarchy is well defined by relationships in the group and by age. Any departure from this tradition is felt as betraying the community. One may wonder what the subliminal message an Adventist church communicates when it has a young leader or pastor, especially an unmarried one.

In Asian societies, marriage is always a sign of adulthood. Often, the marriage process and the wedding ceremony is based on honor and hierarchy codes. In many non-Western cultures marriage requires obedience. To love means to obey, and Jesus’ words linking love to obedience (John 15:10) make perfect sense in Asian contexts. The traditional Asian marriage model offers a sense of stability and permanence. Young people will seek the approval of their parents, grandparents, or clan chief before proceeding with the marriage proposal. Children are supposed to accept their parents’ choice for a spouse, or get their blessing for their own choice.
Marriage is not only about two individuals uniting, but two families. Each family carefully researches the honor level of their counterpart, and the potential for shame or resources for increasing honor. In some cultures, arranged marriages by people on the hierarchical social structure are still the norm. The biblical image of covenant is an excellent illustration for the basis of marriage in non-Western cultures. Biblical covenants are rarely between individuals. Behind individuals are always communities, the individuals being only representatives of the respective groups. A covenant is based on a promise and the honor attached to keeping the promise. The traditional or the accepted model of marriage is an important part of the discipleship process. In such contexts, some potential converts may ask to join the church because they want to marry a Christian boy or girl. Missionaries and leaders should be sensitive to such worldview values, making sure to emphasize that discipleship brings the presence of Jesus in our lives, not necessarily a husband or wife.

Crossing assigned roles and territory in marriage would be shameful, although the inside/outside domains assigned to family members may be complementary. Domains and responsibilities are not equal. Asian societies also assign very clear hierarchical gender roles. To a Westerner, the prevalent male dominance in Asian cultures is seen as affecting the discipleship process. However, the Bible describes family and group conversion, as well as male authority and dominance. It should not be difficult, in light of clearly assigned traditional gender roles, to understand the opposition of non-Western Adventist representatives to women’s ordination. Christian discipleship is too often perceived as a threat to or as abandoning of traditional values. However, in these societies, the potential for discipleship is greater due to family structure. Family or group conversion is better than individual conversion, and often the discipleship process needs to begin at the top of the hierarchical structure, with the chief or the elder or even the husband.

The cultural understanding of gender authority and submission, meaning power and control, as well as unquestioned loyalty and obedience, is often imported uncritically into the Christian church and family, often leading to abuses and a distorted model of discipleship. The undisputable advantage of males in Asian societies may be a barrier in communicating biblical values and their necessary impact on a people’s worldviews. Women are often facing not only a Confucian social tradition, as in China, Korea, or Japan, or the Latino macho tradition as in the Philippines, but also a distorted ultraconservative theology that keeps them prisoners in the gender trap. For males, giving up power and control is a real struggle. A true discipleship process should also touch on these sensitive cultural values. Christian mentors, who uphold biblical values of equality and
submission, should include both genders. Males should discover their “feminine” gifts and use them to support their partners. Mission involvement will bring spouses together and help them discover the principle of complementarity and community even within the hierarchical structured societies. Jesus did not change the social structure of Jewish society, but he did call for mature and converted disciples living within their own cultural maze.

However, maturity in the discipleship process is not solely related to marriage, it can happen to singles, too. Yep concludes that “God may or may not honor our cultural social clocks. He may lead some of us into marriage at a time in our lives that matches cultural expectations. For some this will not be true. We can’t control our family’s or our church’s response, but we can control our own. As we struggle to keep our identity safely in Jesus alone, he promises us comfort, direction, and fruitfulness in whatever life situation he brings us” (1988:89).

To follow Christ means to accept his role as Creator and his design for human family and sexuality. Discipleship means change and growth in these areas, too. However, discipleship does not take place in ideal contexts. Sexual exploitation is common in Eastern countries. There is a large number of sexual transvestites in the Philippines, and they are accepted in society. There are millions of sex workers in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, or Cambodia who are forced to practice prostitution or willingly embrace it as a job in order to support their families back home. To talk about discipling those in the classical Western approach would be a failure.

Conclusion

For Asians, the four values of community, face saving, avoiding conflict, and hierarchy obedience are issues of identity. They impact the discipleship process more than the global church may realize. Discipleship is a change of identity, and such a change requires time and patience. These cultural values impact every aspect of life, and a desired change in a person’s life cannot really take place without addressing the assumptions behind the values.

Discipleship is not an intellectual or mental acceptance of a set of fundamentals. It is not an event, but a lifelong changing process within the cultural context. Learning is not only about theoretical knowledge, but about change of life or daily practice. It is a relationship with the Master, a transformation by beholding the Model and living according to his example. Today, when checking for people’s readiness for baptism, examination should be about change in people’s lives and about their relationship to Jesus. John the Baptist did not ask people if they accepted a
set of fundamentals before baptizing them with water but required clear evidence of a changed life. When Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized, John refused to accept their request because their lives were far from the Kingdom of God model, being more concerned with acquiring more honor for themselves and being recognized as part of the top cast of Jewish society. The Kingdom of God requires obedience to God and giving him glory (Rev 14:6).

When soldiers asked John the Baptist about the conditions required for baptism, they received an orthopraxy answer. Real change was necessary in their lives, within the very cultural values impacting their worldview. Jesus himself described, through parables and teaching, how the life of a disciple should look—by their fruits you will recognize them (Matt 7:16). In his gospel Matthew describes Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of heaven focused on the ethics of the Kingdom (5-7), the mission of the Kingdom (10), the commitment of the disciples to the Kingdom (13), the life of the community of the Kingdom (18), and Kingdom stewardship (24-25) (Lewis:2012). This is cultural orthopraxy of the Kingdom lived in light of its orthodoxy. Kingdom principles need more than intellectual assent; they should reorder people’s lives and cultural values because of the relationship with the King. Ellen White describes Jesus’ method of winning people as 100% relationship with him—mingling with them, sympathizing with them, earning their trust, serving them, and inviting them to follow him. One cannot make a disciple, it must be the disciple’s desire to follow the Master.

God would like us to allow him to sanctify our cultural values and worldview so the discipleship process could transform us entirely. Regardless of our style being confrontational or conflict avoiding, using direct or indirect speech, being hierarchical or egalitarian, or expressing opinions or being deferential, God is interested in disciples that will honor him. Our ultimate Master is Jesus, and we are his disciples. When we will be pointing people to him, and One crucified, then a true discipleship process can take place. True disciples are those who facilitate others’ growth into channels of attraction to Jesus. Solid membership growth will be the direct result of allowing contextualized discipleship methods that will attract people to God while allowing them to function within their own communities and cultures.

Works Cited


Cristian Dumitrescu teaches mission and intercultural studies at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) in the Philippines. His teaching and mission projects take him to most countries in South-East Asia where miraculous healing and demon possession are common occurrences.
Recent events in the Seventh-day Adventist Church have demonstrated the need and importance of discipleship. However, the discipleship process can have a variety of emphases such as change of behavior, change of beliefs, and change of the underlying core worldview values. This paper seeks to emphasize the importance of worldview change in the discipling process.

Before getting into the paper it is important to define three terms that will be used throughout.

1. **Worldview**—“The fundamental cognitive, affective, and evaluative presuppositions a group of people make about the nature of things, and which they use to order their lives. Worldviews are what people in a community take as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living” (Heibert 2008:15). Worldview involves the core values, premises, and constructs that create a person’s view of reality.

2. **Disciple**—“A follower who was committed to a recognized leader or teacher” (Wilkins 2000:278). “Jesus’s disciples were those who heard his invitation to begin a new kind of life, accepted his call to the new life, and became obedient to it. The center of this new life was Jesus himself, because his disciples gained new life through him (John 10:7-10), they followed him (Mark 1:16-20), they were to hear and obey his teachings (Matt. 5:1-2), and they were to share in Jesus’ mission by going into all of the world, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and calling all people to become Jesus’ disciples” (278, 279).

3. **Discipling**—The process during one’s life of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Over the years I have observed several situations where established Seventh-day Adventist communities that demonstrated Seventh-day Adventist behavior and beliefs completely failed when a crisis came. The
results were Adventists killing Adventists in Rwanda, dual allegiance or multiple allegiances in many parts of the world, and Adventists involved in ethnic cleansing in Kenya against people of other tribes who were living in their traditional tribal areas. These experiences have challenged me to ask where the church went wrong in its discipleship of new members. I have come to realize that what gets emphasized and funded indicates the priority the church places on various activities. However, the recent dropping of hundreds of thousands of inactive members through membership audits seem to indicate that much more emphasis must be made on discipling that impacts the worldview of those coming into the Adventist Church (see General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2005; 2007-2009).

It is important for newly baptized Adventist church members to have a conversion experience that goes deeper than just a change in outward behavior or a change in their belief system. They must also experience and undergo a transformed and converted worldview. This does not happen quickly or without an intentional focus. People’s worldview assumptions, premises, and values create their beliefs out of which behavior flows. Therefore, it seems important to place a much greater emphasis on worldview transformation in the discipling process.

Most of the traditional evangelism in the Seventh-day Adventist Church has focused on sharing the distinctive Adventist doctrines with those who are already Christians. New converts add biblical knowledge about the Sabbath, prophecy, diet, and health to their already existing beliefs about Jesus, his life, and death, and atoning sacrifice. Such Christians already have a worldview that has hopefully been shaped by biblical principles. They hopefully have already dealt with issues such as loyalty to God, allegiance to the Bible, and the importance of living according to the principles of the Word of God. As long as Adventist evangelism was largely carried out among Christians of other denominations it usually resulted in a Christian conversion experience that produced healthy Adventists with biblically-shaped worldviews.

However, in the 1990s, the global mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church expanded to include much more emphasis on outreach among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, African Traditional Religionists, secular people, and those with a postmodern perspective. Although this was a dramatic shift from trying to win already converted Christians to those who had little or no Christian background, the same methodology of evangelism was usually followed. This traditional approach of evangelism had some serious flaws when used among non-Christian groups.

Seventh-day Adventist evangelism continued to emphasize the importance of changed behavior, expecting new believers to honor the Sabbath,
to abstain from alcohol and tobacco, to give tithes and offerings—to exhibit behavior that was recognized as Adventist. Adventist evangelism also continued to emphasize correct doctrinal beliefs, teaching the importance of the seventh-day Sabbath, prophecy, the sanctuary, marks of the true church, and many other Adventist beliefs. However, serious problems began to emerge in various parts of the world.

For example, in August of 2016 I received a letter from a church leader in Zimbabwe in which he stated that many new converts have had little time to be grounded in Adventist doctrines. In most cases, their former worldviews are still intact. Currently, I am addressing a situation where five churches have had over 300 members removed from church membership because they participated in witch-hunting cleansing ceremonies. These cleansing ceremonies were incidental, but they are a symptom of bigger problems of unresolved worldview issues. The issue of the rituals is just one of the many problems. Several other questionable cultural practices are still considered as options when people are in crisis.

The problem seems to be not spending the time or the effort to change the worldview of these new Adventists. Too many reports are indicating that many new converts who are entering the church through a two to three week evangelistic series continue to exhibit attitudes and patterns of behavior that are not representative of what the Seventh-day Adventist Church expects.

One of the responses was that the Biblical Research Institute (BRI), in conjunction with the three African divisions, held a series of meetings dealing with dual allegiance and spiritualistic manifestations that were prevalent in African societies but which were also appearing within Adventist membership. In 2011, those presentations were published in *The Church, Culture and Spirits: Adventism in Africa* (Donkor 2011).

An additional problem was in many of the countries where Seventh-day Adventists had well-established churches there was a growing trend for many second and third generation Adventists to develop their value system based more on the values of their culture and what was presented through the media than through the teachings of the Bible.

George Barna has conducted religious polling in the United States with a recent focus on whether or not Christians have a biblically-shaped worldview. It is quite shocking what he is finding.

For the purposes of the survey, a “biblical worldview” was defined as believing that absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to
be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the world who still rules the universe today. In the research, anyone who held all of those beliefs was said to have a biblical worldview. (in Stetzer 2009)

Barna found that “only 9% of all American adults have a biblical worldview as defined above.” And that “even among born again Christians, less than one out of every five (19%) had such an outlook on life” (Stetzer 2009). This study was among all Americans, but I wonder if there has been similar slippage among Seventh-day Adventists. This would make a fascinating research topic.

In other parts of the world the Annual Statistical Report of the Adventist Church indicates that in spite of impressive membership gains the actual number of members attending Sabbath School and church each week was only a fraction of the number of members listed. In addition, recent membership audits in some divisions have dropped hundreds of thousands of people. For example, on January 1, 2005, the Southern Asia-Pacific Division membership was 1,133,190, but by year end it had dropped to 830,946—a drop of 302,244 (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2005:38). Another example, the South America Division had a 2006 year end membership of 2,648,602 that dropped to 2,617,706 in 2007, dropped again to 2,250,520 in 2008, and dropped once again to 2,015,910 by year end 2009. During those same three years the division added 957,434 members (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2007; 2008; 2009:38). I just returned from the Philippines and talked with the president of the West Mindanao Conference. Their membership went from 61,000 to 31,000 after a membership audit.

Is it possible that many of these people who stopped attending the Adventist Church did so because of a lack of worldview transformation? Is it possible that although they said “yes” to the baptismal vows, that in the weeks and months following their baptism they faced challenges that a short evangelistic effort had not prepared them for?

Instead of having clear biblical principles to follow they lived in confusion as to what the Bible said, so in times of crises they reverted to the old ways of dealing with problems, or stopped attending church. Paul Hiebert suggests that people can come to Christ and be converted within their old worldviews. This means that they can agree with new beliefs and can change their behavior so they look like followers of Jesus; however, if their old core values and premises are not transformed by biblical principles they will remain as weak Christians that are prone to syncretism and dual allegiance (2008:11). This is the very thing that prompted BRI to initiate a series of meetings throughout Africa.
So, how do worldviews get transformed? How do those assumptions, values, and premises that go against biblical principles get changed and brought into conformity with the teachings of Scripture? Perhaps it would be good to compare this challenge with how children initially learn a culture’s worldview. Day after day for many years their values and core assumptions are shaped and formed by parents and other members of their society. It is a long, drawn-out process that continues for years with both family and community involvement.

This was also the practice in the early years of Adventist mission. Evangelistic series often lasted three months with additional Bible study required for an additional year or two before baptism was allowed. The goal was to transform the old cultural ways and replace them with biblical ways of living, believing, and thinking. Recently however, a fast-food approach to Adventist evangelism has produced members who often look like Adventists on the outside, but in times of crises or when they are away from the church, these members revert to their old ways of living because they have not spent enough time allowing God’s Word to transform and re-shape their worldview.

**Biblical Examples of the Need for Discipling at the Worldview Level**

The Bible offers many examples of the importance and need for discipling at the worldview level. Judas was part of the twelve disciples for three and a half years, yet his core values seem to have been little affected by the teaching of Jesus.

Peter offers another good biblical example of the need for discipling to the worldview level. For three and a half years Jesus worked to impact Peter’s behavior, his beliefs, and his value system. There were many ups and downs, but Peter’s behavior and belief system were being changed. His worldview value system took the longest to transform, and not until after Jesus returned to heaven did Peter finally come to accept that it was not part of Jesus’ way to look down on Gentiles. It took the miraculous intervention of visions, dreams, and an angel to convince him that God intended to include non-Jews in his kingdom (Acts 10).

Jonah offers another example of a person who needed to have a worldview conversion. His value system never came to grips with the fact that God’s love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion for people also included the hated people of Nineveh. Jonah had a biblically-shaped belief system; most of his behavior would be called biblical, yet his core values still needed changing.
Worldview Change

The important question to ask is, How do worldviews get changed? Charles Kraft suggests that worldview change can be encouraged in two ways (1996:56, 57). First, by giving people a new explanation of reality. This new explanation sets up tension within their worldview and causes them to reassess what they think and believe. Adventists are good at this approach and have used it effectively in presenting biblical truths in powerful and convincing ways. For example, when Adventists present biblical truths on the Sabbath or on the state of human beings in death or on other truths from Daniel or Revelation the new explanations often create tension. The Holy Spirit can then use that tension to encourage the person to reevaluate and even change their core religious values. This method is most effective among those who are already Christian.

However, many in our modern world are not interested in truth and the peoples in the world religions are often antagonistic toward Adventist teachings and doctrines. In this type of situation the second approach to worldview change can be more effective. This approach helps people have a new experience that again challenges their worldview and causes them to reassess their view of reality. This approach more closely mirrors the approach of Jesus, the disciples, and the early church in its emphasis on healing, setting people free from the evil one, and in helping people experience the power of a loving, caring God in some practical and experiential way.

Those who have a built-in prejudice and hostility towards Christianity can often be better impacted by the gospel when they first encounter it through some faith-building experience. Psalm 34:8 suggests to people they should “taste and see that the Lord is good” (NIV). When Jesus appears to Muslims in a dream or touches them through a healing or sets them free from evil spirits, that experience often starts them on a journey to faith in Jesus Christ (see Woodberry 2008:120, 121).

Christian mission has also struggled in the Hindu setting and has had an especially difficult time in reaching the Brahmin caste. However, when Hindus taste God’s goodness or have an encounter with God in some experiential way, they too more easily begin to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (see Bauer 2013:78-85).

It is interesting to note that in Jesus’ ministry he utilized both approaches. “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases [a new experience], and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God [a new explanation] and to heal the sick [a new experience]” (Luke 9:1, 2). “After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him.
to every town and place where he was about to go (Luke 10:1). “Heal the sick who are there [new experience] and tell them, “the kingdom of God is near you [new explanation]” (Luke 10:9). “The seventy-two returned with joy and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name [new experience]’” (Luke 10:17).

Adventists have usually approached discipleship and evangelism from the perspective of offering new explanations with the hope that the new believers will experience the reality and goodness of God. In many parts of Asia and in the 10/40 Window only a few people will attend a typical evangelistic meeting. Therefore, they do not hear enough for the Holy Spirit to bring conviction. In such situations it is often better to help the pre-believer have some type of faith building experience—an answer to prayer, an experience of being accepted in a loving, caring community, or praying that God will give them a dream or vision of Jesus. Once people experience God’s goodness and grace in some way it is much easier for the Christian witness to then give an explanation of the Kingdom of God. Both an explanation and experiential knowledge are important for worldview change.

What are the consequences of a conversion experience that does not penetrate to the worldview level? I have already hinted at several results of an incomplete nurturing and discipling process, but for emphasis I will list them again briefly.

A primary consequence of conversion without worldview change is dual allegiance. This is not a problem limited to any one area of the world. Many Adventists in the Western world are more cultural than they are biblical in areas such as dating habits, divorce and remarriage, and following the biblical principles of modesty and simplicity. In other parts of the world the treatment of women, reverting to guidance from diviners and shaman, and fear of witchcraft are signs of dual allegiance and a shallow discipleship that has not penetrated to the worldview level.

Dual allegiance and shallow discipleship also manifests itself by allowing one’s primary allegiance to be focused on something or someone other than God. The rampant materialism and individualism of the West has captured the primary allegiance of many. Tribal allegiance remained primary among some Adventists in Rwanda allowing them to kill other Adventists from the other tribe. Dual allegiance also results in syncretism that allows for the blending of non-Christian or cultural beliefs and practices with the teachings of the Bible.

These symptoms can all be impacted through a commitment to discipleship that affects a person’s core values, through a more thorough grounding in the Word of God, through extended biblical teaching before baptism, but also through an intentional discussion of the cultural issues.
that go against biblical principles. What is needed is for Bible conferences to be held at the local district level so that the cultural issues facing the local people can be discussed in a way to show how biblical principles can be applied to the issue.

When I worked in Cambodia our church members came out of folk Buddhism with a fear of evil spirits. They were looking for power to protect them from the spirits. Not until we preached and talked openly about this topic did the new members begin to realize that God was greater than any spirit. I remember one old church elder that became very sick. He was prayed for and anointed, but his cancer remained. His non-Christian family urged him to call the krukamai, the traditional healer, to appease the spirits and bring him healing.

He initially refused, but later gave in and went through three days of traditional ceremonies. He died a few days later. As I shared this story with the new members I asked very pointedly, “If you are faced with the same situation, will you go back to the old power source, or will you remain true to God?” These kinds of cultural issues and the issues faced by the Western churches must be openly confronted with teaching from God’s Word.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

As mentioned earlier it has been suggested that people can come to Christ just as they are with their old worldviews, but if they remain in those old worldviews they will be stunted in their Christian walk and will continue to live with conflict and syncretism (Hiebert 2008:11). What is needed, especially when working with non-Christian peoples, is for Adventist evangelism to return to the early template where much longer periods of time were spent in extended Bible study, discipleship, and nurture prior to baptism.

In addition to longer evangelistic meetings, I would recommend that much more emphasis be spent on topics that apply biblical principles to the people’s cultural issues. If Adventists continue the practice of having only short series of evangelistic meetings with poor or non-existent follow-up we will continue to bring people into the church with worldviews that have not been transformed by the Word of God.

A related issue is the wide-spread practice of people from the West going to areas of the world for two to three week evangelistic series. At the end of those series they baptize people who have heard excellent presentations on Adventist distinctive beliefs. However, as foreigners, they did not understand the deep value conflicts between the local worldview and a biblically-shaped worldview and they were unable to talk effectively
about the specific cultural issues facing the new believers. This lack of specific application of biblical principles to local cultural issues is a major factor resulting in syncretism, dual allegiance, and frustration.

Let me illustrate this in a dramatic and graphic way. Short series evangelism presented by foreign evangelists with weak discipleship and nurture is like an irresponsible man visiting a village and over a short period of time fathering 80-100 babies, but then getting on a plane and leaving. A year later he goes to another village and does the same. Most countries would put a person like that in jail. Yet we tolerate that same behavior in the spiritual realm. Every year thousands of newborn, baby Christians are dying because they are neglected and abandoned. No one took the time to help them find answers in the Bible to the cultural challenges they face. No one was around to nurture and disciple them. Yes, they had heard the Adventist distinctives, heard about an Adventist lifestyle, but the principles and values of God’s Word had not had time to shape and change their worldview. Such practices are irresponsible and inexcusable.

Therefore I recommend the following:

1. The goal of all discipleship should be the development of a biblically-shaped worldview. Public series of meetings must include a nurturing and discipling plan with baptism delayed until biblical principles have had an opportunity to impact a person’s worldview assumptions and values. This will mean that the Adventist Church will have to change the way it does evangelism so that all new baby Christians receive an adequate period of time (perhaps at least a year or two) of supervised nurture and discipleship after their baptism.

2. Adventists need to assess the Church’s understanding of the importance of discipleship. The Gospel Commission commands the making of disciples, not just members. Therefore, much more time, effort, and finance should be allocated to this vital work.

3. Those of us who have responsibility at the division, union, and conference levels must ensure that when there is pressure to accept outside money in the support of evangelistic series that money from those same sources must be allocated for the discipling process following the public meetings. In many parts of the world post-baptismal care is assigned to a local church elder who must work six days a week to support the family. Such elders do their best on Sabbath to care for the many baby Christians left in their care, but realistically, they cannot nurture that many babies. Unless money is allocated for a Bible worker or a full-time person to work with the new believers we will continue to have high dropout statistics. We must remember that the ultimate goal of evangelism is making disciples.

4. I recommend that five percent of all public evangelism funds be set aside for evaluation and assessment of the Adventist evangelistic
processes. Surveys should be conducted six months after baptisms, after a year, and after two years to find out how many people are staying in the church, how many people are leaving, and why people leave. The goal is to improve what we are doing. If we just keep doing what we have always done we will keep getting the same results—results that indicate high dropout rates within six months of most public meetings. The assessment should also include questions to ascertain whether cultural worldview issues had been dealt with during the discipleship process.

Works Cited


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Discipleship Structures, Movements, and the Role of Multipliers

Introduction

Disciple making movements matter because they were at the heart of God’s design for humankind at creation and they play a central role in his plan to prepare a people for the second coming of Christ. They matter if the promise of Jesus is indeed true, a promise that abundant life is attainable now (John 10:10) and a promise that provides assurance of eternal life in the hereafter (John 14:1-3). Because movements matter, understanding the role of multipliers, the nature of discipleship structures that facilitate movements and nurture multipliers is mission critical. This is especially true in the era of social media and the epidemic of isolation.

If we take the Adventist Yearbook as our measure of denominational thinking one could conclude that up until relatively recently discipleship, disciple making, and disciple making movements have not been at the heart of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s understanding of its mission. This may be because Daniel 7 and Revelation 14 played a significant role in shaping early Adventist identity and sense of purpose; however, recent changes seem to indicate a shift towards disciple making as a strategic priority of the church, a topic which seems to be at the very heart of the mission of God. My article explores discipleship structures, movements, and the role of multipliers as part of this conversation.

Definition of Key Terms

To start the conversation, it will be helpful to define the key terms which form the heart of this article because they can convey multiple shades of meaning. Here is how they should be understood in this context.
Discipleship

Jesus’ relationship with his twelve disciples defines Christian discipleship. This relationship began when Jesus said, “Come follow me.” (Matt 4:18-20) and climaxed with the command to “go make disciples!” (Matt 28:18-20). Jesus initiated discipleship—he “walked, saw, and said.” “And Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, and He saw . . . and He said, ‘come follow me.”’ Disciples were shaped by Jesus, “and I will make you,” in a process that re-defined identity, purpose, and priority. These fishermen—who were defined by their nets, instruments of entrapment and death—were transformed into fishers of men—agents of liberty and life.

For the disciples who were being formed by Jesus, the process began with leaving (in Matt 4 they left their nets, their father, and their boats) and was experienced on the way while following Jesus! Between Matt 4 and 28 discipleship was delivered by curriculum and conversation shaped in the context of life. It engaged ordinary simple uneducated people on the fringes of society (fishermen and tax collectors, see Acts 4:13) and was viewed with critical suspicion by the establishment. Discipleship took time (three and a half years) and did not produce immediate results. The growth it produced was internal and often not immediately apparent but it exploded after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 2:41).

Finally, in Matt 28 Jesus defined disciple making and discipleship as something that occurred under his authority and with the assurance of his presence (vv. 18, 20). What started as “come follow” and “I will make” in Matt 4 ended with “go make disciples of all people” in Matt 28. He identified two disciple-making activities: immersing and teaching. First, to make disciples involved baptizing or immersing people in the name (or character) of the godhead, and second disciple making involved teaching people to obey, observe or keep strictly everything he commanded.

In the New Testament the verb baptize (βαπτίζω) is often used to describe immersion in water. This is what John the Baptist, the disciples, and Paul did on occasion. Baptism by emersion in water was consistently described as John’s baptism—a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin (Acts 19:4). In each of the four Gospels John the Baptist made the following statement or something like it, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11; see also Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). And in John 4:2 we learn that Jesus did not baptize with water but his disciples did. With this in mind it seems that there are two layers of meaning that could be associated with what Jesus says in Matt 28. First, there is the traditional understanding, that Jesus is talking about baptizing people in water and
doing it in the name of the godhead. The second is that Jesus is calling us
to immerse people in the name or character of the godhead. To be bap-
tized with the Holy Spirit and fire implies total immersion in the person of
God. Discipleship soaks people in the character of God and teaches loving
obedience and results in the restoration of the image and likeness of God
in humankind.

Structures

Casual conversations about the contents of this article have helped me
understand that the concept of structures has the greatest potential for
confusion. In this article structures refer to the way things are organized
or arranged. In other words, structures are the product of the individu-
al parts used to construct them as well as how these parts are arranged.
Change the structures, the parts or how they are arranged, and the na-
ture of the product can be significantly different. An example of this can
be seen in the difference between water (H2O) and hydrogen peroxide
(H2O2). Both are made up of hydrogen and oxygen but the addition of
one oxygen molecule to hydrogen peroxide fundamentally changes the
product. This demonstrates the principle that how things are structured
makes a significant difference to what they are and how they function.

At the level of human experience structures are significant at an ad-
ditional dimension. This point is illustrated by a statement made by
Sir Winston Churchill during a debate on how the House of Commons
should be rebuilt after it was bombed by the Nazi’s. He said, “We shape
our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us” (Churchill and the
Commons Chamber 2016). This keen observation points to the truth that
the structures we create ultimately shape us. This is not only true of build-
ings, it also applies to how we shape policies and procedures, roles and
responsibilities, and organizational charts. Churchill’s observation could be modified to say, “We shape our institutions, and afterwards our institution shape us.” In this article I will explore the significant impact that structures have on disciple making.

Movements

The idea of movements, I have found, conjures up very different pictures in peoples’ minds. This is especially true for those in the medical community, where this term is associated with the bowels or the actions of the body in space and time. To clarify how the word movements is used in this article I would like to share four definitions that have influenced my thinking.

The first comes from a book written by two European social scientists. They offer this working definition as an introduction to the concept of social movements. “Social movements are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action:” Movements (1) “are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents,” (2) “are linked by dense informal networks,” and (3) “share a distinct collective identity” (Della Porta and Diani 2006:20).

In this definition we are introduced to the fact that movements are characterized by collective action, actors, and mechanisms that include conflict, dense informal networks, and collective identity. In other words, social movements are any social action facilitated through informal networks aimed at bringing about perceived positive change by a group of individuals who share a collective identity. Rodney Stark adds religious and missiological insight to this definition:

The basis for successful conversionist movements is growth through social networks, through a structure of direct and intimate interpersonal attachments. Most new religious movements fail because they quickly become closed, or semiclosed [sic] networks. That is, they fail to keep forming and sustaining attachments to outsiders and thereby lose the capacity to grow. Successful movements discover techniques for remaining open networks, able to reach out and into new adjacent social networks. And herein lies the capacity of movements to sustain exponential rates of growth over a long period of time. (1996:20)

The key idea that is echoed and emphasized is that conversionist movements grow through “direct and intimate interpersonal attachments.” The success or failure of movements is predicted in large part by how open or closed these social networks remain.

David Garrison adds the element of speed to the definition when
applied to church planting. He says, “A Church Planting Movement is a rapid multiplication of indigenous churches planting churches that sweeps through a people group or population segment” (2004, 21). And David and Paul Watson narrow the definition of a church planting movement to “an indigenously led Gospel-planting and obedience-based discipleship process that resulted in a minimum of one hundred new locally initiated and led churches, four generations deep, within three years” (Watson and Watson 2014:4).

The specifics of these definitions will be discussed and debated by social scientist, theologians, missiologists and concerned constituents. However, there are several general principles that apply to social movements, church planting movements and disciple-making movements alike. First, movements involve change, perceived positive change. Second, they spread through informal social or relational networks rather than through formal institutional structures. Third, disciple-making movements focus on conversion, loving obedience, and positive transformation. Finally, movements are driven by ordinary individuals who multiply, amplify, and propagate the agenda of the movement.

**Multipliers**

As has already been noted multipliers are key to movements. For the purposes of this article a multiplier is an individual who is trained and equipped to teach others what they have learned and are practicing. These individuals are described by Paul in 2 Tim 2:2: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” Ying Kai, co-author of the book *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution: The Story Behind the World’s Fastest Growing Church Planting Movement and How It Can Happen in Your Community!* referred to the process of preparing multipliers “as Training for Trainers (T4T) because he expected every disciple to train others” (Smith and Kai 2011:17). I am convicted that finding, training, and supporting multipliers under the direction of the Holy Spirit is the key to “disciple making movements.

**Background: Movements and the Three Commissions**

In Gen 1 and 2 God laid the foundation for abundant life on earth. He also established his purpose for human beings. This purpose existed before the fall, defined God’s original design for people, and clarified God’s ultimate goal in salvation.

In Gen 1:26 we read that God created humankind in his image and
likeness and delegated the responsibility to rule over the air, the waters, and the land and all the living creatures that inhabit these domains. In verse 27 God's image and likeness is expressed as a "we" and not a "me"—God created them male and female. Then in verse 28, "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number (multiply); fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'" The very first interaction that took place between God and the people he created is described as a blessing. In essence people were made for blessing! "The creator gave man the commission to fill the earth and to have dominion over everything that lives on the earth (Gen. 1:28ff.). It is the creator's intention to make the earth a place of blessing" (Bergman and Ottosson 1977:396). This is the creation commission. People were made to fill the earth with the image and likeness of God, the authority of God, and the blessing of God. Blessing, fruitfulness, and multiplication are a part of God's original plan for humankind.

In Gen 2 God shares close personal interaction with humankind, making, shaping, and breathing the breath of life into them (v. 7), instructing (v. 16) giving purpose (v. 19) and creating companionship (v. 18). In Gen 3:8 God comes to visit the fallen couple in the cool of the day—from the description in Genesis 2 of God’s intimate interaction with his creation we may be able to assume that this “coming in the cool of the day” was a habit of his.

I do not think that it is overstating the case to observe that all the elements of discipleship are present in creation. Adam and Eve walking with their Creator (the Word in John 1:1), Adam and Eve being shaped and instructed by God, and being given the responsibility to fill the earth with the character or name of God, obedience to God, and the blessing of God.

After the Fall the creation commission is repeated to Noah (Gen 9), a second Adam of sorts, in the context of covenant. It is restated to Abram in Gen 12:1-3, a second Adam in his own right. Christopher Wright makes the connection between the creation commission and the Abrahamic covenants in his exceptional book, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative:

In the majestic account of creation in Genesis 1, God’s blessing is pronounced three times: on day five, he blessed the creatures of the sea and air; on day six, he blessed human beings; and on day seven he blessed the [sic] sabbath. The first two blessings are immediately followed by the instruction to multiply and fill the seas and the earth. The third is followed by the words of sanctification and rest that define the sabbath. Blessing then, in this foundational creation account, is constituted by fruitfulness, abundance and fullness on the one hand, and
by enjoying rest within creation in holy and harmonious relationship with the Creator on the other. Blessing is off to a good start. The next time we hear of God’s blessing, it is launching the new world after the flood, and the language is almost the same as in the first creation account (Gen 9). God blesses Noah and his family, and instructs them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. At the same time he enters into a relationship with them that includes respect for life—whether animal or human blood—and the preservation of life. That blessing and command are then worked out in the spreading of the nations in Genesis 10.

So when we come to Genesis 12:1-3, the word of blessing must include at least the concept of multiplication, spreading, filling and abundance. (2006:208)

What strikes me is that the heart of God for his creation has not changed. Once paradise was lost it was his deliberate and determined purpose to restore his image, likeness, authority, and blessing to human beings and creation. Multiplication and movements are not a missiological fad or some new strategic buzzwords. Rather to embrace the call to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth is a call back to the heart of God and his original design for people. Wright makes a remarkable observation that has radically impacted my understanding of discipleship. He does this by drawing a long line between the Abrahamic commission and the Great Commission:

With the same dynamic understanding of the place of Jesus within the narrative of “the gospel announced in advance to Abraham,” Matthew begins his gospel affirming Jesus the Messiah as the son of Abraham and ends it with the mission mandate that would encompass all nations. He thus sets the church also under the authority of the Abrahamic mission. The words of Jesus to his disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, the so-called Great Commission, could be seen as a christological mutation of the original Abrahamic commission—“Go . . . and be a blessing . . . and all nations on earth will be blessed through you.” (2006:212)

In this light the command to make disciples is transformed from an evangelistic tool or a church growth strategy into an opportunity to live in obedience to God’s original design for humankind. It is a doctrine as precious as the Sabbath and an institution as sacred as marriage.

From this point of view the great commission is a thunderous echo of God’s design in creation and his object in redemption. “All authority has been given me in heaven and earth” (Matt 28:18) echoes the idea of “and let them rule over the sea, the earth and the air” (Gen 1:26) and “I will
make your name great” (Gen 12:2). Jesus is the first man since Adam’s fall to rule with all power and authority in heaven and earth. Go make disciples of all nations echoes “let us make humankind” and “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” in Gen 1:26, 28 and “go . . . , be a blessing . . . and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through you” of Gen 12:1-3. And “baptizing them in the name of the father, son and Holy Spirit” and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” points to the restoration of God’s “image and likeness” in human beings (Gen 1:26).

If this is indeed true, then disciple making should most definitely be our consuming passion and most urgent priority. And not just disciple making but disciple making that envisions multiplication and movements.

Movements and Multiplication

Some may say that movements and multipliers are not described explicitly in the great commission or the Abrahamic commission or the creation commission. I am convicted that God’s intention for multiplication is clearly stated in Gen 1:28, “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” In Gen 12:1-3 God says, “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you” and “all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.” After Abraham demonstrates that he is willing to sacrifice his son, God tells him, “I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (Gen 22:17, 18). This text makes the explicit connection between blessing (especially the blessing of others) and obedience. The creation commission is repeated to Jacob in Gen 35:11, “And God said to him, “I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number (multiply). A nation and a community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body.” In each of these passages that allude back to the creation commission and the Abrahamic commission the idea of multiplication is repeated.

In Matt 28 the principle of multiplication is clearly stated in the text. In verse 19 Jesus commands, “Go make disciples!” and in verse 20 he instructs these disciple makers to “teach them to obey everything I commanded.”
There is no doubt in my mind that multiplication is deeply imbedded in the Creation, Abrahamic, and Great Commissions. Earlier I mentioned that movements ripple through social networks, around a common identity, and in opposition to a common enemy. Gen 3 clearly identifies that an enemy has disrupted God’s original design. From Cain and Able on it is clear that God is calling a people with a kingdom identity who will multiply through family networks and who live in loving obedience and blessing. In Matt 28 Jesus relaunches a kingdom revolution through disciple-making movements that restores his original design. Go, be a blessing, be immersed in God’s character (name), and live and teach obedience. Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with God’s image, likeness, authority, and blessing.

So if disciple making is God’s original design for us then how do we catalyze disciple-making movements?

**Discipleship Structures**

In order to answer the question of how to make disciples I believe it is important to understand the significance of structures. Business leaders understand that there is a relationship between mission, strategy, and structure. The mission of a group of individuals articulates a corporate sense of purpose. It answers the question, “Why do we exist?” The strategy of a group creates clarity around coordinated action and answers the question, “How will we succeed?” (Lencioni 2012:143). Finally, structure addresses the question of how a group of individuals organize to most efficiently execute its strategy and accomplish its mission. The following paragraphs develop the connection between mission, strategy, and structure even further:
An organization’s strategy is its plan for the whole business that sets out how the organization will use its major resources. In other words, an organization’s strategy is a plan of action aimed at reaching specific goals and staying in good stead with clients and vendors. On the other hands [sic], an organization’s structure is the way the pieces of the organization fit together internally. For the organization to deliver its plans, the strategy and the structure must be woven together seamlessly. In other words, organizational structure is a term used to highlight the way a company thinks about hierarchy, assigns tasks to personnel and ensures its workforce works collaboratively to achieve a common goal.

It is important to highlight that for too long, structure has been viewed as something separate from strategy. Revising structures are often seen as ways to improve efficiency, promote teamwork, create synergy, eliminate or create new department or reduce cost, including personnel. Yes, restructuring can do all that and more. What has been less obvious is that structure and strategy are dependent on each other. You can create the most efficient, team oriented, synergistic structure possible and still end up in the same place you are or worse if a good strategy is not adopted.

Organizational structure and strategy are related because organizational strategy helps a company define and build its organizational structure. A company’s organizational structure is based on the result of the analysis of organizational strategy. The company will use these results to determine its areas of concentration and how to position itself in order to succeed. (Pedraza 2014)

Figure 4. Proper relationship of mission strategy and structure

Pedraza’s point illustrated in figure 4 is that mission should ideally inform strategy and strategy informs structure. He said, “Organizational structure and strategy are related because organizational strategy helps a company define and build its organizational structure.” This is the ideal. Structures should be aligned with strategy and mission and not the other way around. Kent Shaffer, quoting David Watson points out what happens when this relationship is reversed:

Strategy is determined by structure. If we are a house church, the strategies we think about are house church strategies. If we are a megachurch, the strategies we think of are megachurch strategies. The problem with this is the strategy is based on us and not who we are trying to reach.
Strategy and structure are intimately connected, but most of us have connected it to the wrong end—ourselves. The strategy cannot be (about) us but about them. We must learn how to reach people within their context not our context.

I’ve got to learn something in order to reach people that churches are not reaching. Our strategy has to be defined by the structures we are trying to reach. This means you have to understand the structures in your community. (Shaffer 2010)

The point being made here is that while organizational structure should be shaped by strategy and aligned with mission, as Pedraza’s argues, it is often the other way around. As an organization’s structures mature and become institutionalized, those structures begin to shape strategy in ways that are not always aligned with mission. Mission becomes secondary to structure and strategy as is depicted in figure 5.

Churchill’s observation again comes to mind where he said, “We shape our buildings and afterward they shape us” (Churchill and the Commons Chamber 2016). If we are wanting to reach those we are not reaching “our structures need to be shaped by the structures we are trying to reach and not the structures we have built” (Shaffer 2010).

**Seventh-day Adventist Structure**

So what does this mean to discipleship in the Seventh-day Adventist Church? Between 2001 and 2005 I had the privilege of travelling across the United States and around the world teaching a simple discipleship curriculum I developed with a team of students at Andrews University. What I found everywhere I went was a deep hunger for discipleship among Adventist church members. I presented to an international
group of students at Andrews, a number of churches across the USA, South Africa, and several locations in Europe. The anecdotal evidence was overwhelming. People longed for deeper personal transformation, authentic biblical community, and equipping for effective engagement in God’s Kingdom. This led me to wonder what it was about our denomination that contributed to this consistently expressed sentiment.

I believe that we may find a clue in the church’s official statement of purpose that has been published in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*. The earliest yearbook on the Adventist Archives and Statistics website goes back to 1883. The first statement of purpose of the General Conference is the opening paragraph under the title “Constitution of the General Conference and reflects the need for organization and coordination of effort.

For the purpose of securing unity and efficiency in labor, and promoting the general interests of the cause of present truth, and of perfecting the organization of the Seventh-day Adventists, we, the delegates from the several State Conferences, hereby proceed to organize a General Conference, and adopt the following Constitution for the government thereof. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1883:52)

Since its inception the Seventh-day Adventist Church has wrestled with the question of perfecting its organization. This has been and continues to be a noble and positive endeavor. The organization of dynamic and diverse employees and members with different gifts and varying degrees of dysfunction is no small task. The mission’s critical need for order is identified in the following lines that can be found in the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. Quoting Ellen White:

The church of Christ is in constant peril. Satan is seeking to destroy the people of God, and one man’s mind, one man’s judgment, is not sufficient to be trusted. Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves. — 3T 445. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016:15)

It is clear that the need to observe order, the process of subjecting of one to another, the diminishing of the influence of one’s mind and one person’s judgment over others are to be seen as a critical defense against Satan’s determined efforts to destroy the church. Not only do the structures of the church provide protection against the archenemy of Christ. They are also critical to furthering the work of the church:

As our numbers increased, it was evident that without some form of organization there would be great confusion, and the work would
not be carried forward successfully. To provide for the support of the ministry, for carrying the work in new fields, for protecting both the churches and the ministry from unworthy members, for holding church property, for the publication of the truth through the press, and for many other objects, organization was indispensable.—TM 26. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2016:25, 26)

There is no question that the structures of the church have been carefully crafted and refined over the years for the purpose of providing this protection and with the earnest intent of furthering the work of the church. The critical question though is how have the structures that have been created to meet the needs outline above shaped the church’s understanding and vision of discipleship?

The organizational structures of the SDA Church are defined in two important documents. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* and *The General Conference Working Policy*. Figure 6 illustrates the coordination and jurisdictions of the various levels of church administration.

Figure 6. Denominational structure (adapted from The Commission of Ministries 2007:15; statistics from The Office of Archives 2016:4)
According to the General Conference Working Policy, “the primary building blocks of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church organization are the local church, the local conference/mission, the union conference/mission, and the General Conference” (2015b:51).

Local churches are organized around the contributions of pastors, boards, ministry leaders, and members. Figure 7 illustrates the ministries that represent the ideal makeup of the local church.

The work of the pastor is to care for the members and lead the congregation in its mission. The members’ roles are to support the initiatives of the church with their time and talents. At the center of the life of the average congregation is the Sabbath morning services and activities. In many places the purpose of evangelism is to lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus, invite them to join the prophetic and apocalyptic mission of the church, gather more people into the community of like-minded believers who will faithfully attend Sabbath services and grow towards spiritual maturity. Often success is measured by the quality of the sermons and programming, number of regular attendees, and the faithfulness of the members both in doctrine and lifestyle. In this context discipleship is either seen as an informal process that takes place in good Adventist homes and includes family worships and involvement in the
ministry and mission of the church. Or it is seen as a formal process that focuses on taking new members through a curriculum designed to deepen their understanding of biblical themes and integrate them into the life of the church.

Leaders serving at the level of conferences, unions, and divisions can find themselves absorbed with managing the many details and issues that come with balancing budgets, mitigating risk, owning assets, employing people, responding to human crises and dysfunction, running institutions, and leading initiatives that are conceived locally or handed down from above. A lot of time can be spent meeting, traveling, mediating, speaking, and teaching. Having spent significant time consulting at the conference level I have observed that there are two additional dimensions to the structures of the church. There is the task of coordinating the work of a group of elected officials and the ever-present sub-plot of sessions or elections and the uncertainty of re-election. The team dynamics that result when an elected leader is given the responsibility to lead a group of people who have each been elected to their positions is a subject for another paper. The point is that these structures impact how we conceive of discipleship. In this context discipleship and disciple making often take the form of initiatives, websites, and curriculum development and distribution. Instead of the needs of people and the mission of the church informing and shaping thinking and structures, the structures play a significant role in shaping how we conceive of and go about the work of disciple making.

Considering the nature of the structures that have been created over the years it is understandable that members and administrators are inclined to see the fulfillment of the Great Commission and the discipleship mandate from an institutional perspective. Evangelists and pastors do the baptizing, and teaching is relegated to the denomination’s vast educational systems. Hospitals do the healing and churches are the place where members serve and give, are dedicated, baptized, married, and supported through divorce, death, and natural disasters.

A survey of the *Adventist Yearbook* reveals that discipleship is a relatively new addition to the church’s official articulation of its mission. The first time the word discipleship or disciple appeared in the Church’s mission statement was in 2011:

> Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make disciples of all people, communicating the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Savior and unite with His remnant Church, discipling them to serve Him as Lord, and preparing them for His soon return. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2011:8)
This represented a significant shift for the church. Here the core mission of the church is clearly to make disciples of all people. Communicating, leading, uniting, serving, and preparing form subsets of this single focus. The year before the mission statement read:

Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to proclaim to all peoples the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6-12, leading them to accept Jesus as personal Saviour and to unite with His church, and nurturing them in preparation for His soon return. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2010)

Here the core mission of the church is the proclamation of the gospel rather than making disciples. This mission statement was first recorded in the 2001 Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2001:8). For several decades prior to this the church’s core mission was described as follows: “The purpose of the General Conference is to teach all nations the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the commandments of God” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1999:9). The focus in this statement was on teaching the gospel and the commandments. In 2015 the mission statement was updated to read:

Our Mission—The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to call all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the everlasting gospel embraced by the three angels’ messages (Revelation 14:6-12), and to prepare the world for Christ’s soon return. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Office of Archives and Statistics 2015:9)

It appears that the emphasis of the church shifted back to one of proclamation—calling people to become disciples rather than making disciples. This represented a shift back to a focus on delivering a message rather than the process of making disciples.

In the General Conference’s strategic plan entitled “Reach the World” it is encouraging to note that significant time and attention is given to the need for discipleship. A careful reading of this text seems to suggest that the backdrop for this emphasis is retention, member engagement, and spiritual maturity. The following list of key performance indicators (KPI)—measurable outcomes that signal progress towards a given objective—for discipleship are telling:
VIII. Because our Christ-given mission is to create communities of faithful disciples:

**OBJECTIVE:** To nurture believers in lives of discipleship and to involve them in service

**KPI** Church members express lifelong commitment to the church and personal, prayerful involvement in its mission

**KPI** Evidence of increased church-member involvement in service in the church and community

**KPI** Each division and union has a designated Nurture and Retention coordinator and a Nurture and Retention committee

**KPI** Widespread adoption of Seventh-day Adventist membership software to improve records of local church membership

**KPI** General Conference departments collaborating with one another and in consultation with division leaders in creating materials that meet expressed needs in the areas of nurture, retention, and discipling

**KPI** Each division holds conferences on nurture, retention, and discipling

**KPI** Evidence that church members around the world recognize the need for, and support the roles of, organizational structure for the accomplishment of mission. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015a:18)

In this context the object of disciples is lifelong commitment to the church and involvement in its mission, increased involvement in the service of the church and to the community through the church. To accomplish these outcomes each Division is instructed to appoint a nurture and retention coordinator—an indicator that discipleship here is understood to mean helping people to continue to grow after baptism and remain faithful members. In addition to this, membership software provided by the General Conference, material development coordinated by the different departments of the church, conferences on nurture, retention, and discipling are tools that will be provided by the church for the purpose of facilitating disciple making. The final measure of success is that “members around the world recognize the need for and support the roles of, organizational structure for the accomplishment of mission.” Although these efforts are to be applauded and the renewed focus on discipleship is to be commended the language and focus of these objectives begs the question, Is this evidence of the “we shape our structures and afterward they shape us” syndrome?

I find this new focus on discipleship as an institutional objective both encouraging and disturbing. On the one hand, it is wonderful that disciple making is a centerpiece of the church’s strategic plan. On the other hand,
it appears that there is still a need or opportunity to clarify what exactly this means to the organization and the ordinary member. Will the results of this initiative serve the needs of the institutional church or empower ordinary members to live in loving obedience and follow Jesus’ command to make disciples? Two contemporary disciple-making movements stand in stark contrast to the disciple-making strategies that appear to be heavily influenced by the structures of the church.

DMM and T4T Contemporary Disciple Making Movement Catalysts

In the Jan/Feb and May/June issues of Mission Frontiers Magazine a two-part series exploring the similarities and differences between Training for Trainers (T4T) and Disciple Making Movements (DMM) was published. The authors begin their observations by noting that

the Spirit of God is launching Church-Planting Movements (CPMs) around the world, just as he has done at various times in history. With Acts-like DNA disciples, churches and leaders are multiplying every few months. In the glorious mystery of God causing the growth, we find that he calls us to join him in the work. (Smith and Parks 2015:36)

What follows is a summary and a description of the mission, strategies, and structures defined by two mission practitioners committed to living in obedience to Jesus’ command to make disciples. Both Ying Kai (T4T) and David Watson (DMM) came to the conclusion that strategic and structural changes were necessary if disciple-making movements were to be catalyzed. Both men came out of traditional institutional church structures. Both were considered successful soul winners and church planters but through different life experiences came to the same conclusion: training trainers of trainers (Kai’s definition of discipleship) or investing deeply in multipliers is critical to the success of the mission of Christ. For these men disciple making is a process not a curriculum or content. This point is made in the following paragraph referring to people who request the book:

When people ask me to “send them T4T,” I cringe. What they are looking for is content, but they may completely miss the process of training trainers. The process must take people from lostness to 4th+ generation believers and churches. It’s not simple discipleship. It’s a discipleship re-revolution that leads to church-planting movements! (Smith and Kai 2011:95)
So what are the similarities and differences between the strategies and structures of the discipleship re-revolution proposed by these two schools of thought and practice? The first key similarity is a profound respect for the authority and power of the Word of God and the miraculous moving of the Spirit of God as central to the mission of God. For these individuals, the core focus is not primarily teaching what the Bible says but teaching people how to study the Bible so that they can faithfully hear what it says, practice what they are learning, and teach others to do the same. The focus is not on persuading individuals to join a denomination that calls itself a movement but on training and equipping individuals to catalyze disciple-making movements. A breakdown of the structures that deliver discipleship is shown in Figure 8.

For both of these disciple-making strategies and the structures that are developed around them, relatively slow growth is expected in the beginning and explosive growth is expected as multipliers are trained. Discipleship is not a part of evangelism, rather evangelism is seen as a process built into the process of making disciples. Individuals are trained to share what they are learning and practicing with their networks with the expectation that they will be blessed by God and experience God’s miraculous interventions. The DNA of dynamic disciple making is imbedded from the very first meeting. In contrast to an educational system or institutional initiatives where students sit in classrooms listening to lecturers for two or three days or four to seven years before they engage in ministry, participants are urged to discover and act on God’s Word in the context of everyday life. People are taught to worship, identify needs, minister to those needs, study the Bible, share with others what they are learning, and hold each other accountable for the commitments they are making in every lesson. Within this paradigm a person who only knows five percent of all there is to know about Christ but is practicing ninety percent is seen to be better qualified to make disciples than someone who knows seventy-five percent of everything that there is to know but is only practicing twenty-five percent (Smith and Kai 2011:85).

The context where disciples are made in both of these disciple-making systems is social networks. The local church is the basic building block for the institutional structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church but the family unit and social networks are the focus of disciple-making movements. Ellen White affirms the central role that families and family networks play in creating significant personal and societal change,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T4T</th>
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| **FIRST THIRD OF THE MEETING | LOOK BACK** | - What are you thankful for this week? (Prayer)  
- What needs do you or others have? (Intercession)  
- How can we help meet these needs? (Ministry) |
| PASTORAL CARE – Ask group members “How are you doing?” and respond – prayer, biblical counsel, meeting needs, etc. Can be done in smaller subsets. | (Addressed in “What are you thankful for?” and later “What do we learn about God?” Developed more fully in church phase.) |
| WORSHIP – Worship God in praise and song. | Repeat and Review of last Bible story  
- What did we learn about God last week?  
- What did we learn about people / ourselves?  
- How did we obey / apply the Scripture?  
- Who did we share with & how did they respond? |
| LOVING ACCOUNTABILITY – Asking questions of each member about Following Jesus (“How did you obey what God told us last time?”) and Fishing for men (“Whom did you share with or train and how is that going?”). Key is developing a culture of openness and mutual encouragement/edification. | The main component of this is focused on sharing with others and seeking to start new groups with those who respond with interest. (See the question below)  
Broader visioning varies. Movements have explicit long term visions that some repeat in local church meetings and/or in leadership meetings of leaders from various churches in the larger movement. |
| VISION CASTING – A short encouraging word to remind the members what God wants to do in them and through them. Vision has a 30-day expiration point, so it is continually renewed. | |
| **SECOND THIRD OF THE MEETING | LOOK UP** | New Bible Story |
| NEW LESSON OR BIBLE STORY – with simple application for obedience and/or using a set of inductive questions | |
| **FINAL THIRD OF THE MEETING | LOOK AHEAD** | Everyone in the group restates the story in their own words (showing understanding) and helps correct others as they repeat by referring back to the text (Bible as authority).  
- What do we learn about God? (Worship)  
- What do we learn about people / ourselves? (Confession / Repentance)  
- How will we obey? (Accountability) |
| PRACTICE – Practice until the group is competent and confident to pass this on to others. This usually means 8-10 repetitions. | - With whom will you share what you have learned? (Evangelism)  
- Plans for meeting the needs expressed in the coming week (Ministry) |
| SET GOALS WITH PRAYER – Listening to God and setting goals to obey. The group prays over these goals and re-commissions one another. | |
The restoration and uplifting of humanity begins in the home. The work of parents underlies every other. Society is composed of families, and is what the heads of families make it. Out of the heart are “the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23); and the heart of the community, of the church, and of the nation is the household. The well-being of society, the success of the church, the prosperity of the nation, depend upon home influences. (1905:349)

If this is indeed true then it stands to reason that the best investment that can be made for the betterment of families, church, and society would be to invest in heads of families. The critical question for this article is what are the structures that will deliver discipleship to the very heart of society? Both DMM and T4T agree with White’s assertion that the family unit and social networks are the fundamental building blocks of disciple making. Figure 9 illustrates the structures of disciple making that focuses on training multipliers:

![Figure 9. The structure of movements](image)

In this diagram the square represents the missionary, pastor, or disciple maker. The focus of ministry is training multipliers in the context of life using strategies and structures outlined in figure 8. Notice that the trainer is involved in training multipliers as the movement grows.
trainer is forced to grow in her/his capacity to lead and train as successive generations multiply. Leaders are developed in the context of community and the everyday battle to become like Jesus. People are trained to discover what God is saying to them in his Word, respond in loving obedience to his spirit, and sharing this life changing journey with others. The ultimate measure of success is an increase in trainers of trainers or multipliers.

**The Role of Multipliers**

Multipliers are central to movements. Jesus deliberately spent three and a half years investing in his disciples with the expectation that they would multiply, make disciple-making disciples—be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and to the ends of the earth. As we have noted earlier, this is not some fantastic innovation. In the very beginning God created fruitful multipliers who were to fill the earth with his image and likeness, authority, and blessing.

For modern movements there is no mystery to multiplication. When ordinary individuals experience not just a message but the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10:10b)—when they experience genuine blessing, these ordinary people spontaneously and naturally share what they have found with everyone that they care about. This is especially true because the norm for most people is a world dominated by a life filled with stealing, killing, and destroying rather than abundant living, curse rather than blessing. Could this be what drove the early church like a wild fire across the Roman Empire often in the face of severe persecution? Could this be what fanned the flames of the Waldensians, the Pietists, the Methodists, and early Adventists? Ordinary people made the profound discovery that they were made for blessing and once they had experienced that blessing were compelled to go and be a blessing.

**Conclusions**

How we understand and organize for disciple making matters. Discipleship structures, movements, and the role of multipliers matters. Movements matter if what Jesus promises is true. All our friends and relatives, by creation and redemption need to know the good news. We need to tell them, show them, warn them, and train them. It’s true—we can enjoy abundant life now and eternal life in the hereafter. We were made for blessing others. There is an urgency to our mission because what is will not always be. God intends to end the curse, destroy evil, and restore his uncontested blessing. Jesus is coming soon.

Structure and strategy matter because how we organize and how we
work can get in the way of why we exist. How we teach is as important as what we teach. We can teach about discipleship and abort disciples and disciple makers. I am deeply convicted that the modern disciple-making movements we see being catalyzed by practitioners who are influenced by the likes of Kai and Watson are an invitation for us to rediscover our Adventist roots. Bible study that is focused on the plain text of Scripture, the expectation that the Holy Spirit will lead, and the commitment to taking this life-changing message to the world describe the passion of our early pioneers. The three angel’s messages are about the everlasting gospel and the promise of judgment on deception and evil. God’s end-time people have the faith of Jesus and live in loving obedience to his law (Rev 14:6-12). Discipleship is an invitation to a live a life and share a life not just a message.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a special message and an end-time mission. The various structures of church organization are at some level benign, even useful for maintaining order and coordinating the efforts of a worldwide church. The challenge may be that the church at times can only see as far as its self-imposed parameters. Modern disciple-making movements recognize that the basic building block of the Kingdom of God is the individual in her/his family or network. Time, energy, and resources are focused on training trainers who understand the Word of God, strive to obey the will of God, and share the work of God with people—people they love in their social networks and people they come to love because Christ’s love compels them. This insight may be the critical link to the urgent mandate to “Tell the World.” The role of multipliers matter because they are the measure of the quality and the effectiveness of our faithfulness to Jesus’ call to go, to be a blessing, to make disciples, and deliver the life he promised.

It is my conviction that if we use disciple-making initiatives in an attempt to improve retention and engagement we will fail, but if we invest in relationships and engage in systems of disciple making that have depth and take time, retention and engagement will be the fruit of our labor rather than its focus. This is not a call to do away with the structures of the church but rather to reinfuse them with the principles of discipleship. This is a call to recognize that institutions and initiatives and budgets and boards can blind us to the simple mandate to invest deeply in people with structures designed to encourage worship, ministry, obedience, and witness.

The administrative structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church serve a critical function. Property is owned, institutions are administered, entities are coordinated, resources are gathered and distributed, problems are solved, and people are supported. However, there is danger that must
not be ignored. Power may be vested in individuals responsible for stewarding the structures of the church but “all Power” is behind the humblest disciple maker. Committees may take actions but the real action is on the front lines in families as the Holy Spirit miraculously moves through social networks. Bold initiatives cannot replace the blessing. For movements to succeed, strategies and structures must be simple and within the reach of those with limited resources and little technology. For our identity to be derived from our mission rather than our structures (Knight 2001:8) our structures and strategies must be shaped by the people we are to reach and the contexts they live in. Discipleship—the training of trainers—must become the heart of evangelism and not a tool to ground, nurture, and mobilize people after evangelism.

Recommendations

I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. Revert to language in the 2011 mission statement in the 2011 Adventist Yearbook that calls us to make disciples—not just call people to discipleship.

2. Begin the process of assessing our structures and strategies for alignment with God’s disciple-making mission. Then explore what small changes to our thinking and behavior it will take to coach multipliers in every local context.

3. Add the category of effective multipliers to tithe and baptisms as the key measures of success. Rather than promoting a single method, every church and conference should be required to report three things: (a) how many multiplying exist in each church, (b) how many generations of multipliers are there in the local community, and (c) what are the strategies and structures most effective for discipling maturing multipliers or trainers of trainers.

4. Expect every church leader, pastor, and faithful members to be training trainers. In addition to governing the coordinating bodies of the church, everyone from the General Conference president down through the ranks should be expected to be investing in a process of training multipliers.

5. “Go, Be a Blessing!”

Works Cited


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Discipling Muslim Insiders: A Working Framework

Introduction

The Christian church struggles with the discipleship of believers in Christ from a Muslim background. Muslims, who turn to Jesus Christ as their Savior, also find it hard to become part of a church community. In spite of these challenges, the command to disciple people of all nations and cultures is still valid. This paper focuses on Insider Discipleship of Muslims practiced within the evangelical mission enterprise. The practice of discipling Muslims within their own cultural contexts elicits mixed reactions from theologians and missiologists. However, regardless of how this debate plays out, the Holy Spirit is working in the Muslim community, moving hearts of men and women to Christ. It is no secret today in mission circles that there is a movement of Muslims towards the biblical Jesus Christ (Trousdale 2012; Doyle and Webster 2012; Qureshi and Strobel 2016) Therefore, the spiritual nurture and discipleship of Muslims that come to faith in Jesus is a work that urgently needs to be done.

This article argues that discipling Insiders is a valid part of ministry to Muslims today. I will present case studies of real situations and draw questions from these incidents to guide my thinking in this paper. I begin with a background discussion of Insider Movements by missiologists and practitioners across the evangelical fraternity. This helps to understand where the debate is at and the key issues raised. This paper provides a three-level progression from three locations as a way to respond to questions raised against Insider work. I draw from Warrick Farah (2015) to explain my three locations in response to issues raised against Insider discipleship. My response is informed by the lived reality of believers from a Muslim background (BMB). Finally, I made suggestions on a way forward in discipling Insider BMB based on lessons I and other practitioners
learned from our failures and successes and what we currently learn from the field.

Over the years I have witnessed the baggage Muslims carry when they join the church. A good number are displaced, disinheritied, or have their lives threatened. Don Little in his book, Discipling in Muslim Communities (2005) and Joseph Fadelle’s Price to Pay (2010) describe the pain and suffering that Muslims endure as they embrace our Savior Jesus Christ. Some former Muslims have written of their experiences such as Bilquis Sheikh (2003), I Dared to Call Him Father. This is an extraordinary story of a Muslim woman’s journey as she embraced Christ and the struggle to disengage from Islam. All those who work for Muslims are confronted with this struggle. I shall cite the story of Yahya Hussein and Sayyid who embraced Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and the end result of our uninformed discipleship process.

Case Studies

In the 1980s Sheikh Yahya Hussein accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and was subsequently baptized. His conversion took place about 2,000 km away from his original home town. Yahya Hussein came from a region that is 100% Muslim, where no faith expression other than Sunni Islam is tolerated. Yahya’s conversion was not the result of some missionary effort but resulted from his own encounter with Jesus Christ. So Yahya set out on a journey to find a community of believers that followed Jesus. It was exciting to have an imam (Muslim leader) join the church, especially one who seemed passionate to share his newfound faith. We discipled Yahya in the way that we knew best, trained him on how to do door-to-door witnessing and public campaigns. Evangelist Yahya was ready to go back and engage his Muslim people with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yahya arrived in his home town and headed straight to the Mosque entrance and proclaimed Christ. No sooner had he started than he was beaten and beheaded. May God forgive us for the way that we discipled the late Yahya Hussein, a way that led to the sudden loss of his life even before he could enjoy or witness to his new Christian life. We as a Church were not ready for the likes of Yahya at the time. The question still remains: Is the Church ready to receive BMB and nurture them appropriately? This is an urgent need because, in spite of whether we plan to reach out to Muslims or not, the Holy Spirit is moving Muslims to Jesus Christ.

Another sad incident took place in the mid 1990s when Sayyid, a man of Arab descent on the East African Coast, embraced Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and was gladly baptized in a regular church. News of Sayyid’s conversion spread in the Muslim community and that day his
marriage dissolved automatically. It is against Islamic law for a Muslim woman to be married to a non-Muslim man. Within a few days, Sayyid’s wife was married off to another man who lived on the same street. Sayyid’s two daughters aged 4 and 6 went with their mother since a non-Muslim person is not allowed to parent Muslim children. Sayyid’s property, that he had inherited from his late father as an only son, was taken away and shared among other close relatives, because in Islamic law, a non-Muslim cannot inherit the property of a Muslim. Sayyid became penniless and his pain increased each day as he saw his wife and two daughters in the company of another man. This desperate life overwhelmed Sayyid and within a few months, frustration and heartbreak killed him.

As much as martyrdom may be part of a believer’s’ journey of faith in Jesus Christ, it should not be as result of inappropriate discipling methods. We asked ourselves, whether there was another way to nurture and disciple such believers. Is our message one that breaks up families, renders convert poor, makes them outcasts, and brings death? Is our goal to allow converts to suffer while we celebrate baptismal numbers without regard to their welfare and safety?

Yahya and Sayyid: The Big Question

So why did Yahya and Sayyid pay with their lives? Was that the way that Christians should do mission? Why is it that each time a convert came from a majority Muslim population they were rendered useless or died? The question we asked ourselves was why did those two Muslim converts die? It dawned on us over time that Yahya and Sayyid were rejected because they became Christians and NOT because they followed Jesus. We realized that the label “Christianity” has a negative meaning in Islam, different than what it means to us. According to the Muslim community, to be a Christian means that one has denied his people and joined himself to an infidel community. To be Christian is to deny the One God, legalize prostitution, alcohol, gambling and pork eating, things that are considered offensive in Islam. The convert’s family and to an extent the whole community is shamed by the apostate and thus the urgent need to annihilate that object of shame. Sarah Yoon’s Identity Crisis: Standing between Two Identities of Women Believers from Muslim Backgrounds in Jordan (2015), brings to our attention the struggle of Jordanian Muslim women who attempt to come to faith in Jesus: many fall back into Islam due to numerous difficulties. And so I ask, are there ways in which Muslims could come to faith in Jesus and be discipled into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ without being tagged Christian? This would allow for the possibility that even if they had to suffer persecution it should be for the right reason.
Many times I have heard Muslims say that they believed in the Bible message and wished to order their lives in harmony with Jesus Christ, but they did not want to be a Christian. From time to time I am confronted with real people in real situations who need an environment where they can be nurtured and discipled. The issue that remains is what to do with BMB. It is in response to situations like Yahya’s and Sayyid’s that workers among Muslims continue to discuss how best to disciple BMB. One way of discipleship is the Insider model which allows BMB to retain aspects of their Muslim identity and to grow in Christ within their Muslim culture.

Consideration of Insider Space for Discipleship

Rebecca Lewis (2009:16) says that the “gospel takes root within pre-existing communities or social networks which become the main expressions of ‘church’ in that context. Believers are not gathered from diverse social networks to create a ‘church.’ New parallel social structures are not invented or introduced.” She goes on to say, “believers retain their identity as members of their socio-religious community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.” She suggests that an Insider Movement is a Church implant where families become the Church while a Church plant is a composition of new believers who are unknown to each other that is formed into a new social entity, a church. An Insider Movement is a deliberate act of the Christian church to grow a community of believers in a non-Christian community. As much as discipling Muslims on the inside seems a viable option to correct the way we discipled Yahya Hussein and Sayyid, Morton (2012) and many others argue against it. To expand our understanding of the extent of the discussion going on I will describe the C-Spectrum of Muslim ministry. The C5 on this spectrum is usually considered synonymous with the term, Insider. This spectrum was created by John Travis (1998), “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-Centered Communities (‘C’) Found in the Muslim Context” presents a descriptive tool for a community of believers in the Muslim world. The six types are summarized by Bill Nikides (2006:1):

C1—Traditional church using non-indigenous language. Christian churches in Muslim countries entirely removed from the culture. Christians exist as an ethnic/religious minority.
C2—Traditional church using indigenous language. The cultural forms are still far removed from the broader Islamic culture.
C3—Contextualized Christ-Centered communities using Muslims’ language and non-religiously indigenous cultural forms. Style of worship, dress, etc., are loosely from the indigenous culture. Local rituals
and traditions, if used are purged of religious elements. May meet in a church or a more religiously neutral location. The majority of the congregation is of Muslim background and call themselves Christians.

C4—Contextualized Christ-Centered communities using Muslims’ language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms. Similar to C3 except the believers’ worship looks like Muslim worship, they keep the fast; avoid pork and alcohol, use Islamic terms and dress. Community is almost entirely of Muslim background. Though highly contextualized, believers are not seen as Muslims by the Muslim community. Believers call themselves “followers of Isa Al-Masih, Jesus the Messiah.

C5—Christ-Centered Communities of “Messianic Muslims” who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. Believers remain legally and socially within the Islamic community. Aspects of Islam incompatible with the Bible are rejected or if possible, reinterpreted. Believers may remain active in the mosque. Unsaved Muslims may view C5 believers as deviant and may expel them from the Islamic community. If sufficient numbers permit, a C5 mosque may be established.

C6—Small Christ-Centered communities of secret/underground believers. These can be individuals or small groups isolated by extreme hostility. Openly sharing faith is typically not attempted.

The C-Spectrum is not a method of reaching Muslims, but a description of what already existed in Muslim areas of the world. Travis observed various ways the Christian Church expressed itself in Muslim contexts. It is the C5 descriptor in the C1-C6 spectrum that has generated the most heated debate in mission circles. Therefore, I shall outline issues raised by those opposed to C5 which is synonymous with Insider believers.

From the onset Travis has insisted, saying, “We will not be contending that C5 is the best or only thing God is doing in the Muslim world today; indeed, God is bringing Muslims to Himself in a great diversity of ways, some of which we may only understand in eternity” (Travis and Travis 2005:12). Many evangelical Islamic missiologists and practitioners have written in support and commented on Insider work for Muslim just to give a few examples, Joshua Massey (1999) writing in the Evangelical Missions Quarterly: “His Ways Are Not Our Ways: God’s Amazing Unpredictability in Drawing Muslims to Jesus.” An entire issue of the International Journal of Frontier Missiology (January-March, 2000) was devoted to contextualization among Muslims and another issue in 2015 dealt with debating insiderness. Jerald Whitehouse (1993 and 2005) highlighted Muslim worldview values that required a different approach to Islam and the need for contextualization in contrast to how Adventists approach those who are already Christians. Since C5 is identified as Insiders on Travis C-Spectrum I shall use both terms interchangeably.
Questions on the Validity of Discipling Insiders


Timothy Tennent (2006:101) also asks, “How do these followers of Jesus relate to the rest of the global church? Can someone say ‘yes’ to Jesus and ‘no’ to the visible church? Are the biblical and theological arguments made in support of this movement valid?” Tennent argues that believers in Christ must identify with the visible Church. It is of great concern to him that a good number of C5 believers hold onto the Qur’an as the holiest book and do not believe in a triune God (2006:109). Tennent concludes, “The retaining of one’s religious identity within Islam after becoming a follower of Christ is, in my view, unethical” (112). Iskander Tee raises even more questions:

How big and biblical is our picture of the body of Christ? What do we believe God can answer in Jesus’ prayer in John 17, about unity within the church? Field workers and strategists must ask, “Will Jesus share his glory with another religion?” Should we plan a part of the body of Christ where Christ shares his glory with another world view? Would Christ set up part of His body as a sect within another world religion, as some pro-Insiders hope to see? Would that bring His greatest glory? Can’t Jesus do any better in a Muslim context?” (2007:3)

Tee seems to be quite unhappy with the whole concept and practice of Insider Movements (4). Jeff Morton, who pulled together all the reasons for opposing the Insider Movement, argues that this approach lacks biblical support and he believes that this approach should be stopped (2012:102, 103).

Those against C5 see it as an endeavor by Western missionaries with their missiology and money to promote Insider Movements (Nikides 2006:5). Bill Nikides doubts how far a C5 believer would be able to go in
following Christ when the mosque has no room for a fully realized Christ (11). After being so negative toward C5ers, Nikides concludes that “Messianic Islam might in fact best be seen as a seeker movement. Classified as such, we can see C5 communities as an excellent springboard for biblical C3-C4 movements” (14). This seems positive.

Tennent after he expressed his displeasure with C5 and argued that there should be only one Christian identity, goes on and concedes, “Nevertheless, no one can deny that, descriptively speaking, there are Muslims coming to Christ in some dramatic ways today. How should we respond to the genuine movement to Christ among these Muslims, many of whom have encountered Christ in dreams and visions?” (2006:113). Views such as these leave room for the germination and growth of authentic Jesus movements in Islam outside of any missionary endeavor to encourage or spur on the development of C5 believers.

An example of a C5 community in Bangladesh (Higgins 2006:117-223) indicates that a good proportion of the Insiders believe that their sins are forgiven in Allah through Jesus who died for their sins. A Muslim observer cautions his fellow Muslims, “The missionaries who pose the greatest threat to the Muslim community here and abroad are those who use C4-C6 methods” (Zaid 2004). This seems to suggest that the Insider approach is the one approach that retains Muslims in the fold of Jesus Christ.

Summary of Points of Contention

Critics tend to assume that since Insiders remain legally Muslims they must pray five times a day in a Mosque, they must fast, go on Hajj, may marry multiple wives, deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ, value the Qur’an over the Bible, and pay allegiance to Muhammad since this is what all Muslims do. Based on these assumptions then critics proceed to pour vitriol on Insider discipleship. All the issues raised in this discussion by those who fault insider work can be summarized as falling into three main areas.

1. Insider work is deceptive, therefore unethical. It is shrouded in secrecy under the guise of security concerns, but it is a way evading accountability. Jay Smith goes so far as to say that it is hard to pin down C5 missionaries on anything, in other words they are slippery and evasive (2013).

2. The mosque is incompatible with the church, thus it is impossible for a true beliver to practice his faith in a mosque community since he has to pay allegiance to Muhammad, celebrate Muslim feasts, and observe all the Islamic rituals. This is syncretism. It is even worse for a Christian to take on a Muslim identity, an act which Parshall terms as crossing the line and wandering in uncharted waters (1998).
3. The fullness of Jesus Christ cannot be realized in a mosque because the Qur'an denies Christ’s divinity and atoning death. Without this fullness of Jesus, Christian faith has no foundation upon which to stand. Believing in Jesus Christ as Muslims do without accepting his divinity, Sonship, and death avails nothing.

Critics of Insider work seem to agree on two things, first, that this work is a danger to the integrity of gospel ministry and to the existence of the Church itself. This view is taken by Phil Parshal, Borge Schantz, Jay Smith, and Jeff Morton among others. Second, that if it was necessary for Insider work to be done, then there must be a clear way to grow these BMB towards full church fellowship. Carlos Martin argues that BMB must be made fully aware at baptism that they are joining a worldwide body of Christians (2005). However, in my view the critics seem to be frozen in the time period (1998) when Travis first introduced his definition of C5 and indicated that BMB remain in a Mosque community culturally and continue to be legally Muslims. If the critics had followed recent developments taking place on the field, they would not be asking the same questions and repeating themselves. They would raise new questions to help practitioners find best practices to disciple BMB on the inside. Jerald Whitehouse published a point by point response to Martin titled, “A Response to Questions on C5” in the Journal of Adventist Mission Studies in which he pointed out that Insider work is not frozen in time, but is progressive and that practitioners learn new ways to improve on what they do (2005:49). In other words, Martin and others needed to keep abreast of what is evolving with insider movements.

Critics of Insider discipling of Muslims want to see BMB come out of their Muslim context and confess Christ as a public demonstration that they have left Islam and joined the Church. This might feel good, and it is what we did with Yahya Hussein and Sayyid and, as a result, they never lived long enough to be witnesses in their respective communities. The question remains, what do we do with Muslim converts, particularly those from one hundred percent Muslim societies? Proponents of Insider Movements are attempting to answer this question while those opposed seem not to be in the business of solving this problem. Rather, their role has been to attack those who attempt to do something. How much better it would be if they would offer an alternative working model. The debate on C-5 has gone on for more than 15 years with Travis and others offering many clarifications in areas of misconception.

Travis’ article, “C1-C6 Spectrum after 15 years,” addressed common misunderstandings and misuses. He reminded those who argue against the spectrum that it is a description of how Muslims express faith in Jesus and not how the Christian missionary expresses theirs. Travis says
that the C-Spectrum describes how groups of believers, not individuals, express their faith. He refutes those who distort his original meaning to include beliefs and practices of Islam which they assume that Muslims who follow Jesus must adhere to. Travis clarifies that C5 groups engage with and judge Muslim beliefs and practices by the Word of God. And based on the Word of God, C5 believers reject those Muslim practices that are in conflict with the Bible, reinterpret redeemable ones, and make decisions on what to keep. C5 believers develop their faith, keeping in mind the overarching framework which is allegiance to the Lordship of Jesus and the Bible as the guide as to what they reject or retain from Islam (2015:348-365).

A Response to Insider Critics and a Way Forward

It is evident that the majority of critics are not practitioners, have not been out in the field, and have never personally met an insider. Whitehouse suggests that some critics do not even examine discipleship materials, instructional manuals, or the baptismal vows used in order to know where Insiders are at, so they criticize from a point of insufficient understanding (2005:49). As I have already demonstrated, critics of Insider work have created a high theological, ecclesiastical, and ethical pedestal from which they attack Insider work. Jay Smith did attend a Common Ground meeting in Atlanta attended by about 300 American Christian supporters of Insider ministries. However, in reality he has never interacted with an Insider nor visited the field. Samuel Adefemi visited an Insider field to collect doctoral dissertation data and so indeed interacted with insiders for a few days; however, he never visited them in their natural setting, instead he interviewed several of them at their annual convention where there were security agents present forcing the Insiders respondents to Adefemi’s questions to reply with political correctness and in some cases not exactly what they would have said if they were in a secure context. Borge Schantz believed in only working for neglected Christians in Muslim majority populations and not reaching Muslims. Muslim ministry was not at the core of his evangelistic endeavors yet he criticized Insider work.

In reality, a deliberate interaction with C5 believers answers some of these questions. I had questions about C5 until I spent one month with C5 believers in their villages, ate with them, and studied the Word of God together. I looked into the eyes of these people who did all they could to be faithful to Jesus Christ and his Word in view of the sociopolitical context in which they lived. In other words, questions that I had from the comfort of my office changed into another set of questions as the pharisaic scales fell off my eyes. I saw real people, in real situations, with real spiritual
struggles doing their best to follow Jesus. I sensed the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. I did not visit to assess for the purposes of academic research or to play to some gallery, but to simply interact and be immersed in this world of Insiders. I noticed areas that needed to be improved upon and the idea of beginning a new ministry at a second location dawned on me as a way to refine this noble work. How could I judge these people to be unbelievers when they are on a journey to find a fully-realized Christ?

My life in a country where I was free to openly hold public debates with Muslims and where I saw Muslims come to faith, gave me the false notion that the rest of the world was the same. I am a debater and still confrontational in contexts where that works and serves a purpose, but at this point in my life I opened my heart to God’s leading. I purposed to stand side-by-side with those on a journey towards a fuller faith in the Bible and appropriation of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ. My journey in the ministry of discipling Insiders had started. I followed the promptings of the Holy Spirit and came to believe that, so long as C5 believers had the inclination to follow Jesus, they would arrive at the full identity of Jesus Christ. My presentations on insider discipleship in three different locations demonstrated that C5 is but the beginning of a spiritual journey.

It is imperative to ask ourselves where converts come from. At the same time, we who disciple BMB must understand that we also come from different backgrounds informed by our own theology of religions. A careful consideration of who these converts are, and who we are, forms the basis of a sound discipleship process for the BMB. I can confidently say that we are God’s community of believers in these last days to proclaim the everlasting gospel to all nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples as a preparation for the soon return of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Global evangelization requires that we understand different cultures, manners, customs, and religions.

Who Are They and Where Are They From?

Muslims come from different economic backgrounds. Their age, education, cross-cultural exposure, gender, and marital status are things to consider. They also vary in their perception of other religions. Equally important is how these converts have come to Jesus. We have observed that Muslims come to faith in three ways.

1. There are internal triggers that prompt new Jesus-oriented movements and communities. Islamic terrorism and violence has increased the number of Muslims disillusioned with Islam and caused many to search for something better. Some Muslims question their own religious traditions, such as the Qur’an and hadith as being out of step with present
realities. There is a renewed quest for interfaith dialogue such as Common Word Call and the annual Doha Interfaith Conference. And there are many other triggers within Muslim communities that cause Muslims to move towards a new understanding of Jesus Christ. That was the case with Yahya Hussein who travelled many miles from his town in search for Christians who followed the Bible and that is how he arrived at the door of our Church.

2. There are also movements towards Jesus that are not a result of any Christian mission activity, caused by Jesus appearing to Muslims in dreams and visions. There are numerous stories of Muslims who see a man in white who then receive directions to follow and obey him. Tom Doyle and Greg Webster (2012) record amazing testimonies in their book, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* Arab Muslims who trace their lineage to Christian ancestors in pre-Islamic Arabia have also triggered movements towards their spiritual roots. Is the Church ready to receive and disciple such groups? Several years ago such a man confronted me and demanded to be baptized. He would not hear any of my explanation that he wait for one week to be prepared. He demanded that I give him Scripture to support the idea that if an individual wanted baptism and there was water that they should wait for several days. So I went to my house grabbed my copy of the baptismal vows, clothes to change into, called one of my deacons and we baptized Ayub, a lecturer at a local Muslim seminary.

3. Finally, there are Muslim converts as a result of the Church’s strategy to reach Muslims such as printed materials, digital materials on the Web, and social and mass media ministries. Personal evangelism and even public campaigns have also been effective in some places. This is where Christians have spent the majority of their resources and efforts. Training seminars have outlined steps on how to witness and how to bring converts into the church. Unfortunately many are oblivious of the first two ways in which God brings Muslims to faith. Therefore, regardless of how Muslims are coming to faith in Jesus Christ, we must be ready to disciple and nurture them.

Understanding the background of each Muslim seeker helps the church to place them at an appropriate starting point on their nurture and discipleship journey. When a Muslim inquirer states that they are inclined to accept Jesus as their personal Savior, except that they do not wish to take on a Christian identity, we must know how to encourage them on their journey rather than insisting that they must first take on a Christian identity. Jay Smith (2013) noted when he visited the Common Ground Conference that there was confusion among Insider ministries because there were many versions and even different approaches used by
practitioners of C5 with many disagreements. This reality is explained by Warrick Farah (2015) in his article “The Complexity of Insiderness” who sees five layers of Insiders.

Farah has made a good attempt to demonstrates why there are different types of Insiders and the areas where there may be challenges and differences. He also shows how the concept of an Insider can mean different things to different people, because a change of faith in strict Muslim contexts comes with its own challenges. Farah borrowed the concept of insider/outsider from an interview with Abu Jaz (2015:61-67), who identified himself as a Cultural Insider, but a Theological Outsider (CITO). Farah expanded on this concept and created five possible expressions on a continuum between cultural concepts and theological concepts which in the table below resembles a staircase. I refer to it as Farah’s staircase of insiderness expressions.

Table 1. Warrick Farah’s five expressions of insiderness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Expressions of Insiderness</th>
<th>Cultural</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Communal</th>
<th>Ritual</th>
<th>Theological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0. Exile or Refugee</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Cultural Insider</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sociocultural Insider</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>o/?</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Dual Belonging Insider</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>?/o</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reinterpreting Insider</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Syncretistic Insider</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i/?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

i = “insider; o = outsider; ? = occasional exception or ambiguous

*Cultural Insider:* A cultural insider identifies with his own culture and does not necessarily suffer cultural shock. This person is a cultural insider, but a theological outsider, social outsider, a communal outsider, and a ritual outsider. This is a person who joins a community of worshippers from his own culture wherever he finds them to be.

*Sociocultural Insider:* A sociocultural insider is one who is a social and cultural Insider, but the larger Muslim society does not perceive them as Muslims. These may fast but only for spiritual reasons or in solidarity with Muslims. Their self-identity is Christian and not Muslim. They create their own spaces within their social networks that allow them to live without stigmatization. They are theological, ritual, and communal outsiders.

*Dual Belonging Insider:* Dual belonging insiders are not to be confused with dual allegiance. They have a clear identity “in Christ” at the core level of their personal identity. Socially they belong to the Muslim community.
while at the same time this multiple belonging is problematic in many ways. They obey the Bible, they do not believe in the prophethood of Muhammad, and do not believe in the inspiration of the Qur’an. They may never perform communal prayers at the mosque and so seem nominal, they are communal insiders, but theological and ritual outsiders.

Reinterpreting Insider: Reinterpreting insiders are Muslim followers of Christ, theological outsiders, but ritual insiders who endeavor to give new meaning to Islamic rituals. Muhammad is given another title of honor, for example, statesman. They read the Bible and the Qur’an side by side and find truth in both of them. They do perform the salat and repeat the shahada as a cultural marker for they care less about Christian and Muslim labels because Islam is a religion of orthopraxy so they survive.

Syncretistic Insider: Syncretistic insiders retain beliefs that could block their movement towards orthodox faith such as having a theology that more closely “matches a Unitarian understanding of God. . . .This would make them closer to theological insiders, since they may also implicitly affirm the Islamic doctrine of tawheed which teaches that God is a singular monad” (Farah 2015:88). This group is not theologically outside enough and is very unlikely to transition into a biblical movement. Discipling this category requires help with their hermeneutics and doctrine.

Farah has done a good job identifying different expressions of insiders in an attempt to create order in the understanding of what constitutes insiderness. You can see why Jay Smith reported disagreements between the speakers at the Insider Conference he attended in Atlanta. It is because of these diverse expressions. As shown above Muslims come to faith through three ways. They start their spiritual journey at different points conditioned by the nature of their sociopolitical context. Farah does not mention whether these five types of insiders are connected or whether there has been a deliberate effort to grow them from position 5 to 4, 3, 2, and finally to 1. As Farah described them, these expressions of insiders seem to be locked in to the point they were at when they first moved away from orthodox Islam. This indicates a lack of dynamism and growth and a lack of continued movement towards orthodox biblical beliefs.

I identified three things that trigger movements of Muslims towards Jesus Christ. Two of those are not a result of any missionary activity on the part of believers. Therefore, whether we like it or not Muslims are coming to faith in Jesus. Depending on which Muslim sociopolitical context they are in, a good number will choose to follow Jesus from the inside. In view of this reality, I disagree with those who insist that Insider discipling must stop. How can it stop when Muslims are seeing visions of Jesus and being commanded to follow him? Whether there is a Christian who can disciple them or not, they will still follow Jesus as an insider in the way that the
Holy Spirit guides them. I would rather take a cue from some critics who demand that there be a clear plan to lead insiders to a fuller knowledge of Christ and eventual membership in the visible church. Therefore, I wish to present a model that started in one location but then was further developed in three main stages in three different geographical locations. That journey was a practical response to the many issues raised against Insiders.

These Insider models span three geographical locations that I simply call Location 1, 2, and 3. The work started in Location 1 as an experiment and, as with any pioneer work, there were mistakes made in the learning process. It was not easy to correct those mistakes and so similar ministries were started elsewhere to build on the strengths of that model while correcting the weaknesses experienced in location 1. Location 2 was an improvement over Location 1 and Location 3 also benefitted and built on the strengths and corrected the weaknesses of the previous models. These three locations are not in competition with each other, but are practical demonstrations of what can happen as practitioners, missiologists, and administrators work together to better disciple BMB. Each location has numerous sites with variations that I do not wish to discuss in detail. The purpose is for each location to learn from the improvements made in other locations. Even as I write I am waiting on the Holy Spirit to direct where Location 4 will be established so further improvements can be realized. At this point Location 3 looks good and meets the criteria for an authentic Christian faith, church unity, and doctrinal faithfulness. Worship structures and other minor areas still need to be improved. These locations also describe the state and stages that this work went through up to the present.

Model Improvement through Subsequent Locations

Description of Location 1

Location 1 started among rural Muslims with a lower economic status. Location 1 resembles Syncretistic Insiders and Reinterpreting Insiders on Farah’s staircase. Those at this location have a personal identity as a Muslim. The ministry is an open work and growth is by multiplication. Its organizational structure is not connected to the Church in any way, but is administered by outsiders who live outside the territory. The overall leader is the president, secretary, and treasurer of the organization. The leader holds all executive power and from time to time he assigns duties to his cell leaders across the region. Funds from donors and supporting ministries go directly to the leader who in turn solely determines how they are disbursed. Lack of connection with the Church deprives location 1 Insiders of the wealth of nurture and discipleship opportunities and materials.
that are available. A lot of financial resources are required to sustain this model because members are not mature enough to return tithes and offerings. In Islam only the rich give zakat while those who are poor are on the receiving end, so this group is different from the biblical model where all are obliged to tithe. Believers and change agents bicker constantly about money. Also the strong Muslim influence in the area has slowed down their spiritual growth.

BMB at Location 1 are social, cultural, communal and ritual insiders. Some are theological insiders and others are theological outsiders. These insiders hold a full Muslim identity, culturally, socially and religiously with a substantial awareness of theological affiliation to Jesus Christ. This level of theological outsidersness by some of the believers presents a path that could lead to transformation but a lot needs to be done in the way of doctrinal and hermeneutical efforts to move this group along.

In order to remain legally Muslim, this group continues to attend the Mosque, honor Muhammad, and participate in Muslim activities so that the believers do not raise suspicion within their communities that they are no longer traditional Muslims. The core issue with this group is the matter of identity—is this insider group truly Christians or not—with the main accusation against them being the obvious syncretism.

Description of Location 2

At Location 2, the movement was located in both rural areas and in towns and cities. Discipleship at Location 2 shares some commonalities with dual belonging Insiders and reinterpreting Insiders on Farah’s staircase. Location 2 is secret work and growth is by addition. The organizational structure is linked to the Church and is led by church-sponsored leaders through an arrangement that factors in both security of the believers and the workers. The national leadership at Location 2 are answerable to national Church leadership and the two constantly dialogue without leaving a paper trail. This work is dependent on funds that come through the Church, but is not as expensive as at Location 1. A sizeable minority return tithes. There is an attempt to use both the Qur’an and the Bible as if they are on par. They even attempt to locate fundamental Christian beliefs in the Qur’an.

Location 2 Insiders are cultural, social, and communal insiders, split on ritual but theological outsiders. Muhammad is assigned a special status such that he is not fully a true prophet neither is he fully false, but somewhere in between. Accusations leveled against Location 2 Insiders are in what they believe about Muhammad, the Qur’an, and sometimes on ritual practices such as prayers and fasting. The main accusation is that they seem to dilute the gospel for the sake of numbers.
Description of Location 3

Location 3 is a movement of mainly young people that operates in colleges and universities and of late among young professionals. They have started to bring their parents along in the last three years (since 2013). The primary focus in Location 3 is to stress the identity of the BMB as members of a worldwide body of believers. At baptism the believer is well aware of who they are and have zero allegiance to Islam, Muhammad, or the Qur’an. Therefore, believers are baptized in a local church in the presence of regular church members. From this point their identity is very clear even as they live and witness for Christ. However, they live in their communities as secret Christians. Jesus is their Savior and is incomparable to any prophet. He is their only hope of life. Their place of worship and nurture is the home. Location 3 provides Insider discipleship that is acceptable to a section of critics who propose that Insider believers must be made aware at baptism that they are joining a worldwide body of Jesus Christ—the Christian Church.

Insiders at Location 3 share some commonalities with Insider 3 dual belongings and insider 2 social and cultural Insider on Farah staircase. This work is jointly led by outsiders and Insiders because its organizational structure is linked to the Adventist Church. It is secret work that grows by multiplication. The change agent is an BMB who is approved and well-spoken of, grounded in biblical teachings, and who demonstrates a Christ-like life. The Muslim inquirer is moved from the Qur’an to the Bible until God’s Word becomes the basis of his faith. The Qur’an is then taken off the table except in reference to beginning points for new inquirers. The Qur’an remains just a tool in the witnessing kit. The believer is now moved to a new understanding of Jesus Christ. This process can take several months until Jesus Christ replaces Muhammad and Jesus becomes Lord and Savior of this inquirer. At this stage the inquirer has moved away from the Qur’an and Muhammad, the two pillars of Islamic belief and practices. Once a person has moved away from Muhammad it is much easier for them to accept all the other Bible teachings.

At this point believers are taught in clear Christian terms and become aware of the church. The believers see how they will live under the Lordship of Christ in their strict Muslim community. On the day of their baptism, candidates are transported to a local church far away from their homes for worship and baptism. Insiders at Location 3 do not keep Islamic feasts nor pay allegiance to Muhammad and the Qur’an due to their clear knowledge of who they are. They process how best to practice their faith within their strict Muslim community. Little outside funding is invested in this model, a factor that aids healthy growth in numbers and quality at Location 3.
More money is invested at Location 1 in order to grow the numbers, but without much corresponding growth in faith, whereas slightly less money is invested in Location 2, but numerical growth and growth in faith is largely stifled. It seems that the more money put into Insider work the fewer results received, and the less the funding the better for the ministry both in numbers and faith quality. In Location 3 BMB are cultural and social insiders, ritual and theological outsiders, but divided on participation in communal activities such as funeral rituals and baby naming. Critics have yet to level accusations against Location 3, maybe because they are not even aware that this work has moved this far.

The Future at Location 4

At the prompting of the Holy Spirit and at the right time, Location 4 ministry will be started to complete the process of Insider discipleship for Muslims coming to faith. At Location 4 believers would be Insiders with no allegiance to the Qur'an or Muhammad and who do not participate in rituals that are contrary to the purity of the gospel. Would this type of Insider still be considered to be on the inside or would they have moved into a full Christian identity? Only God knows how Location 4 Insiders will look like, but nevertheless that is where this model is headed. Moving up Farah’s staircase, Location 4 believers would be a combination of cultural Insider and exile or refugee. At Location 4 some believers would be cultural insider and others cultural outsiders, and all would be social, communal, ritual, and theological outsiders.

I have drawn from Farah’s staircase to present my three locations, however let me say that there are two major differences between my three Locations and the five Insider expressions. First, Farah’s staircase steps of five Insider expressions are not connected to each other, but list five separate steps as settled or finished products. Realistically speaking, the steps should be connected to each other in order to result in progression. Farah does not tell us where his Insiders come from or what circumstances cause these Muslims to come to faith and be where they are. On the other hand, the Location model is one ministry that grows and where leaders know each other. These models learn from each other. Second, the Location models are eschatological movements in spite of ecclesiastical and theological shortfalls in Location 1 and 2. They have one thing in common which is to prepare a people for the return of Jesus Christ. This reality is not emphasized or mentioned in Farah’s five expressions.
Objection to What?

Many practitioners, myself included, have had and still have questions about insider movements but, rather than spend our energies pinpointing the evil in Insider work, we are prompted by the authenticity of Muslim men and women, who earnestly seek for a fuller understanding of Jesus Christ, to go along with them in looking for answers from the Lord of the harvest. We are practitioners, without comfortable armchairs in cozy offices, from where we can throw salvos at poor Muslim souls who struggle to see the light of Christ.

The ongoing debate on Insider discipleship continues, but one may ask which model or expression, either on Farah staircase or on my three locations, is being objected to? It is obvious that objections are directed towards syncretistic insiders or Location 1 insiders because of the use of the Qur’an as if it is inspired, Muhammad as if he is on a par with biblical prophets, the participation in Islamic rituals, and regular mosque prayers. One other accusation is that a community of believers that does not openly identify with the Savior Jesus Christ is disunity in the body of Christ. But which unity do they mean? Is it liturgical uniformity or ecclesiastical or doctrinal unity? In my opinion doctrinal unity on core Christian beliefs is foundational. It does not matter whether a believer worships on the floor or in pews, wears a suit and tie or a long flowing robe, or whether two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus or whether hundreds worship in a church. Church is more than just a building or even a denominational structure, for it includes both the visible and invisible church. Some Christian scholars continue to spend their energy in criticism of C5 believers, but they are unaware that Insider work may have started as C5 work, but it has moved on and is becoming more and more biblical with each passing day.

This work is growing and believers are coming to faith desiring to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ inside their cultural setting. This work is unstoppable. So long as it is illegal to do evangelism in certain countries or communities of the world, and so long as there is movement to Jesus without human activity, the insider space will continue to be filled with seekers after Christ. If Muslims could only come to faith through missionary activity then it might make sense to close down this work, but since many more Muslims experience divine miracles that draws them to Jesus, the church must make provisions for discipleship. Discipleship must not be one size fits all, but must take into consideration where Muslims come from and which sociopolitical context they live in, otherwise the end result will be more unfortunate cases like those of Yahya Hussein and Sayyid.
Summary

This article has stressed that believers come from three strands. First, from Islam’s internal triggers that cause them to want to leave and become Christians. Second, they have visions and dreams of Jesus Christ commanding them to leave Islam and follow him. And third, Muslims believers can come to faith through traditional evangelistic strategies. Muslims understand their contexts much better than outsiders do so they will know which identity will enable them to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Those who wish not to be part of the open, visible church can be discipled in homes or even within a Mosque community. While the latter sounds impossible, it is doable. The objective of discipleship is to help believers realize the fullness of Christ in their lives and to anchor their faith in the Bible. When an BMB embraces these two things, the rest can easily follow. This is how Location 3 worked through the theological, doctrinal, and ecclesiastical issues that are still part of Location 1 and 2.

Discipling Muslims on the inside is valid because not everyone who comes to Christ can be discipled in an open church. In John 3 is the well-known story of Nicodemus who came to Jesus at night. Why did he go to Jesus at night? Because Nicodemus was a Jewish leader who could not come openly without being persecuted. Nicodemus came into Jesus’ private space away from the open places of meeting. They discussed. Jesus taught him. The gospel does not tell us whether Nicodemus became a believer or not at that point. Only at the end of Jesus’ life on earth does Nicodemus appear again with Joseph of Arimathea and boldly ask to be given the body of Christ for a decent burial. It seems that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were Insiders who Jesus had nurtured secretly. They followed him closely but the open believers were not even aware of them. At the end they had the courage to come out and identify with Jesus Christ when those who constituted Jesus’ open believers had abandoned him.

I strongly suggest that any ministry to Muslims needs to create space like the space that Nicodemus initially needed. This is similar to the space needed by Insiders or secret believers. Not everyone can have space in an open church. However, Insiders are on a journey that can lead to a fuller understanding of Christ and his church, as it was with Nicodemus. We may make mistakes in our discipling process, but that does not invalidate the concept of Insider discipleship. We must at all times realign our discipling process with Jesus Christ and his teachings.

It would be best for those with questions to visit the field and to personally experience, and if possible assist practitioners and missiologists as they continue working on the best practice to disciple insiders. Insider missiologists need to speak up and help the church realize the issues be-
cause silence elicits unnecessary questions. For example, in 2007, Schantz wrote a 19-page letter and circulated it via e-mail to hundreds of those connected with reaching Muslims. After four months he wrote another short e-mail wondering why there was no response from practitioners and church leaders. The Evangelical practitioners and missiologists do write to describe what they are doing with Insiders; however, those actually working with the Locations 1, 2, and 3 models say little about what they are doing, yet they are working with thousands of Insider believers. There is need for the Insider work in these locations to constantly dialogue and interact with each other. The last time key leaders of Location 1 and 2 met was in 2004. At the time Location 3 had not yet come into existence. It was only after that 2004 conference attended by 22 leaders from Muslim ministries that the move towards Location 3 started. Ground preparation for Location 3 took about six years. The Holy Spirit prepared individuals to do this work. God also prepared recipients for that ministry and revealed the field where this work could best be started. We await to see God’s plans for Location 4, where that will be, and which people group God will call for this much anticipated work.

Conclusion

Without doubt the Christian initiative known as Insider Movements has generated heated debates within mission circles. Yet, when everything is said and done, the bottom line is that Christians have been given the Great Commission to preach the gospel to all nations. Islam presents a unique challenge for Christian mission initiatives. Indeed, Muslim believers in Christ must be so committed that they will give their lives if necessary. To die because they are “Christian” when “Christian” is misunderstood by their persecutors to mean infidel, polytheist, pork eater, alcohol consumer, immoral and filthy lifestyles—everything that goes against God ideal for his people is to die a death for wrong reasons. Therefore the need to seek the best discipleship and nurture practices both in the open church and among Insiders.

Our message is good news and it is not always meant to disfranchise families, harm individuals, or even cause death. Converts should not suffer while we celebrate baptismal numbers in disregard to the welfare and safety of new converts from Islam. How can it be that if you are born in the West you can follow Jesus without threat to your life and property, but if someone from the East follows Jesus they must be banished from their countries, have their families broken up, lose their property, their cultural identity, and in some cases their lives?

The mission path to Islam is littered with struggles for the souls of the
Muslim, but the Good News is that the Holy Spirit is working ahead of us and leading Muslim men and women to belief in Jesus Christ. God has equipped his people with diverse skills to nurture and disciple BMB. Let us do it. The work in the three different locations is a living demonstration of the progression in the spiritual quality of believers and the discipling methodologies needed for the growth of Insider work.

**Works Cited**


Oscar Osindo grew up and worked for many years in Kenya. In the early 1990s he began his ministry to Muslims, worked in England pioneering work among Muslims there, was connected with the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations in Cyprus, and is presently working as an associate director for the Institute of World Mission training the career missionaries for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
A True-to-Life Parable

I would like to share a story—a parable, really.

Pastor Joe was a new, young pastor, pastoring in a predominately Buddhist town. His congregation was small, and only three of his members came from a Buddhist background.

When Pastor Joe suggested that they plan a week-long evangelistic campaign, the church members eyed each other uncomfortably. But no one opposed him because they all knew evangelism was important. However, they knew from experience how hard it was. While a number had been baptized in previous years, only two had remained in the church.

But Pastor Joe, knowing that evangelizing Buddhists would be difficult, had familiarized himself with the major differences between Christianity and Buddhism. He had also learned that it would be best to avoid ‘topical’ studies that skipped around in the Scriptures. So he decided to focus on stories that would teach the key points of salvation—creation and the fall; the promise of the Messiah; the birth, life, and death of Jesus; and finally, the resurrection and promise of the second coming. Pastor Joe selected John 3:16 as his key text and ordered a banner with a picture of Jesus smiling and the words “Jesus Loves You” emblazoned across it in bold letters.

Before long the first evening arrived, and while the turnout was small, the members were happy for the few visitors who came. Afterwards,
Pastor Joe introduced himself to each of them and learned that only two were Buddhist—a middle-aged couple named Tui and Nok.

After the obligatory hymn singing and prayer, Pastor Joe stood up and introduced the theme: “Many people wonder who Jesus is and why Christians worship Him. I look forward to teaching you about Him over the next few days. There is a verse in the Bible that is perhaps the most famous of all Bible texts. It’s found in John 3:16. It says, ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’”

At home that night, Tui and Nok talked about what they had heard. “What is it that Christians find so appealing about Jesus?” Tui began, “It just makes no sense. It is sad that they put all their hope in someone that died and went to heaven. Don’t Christians know that they can only depend on themselves?”

“That may be true,” Nok responded. “But think of it this way, we Buddhists are known to pray for blessing from Ganesh and Indra and other gods. I suppose there are many gods we don’t know about and this Jesus must be one of them. I like Him because He is supposed to be quite a miracle worker and is willing to help everyone. Obviously we don’t have to become Christian to get his help in our lives.”

With this thought in mind, Tui and Nok continued to attend the meetings. As the meetings came to a close, the pastor invited those who wanted to confess their sin and receive Jesus’ forgiveness and gift of life, to raise their hand. Seeing everyone raising their hands, Tui and Nok raised theirs. After the service, Pastor Joe talked with them and shared how excited he was that they wanted to give their lives to Jesus. They smiled and accepted his prayer for them then quickly went home.

Pastor Joe was overjoyed. His meetings had been a success! The next day he visited Tui and Nok to make sure they understood everything they had heard.

“I am so happy that you have decided to give your lives to Jesus,” Pastor Joe began. “You will never regret your decision! But do you have any questions about what I have been presenting the last few evenings?”

After a few general comments Tui ventured, “Well, I am a bit confused by a couple things, especially the Bible verse you quoted every evening.”

“What seems confusing to you?” Pastor Joe asked warmly.

“Well, first you say the Christian God is in heaven. Everyone knows that the gods were once humans with great merit. The more we worship and do good things in their name, the longer they will be stuck there. It seems to me that it will take a long time before the Christian God will ever be reborn! And another thing is that this God loves the world. There are good things in this world, but anyone with wisdom knows that cravings
and desires are a sign of ignorance and the very source of suffering. So while you say your God did not create suffering, He seems to have been affected by the desires of this world and so must experience suffering like us. And the fact that he offered his Son as a blood sacrifice is disturbing. The only people I know who do this are the uneducated mountain tribes, making peace with the spirits. Was God trying to make peace with the spirit Satan?”

Tui finally paused, allowing the preacher the opportunity to respond. However, young Pastor Joe was now just as confused as Tui. He managed to give some kind of answer before praying and heading home, discouraged as he realized his new converts were still fully Buddhist.

**The Statistical Picture**

While Christian missions has sought to make disciples across the world, some areas have seen success—such as South America and Sub-Saharan Africa—while others like Asia have been much more difficult.

The question we need to now ask is, “How is Christian mission fairing amongst these people groups?” To answer this question, it is helpful to refer to Paul Hattaway’s, *Peoples of the Buddhist World: A Christian Prayer Diary* (2004). In this work, Hattaway identifies 238 major Buddhist ethnolinguistic groups. Table 1 shows a summary of the Buddhist people groups by major school of Buddhism. Allow me to point out a few key points. There are 23 ethnolinguistic groups in the Mahayana Buddhist School found primarily in China and East Asia. There is an estimated 1.7 billion people in these 23 language groups of which 31% are Buddhist and 6.9% Christian. China and South Korea have the large Christian populations.

The Theravada Buddhist school of South and Southeast Asia and the Tibetan school of the Himalayas and Steppes of China, Mongolia, and Central Asia have a much greater diversity of languages. There are 86 language groups with a population of 153 million people in the Theravada branch and 129 language groups with a population of 23 million people in the Tibetan branch. In both these groups, less than one percent are Christian (Hattaway xxii).

**Table 1. Christian progress by the three major Buddhist schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>GROUPS</th>
<th>POPULATION (2010)</th>
<th>PROFESSING BUDDHISTS</th>
<th>B %</th>
<th>PROFESSING CHRISTIANS</th>
<th>C %</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Mahayana</td>
<td>23 groups</td>
<td>1,701,910,890</td>
<td>526,891,190</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
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<td>Theravada</td>
<td>86 groups</td>
<td>153,085,440</td>
<td>143,900,240</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tibetan</td>
<td>129 groups</td>
<td>23,277,280</td>
<td>16,642,865</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>238 groups</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,878,278,990</strong></td>
<td><strong>687,439,675</strong></td>
<td><strong>36.6%</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.4%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regretfully, reliable and universal data regarding Seventh-day Adventist membership demographics by language group is not available. However, consider the following:

- There is one Seventh-day Adventist for every 393 people in the world.
- There is one Seventh-day Adventist for every 4,714 people in the countries where Buddhism is the major belief system of the society.

But these statistics do not adequately show the degree of the challenge. In many Buddhist majority countries, there are non-Buddhist people and foreign residents that inflate the ratio of SDAs to Buddhists in the country. For example, the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions, an organization operating under the General Conference Office of Adventist Mission, conducted a membership religious history survey in Sri Lanka to identify how many of the Adventist members came from a Buddhist background. Sri Lanka is a primarily Buddhist country with 70% of the population self-identifying with the state religion. The survey was translated into two languages and distributed by the local leaders of each of the 40 churches and worship groups in the country. Of the 1,654 average worshippers on any given Sabbath, 963 participated (or 58%) participated in the survey. The results showed that 6% of the members of those in regular attendance (about 99 people) were Buddhist when the Adventist Church shared the Gospel with them. This is consistent with anecdotal evidence in many of the other Buddhist countries.

The Challenge to Disciple Making in Buddhist Asia

In the parable above, it is clear that Pastor Joe and Tui are on very different wavelengths. Even with all his prayers and good intentions, Pastor Joe is not going to be able to convince Tui that Christianity is better than Buddhism. Why? Let me share a couple of reasons.

Worldview Differences Prevent Buddhists from Appreciating Christianity

Much has been written by Christian missiologists regarding the differences between the beliefs, values, and worldviews of Buddhism and Christianity, and space does not allow me to give a thorough overview of this very serious challenge to Christian mission. Instead I will simply give an analogy as to how the Christian worldview clashes with Buddhism.

How many people enjoy wearing a t-shirt or ball cap with the name and logo of their favorite golf team emblazoned across it? Of course, none, because, unlike most popular sports, golf is not a team sport. In a similar
way, Buddhism is a religion of the individual. While many Asian cultures are social in nature, Buddhism teaches that it can only be the individual who is responsible for one’s karma. Just as no one but the golfer can hit the ball, Buddhism teaches that only the individual can address \textit{vipāka}, the results of one’s own karma, and only the individual can determine the journey that will lead him or her ever closer to or further from nirvana.

Unlike most other popular sports, in golf the lowest score wins. The goal is to complete the eighteen-hole course with as few strokes as possible. Similarly, Buddhists believe that they will experience a repeated cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. When a golfer is playing his game, he will probably tell you that he is not focused on the last hole. Rather, he is focused on the current hole he is playing. His focus is on getting the ball into the hole with as few strokes as possible—and that takes all of his concentration. In Buddhism, while the ultimate goal is nirvana, very few Buddhists actually keep that goal in mind. While they know there is a “final hole” up ahead, they direct their energies to their current life, knowing that the end will eventually come in due time. But to get there requires focus and concentration on the present.

To keep his score low, the golfer is blessed to have an array of tools at his disposal, most of which come in the form of golf clubs that he carries in a golf bag. The golf clubs vary in weight and size—some thick and heavy, others thin and light, but each designed to serve a different purpose. And a good golfer knows how and when to use each one to his advantage. Buddhists also have an array of tools that come in the form of rituals, amulets, sacred sites, sutras, and so forth. Each have their purpose and can help a Buddhist improve their lot in life and to offset the ill results of karma. In addition, a golfer can hire a caddy to offer advice and a trainer to improve their skill. Likewise a Buddhist will revere Buddha and monks who have shown expertise in the game and can give them help through their power or advice.

Golf is not without its challenges, however. Every good golf course has obstacles and conditions that must be accounted for. Golfers face sand traps, water hazards, challenging slopes on the greens, stands of trees, and even varying weather conditions. More experienced golfers are able to skillfully compensate for each of these and manage to card a good score. The less skilled often find themselves blasting clouds of sand into the air as they attempt to get their ball from the sand trap back to the turf. Similarly, there are obstacles in the Buddhist life. Bad things happen to everyone and are \textit{vipāka}—the result of one’s karma—that create misfortune. Also, Buddhists see the spirits and wild beasts as simply fulfilling their lot in life and not in a sinister plot to cause them trouble. Buddhism teaches that one must simply accept what has happened as fact and move
on. Just as a golfer uses a specific club to drive his ball out of a sand trap, a Buddhist can use rituals and ceremonies to help him “get out of the sand trap” and get the ball back on the green. There is no value in getting angry or upset at these things, Buddhists believe. Suffering just is, so accept it, deal with it, and move on.

Christianity, on the other hand, is better compared to the game of soccer—or football as it is called in Asia. Football is a contest between two opposing teams each trying to outscore the other during the ninety-minute game. The members of the team work together, with each player filling a specific role. It is a fast-paced, intense 90 minutes of running, passing, striking, and ball-stealing as the battle for control of the ball moves back and forth across the field. There are two tactics used—offense and defense—and the players are skilled at both. On a good team, players know how to use each other’s skills to the team’s advantage.

The parallel with Christianity should already be apparent. In Christianity there are two teams: God’s team and Satan’s team, who are engaged in a great controversy where only one team can win. Like football, Christianity is set in a definite linear timeframe, as Christians believe that there will come a time when God will resolve the sin issue and restore creation to its pre-sin state, ending this present state of suffering and sorrow. With only one life to live, every person has important choices to make—which team one will play on, how skilled one will become, and how closely one will listen to and follow the team Captain. The similarities go on. But suffice it to say, Christianity and Buddhism are worlds apart in their cultural themes and worldview.

Evangelism Methodology of Workers Is Not Adequate for Buddhist Fields

When the gospel worker approaches a Buddhist with Bible studies, evangelistic preaching, or Christian literature, he prays that he will find success in impressing the Buddhist with the beauty of the gospel of grace and forgiveness through Jesus’ death and shed blood. He eloquently paints vivid pictures of the end of time and Christ’s return to reward the faithful; however, more often than not, his labor is in vain. Why? Because it would be like bringing a football training video to a country club with the hope that the golfers would find it relevant to their game. The golfers may show kindness and friendliness to the footballer and patiently sit through the training video—some may even take notes. But in reality, there is little in the football training video that can be applied to the game of golf. Alas, when Christians follow their good motives but fail to make the good news of Jesus Christ relevant by presenting it in the language
and lifestyle of the Buddhist worldview, they find that their efforts yield little fruit.

The leading edge of mission to Buddhists in Asia belongs to pastors, Bible workers, and Global Mission pioneers who set the pace and tone for building God’s kingdom. Sadly, these workers are often ill-equipped due to either a lack of training, or the training and resources are designed for other non-Buddhist audiences. This lack of expertise further drives gospel workers away from evangelism and more toward the inward-facing aspects of ministry, such as preaching, directing board meetings, and caring for church members’ needs.

Because “golfers” (Buddhists) so rarely decide to switch sports and become “footballers” (Christians), gospel workers find more success and fulfillment in recruiting footballers from other teams (Christians of other denominations) and adding them to their rosters. Of course, we rightfully desire and take joy when brothers and sisters from other Christian faith traditions see the beauty of the Three Angels’ Messages trumpeting the soon return of Christ, but it seems that success along these lines only seems to pacify our concerns at not being successful in discipling Buddhists for Jesus.

Before turning to the solution for those problems, the next section discusses the challenge of worldview a little more. To understand the concept of worldview we must first understand culture.

The Culture Tree

When we think about culture, we usually think of dress, food, language, mannerisms, etc. We know that Lao people eat sticky rice and papaya salad, Burmese men traditionally wear longyis or sarongs, Cambodians speak Khmer, and they all are Buddhist. And if we take the time to closely examine culture, we will find that even the way information is processed can be different. Logic and common sense are not universally the same. We call all of this “culture,” but there is more to culture than just these “visible” things. In fact, these are simply the behaviors and forms. I like to use the analogy of a tree—a culture tree. The behaviors and forms that we often refer to as culture are represented by the leaves and branches. They are the things we see first and what we use to identify a culture by, just as we do a tree. When we identify a tree we typically look at the top or crown of the tree and observe its shape, leaves, fruit, and flowers. Indeed, from a distance we can easily spot a banana tree, coconut palm, or a mango tree. Likewise we usually identify a culture by its characteristic forms and behaviors.
But what supports the leaves and branches of a tree? A trunk, of course! In the ‘culture tree’ analogy, the trunk is the network of beliefs and values. Beliefs and values provide support and structure for the behaviors and forms. Beliefs are what we believe to be right and wrong, true and false, things that we know to work and those that don’t; while values reflect the priority we place on these beliefs. Although our beliefs may remain constant, the value we place on them may vary a little as we re-prioritize based on the context of various situations. It is important to note that sometimes we do not make decisions based on our desired or ideal values. Instead, we make decisions based on our actual beliefs and values. For example, in the Seventh-day Adventist Church we have a mission statement, a vision statement, and the 28 Fundamental Beliefs. But we find that while these are extremely important to us as individuals, how we actually experience them and live them out in our lives differs from person to person. Even more interesting, we may compromise our own beliefs because of other things that seem to conflict and hold all our values in tension. So while we may be able to make a neat little list of our values, it is not uncommon to find that some may just be desired or ideal values. However, if we watch our behaviors—or have someone else watch and tell us what they see—we will be better able to identify our actual values.

After the ‘branches’ (cultural behaviors & forms) and ‘trunk’ (cultural values & beliefs) we need to consider the roots of the tree. Just as tree roots are out of site below ground but provide the nutrients a tree needs to be healthy, cultures also have “roots” that are equally vital yet invisible.

In cultural terms, tree roots are analogous to a cultures worldview and assumptions. The worldview determines the ‘system’ in which life
is played out and why it should be lived in a certain way. It provides the theme or purpose for life from which all behaviors, forms, values, and beliefs take their meaning and are nourished. Assumptions are so called because their truthfulness is assumed. Whether defendable or not, each culture has assumptions about what is real, about the nature of life and death, about spirits, karma, and what is most important in life, what we do when we experience crisis, and so on.

I have found that as I study other worldviews and beliefs I begin to get a window into my own assumptions and worldview. There is no culture that does not need the transforming influence of the Holy Spirit to correct and refine its collective understanding and assumptions.

Analyzing Worldview

Let us consider a real-life example. There is a spirit house located at a three-way intersection a couple of blocks away from the Thailand Mission office in Bangkok. The corner is dangerous because the perpendicular road emerges between two high walls making it very difficult to see oncoming traffic. This particular spirit house is really quite attractive and well taken care of. It has a clean white paint job with bright orange trim work. The dozens of bottles of red Fanta soda set on the table in front of the spirit house are regularly replaced which indicates the degree of devotion its owner has. If you were to come at the right time, you would also notice that there are regular visits by the owner to offer his or her prayers and offerings. Some passersby honk their horn or wai (bow) to the spirit house.

Figure 2. Spirit house in Thailand
The design and the activity are all based on the belief that a spirit in that location—perhaps the spirit of one who died in a violent accident—has power to harm or to help passersby. By demonstrating respect to it, travelers believe that they prevent angering the spirit, which could in turn cause them to have a traffic accident. In fact, the local people believe the spirit house is a road safety device.

Behind these beliefs is the Thai assumption that spirits are sentient beings just like human beings but in a different life form. How do they “know” this? From the experience of collective generations that have learned that spirits are indeed real and can harass and harm a passerby. There are anecdotes of spirits that began to haunt a place along the road after a fatal accident.

But a European with a secular scientific worldview will see something totally different. She will observe the aesthetics of the shrine and the quaintness of the devotion. For her, it is all just a silly superstition and potentially a traffic hazard because it could distract a passing driver who may wish to *wai* and take his hands off the steering wheel.

What does a Seventh-day Adventist see? Because his worldview is influenced by the theme of the Great Controversy, he does not see a shrine to a spirit that could harm him, neither does he see it as a silly superstition. The Adventist sees this shrine as a place where one of Satan’s demons is harassing travelers and deceiving the residents about the true nature of death—causing them to believe in a soul that lives on after death. Also a fully-discipled Seventh-day Adventist will see this spirit house as a tool of Satan to twist the understanding of people and make it hard for them to appreciate the gospel if and when they hear it preached.

If a Thai person wanted to convert a secular European or a Seventh-day Adventist to his opinion, he would have a real challenge. Why? Because both the secular European and Adventist beliefs and lifestyle are grounded in a worldview that is not easily changed. It stands to reason, then, that if we are going to be successful in discipling Buddhists for Christ then we are going to have to deal with these worldview issues. So how are worldviews informed? Can a few quotes from Scripture do this?

I recently met an elderly woman while visiting a new church plant in Thailand. She sat in the front row and was an attentive and active participant in the worship service. Curious about her story, I discovered that she came from a Buddhist background and had in fact been baptized a few years earlier—at the age of 72! This was a surprise! Typically, women her age become more devout in their Buddhism, even becoming nuns to earn more merit. My curiosity was fully aroused—What happened to cause her to change religion? So I talked with her after church. She told me that since the age of five she had experienced a life-long struggle with spirits.
She had spent thousands of dollars doing everything she could to get rid of them, but nothing worked. Then an Adventist pastor moved in next door to her. Each week she heard the singing and it appealed to her. Finally mustering her courage, she visited the pastor and a friendship began. Eventually she confided in him about the spirit problems she was experiencing. The pastor offered to pray for her and she gladly accepted, though she doubted that it would make any difference. But to her surprise, after the pastor prayed, the spirits stopped bothering her! She immediately began Bible studies and was baptized a short time later. As we concluded our conversation I asked her to summarize what Christianity meant to her. Her response was intriguing. She said, “Jesus means everything to me. He has saved me from so much and I owe Him everything. Because of this I have decided that when I die, I want to be a Christian in my next life!”

The story started wonderfully, but it became clear that her worldview had not changed. Why? The pastor had studied with her. I am certain of this. But telling someone and showing them Bible texts to support your teaching does not change a worldview.

**Change: Can Worldviews Change?**

Worldviews do not change because we want them to! Worldviews are shaped by life experiences and the explanations that accompany those experiences. Worldviews are learned from infancy. When attempts fail, parents, teachers, and older siblings scold and tell the young child why it failed. When success is achieved, members of the society offer their explanatory narratives. One of the richest seedbeds for worldview formation is times of crisis and what people do in times of crisis can help you understand their worldview. A Western Adventist may ‘believe’ in prayer but when he gets sick he likely turns to doctors and not God through prayer for help. Only when doctors can no longer help do some people turn to God in prayer.

Likewise, when things happen in life that challenge our old assumptions, worldviews are modified to accommodate the new information. Many gospel workers think that their words, shaped into well-crafted Bible narratives, will make the difference, or that a better set of proofs or arguments in behalf of Christ will convert them. But these attempts result in limited success. For worldviews to change, there needs to be a new experience that challenges old assumptions.
A Model for Discipling Buddhists for Jesus

The goal of this paper up to this point has been to clarify the challenge that is faced by the would-be discipler of Buddhists. Disciple making is not merely a process of conversion but it is a process of transformation and the formation of a new worldview and the person’s incorporation into a sub-culture of local believers in Christ.

Measuring success in terms of baptism is a mistake not only because it draws the emphasis away from disciple making to making people loyal to behaviors and creeds, but also because it allows us to be easily deceived into thinking that this person has fully adopted the new pathway of liberation from suffering and shame in this world and preparation for the kingdom of God.

Another major weakness of making baptism the primary measure of success in disciple making is that it fails to focus on the real nature of discipleship which is the journey. While knowing our destination can help us mark our course in the proper direction, it is not the best way to measure our progress. Disciple making is a journey that requires way-stations to measure the progress. This is important not only for motivational purposes for the gospel worker but also for identifying what the disciple needs at each stage in the same way that a teacher will assess students to know what is needed to educate them.

My wife, Amy, and I have spent time thinking about making disciples in the Buddhist context and have developed a “Cycle for Discipling Buddhists.”

Mission 1—Win Confidence

There are five stages in the discipleship cycle. The goal of the first stage is to earn the trust of a Buddhist contact in order for him or her to become a disciple. This is accomplished using Christ’s method of ministry as Ellen G. White describes it in *The Ministry of Healing*. This passage is now an often-quoted and well-known passage of inspiration. Let’s take a moment to meditate upon these words.

Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me.” (White 1905:143)
Several things stand out in this passage.

**Christ’s Method Alone Gives Success**

In other words, there are *many* methods available to the gospel worker from which she can choose, but all of these other options will only give a *false* success. More important is the point that they may appear successful and may result in baptisms, but their success is not genuine. Beware of using man’s methods to achieve God’s mission! The good news is that we have a description of the method Jesus used.

**He Mingled with People as One Desiring Their Good**

This isn’t an activity of working the crowds to hand out tracts or manipulating conversations to insert God whenever possible. Rather, Christ’s mingling was an investment of time spent with people. It required being born as a baby in the home of a Jewish father (Joseph) and a Levite mother (Mary). It meant growing up as a child, doing chores, learning a trade, and walking the dusty roads from village to village. As Jesus’ fame spread, it meant less personal time, late nights, and early mornings. In essence, Jesus’ form of mingling was genuine and included learning from those He had come to save.

As part of this learning, it is important to recognize that Christ-likeness
in cross-cultural mission assumes that the gospel worker will invest significant study into the needs and nature of the people to whom he has been called. Ellen White writes:

In order to lead souls to Jesus there must be a knowledge of human nature and a study of the human mind. Much careful thought and fervent prayer are required to know how to approach men and women upon the great subject of truth. (1948:4:67)

How is this done? As you befriend people, observe their routines and special events. Take note of the themes of their conversation. Identify how they use their money and time—especially for relaxation, toys, and fun. Who is important to them other than their family? Why? What are the necessities for life and why? How are important decisions made? Are they made by a group or individually? What types of decisions involve extended family members? The community? What is the apparent goal or purpose of their life? What is considered success in life? What about failure in life? What enemies or obstacles hinder success in their life? What is the “theme” of life, and how do they “play” the game of life? What are their perceptions of Christianity?

He Showed Sympathy for Them

What is this sympathy that Jesus expressed? Sympathy is of Greek origin, from sympatheo. Sym- is a prefix that can be translated “with,” “join,” or “together.” Patheo is the root word and means “to feel,” “have passion,” or literally, “to suffer.” We could literally say showing sympathy is to join together in other people’s suffering. Jesus participated with people in their joys and sorrows. Paul exhorted the Romans, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15 NKJV).

He Ministered to Their Needs

Today we have glamorized the word minister—we see it as someone who heads a department of the government or as a reference to ordained clergy. But the verb to minister in the New Testament is translated from the word diakoneo, from which we derive the word deacon. This is someone who serves others—in a word, a servant.

There are basically three types of servants—a slave, an indentured servant who is bonded to pay off a debt, and a caregiver. A caregiver is a voluntary servant motivated by generous compassion. Like a mother who serves the needs of her child—nursing him, changing his diapers, bathing
him, and raising him to adulthood—so Christian ministries to Buddhists will be motivated by God’s love for humanity and not out of coercion or a sense of obligation.

**He Won Their Confidence**

Here is the outcome of Christ’s labor. It was through the mingling, sympathizing, and serving that Jesus won the trust of those He associated with. This is not a fourth activity or item on Christ’s agenda but rather the fruit of His labor.

The indicator that we have accomplished the goal of this stage of discipleship is that the Buddhist will say, “You are my brother/sister.” Or “I can talk about things with you that I couldn’t with anyone else.” We must make sure, however, that our relationship with Christ is obvious. God’s presence in our lives must be so real and life-changing that our Buddhist friends are seeing how God is working in our lives and are attracted to learn more.

**He Bade Them Follow Him**

Jesus did not expect life-changing decisions with people dropping their nets and selling their property to follow Him without first demonstrating the good news in tangible ways. Once He saw that they trusted Him, Jesus called them to commitment. It is important to point out, however, that as gospel workers we cannot simply call Buddhists to follow us, because we are not calling them to a social club but rather to Christ. Therefore, we cannot go from winning Buddhists’ confidence in us to asking them to give their lives to Jesus. Something else must happen in order for Christ to win their confidence. That something else is the second stage of our mission to disciple Buddhists for Jesus.

**Mission 2—Host Encounters with God**

We have all read stories in the Bible where people, even Israel’s own kings, entreat a prophet of God, “Pray to your God for me.” At first glance it seems like a reasonable and proper request. But if you look at the pronouns you will find something very profound. Why do they ask the prophet to pray to “his” God? Why did not they say pray to “our” God, or even just “pray to God”? It was simply because they did not have the relationship with God that the prophets did. It was not that the kings were less important to God or that the prayers of the prophets were better received by God than the prayers of the kings. No! It was that the kings did
not have a relationship with God. So the prophets would step in to create a bridge between the king and God. They worked to connect them. This is exactly what we are to do with our Buddhist friends—we are to stand in the gap and be a bridge between them and God. We need to use our relationships and daily interactions to host an encounter with God. Where are they hurting? Where do they need a God-sized answer for their problems? Use those opportunities to pray for and with them. Give God an invitation to work in their lives so they know he is real and that he knows them.

I have interviewed many Buddhists about how they first believed in Jesus and so far, all of them trace their experience back to God working in some tangible way in their lives. They had a personal encounter with God where He healed them physically, helped them get a job, cast out demons, gave them dreams or visions, filled them with a heavenly peace, or assured them of His presence and love. These experiences are not always observable by the Christian disciple-maker but it is none the less a very real experience.

We can measure success in this stage of mission when the Buddhist disciple proclaims faith that Jesus is real and has done something for them causing them to want to continue to pray to and learn about him.

Mission 3—Present the Gospel

After our Buddhist friends have encountered God, they will be open and ready to hear a gospel presentation. But this is not the gospel according to John 3:16 or a spiritual formula. What is needed is the “gospel according to me.” The testimony must focus on how God has transformed one through an understanding of their spiritual shame, guilt, and fear. Also this testimony can be bolstered with recent stories of how God is continuing to change the disciple to be more like Jesus. We have not yet been changed from glory into glory—we are being changed. It is an active, present, current process. And the gospel, or Good News, for them is that God wants to work the same miracle in their lives!

Sanctification is the process of a lifetime. Our job as Christians is to give a testimony that is consistently in the present. The goal is for our Buddhist friends to see the changes in our lives and want to know how to follow Jesus and experience change themselves. But notice the wording: they should not be asking “how to be like Jesus,” they should be asking “how to follow Jesus.”

As our testimony strengthens, the discipler will point to the great promise of the new heaven and new earth—the ultimate solution to suffering, sin, and death in this world and the need for purity to enter that
place. This is the Christian analog to the Buddhist solution they call nirvana—the snuffing out of the flames of ignorance, lust, and avarice.

The ultimate focus of this gospel presentation is that we experience moral change through the transforming gift and power of Jesus for us and in us. We must be open enough about our own personal growth process that our friends ask, “How can I also follow?” I want to live my life in such a way that my Buddhist friends can imitate me as I am continuing to learn to follow. That is what Paul was saying: “I am following. I have not arrived at the destination. So imitate me. Come be a follower with me.”

Mission 4—Disciple Believer

Once our disciples choose to join us in our journey, then we can start opening the Scriptures and helping them experience the truths that we have. It is at this stage that we begin to challenge their Buddhist worldview—gently at first and then more pointedly as we progress through story based, Buddhists-specific Bible lessons. Bible studies should be focused on telling the stories of Scripture to help explain how God worked through history. Focus needs to be given to dealing with the following issues: karma, nirvana, samsara (cycle of life, death, and rebirth), merit, sin, honor and shame, and gratitude towards God.

We must also take time to disciple them in the various spiritual disciplines such as personal prayer and Bible study, Bible memorization and of claiming promises. Also, through the community of Buddhist background believers, new ceremonies and forms need to be developed to replace the old forms. These new functional substitutes should cover all categories of life including:

- Major Life Events—funerals, baby-naming, praying for success in school examinations
- Daily Life—family prayers, setting aside offerings, personal meditation on Scripture
- Seasonal events—prayers for planting, religious/civil holidays
- Corporate Worship—posture of worship, sacred music, order of service

This stage is complete when your disciple fully accepts Jesus, understands what it means to be a disciple, and is applying the learning to everyday life. Also by this point they should have learned how to spiritually self-feed through prayer, Bible study, and medication.
Mission 5—Coach Discipler

And then the circle becomes complete as they choose to become committed followers of Christ and begin winning the confidence of their friends and families. At this stage the focus is on helping the new disciplers understand the spiritual gifts and talents God has given them to willingly invest their time, energy, and means to making disciples for Jesus. You know you have accomplished this level when they are actively sharing stories of how God is guiding them in discipling other people for Jesus.

Conclusion

Gospel workers face significant challenges when trying to use traditional methods borrowed from other societies. While translated Bible studies, sermons, and books—even the inspired Word—are important tools for making disciples of Buddhists, in the early stages, these do not have the designed effect they might in traditionally Christian settings. Instead, a gospel worker seeking to make disciples of Buddhists will need to adapt his methodology and begin with the humility of a learner and the heart of a servant. We can benefit from the words Ellen White wrote to pioneer missionaries in Africa: “Too many of the methods and habits and fashions have been transported from America to Africa, and the result is not favorable” (1977:97). In Gospel Workers she wrote:

The worker in foreign fields will come in contact with all classes of people and all varieties of minds, and he will find that different methods of labor are required to meet the needs of the people. A sense of his own inefficiency will drive him to God and to the Bible for light and strength and knowledge.

The methods and means by which we reach certain ends are not always the same. The missionary must use reason and judgment. Experience will indicate the wisest choice to follow under existing circumstances. It is often the case that the customs and climate of a country make a condition of things that would not be tolerated in another country. (1915:468, emphasis supplied)

As we adapt our methods of labor to make disciples of Buddhists, we can be certain of God’s interest and help. Teaching about our beliefs and values is not the appropriate starting place for discipling Buddhists for Jesus. In the presented model, the first three phases of that mission is relational and experiential and then requires the disciple maker to be vulnerable by transparently pointing to how God is working to change his or her own life.
Once we have seen trust in us solidify, faith in God take root, and their desire to follow Jesus become strong, then we can enter into Bible studies with them to develop a new identity as children of the heavenly king. Ultimately, we coach them in making disciples of their family and friends.

By God’s grace, we can expect success as we commit to cooperating closely with Jesus in this important work.

Works Cited


Gregory Whitsett served for three years as a Literature Evangelist, then earned a Masters of Divinity degree with an emphasis in World Missions at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, graduating in December 2001. While at Andrews, Greg and his wife Amy felt the calling of the Holy Spirit to enter foreign mission service to reach the unreached Buddhist peoples of Asia. From 2002 to 2012 Greg and Amy served as self-supporting missionaries with Adventist Frontier Missions in Laos and from 2012 until the present, Greg is serving as the director for the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions in Thailand. Greg and Amy have enjoyed ‘team ministry’ for 20 years and have two teenage sons and many other spiritual sons and daughters in whom they find great joy.
Disciple-Making Movements among Muslim People: Missiological Considerations

INTRODUCTION

The issue of how to disciple Muslims so as to result in a strong disciple-making movement is not a theoretical question. Recently, a Muslim background Adventist abandoned his family, fearing that staying would compromise his faith. Salim (not his real name) had initially seen dreams of Jesus which Adventists explained in terms of being called to be Jesus’ disciple. But in the process of “translating” what discipleship meant for his particular context, he was told that this newfound identity in Christ demanded a radical rejection of his Islamic socio-religious and cultural heritage. The physical rupture that ensued was the logical next step in response to such an extreme view.

The underlying assumption for those who discipled him was that Islam is primarily a religious deception and that it was created as a counter-claim to the core tenets of Christianity. Thus, it needed to be refuted and ideally eradicated from one’s life before that person could truly become a disciple of Jesus. Frequently the term Islam is to be found in the same sentence with words such as, false, heretic, satanic, anti-Christ, and violent. Nuanced views may call for respecting Muslims as fellow human beings, while exposing Islam’s evil agenda.

I question such logic on two accounts: First, biblically this approach misses the missional activity of God among every nation, tribe, language, and people group and makes Satan the primary actor in history, culture, and society (and while I do not believe that all religions lead to God, I do believe that God can be found walking among all of them). Furthermore,
I am yet to meet a Christian who is able to detach their theological and emotional disdain towards Islam from how they interact with Muslims.

Martin Accad is right when he wrote: “Your view of Islam will affect your attitude toward Muslims. Your attitude will, in turn, influence your approach to Christian-Muslim interaction, and that approach will affect the ultimate outcome of your presence as a witness among Muslims” (2001:29)

At a personal level, Salim experienced theological confusion, an identity crisis, displacement, fear, shame, pain, and rejection. In addition, his father has been sobbing during each phone conversation asking what kind of religion teaches its followers to dishonor their elderly parents. He thinks that Christians are treacherous people, they prey on the weak (because Salim is young), and they are bent on destroying Islam.

Salim’s older brother believes that behind his veil of piety, he is seeking a Western lifestyle like their neighbor who converted to Christianity so that she could marry an American, eat pork, and live a life disconnected from her past, which recently ended in divorce.

Salim’s local church does not understand the depth of this crisis, partly because for them faith is a matter of personal piety, something very personal between you and God, therefore, all these other layers of community, family, identity, culture, social network, and religious background has not been carefully considered.

Even more, Salim felt that his baptism had caused many in his local church to view him with curiosity rather than seeking ways to mentor and disciple him, so he felt disconnected and lonely in his new faith community; and yet Jesus had called him in dreams, so he had to respond and that meant joining a congregation, but which one? On the day of his baptism, God providentially provided someone to be in attendance who understood the unwanted implications of posting pictures on social media. Some church members were surprised to hear that even in a free country like the USA, such security measures were needed. They did not understand that baptism among Muslim people is perceived as betrayal, treason to one’s community, and even disrespect to Allah.

In the midst of this crisis, I met with Salim and together we revisited some core biblical teachings on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, what it means to follow him for a person born in a Muslim family and community. We discussed how he could carry out the mission that was entrusted to all believers.

Blessed to Be a Blessing: God’s Purpose for People

Could it be that when God calls someone to trust him, it is with the intent that they are blessed to become a blessing to their families, to
become a sort of Abrahamic presence in the midst of their community (Gen 12:3)? And if they are there to open the door of faith for their families and Muslim friends, how are they supposed to relate to those whom God has placed in their circle of influence?

When Salim discovered that God’s calling is never a private affair, but a missional endeavor, he felt even more confused. As we explored the OT, he saw that Israel had been set apart (called) for the sake of the nations, and that the NT expanded that theme to include all the unreached peoples of the earth. Thus, Salim wondered how he could ever be a light when he no longer was in contact with his people and family. Perhaps he could become a missionary to other Muslims far away, but in the New Testament the progression was clear: from Judea, then to Samaria, then finally “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Why was Salim confused? Because he was presented with the false dichotomy of having to choose between faith and family and to see his family as enemies of his faith. He had not been invited to explore how his allegiance to Christ included the fifth commandment, which says: “Honor your father and your mother” (Gen 20:12) in ways that would not betray his identity in Christ. He had never understood that being in Christ, the fight or flight mentality must give way to reconciliation.

Because faith was presented as a personal (private) journey, he had kept it secret. The first few months were difficult. Salim had no one to help him explore what to do for the Islamic sacred month of Ramadan when the whole family fasted, or how to explain prayer as dialogue in contrast to ritualistic practices. Often he had to lie, hide, or pretend to follow along. The internal dissonance kept growing and his family started to question why he was often missing from family events.

As a first step towards healing, Salim and I spent several hours exploring the biblical view of a missional God and the mission of God. I felt it was critical not to start with what a disciple ought to be, but rather to explore who God is as the One who calls people to be in familial terms with him, “our Father.” In ministering to Muslims, I have learned to start with God, not Jesus, not the church, not my Adventist faith, but with God. Especially God in creation.

Recovering the Primacy of God

The focus of the story of Creation for Muslims is not about how the material world came into existence, but rather about order in the world, structure, the power of God, his sovereignty over every person, and above all, the importance to discern God’s purpose. Creation is not mechanistic, but purposeful, flowing from a wise and powerful God.
Together we looked at the story of the Great Controversy, using the qur’anic narrative. Salim needed to see that the human problem is not simply lack of guidance or that we are weak because we were formed out of clay, but rather to see that God’s reputation (honor) had been questioned, that Satan sought to promote an alternative form of government based on rebellion, and for that the devil sought to discredit the law while promoting disobedience. Sin is rebellion, it enthrones pride, which erodes the basis of Kingdom relationships.

Why was it important to frame the Great Controversy theme from the Qur’an? Wasn’t Salim already an Adventist? If we look at him as an individual then perhaps we may feel justified in avoiding the Qur’an altogether; but if he is called so that God could also bless his family, then Salim needs to find the footprints of God that are known to his family. Only after exploring God’s character, his way of governing the world, and the beauty of his law, could we look into how Salim could mirror God’s own loving ways of being in the world.

Exploring who God is was both transforming intellectually as well as affectively. In ministering among Muslims, Christians should never underestimate the power of beauty. Muslims who understand Arabic are often moved to tears by the beautiful recitation of their sacred scriptures, for they see in beautiful sounds a sign of the presence of God in them. In interacting with Salim, this involved studying the biblical stories in a way that presented them in the most uplifting and appealing way possible.

Translating What an “In-Christ Identity” Means in a Muslim Context

After broadening Salim’s understanding of God, the next topic we worked on was his identity. James Marcia defines identity as a “self-structure, an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (1980:159). I did not talk about external categories like Christian, Muslim, Arab, engineer, the son of Halim, but what it meant to have an identity in Christ that was also intertwined with others who were also in Christ around the world. Identity is like two sides of a coin. Even when you flip a coin you are still aware of the other side. For identity the two sides are God and community. From a biblical perspective, it is not possible to give allegiance to the head (Christ), and yet refuse to have anything to do with the body (his church).

Salim is starting to understand that he is part of a global end-time movement waiting for the soon coming of Jesus with the responsibility of inviting others to be grafted into this faith community. This end-time movement is rich, because it has people from every language, people...
group (*ethnos*), and different cultural religious-social identities all united by the Lordship of Jesus, the Savior of all. Unity is based not in assent to doctrinal truth, but being in Christ and growing in Christ.

Salim and I restudied the concepts concerning the place of one’s family vis-à-vis one’s participation in the family of faith. Should the church family replace one’s biological family? Jesus did say that one’s family are those who do the will of his Father (Matt 12:50; Mark 3:31). Jesus also said that his father, mother, and sister are those who hear the word of God and carry it out (Luke 8:20). Indeed, when we are in Christ, faith and not genes, not ethnicity, creates a shift in our self-understanding and in the understanding of who is in the in-group and who is not. What it means is that our ultimate frame of reference is in Christ, while learning to love the world that God so loved (John 3:16).

Notice the words of Jesus: “Anyone who loves their father or mother *more than me* is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:37, emphasis supplied). This text is key for integrating “multiple identities” which may come into conflict. Up until then Salim had not seen that his family was a God-given gift. He did not chose them, but it was God who entrusted him to his parents, and provided brothers and sister of God’s own choosing.

How did the followers of Jesus, who were the original recipients of the above teachings, translate them into their Jewish context? The history of the amazing expansion of the Christian movement indicates that new believers, like yeast in their existing dough, put their light on a lampstand for their household to enjoy (Matt 5:15). The gospel spread for the first few centuries from household to household (*oikos*), as its message was lived out in the home, until it became a movement that conquered the most powerful empire of the world. For the jailer of Philippi, salvation was personal but not individualistic (Acts 16:30-34), for when the living Christ entered into his biological *oikos*, he transformed their source of bonding from kinship ties to a bond of faith.

In summary, the process of religious identity formation emerges at the intersection between several identity-markers: (1) how a person understands God, (2) how family is defined (status, expectations, etc.), (3) how much influence a social community has in defining the individual, (4) what type of faith community the person joins and how faith is expressed in the local community of faith (local church), and (5) how the society at large perceives the religious identity of that person/family.

One of the non-biblical legacies of modernity is the fragmentation of life where a person’s values, belief system, finances, and love life are in different compartments, often pulling in different directions, causing the person to experience alienation and frustration. In Christ, these multiple
layers and identity are oriented into a common direction. How the in-
Christ person learns to negotiate and translate how this looks is key to
the sustainability of the local believers and to any expansion of a disciple-
making movement.

In my interaction with Muslim background believers, I have noted that
at times their identity confusion is not caused because they lack a biblical
understanding of who they are becoming in Christ, but rather they lack
language to describe their conversion3 in a way that accurately communi-
cates how they understand themselves.

Adventists from a Christian background, instead of imposing certain
labels on those coming from non-Christian contexts, should invite them to
engage with the Bible so that they may find ways of self-representation,
allowing them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit be in charge of the
management of verbal and visual impressions that they wish to attach to
their experience. For instance, in some cases Muslims have found terms
such as Adventist, remnant, followers of Jesus, to be more accurate in de-
scribing who they are becoming than simply adopting the name Christian,
which miscommunicates faith in Christ among Muslims. In other words,
the identity crisis is one of representation, not internal cognitive or social
dissonance, especially for people whose religion and ethnic identity are
presented as one4 and to whom Christianity is another ethnic-religious
community.

Reconciliation: In Christ and within One’s Family

For Musa and for Mohammad, finding Islamic relevant language to
describe who they are was key for entering into a process of reconciliation
with their families. In their cases, it required them to seek forgiveness for
acting in ways that seemed to promote a rupture with their loved ones.
Their families gladly welcomed them back and once they understood that
neither one wanted to destroy Islam, but to lift up Jesus, the one who
purifies from error, they were ready to hear their message. Some family
members have also become followers of Jesus.

The outcome is not always positive for in history there are the exam-
pies of the first Christians (followers of the way to be more accurate) who
were expelled from synagogues. More recently the Millerites were disfel-
lowshipped from their churches before they formally adopted the term
Seventh-day Adventist and formed their own community. But as far as
possible believers ought to be at peace with one another; however, when
someone is threatened or disowned or no longer able to stay, their family
in Christ needs to be prepared to receive them.

Salim’s case is still unresolved, but after our study, he decided
to reconnect with his family over the phone, and let them know his whereabouts. He apologized for the pain he caused them and for the shame they feel in the extended family. He told his father how he wished that one day they could see that they have not lost a son, but won a better one. At this point his father’s pain is too raw for him to be able to hear what he is saying, so Salim remains physically separated from his family.

Family and Discipleship

The primary context of life is familial and relational; thus, culture develops as it supports human relationships. In mission circles, it has become normative to speak of contextualization in reference to the gospel crossing from one particular cultural context to another culturally different context, but contextualization must also include careful consideration of the existing relational context that constitutes a person’s social capital.

Is it possible that by creating a virtual cultural context detached from the meaningful relationships that people have, that Christian witnesses may be unwittingly destroying the very vehicle that allows movements to Christ to happen? Take for instance the many experimental churches in the 10/40 Window that have a local feeling, a C4 type of expression in the church. The place has no pews, outside there is a sign welcoming all to a “prayer house.” The building is simple: with colorful carpets and beautiful calligraphy. The foreign missionaries adopt local clothing and sing in the native language, yet that building is full of people extracted from their natural settings, torn from their family and friends who are being discipled as individuals and taught to be alienated from their families.

Such gathering places are perceived as competing with the existing social networks of the local community, and more often than not, they become the target of angry leaders who see such strange places as threatening local customs. Note that what is being rejected is not the gospel per se, but the cultural and social trappings that have been linked to it.

When extraction is the method used to separate Muslim background believers from their family relationships, then this approach destroys an important principle of life—social relationships are powerful God-given vehicles that allow the gospel to flow naturally along social networks resulting in a movement to Christ. In the future, I see more missiologists emphasizing the importance of right and stronger relationships in discipling Muslims, and from that vantage point, exploring how the new believers ought to navigate between observance and participation in cultural/religious traditions, which are a natural outworking of these relationships with family and community.

I am praying that Salim may find a go-between, a mediator, who could
help him reconnect with his family from a place of strength, transparency about his journey and struggles, and with a missional heart. I want to see him less driven by self-preservation and more committed to being a blessing to his family.

**Stages for Discipling**

Adventists have recently emphasized that “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (White 1942:143). Notice the stages of discipleship in this statement.

1. *Desire people’s good.* Twenty years ago my husband and I moved to Egypt with the purpose of studying Arabic and immersing ourselves in the Arab faith, culture, history, and people. To my dismay, within a few days I realized that I was not prepared to plunge into such a vastly different world. The mental map that had served me well all my life to make sense of reality was out of sync in this strange landscape, and the Arabic language seemed an insurmountable barrier. In those early days I realized that when you cannot love people, they become projects, targets, and then the conversation moves to techniques and methods to manage their responses. I pleaded with God to provide a way out of this dilemma. One late evening, the Lord and I had our *Jacob encounter* with the result that the angel did not dislocate my hip, but my heart. As I prayed, out of nowhere I finally said, Lord I will stay here if you will give me from your loving heart, love for this people. I did not have an epiphany that night, but for the next few days, I would get up with the Muslim call for early morning prayers (*fajr*) to intercede. Gradually God softened my harsh attitude and gave me his heart for the Arab people. Today I can honestly engage them as someone “who desires their good.” Muslims have often made kind remarks about the way they feel loved by me. I then tell them that my heart was unable to love, but what they see is God’s heart in a dim way within me.

In my case, the process by which God transformed me so that I could desire the good of my Muslim neighbors was twofold: prayer and understanding. In prayer, I was able to see the need to receive a new heart and to plead for it. Later as I carefully studied the story of the children of the East, I was convicted that loving the descendants of Ishmael and inviting them to enter into the blessing of the covenant was in harmony with God’s purposes and was the direction history has been moving all along until it climaxes in the message of Isaiah 60.
2. **Mingle.** Jesus walked among the people. Jesus was found on the roads where people passed, he went to their weddings, funerals, banquets, sat on fishing boats, attended religious gatherings, was where mothers could walk with their little ones, visited the temple, the court, the palace, and stood under a tree to call Zacchaeus. Many today may not have the opportunity to mingle with people like Jesus did; however, if that is your situation, ask God to show you who he already is working on within your existing circle of influence that God wants to bring into your life. Perhaps there is a fellow student, a coworker, your doctor, or your teacher that God want you to mingle with.

According to the PEW report (Lipka 2016), two thirds of Muslims are very religious people, meaning that only other very religious people will make sense to them. But, how will they know that we are religious people if they only see us from a distance? I am part of a team that ministers to 30 Muslim refugee families in our area. From the onset, we made the conscious decision to come alongside these families with the intent to see them integrated into American society as productive citizens and to live up to their God-given potential.

As we prayed together seeking God’s direction, we felt convicted that God was calling us to be a healing community. The families were coming from war-torn countries and needed to be embraced by people of peace, people they could trust, and this required establishing meaningful relationships.

It has proven harder than we anticipated. Most Americans are quite open to passing out material things to newly arrived families in need or in offering services (ESL, driving people around, sorting out mail, helping kids with homework), but they struggle to welcome these strangers into their lives or get involved in situations beyond the controlled situations.

We then felt that in order to meaningfully minister to each family we needed to set up teams of five people per family in order to promote and grow a basic level of trust. This has not always happened, but where it did, it has brought new life into the life of those committed to relational ministry. God is using the organization, Adventist Muslim Relations, to bring new vitality into the life of local congregations that are moving from catering to their members to empowering disciples for mission.

At a macro level, I have come to see that God is working out his purposes in spite of the refugee crisis and the many natural catastrophes around the world. How? By breaking down the walls of separation between “them” and “us” so that we no longer offer excuses for not mingling. Being in close proximity with refugee families also exposes the real state of our hearts, and sadly what is emerging is a lot of fear, even hatred, and other fruits that are not consistent with the Kingdom of God.
3. Offer hospitality. The key for establishing credibility is hospitality. Credibility is what happens when people model godliness between your door and your table. Hospitality is vital discipleship and ministry. The path to the heart goes through the table. When Muslims come to our homes they can see what the lordship of Jesus looks like in the flesh. Theologically speaking, the purpose of hospitality is to prepare a welcoming space where people can encounter God’s word. But hospitality also changes us. The way in which Romans 13 speaks of hospitality requires that the stranger moves from the outside into our inner circle and becomes our brothers and sisters.

Because hospitality in the Muslim context is strongly associated with being a godly person, Adventists ought to take this more seriously. In our homes, Muslims can see us praying, eating, and raising children for the glory of God. It is important that we remain honest, and that hospitality is not a show, a display of religiosity that fades as soon as our guests leave our homes.

Sultan told me that the first time he was invited to the home of a local Adventist he became convinced that “now we truly know that you love us.” Hospitality has given me a new insight regarding how God deals with the sin problem and the plan of salvation. One particular parable stands out that is usually referred to as the parable of the tenants (Luke 20:9-19). God, the owner of the vineyard, sent workers to collect his share of the yearly crops. Muslims understand this well, he is the Master, we are his servants. The servants in the vineyard decide to take over the Master’s rightful property. Note the hardening that occurs at each stage. The Master could have killed them right away, instead he gave them more and more opportunities, but they crossed the line when they rejected the Master’s son, so judgment is the only merciful thing left to do, since if such people were to be left to persist, evil and deep injustice would be the only possible outcome. Muslims are appalled to see the rejection of the son and the failure to offer him basic hospitality.

As result of our mingling, they have brought us their friends and even family members. We speak on skype with them and minister God’s love back to the Middle East. In one case, we prayed for a child that was unresponsive in a hospital bed in Australia, invited the aunt to put her faith in Jesus as healer and prayed together for Jesus to take charge of the situation. Within minutes the child opened her eyes to the astonishment of the doctors. The mother was so shocked by how it happened that her response was, “I believe everything, send someone to explain to me more about Jesus.” We then contacted a local church in Australia so that they could send someone to minister to her.

4. Showed sympathy (friendship). Farid is proud to say that today he
understands that his emigration was not to America, but to God. He also said that Adventists have an important place to play in the lives of Muslims, as we model how to live in a godly way in a country that has so much freedom. He was referring to the many hours we spent speaking with him about godly parenting, how we enrolled their youngest son into our Pathfinder Club, and how we helped them to make lifestyle changes to deal with their diabetes and high-blood pressure. Two weeks ago he had a heart attack. Someone in our group who had just arrived in their home to pick up some freshly baked bread his wife had made, recognized the symptoms of a heart attack. She rushed him to the hospital, where he received an immediate procedure that saved his life.

5. Win people’s confidence. This is not a technique in which friendship is a tool. In our group the confidence first became apparent when various families started to trust us with their deepest needs, the pain of infertility, the breaking down of relationships within their community along Sunni-Shia lines, spiritual questions about who God is, what is sin, who is the Holy Spirit, fears of the future, financial needs, and horrendous stories of pain and suffering during the war. Presently there are a couple of people in our group writing some of the stories and someone else has offered to publish them. We tried to help them focus, not on the pain and horror, but on how and where they saw God working in their lives in the middle of the pain of war, destruction, and death in the Middle East. They were able to speak about these things because they had come to trust us.

Our team has prayed that people will not see these approaches as just seeking fruitful practices, for mission is not about effective marketing. Approaching ministry that way is deceptive. We are not being kind so that Muslims can join our churches. Some missionaries have expressed frustration with rice Christians, but I wonder, could it be that some have been part of the problem by using rice in the first place to attract people into the churches? Is God glorified when anything but love is used to draw people to him?

We are learning to journey close to God in the presence of one another, learning to cry and mingle out tears with others, learning to rejoice every time a refugee child passes a test successfully or a new baby is born. We are called to faithfully live out our faith and to advance the Kingdom of God by prayer, love, and by rooting each family in the Word of God.

6. Minister to their needs. When working with refuges, it is easy to assume that their needs are only in the area of physical needs and feel satisfied with providing blankets, food, school backpacks, and even a used car. Of course those things are needed and welcomed, but I do not think this is what Ellen White means when she says that Jesus attended to people’s needs. To the woman at the well, he spoke about her broken marital life,
to the paralytic he removed the shame of living with the sin that had led to his sickness, and to the bleeding woman he sends her back home in peace. Most of these needs were relational. When we mingle, we hear what the needs of the family are and we are then able to bring God into that need. But perhaps the biggest need is not one that most people are able to see—the need to receive cleansing from sin and freedom in Christ.

Jesus is the answer, but after 20 years I have come to see that part of the challenge of ministering among Muslims is that there is not clarity regarding what the question is. If you offer a remedy for cancer to someone who thinks he has a cold, you are not communicating. In our witness, the first building block towards creating this awareness is to show that God is good. God is full of mercy; God is always engaged; God cares; God welcomes questions; God loves to create out of darkness something beautiful; God, God, God—God can be trusted. If this so, where is the evil that we experience coming from? Well, an enemy has done this. Death, fear, and destruction is the work of the enemy, not God’s work. God has a solution to remove the sin problem, and at the heart of God’s own solution is his appointed source of freedom from sin and eternal salvation—Jesus.

The most common request we receive is that we pray with our friends. We are learning that every problem belongs to God, so we turn to him when seeking help. Often God wants us to be part of the solution and will give us a small role in the situation, but we never should take credit for the outcome. God is their real protector, not us. Our role is to always point people back to God. Yesterday we had a mother and her son in our living room. The young man has been experiencing a lot of distress. He was rejected as a Muslim among all the caucasians at his job. He could not take the pressure any more so left work. As result he had no money to get married and the family of his fiancé gave her to someone else. The pain was too deep so he sought and found temporary relief in drugs until he was caught by the police. Since he did not show up for his court hearing, he is now facing jail time. Together we asked God to show us how he is going to use this situation to heal this young man; we asked for God’s mercy to be made clear. But I confronted him with the ugliness of sin and the human inability to deal with the sin problem. God has provided a way out by sending Jesus to carry our burdens and cleanse us from the “evil whispers from Shaytan” (using qur’anic language). I invited him to put his trust in the One who is able to carry our burdens, to seek God’s forgiveness, to seek the forgiveness of his family, and to open up and talk with his father about what is happening instead of covering things up with one lie after another. Finally, we spoke about how when we live as God’s people, we take responsibility for what we have done. This translates into going to the court, admitting wrongdoing without giving excuses, and appealing
for an opportunity to put things rights. If these are empty words to simply get out of the situation, God would not bless, but if they are coming from a sincere heart, God could turn this situation into a possibility. Today he is turning himself in to the police. My husband will go with him. They both left our home with peace, not that the external circumstances had changed, but that now they know that God is in charge.

7. *Invited them to become Christ’s disciple.* All during this process, the centrality of God’s Word is clearly presented. We do not have to wait till the end before bringing the Bible to the forefront. From the very first interaction, we take seriously the centrality of allowing the Word of God to bear witness to the Kingdom. In each conversation, we plant word seeds, then as trust evolves, Muslims start to ask questions. When that happens we do not answer them, but point to what the Bible says. As the questions deepen, we come to understand that God is nudging us to give them a Bible, which we will study together. In those studies we invite Muslims to tell us what they see. Often they want us to learn how some of the same truths already exist in the Qur’an or other Islamic sources. Each story is a door to the Kingdom and by studying the Bible we are able to see the various doors. But the question remains, who will enter the door? And once you are in, will you continue to grow—what is called obedience? Without obedience there is no real discipleship.

At a personal level I want to confess that lately the Lord has brought a new awareness of my own need of redemption in certain areas I did not see before. I am more and more aware of how deeply sin has taken root in my life and how to call others to radical obedience demands my own surrender. The battle is fierce, part of me is resisting, how often I have cried with Paul, “wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom 7:24).

Integration into the Body of Christ

The topic of integration into the Body of Christ deserves much more attention than just the few lines that are dedicated to it here. Unfortunately, integration into a local Body of Christ presupposes extraction of the Muslim believer from his community and integration into a new Christian community. But, if the gospel would instead flow within an existing social network, then the issue is no longer one of integration, but of developing appropriate ways to express the Kingdom of God in the forms, language, images, and religious vocabulary that best communicates gospel truth.
Islam: A New Understanding Needed

As long as Islam is treated as the counterclaim to Christianity and people place it under a Western category—religion—Christian witnesses will be missing the particular ways in which Muslims navigate between faith, culture, identity, family, loyalty to one’s community (ummah), and God’s will, guided by the Islamic worldview in which God is all encompassing, enmeshed, and unifying.

Islam is din, not religion; and din is a complete way of life: “Indeed, the din in the sight of Allah is Islam” (Qur’an 3:19). “The root of d-y-n has four primary meanings: mutual obligation, submission or acknowledgment, judicial authority, and natural inclination or tendency.” Thus din implies two major ethical-theological considerations.

First, because we owe our existence to God (our Lord and Master), we are indebted to him. This is beautifully expressed in the primordial covenant between God and Adam: “And (mention) when your Lord took from the children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants and made them testify of themselves, (saying to them), ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said, ‘Yes, we have testified.’ [This]—lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, ‘Indeed, we were of this unaware’” (Qur’an 7:172, Sahih International). This establishes human identity and dignity as being one of God’s servants. The response of the responsible servant is submission to the Master’s will in every area of life in accordance to the law (sharia) and its limits (hudud) established by God. And it is on this basis that human beings will be judged in the Final Day. God as Creator and God as supreme Judge are two foundational pillars for developing an Islamic understanding of God and of reality.

Second, because God is the Creator, everyone belongs to the human family, but within that shared community, which calls for basic reciprocity, there are levels of responsibilities and duties in accordance to a hierarchy of faith and community.

The duties between Muslims is stronger than between Muslims and non-Muslims. According to Saheeh Muslim, Book 026, number 5381: “Anas reported that the Companions of Allah’s Apostle (may peace be upon him) said to him: ‘The People of the Book offer us salutations (by saying as-Salamu- ‘Alaikum). How should we reciprocate them? Thereupon he said: Say: Wa ‘Alaikum (and upon you too).’” Most Muslims offer peace, blessings, and mercy to one another, but to non-Muslims, they ought to simply reciprocate their greeting by offering back what was offered to them.

In view of such a complex world, the gospel, as a story, enters like yeast buried in the ethno-religious dough. The inner workings of the yeast may
seem imperceptible for some time before it penetrates every layer of the din and transforms it from within. Conversion, thus, is the reshaping of all things when the everlasting gospel (Rev 14:6) becomes incarnate and leads to worldview transformation. The result is disciples who make disciples.

Notes

1 As we studied, for the first time I saw the “back of God” from Salim’s eastern eyes, which in turned enlarged my own picture of God. I am referring to the story of Moses, who is known in Islam as the friend of God. Moses wanted to see the face of God, the one he had traveled with from the Nile to Sinai and now almost to the edge of the Promised Land. Instead God told him that he would have to settle for his back. If I approach a person with a request, and instead she shows me her back, what is that supposed to mean? Rejection, request not granted, or not forgiven. But not so with the back of God, for on his back there are words, beautiful words: “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exod 33:6).

2 Oikos refers to the web of relationships a person already has, which may include hired servants, slaves, or former slaves who may have become clients, and others who were under the sphere of influence of this household and not only biological relatives.

3 For those wishing to explore the nature of conversion, a good place to start is with Reinhold Strahler’s Coming to Faith in Christ: Understanding Conversion (2010), his chapter “Areas of Change in the Conversion Processes of the East African Muslims,” in Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between? (2013), edited by David Greenlee. Another useful resource from a sociological point of view is the book by Kathreen Ann Kraft, Searching for Heaven in the Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World (2013).

4 Other examples could include “to be Greek is to be orthodox” or “to be Latino is to be Catholic.” Both communities rely on religious institutions to preserve cultural traditions and ethnic boundaries.

5 For instance, the Arabic term dana, which derives from dyn, means “being indebted”; this term conveys an entire group of meanings related to the idea of debt. The concept of civilization has always been associated in Islam with towns and cities. Thus, it is not surprising to find that some of the Arabic terms for civilization are also derived from the root dyn: tamaddana means “to build or found cities” or “to refine” or “to humanize,” while tamaddun means “civilization” or “refinement of society.” “When one considers the four primary meanings of the root dyn, one realizes that in Islam, religion (din) is natural to the human condition. Dyn conveys the idea of obligation or indebtedness, the acknowledgment of indebtedness, and the requirement to repay one’s debts” (Din and Theology in Qur’an and Sunnah 2001).

6 For a detailed treatment on the subject of worldview, see Hiebert 2008.
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Transforming Discipleship: Opportunities in Following the Master in a Postmodern World

Introduction

“Come follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt 4:19 NIV). With these words Jesus Christ proposed to two brothers on the shores of the Sea of Galilee a new lifestyle. On that very day a life-transforming journey began. From a simple and humble life as fishermen, Peter and Andrew, became the first disciples of someone who called himself the long-awaited Messiah. That encounter marked the beginning of a very intentional and purposeful process. Jesus himself put in place a pattern for “discipleship” that should be initially absorbed by the twelve and later emulated by everyone who would accept the invitation to follow him.

However, the original plan of the Master seems to be far from the reality found among many who claim to be Christians. In fact, a majority of Christian churches have quite a different approach from what Jesus Christ experienced with his first disciples. Usually there is a brief orientation/training for the “prospective” follower, mainly on the basis of doctrinal teachings and the uniqueness of denominational beliefs. Then, comes the assumption that the new believer—usually after the ceremony of baptism—will basically be assimilated into the church body and automatically become a devoted and committed disciple. An intentional and real discipleship process is, in most cases, fully ignored. The experiential learning process used by Christ with his first disciples is left out. Perhaps it is important to remind ourselves that “Jesus spent very little time inside temple walls” (Kohn 2010:12). The result? Many names on church books (or depending on the geographical location, not so many), some “regular customers” in worship seeking to satisfy themselves with a “religious
product,” but very few passionate fully dedicated followers of Christ during the ordinary days of the week.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for this sad reality is because very “few believers have a relationship that holds them accountable for spiritual development” (Barna 2013:54). In the end, the main focus still remains on personal choices and priorities. For many Christians, their spiritual life is restricted to a religious routine, spending a few hours, or just one day of the week, within four walls.

It should be clear by now that “something is missing” in many churches today. There is a major gap between becoming a “member” and living a meaningful, relevant, active life as a real disciple, faithfully responding to the call left by the Master. Additionally, this apparent crisis is engulfed by what David Wells (2008) calls “globalized consciousness,” or in other words, the implications on people of the contextual effects of postmodern, post-Christian, post-religious, secular, and highly urbanized societies.

Should not disciple-making be the primary goal of any church evangelistic effort, instead of generally focusing on numerical growth? Furthermore, how can the church indeed be meaningful and relevant among postmodern generations?

With the above issues in mind the main goal of this article is to consider the significance and implications of real Christian discipleship in our contemporary world, exploring new possibilities to develop successful discipleship processes mainly in postmodern contexts. Naturally, taking into consideration the broadness of the subject matter, this paper is narrowed to take into consideration the following: (1) it is beyond the task of this article to develop the philosophical contours of contemporary Western societies affected by postmodern concepts and its subsequent movements, and (2) I assume the basic, biblical teaching on the nature of discipleship; thus, I will not develop the topics and issues associated with it.

This paper is divided in two short sections in order to better understand the importance of discipleship and its applicability in postmodern contexts. I will (1) briefly look at two of the main historical roots of the master-disciple relationship (the Greek and the Jewish) in an attempt to elucidate one of the basic elements involved in the discipleship process, and (2) I will then present, in general terms, some of the challenges and opportunities that the postmodern attitude brings to discipleship.

The Historical Discipleship Journey

All of us would agree that from the earliest days of life on earth the more skilled have taught the less experienced. This was the way knowledge, abilities, competencies, and character were passed through
the generations. This concept is clearly seen in the Bible. A significant example is the connection between Paul and Timothy. Timothy was quite young and inexperienced when he first met his mentor. Paul, in turn, openly instructed Timothy how to proceed: “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. . . . And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:2). The instruction was clear: Timothy should keep Paul’s teachings to himself but also intentionally pass onto others what he had learned from his mentor.

This is just a simple example on how, throughout history, mentors or spiritual teachers have helped others to maintain spiritual focus and keep a godly life. These relationships involved nurture, skills training, obedience, and a deliberate search for wisdom. Even though this process is found in most ancient civilizations, the concept of discipleship found in the Greco-Roman world and in first century Jewish cultures is important for this study as a background on how discipling postmodern generations must have an intentional and specific approach.

Discipleship in the Greco-Roman Culture

Greece is commonly recognized as the birthplace of Western civilization and in many aspects discipleship was part of the Greek life. The Greek word μαθητής (mathētēs) was used by Herodotus, Plato, and Socrates centuries before Jesus (Wilkins 1988:11, 12). The term appears frequently in classical Greek literature with three main meanings (70-73):

Learner/trainee: The earliest use of mathētēs referred to a person who was a learner in different fields, such as dancing, wrestling, music, astronomy, and so on. Therefore, the “learner” was acquiring knowledge or skill from an expert of a particular activity.

Pupil/apprentice: The term then progressed from learner to pupil, thus including the concept not just of learning but also of commitment to an individual teacher. For instance, the disciples of Plato or Socrates were not just learning skills; they were also fervently devoted to their master. Therefore, discipleship during this period became more than just acquiring education.

Disciple/adherent: Additionally, in a deeper level mathētēs also indicated a person who made a significant, personal, life commitment. After the practices were learned, they should be demonstrated in practical ways. For instance, becoming a disciple of a particular culture now meant that one’s lifestyle should reflect that culture. Regarding the nature of the
devotion involved, Wilkins observes: “The type of adherence was determined by the master, ranging from being the follower of a great thinker and master of the past like Socrates, to being the pupil of a philosopher like Pythagoras, to being the devotee of a religious master like Epicurus” (1992:176).

In common usage, however, a μαθητής was not a committed follower of a particular master. Direct contact with the great teacher, nevertheless, was not a prerequisite to following his teaching. For instance, “one could follow the teachings of Socrates simply by adopting the way of life promoted by the person of Socrates as developed in the writings of Plato. A disciple could also conform their habits to a way of life that exemplified the virtues of a particular culture or city” (Ferguson 2003:330). Towards the end of the Hellenic era the focus gradually shifted to the kind of relationship that involved more of a philosophical commitment rather than the obligation to follow the master himself. In the New Testament period, however, the emphasis increasingly moved from learning a basic skill to imitation of the master’s character and conduct.

Discipleship in First Century Jewish Culture

Similar to the meaning of “disciples” in the Greco-Roman classical era (up to the New Testament period) there were people called disciples in first century Judaism. Such individuals were committed to well-known teachers or movements. This involved both Jewish adherents to philosophical schools as well as to religious and/or political parties. Various subgroups had their own followers. For instance, the Pharisees apparently had their own disciples and they declared themselves to be disciples of Moses (John 9:28-29). They were the precursors of the later relationship between a disciple and a master that evolved into a formal system centered on the teachings of the Torah.

Prophets also had their disciples based not only on learning but also on righteousness and piety. John the Baptist had disciples who lived with him and followed his instructions, practiced his ascetic lifestyle, and promulgated—to some extent—his teachings (Mark 2:18; Luke 11:1; John 3:25; Acts 19:1-7). Qumran also had social structures that could be described as a master/disciple relationship within their community.

In general terms, boys were educated in first century Judaism in community, but always having the Torah at the center of the learning process in family circles in their homes. Primarily, the father had the responsibility to teach the Torah to his children (Deut 6:4-9). During Jesus’ time evidences suggest that primary schools were established to diminish Hellenistic influences (Ferguson 2003:102, 103). However, after thirteen years of age
boys would no longer receive this kind of formal training. If further education was desired—in preparation for being a scribe, a judge, a teacher of the Law, and so on—they had to become a disciple under the orientation of a recognized Torah scholar (Watson 2000:308-310). This was the proper way to master the Mosaic Law, Jewish traditions, and the interpretations associated with them. The apostle Paul was a fine example of a Jewish boy who left his home in Tarsus of Cilicia to study the Torah under Gamaliel, a renowned Rabbi in Jerusalem (Acts 5:34; 22:3).

Especially among Jewish contexts of the first century there is clear evidence that one-to-one discipleship was a common practice. Although the term “disciple” is used in distinctive ways in the literature of that period, many are the examples of discipleship referring to people devoted to following a prominent teacher, carrying on his teachings, and imitating his life.

A striking shift, however, in comparing the Greek with the first century Jewish approach to discipleship is clearly perceptible. In the Hebrew context, discipleship meant much more than just the sharing of cognitive information, but included one’s life experience—within the context of community, starting in the family and then with others. In other words, it indicated not only the acceptance of the master’s values and embracing his principles, but ultimately reproducing his ideas and beliefs in practical ways.

I will now shift the focus of this article to the dangers and opportunities the postmodern condition creates for the establishment of a relevant and meaningful discipleship process.

**Postmodernism: A Dangerous Opportunity for Discipleship**

In his magnum opus, *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch calls attention to a wider crisis (i.e., caused by secularization, dechristianization of the West, pluralism, rich/poor divide, among others) that in his opinion would increasingly affect the world, the church, and above all the church’s mission. He then stresses that this “crisis is . . . not the end of opportunity but in reality only its beginning, the point where danger and opportunity meet” (Bosch 1991:3). In a similar way, the postmodern condition—or whatever it may be called today—is, in fact, a time of crisis that holds “dangerous opportunities” for the mission of the church, especially taking into consideration the development of relevant and applicable discipleship processes.

**Postmodern Challenges to Discipleship**

Postmodernism presents tremendous challenges to discipleship, mainly because of the inescapable influence of globalization (Padilla 2001) and
its power to “normalize” different aspects of life across various cultures (Wells 2008). In broad terms, several elements of postmodernism could be viewed and analyzed as current threats to the Christian faith. Considering the purpose of this short study, however, here I present two elements as major concerns to Christian discipleship: consumerism and religious pluralism.

**Consumerism**

A remarkable element in the shift from modernity to postmodernity is the move from a culture based on production to a culture based on consumption. Although consumption can be found in all human cultures, consumerism has been identified as a postmodern phenomenon and appears as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary Western society (Corrigan 1998; Todd 2011). Sociologist Michael Jessup affirms that the postmodern ethos “shapes, forms, and characterizes consumerism” (Jessup 2001:289).

Postmodern consumerism is an active process to create pleasure and meaning as a new source in finding one’s personal identity through a personal experience with the product. “Goods are valued for what they mean as much as for their use, and people find meaning in the very act of consumption” (Sampson 1994:31). Consequently, especially among young postmodern generations, such as millennials, the way they consume is a fundamental part of the kind of persons they are, and the kind of persons they represent to others. This emerging generation is looking for services and products that will do something for them, making them feel or look better in order to be accepted within their own circle of relationships.

The fundamental core value and belief of a society led by consumerism is personal choice. As a result, a new shape of individualism is arising, one that leads to isolation; which in turn, goes back to consumerism as a way to suppress the negative effects of loneliness. It eventually becomes a vicious cycle.

Consumerism also has a spiritual—or rather an anti-spiritual—dimension, where one of the greatest challenges to a Christ follower is to live faithfully in a society that tries to place everything—including God himself—in a gift-wrapped box as a lifestyle accessory. A sociological study done by Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang presents the spiritual consequences of a consumer society affirming that “pleasure lies at the heart of consumerism. It finds in consumerism a unique champion which promises to liberate it both from its bondage of sin, duty and morality as well as its ties to faith, spirituality and redemption” (1995:100, emphasis mine). Unfortunately, numerous Christians have followed this path making
a true discipleship experience impossible. Instead of sharing their lives in the context of a community they are constantly looking for a way to meet their own personal needs. The result? They become mere spectators only consuming religious “goods” in events or churches they do not belong to. This is what I call “hummingbird Christianity:” superficial nominal Christians who quickly dart from one Christian community to another looking for the sweetness that can satisfy their customer palate. However, if the Christian life aligns itself with the consumer mentality it may become increasingly based only on personal choices rather than obeying God’s command to follow him (Luke 9:23) and make disciples of all peoples (Matt 28:19-20).

**Religious Pluralism**

Contemporary societies, especially urban agglomerations, are characterized by a great variety of peoples, cultures, and religions. Postmoderns celebrate this diversity and value respect and tolerance for others’ views and religious beliefs.

In Western societies, where spirituality is mainly recognized as a private matter, religious pluralism is gradually becoming a major challenge to faithful biblical discipleship since people try to fulfill their spiritual needs through many kinds of religion. This personal and individualistic attitude to religion has increasingly solidified religious pluralism and has the potential to ultimately lead to what Conrad Ostwalt calls the “postmodern secularization of religion” (2012:258). In other words, many people are not willing to believe in what they do not appreciate. Others are totally open to any types of religious and/or spiritual experiences.

For instance, a few years ago I was visiting a young lady and her husband who lived in downtown São Paulo, Brazil. As I came into their home, on the corridor leading to the living room, there was the typical illustration of the postmodern “openness” to religion: an opened Bible on Psalm 91, but to my surprise, behind the Bible, on the right side of the table, was a small statue of the Chinese version of Buddha, and on the other side a bluish crystal pyramid!

The postmodern demand to uncritically accept all religious beliefs as true—at least for the person who believes them—is deeply problematic and poses a serious threat to discipleship. The Christian call is to follow the only true Master (John 14:6; Luke 9:23), not any master. Such beliefs, formed in the postmodern climate of openness and tolerance, create obstacles for genuine and meaningful spiritual growth and biblical truth—critical steps that all authentic followers of Christ must take.

The religious arena is now open to all kinds of religious options. The
personal search for spiritual things—primarily separate from institutionalized religion—aided by popular expressions of postmodern spirituality found in mystical practices, is responsible for the remarkable occurrence of the terms “spiritual” and “spirituality” in contemporary cultures.

Unlike anything before, postmodernity has paved the way for an eclectic spiritual experience that incorporates both East and West. As diverse as these movements are, underlying their beliefs is an affinity with teachings rooted in Eastern mysticism that offer the personal and practical religious experience postmoderns seek.

Nonetheless, as Christian discipleship faces existing challenges in postmodern contexts, there are bridges of opportunity. Churches and Christian communities that are perceptive to this ongoing reality should recognize these bridges, as they seek different ways of living the call left by the Master in making disciples among all, including of course, postmodern people groups.

Postmodern Opportunities for Discipleship

In the process of understanding the trends of contemporary society, the church may find new opportunities in forming a real discipleship process among postmoderns. Some of the most significant opportunities for reaching them are found in their openness for real spiritual and community experiences.

Looking for a Real Spiritual Experience

In the past few years the world, especially in the West, has observed the emergence of an age in which the search for spiritual development has suddenly returned. At the same time, as insightfully presented in James Emery White’s latest book title: The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated (2014), this renewed attraction for supernatural and spiritual things has its own contours. Postmoderns believe there is something beyond what is normally experienced in human life, and this is to be experienced in the spiritual sphere, even though institutionalized religion is avoided. In fact, as one author puts it, “one of the last places postmoderns expect to be ‘spiritual’ is the church” (Sweet 2000:29). Nevertheless, the postmodern quest for spirituality looks for something experiential and authentic in nature.

Experiential Spirituality. One of the major opportunities Christian discipleship has in dealing with postmoderns is provided by the belief that Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, is real and active in everyday life. Postmoderns are more likely to accept the Christian faith through real
and meaningful spiritual experiences—which may lead to accepting doctrines—rather than through mere intellectual exercises. Through genuine spirituality in the discipling-making process they can learn how to be in touch with Jesus in tangible, experiential ways, which will make sense out of their own life experiences.

The importance of experiential spirituality, however, does not imply the rejection of the rational aspects of the gospel. Richardson notes: “Today we need a personal, experiential approach to answering questions and defending our faith that is informed by good philosophy, and good evidence. But we must start with personal experience” (2000:47). In the postmodern mindset, Christian apologetics has its value and importance, but it should shift its focus from attempting to convince, to encouraging the postmodern seeker to have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ in an experiential, personal, and practical way.

**Authentic Spirituality.** Postmoderns who are spiritually minded are looking for personal interactions with spiritual forces in their search to find answers to the real life problems they face in their daily lives. However, great importance is placed upon the authenticity and practicability of what is presented to them. We should ask ourselves: Do we really practice what we teach? Are we seeking to live by an unconditional and radical commitment to our beliefs? Discipleship begins with us. We can only share Jesus Christ in a meaningful way if we have ourselves an intimate and significant experience with him.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a great deal of discontinuity between what some churches believe and teach and how these beliefs actually work out in practice. Postmoderns are not necessarily looking for religion, but they are open to an authentic spiritual life. Practical spirituality is indeed a powerful bridge over which doctrinal truth can be carried to the postmodern heart and mind through a meaningful discipleship process.

**Looking for a Real Community Experience**

The development of significant relationships in the discipling-making process is another powerful bridge to postmoderns. The individualistic approach coming from the modern era has led to a depreciation of the communal dimension of human life. Nowadays, however, there is a perceptible “widespread fear of not belonging to a larger context—the fear of being excluded from relationships, groups, and networks” (Jeanrond 2002:23). Postmodernism, in a reactionary response, emphasizes community as critical to human existence.

The impact of the lack of community is perceived everywhere. Family connections have broken down. Amazingly, technological developments
that we hoped could connect us more efficiently have in fact left us even more disconnected: instead of personal visits and interactions with “friends” we text or e-mail them. Instead of creating an authentic, meaningful, and intimate community in the real world we are satisfied by clicking the “like button” in the virtual world. As a direct consequence, we live in an era of many acquaintances, but very few, if any, deep and significant relationships. This has been, for instance, one of the main negative consequences of Social Media.

The issue of community—especially in the discipleship processes—is even more acute taking into consideration urban contexts. In the city, the problem of loneliness and alienation is most striking. The collapse of the relationship between the social and physical space shaped by the forces of urbanization has turned urban life into a physically close, yet relationally distant reality.

In most cases, the intimacy postmoderns are looking for has a horizontal dimension, toward human relationships; and a vertical dimension, toward the sacred or the spiritual. From the perspective of Christian discipleship, therefore, the postmodern quest for spirituality is ultimately the search for a relationship with God, which in turn, is the experience of belonging to the community of God’s followers—the church.

Especially because of the growing indifference with institutionalized religion, postmoderns are looking for a community to belong to, before they find a message to believe in. For this reason, and by personal experience, I wholeheartedly believe that the best environment for the development of a meaningful and relevant discipleship experience is found in the context of intentional small groups.

In the context of real community, therefore, postmoderns may experience what they are exposed to believe, and then, they may decide to affirm that belief publicly, and to follow Christ intentionally. With the concept of Christian discipleship in mind, the mission of the church to postmoderns must have a different methodology and focus. The church needs to employ a much more communal approach as the basic relational framework for mission in a postmodern environment.

**Conclusion**

Looking at the historical development of the discipleship concept we can essentially find two paths for discipleship. The early Greek understanding of discipleship was to be connected with a teacher/master to gain knowledge. In other words, discipleship was more centered on intellectual understanding, more of a cognitive exchange of ideas and/or philosophical, political, and religious convictions.
Jewish understanding and practices of discipleship, on the other hand, were more centered in following the Rabbi/teacher, sitting at his feet not only to gain knowledge but also to learn how to do what he did, how to live as he lived. Basically, the first century Jewish discipleship process was focused not only on how to learn from the Rabbi but also how to become like him.

Looking at the current state of discipleship within the Seventh-day Adventist Church I tend to come to the conclusion that, unfortunately, the church in general terms, still places considerable emphasis on the Western, Greek-based intellectual/cognitive aspect of discipleship. This emphasis is not entirely wrong, but it is not enough. Discipleship needs to have a deeper understanding and practice. In many parts of the world, the “Christian life” of Seventh-day Adventists is limited to a couple of hours on Sabbath morning, within the limits of a church building. Most of such people are good church members but unfortunately have never understood nor lived the life of a real disciple of Christ.

Taking into consideration the pressing challenges coming from the consumeristic and pluralistic realities cherished and nurtured by the postmodern condition, the radical nature and cost of biblical discipleship involved in the call Jesus has to be more than just intellectually accepting doctrinal instruction. If we are to operate up to our mission statement as it reads, “The mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to call all people to become disciples of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the everlasting gospel embraced by the three angels’ messages (Revelation 14:6-12), and to prepare the world for Christ’s soon return”—including emerging postmodern generations—We need more than numerical growth, we need more than church members, we need real disciples who have accepted the Master’s call: “Come follow me . . . and I will make you fishers of men.” For that, the new spiritual awakening and community demand of our days are still among the best bridges to reach the heart and mind of postmoderns.

For this purpose, I recommend the following:

1. Study after study indicate that the best environment for the discipleship process is the context of community inserted in a healthy and intentional experience of small groups. The church should address at every denominational level how discipleship could permeate the church as a whole, and specifically how it could operate together with small group ministries. For that purpose, the Sabbath School structure should be used as the prime platform for discipleship at the local church level. Time, resources, and new motivation are urgently needed for that to happen.

2. Discipleship does not happen overnight. It takes intentionality and time. In spite of their importance, discipleship curricula, event-based
training, and resources available on the web are not enough. Therefore, I recommend the planning and implementation of a discipleship process at the local church level that takes into consideration the one-on-one approach as well as a community-based structure as found in the biblical examples of discipleship.

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HARON MATWETWE

Principles and Strategies for Reaching and Discipling Nomads: A Case Study of the Pokot of East Africa

Introduction

Reaching and discipling believers from a nomadic background is a continual challenge in the mission world. Research indicates that the majority of itinerant people such as pastoralists are still unreached or are the least reached and are generally unresponsive to Christian influences (Hunter 2000:9-13; The Joshua Project). Although missionaries, who mostly hail from settled backgrounds, find the migration in search of pastures and water for animals to be a challenge and thus a barrier for fruitful witness and discipleship, unfamiliarity with the nomads’ culture and worldview is considered a major contributor to ineffective witness among nomads.

The missionaries’ inadvertent ignorance of nomad culture and worldview is largely based on trends in modern mission work. It is widely known that two-thirds of the world’s population, which includes nomadic people, communicate primarily through oral methods such as stories, songs, proverbs, sayings, drama, dances, and riddles, yet ninety percent of Christian workers among this vast population are from literary backgrounds. These workers rely on communication styles, which emphasize reading, writing, and abstract presentation of the gospel—approaches that they are accustomed to, yet such approaches are foreign to nomads (Johnson and Musser 2012:100). To address this existing dichotomy is a profound necessity in order to achieve success. Any approach should include studying the cultural context of nomadic groups, developing culturally appropriate strategies for sharing the gospel, and also facilitating a more meaningful, sustainable, and vibrant ministry by discipling new believers from nomadic backgrounds to become mature Christians who are able to reach others.
This article is based on qualitative research I conducted in 2014 to collect data that enabled me to better understand the Pokot culture and worldview. Since the community shares most cultural values and practices with other nomads, principles for witnessing and discipling are applicable for other groups as well.

**Socio-Cultural Context of the Pokot**

The Pokot are part of a larger group of pastoralists, the Kalenjin, who speak a similar language, *ki nandi*. They are settled in West Pokot and Baringo Counties of Kenya, and Amudat District of Uganda (Obika and Bibangambah 2013:141-144). Other members can be found in urban centers where they do menial jobs to supplement the family income. The West Pokot County government estimates that there are 640,000 Pokots in the county, while those of Baringo County total 150,000. The number of those living along the Kenya-Uganda border and in urban centers, but who occasionally reunite with their families and are still attached to Pokot culture is largely unknown. Demographic sources such as the Joshua Project estimate that there are over 726,000 members of the group in Kenya alone (2016).

Culturally, the Pokot are related to groups such as the Karamojong, the Turkana, and the Masai from whom they are also believed to have descended (Lamphear 2005:1127-1135). Through close association and interaction, these groups share similar traditional customs and practices such as rites of passage and the belief in ancestral spirits, which are manifest in every stage of life (Bollig 1990:71-79). Even though external influences and pressure from Western education and modern technology threaten traditional customs and practices, the Pokot have managed to maintain a relatively conservative cultural identity that is characterized by traditional celebrations and rituals. Life transitions and occasions of planting, harvesting, war, tragedy, or traditional religious practices are often accompanied with songs, dances, and chanting.

Like most pastoral communities in the region, the Pokot communicate primarily through proverbs, stories, songs, riddles, and dances. Information is stored, relayed, or shared through oral means. This also includes oral instruction and teaching of cultural values such as humility, obedience, respect, sharing, kindness, and generosity.

**Proverbs**

Paul Hiebert is clear that proverbs are useful in maintaining cultural values and identity of a community (2008:105-122). This is apparent
among the Pokot whereby proverbs are used to illustrate or convey important lessons. Clan elders apply proverbs extensively to rebuke, shame, and discourage bad behaviors, or to warn young people from straying away from moral paths. They are also skillfully quoted publicly during the elders’ council (*kokwo*) as a sign of eloquence and oratory when deliberating and settling disputes.

**Stories**

Apart from providing historical information, stories communicate important lessons for daily living. They admonish young people to be imaginative, careful, sensible, and morally upright. Most of the stories are narrated around the family circle, in the field during celebrations and rituals of rites of passage, or when tending animals. The elders are usually the primary storytellers. They use illustrations from nature to capture the attention and imagination of their listeners.

**Songs**

Song and dance is an important feature of Pokot culture. Religious celebrations and ceremonies are marked by songs and dances, which also reveal the expressive nature of the people. Most ceremonies and rituals are never completed unless accompanied by songs and dances. Like proverbs and stories, songs convey lessons and instructions for daily living as well as petitioning divine beings for protection, providence, and leadership. It is noted, for example, that among the Borana of Northern Kenya, every aspect of their culture is captured in song and handed down from one generation to the next. Children are also educated and enculturated through music (The Borana of Ethiopia and Kenya 2005).

**Riddles**

Riddles are mostly shared by storytellers with children to sharpen their thinking and imagination. Children use riddles among themselves when looking after animals or playing at home. Even with the introduction of Western education in the community, riddles are still useful educational tools for imparting Pokot values to younger people and in keeping their culture intact (Chesaina and Swinimer 1994:47).

**State of Christianity in Pokot**

Christianity was first introduced to the Pokot in the early 1930s by the
Anglican Church (Anglican Church of Kenya 2009). Since then, various Christian groups have been involved in evangelistic activities using development projects and public preaching as the main witnessing approaches. Adventist work began in the early 1980s using health, education, and preaching to reach the Pokot. So far, the church has managed to build a few schools and a clinic to meet the needs of the people. The involvement of Global Mission Pioneers and relief activities has also contributed to ministry work among the Pokot.

In spite of many years of existence in the region, Christian growth in most churches is still minimal. The majority of the Pokot people still practice traditional religious beliefs and in some areas churches are nonexistent. Currently there are a few Adventist churches in urban centers; however, some of the congregations lack adequate pastoral care. The survival and strength of these few existing congregations depend on appropriate discipling, mobilizing, and equipping believers to reach their fellow nomads. One priority for the Adventist Church is the need to identify the challenges involved with discipling believers from an oral background.

Challenges for Discipling Nomads

The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization states that the goal of discipling believers from oral communities involves identifying what new believers need to know and do, and then communicating these truths using appropriate methods (Lausanne Committee 2004:48). This proposition is embedded in the Great Commission mandate (Matt 28:18-20) that calls Christians from all cultural backgrounds to make disciples of all people by sharing the gospel and reproducing the character and life of Christ in their lives. Since modern mission frameworks are rooted in Western theological orientations which emphasize the reading and writing of Christian literature, two major questions arise: (1) how can believers from oral backgrounds be discipled into mature Christians who are able to witness to others when the gospel presented to them is packaged in Western forms—a written Bible, a permanent house of worship (a church), and a hymnal (Petersen 2011:21), and (2) are oral believers able to share the gospel with others in a culturally appropriate way, and still ensure the message and lives of the disciples remain biblically faithful?

Challenges associated with discipling believers using oral methods undeniably exist. Although discipleship ensures that the gospel message is grounded and remains viable in successive generations, this goal still remains a huge task in oral contexts because Christian expressions are still largely suitable for literate and settled peoples. Even when the very best efforts are used in employing oral strategies, the challenge still looms.
Most missiologists and church planters agree that oral approaches such as the Chronological Bible Storying may be useful during the initial stages of witnessing, but they do not guarantee sustained discipleship among the successive second and third generations, or for leadership development in the church (Lausanne Committee 2004:40). In spite of these challenges, selected cross-cultural principles for sharing the gospel attest to the fact that oral communicators can hear, can respond, and can reproduce the gospel in the same way literary communicators do. These principles include appropriate methods for sharing the biblical story: Christ’s method of discipleship, incarnational ministry and communication, respect for societal structures, authentic Christian living, and communication through stories. Applying these principles helps ensure that discipleship is biblical and also culturally appropriate in spite of the existing challenges found among ministry to nomads.

Appropriate Methods for Sharing the Biblical Story

Tom Steffen argues in favor of communicating the gospel through stories since seventy-five percent of the Bible is in a narrative form, fifteen percent is poetry, while ten percent is thought organized (2009:441). Even though other biblical scholars such as Robert Plummer lower the percentage to sixty percent, stories still dominate the Old and the New Testament (Plummer 2010:191). Extensive historical information in narrative format can be found in books such as Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts. The other significant portion is poetry, which encompasses songs, proverbs, and lamentations.

This assessment of Scripture affirms fundamental facts about biblical narratives. First, Bible stories indicate that in spite of a modern theological emphasis on the ten percent of literalism of Scripture, God has in the past communicated and revealed himself more through narratives than through abstract thoughts. Second, presenting biblical teachings in story format is in line with God’s revelation. Third, oral communicators can study and understand Scripture since it resonates better with their cultural communication styles. And fourth, oral communicators can be discipled to follow Christ and become his messengers proving that orality is not a barrier to knowing God or telling others about him, but is a relevant strategy that is both biblical and culturally appropriate.

Christ’s Method

Concerning Christ’s discipling method, Ellen White admonishes
Christian workers throughout all generations that “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence” (1942:143). Christ’s method involves a personal touch with people in all spheres of life—emotionally, physically, and spiritually. He managed to achieve this by purposely associating and relating with people, by listening to their stories and experiences, and then ministering to their needs. Through developing strong relationships with his audience, Christ won people’s hearts and bade them to follow him. These followers were not only excited to talk about him wherever they went, but they were also willing to die for him.

His approach also involved the use of familiar communication methods. He employed parables, sayings, proverbs, and stories to unfold the mysteries of the kingdom of God. His audiences were often challenged to examine their lives through the stories they heard and most of them gave their lives to God. The Savior’s method is captured in the words of Steffen who writes,

Jesus never wrote a book on systematic theology yet He taught theology wherever He went. As a holistic thinker, Jesus often used parabolic stories to tease audiences into reflecting on new ways of thinking about life. As Jesus’s listeners wrestled with new concepts introduced through parables, they were challenged to examine traditions, form new images of God, and transform their behavior. Stories pushed the people to encounter God and change. . . . Jesus’ stories, packed with theology, caused reason, imagination, and emotions to collide, demanding a change of allegiance. (2005:443-44)

Christ’s method which incorporates the development and strengthening of personal relationships is imperative among nomads as well. Missionaries should aspire to capitalize on the high relational and communal lifestyle of oral communities to develop enduring bonds between the missionary and the people in order to create a positive atmosphere for witnessing and discipleship.

Incarnational Ministry and Communication

Incarnation as an ideal motif for mission is fundamental for two major reasons: (1) it challenges missionaries to identify with the environment of the respondent community by entering into the culture of the people, learning how they think and make decisions in order to aid the process of communicating the gospel in ways that can be understood; and (2) it ensures that the message is translated into the cultural context of the
target group by using communication methods, symbols, and objects that are familiar to the local people (Van Rheenan 1996:32). In communication, the hallmark of the incarnation approach ensures that through critical contextualization, missionaries discover from the community suitable objects and symbols to present biblical teachings rather than imposing unfamiliar illustrations from an outside community. For the Pokot and other pastoralists, this requires missionaries to intentionally use and apply in their sermons and teaching cultural proverbs, stories, songs, and riddles from the community that are not antagonistic with the Scriptures. This approach is likely to advance a positive response towards the Christian message from a people who are fundamentally suspicious of outside influences and fearful that outsiders will destroy their culture and belief systems.

Incarnated communication also includes the use of the local people’s language. Charles Kraft indicates that people generally get excited when they first hear God speaking in and through their language (1994:121). The Pentecost experience (Acts 2) when the apostles spoke the languages of the visitors to Jerusalem is just one example of many instances which affirm that God desires to speak through people’s languages so that transformation can take place at a deeper level (Pierson 2009:23).

Respect for Societal Structures

Christian witnesses should be mindful and respectful of social structures. Oral communicators are generally respectful of social structures emanating from life-long experiences. Among the Pokot, elderly people are highly regarded for their wisdom and judgment, which is for the well-being of the whole society. They are recognized for their knowledge of community history and understanding of values. Years of experience qualify the elders to be teachers, counselors, judges, and guides. They uphold moral standards and prescribe the way for living. On the other hand, young people are expected to listen and follow instructions that are offered by the elders. It is unusual for young people to speak in a gathering composed of older people unless they are asked to do so.

Lack of recognizing people’s social structures can be harmful to witnessing and discipleship. Most tribal groups such as the Pokot hold a view that Christianity is a religion of women and children. Elderly men of authority are sidelined and generally uninterested in committing their lives to Christ. These unintended consequences could be corrected if missionaries became more attentive to the social structures by recognizing the authority of the elders and respecting them as the spokespersons of the community. In the church, elderly nomads should be identified and
prepared for leadership positions as much as possible, while grooming younger people for leadership where allowed. They should be trained to teach, guide, and counsel younger members since that would be in agreement with the expectations of the society.

Authentic Christian Life

During my research among the Pokot, I inquired from the elders why most Pokot people are generally reluctant to accept Christianity. Without hesitation, Lemokel, one of the village elders responded, “Why should we go to a Christian church? We have a better life than most of the Christians we see around here. When we have disputes in the village, we slaughter a goat, share a meal with the parties involved and hold a conversation, then the dispute is over. But Christians do not forgive or forget. They harbor hatred. They walk around the village filled with animosity in their hearts.” The elder mentioned that he knew of some church members who did not talk to each other yet they always attended church services.

A genuine Christian life can neither be hidden nor faked. Nomads are keen to observe the lives of those presenting the gospel to them. Attitudes such as those narrated by Lemokel are a barrier to discipleship and witnessing among the nomads who tend to believe in people more than abstract truths presented to them. Like most oral communicators, nomads’ model their lives after that of their teachers. This reality challenges Christian witnesses to lead exemplary lives, showing by word and deed what followers of Christ should be. A spirit-led life demonstrated by genuine love, humility, kindness, forgiveness, and mercy has more power to draw people to Christ than lengthy sermons and theological arguments.

Authentic Christian lives should also demonstrate genuine love and care for God and people (Lausanne Committee 2004:33). Attitudes of skepticism and suspicion or outside influences that are common among nomadic people stem from experiences of manipulations, marginalization, and stereotypes from those witnessing to nomads. Attempts to settle nomads or change their way of life through religion, education, and other development projects have often resulted in hatred of foreign influences imposed on the community. Making disciples in such contexts requires developing and maintaining genuine loving relationships without strings attached. Discipleship methods should also allow the nomads to choose how to worship God, what to give as offerings or tithe, when to be baptized, the type of church structure they should have, and how they should sing, among other choices. Genuine love will also be manifest by missionaries living among nomads, staying in their tents, listening to their stories, and praying for them. This will also be grounds for modeling a Christian life to be emulated by believers.
Communicating through Stories

Sharing the Christian message through stories is valuable in many ways. First, oral methods relate to the cultural worldview of oral communicators. Past events narrated over and over have a tremendous influence over the present and the future life of an individual as well as the community. One of the strategies being widely employed and championed by mission organizations such as the International Oral Network (ION) is the Chronological Story-telling Approach. The goal of this approach is to encourage witnessing based on narrating key biblical stories in a chronological order to assist oral communicators who depend on memory to retain what they have learned and to help the people shape their life experiences through the lens of the stories they hear (Poe). This approach also resonates with the oral communicators’ understanding of the concept of time, which encompasses past events having present and future effects (Hiebert 2008:115). The chronological telling of biblical stories in such contexts helps to link biblical teachings into one big story rather than isolating the salvation story into disconnected units.

Other benefits of the chronological story-telling includes assisting hearers to understand each individual Bible story in the context of God’s Big Story (McIlwain 2009:49). This helps to avoid blending of individual biblical stories or truths with conflicting worldview assumptions that the local people hold based on their own cultural stories and experiences. Second, by fostering a sense of community through uniting the storyteller and the listeners (Terry 1997:6), chronological story-telling helps to connect the missionary and the community as they engage each other in a relational way through dialogue and listening (Moon 2010). Third, chronological story-telling aids not only in worldview construction (Dicks 2012:61, Graham 2009:442-443), but also in its change (Dillon 2012:28-33). By sharing stories of the Fall, the call of Abraham, and the Old Testament sacrificial system and its promises of redemption, a biblically-shaped worldview is constructed (Hesselgrave 2000:145). This also enables new believers to become disciples-makers themselves as they tell others about the Bible (145), and even become “instant evangelists” (Steffen 2009:441).

Oral methods can also be useful in building bridges for sharing the gospel. In the context of Africa, stories have always been privileged places of God’s revelation. The proverbs and myths of African people reveal that the Holy Spirit sowed seeds of the Good News in the African cultures long before the African people ever heard of Jesus’ words and teachings. Pokot wisdom expressed in proverbs such as, molupe chi ammony ondeng—do not burn or prepare two walking sticks at the same time—reveals their understanding of virtuous living and can be connected with the biblical
injunction, one cannot serve two masters (Matt 6:24). By connecting biblical truths to local stories the people can be encouraged to pursue the most important matters of life.

Conclusion

Understanding the nomads’ cultural values is fundamental for witnessing and discipling new believers. Missionaries’ familiarity with the nomads’ oral methods of communication is essential for modeling biblical living, and for developing, and equipping local Christians to be able to witness to others by reproducing biblical faith in their cultural ways. Those working among these groups should seek to employ oral methods such as proverbs, stories, songs, and riddles to communicate the gospel since these strategies are more relevant in oral contexts. Crafting and telling stories in a dynamic, natural manner will allow the hearers to be able to readily remember and then retell the stories to others, thereby ensuring that nomads express Christianity in culturally appropriate ways and are able to reproduce faith in their setting.

Works Cited


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