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Kathleen Beagles

Andrews University, beaglesk@andrews.edu

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The Shema: Message and Method of Discipling that Could Change the Church



When I read in Bill Hull's *The Complete Book of Discipleship* (2006) that there have recently been “three streams of thought regarding discipleship” (p. 18), my interest was piqued. When I talk to different people in just my small world, I get at least three main streams of thought. For some discipleship means going out and winning more souls for baptism, for others it is fine-tuning their personal quiet time with God to an art form, and for still others it is a public push for revival and reformation. A concept that doesn't seem to take a front seat in the discipleship/spirituality debates is how we relate with one another.

Three Streams of Thought

So, I was very interested in how Hull would delineate the streams of thought he saw. The first he calls “Classic Discipleship.” The characteristics of this approach included mentoring, disciplined Bible study and memorization, and training in witnessing—personally and publically. The strengths of the approach included focus, method, and measured performance. “The essential and lasting strength of classic discipleship is its commitment to Scripture and the importance of sequence and segmentation in training people well” (p. 18). However, the weaknesses included a lack of addressing the disciple's inner life and the tendency of the discipleship to last only as long as a program did.

The second stream of thought regarding discipleship that Hull (2006) reports is the spiritual formation movement. This movement recaptures “ancient exercises practiced by Jesus, his disciples, and the monastics” (p. 18). Many of these “ancient exercises” were not embraced by the participants in the Protestant Reformation when they made their break from their Catholic heritage. Hull defines spiritual formation as the process where born again disciples position themselves to follow Jesus and be transformed into His image through God's grace and their effort.

Hull (2006) sees the weakness of this movement to be that it is easily infiltrated by secular worldviews and other religions and philosophies. He advises that it is important to distinguish Christian spiritual formation from others. Hull believes that the greatest strength of this stream of discipleship is that it “causes us to slow down twenty-first-century life long enough to ponder what's going on in us and around us” (p. 19). But, he also believes that “recently the spiritual formation movement has also incorporated the focused and ‘let's get things done’ nature of the classic discipleship movement, creating a richer and more thoughtful approach to transformation” (p. 19).

For me, the way Hull articulated those two streams of thought were very helpful in getting a handle on the unending suspicion between various camps of “spiritual” thought in the environment in which I live and work. However, when I read his explanation of what he sees as a third stream, I was fully and personally “all ears.”

The third stream of thought Hull calls “environmental discipleship” (although in the literature it is also called psychological discipleship or relational discipleship), “encompassing the ways people get along” (Hull, 2006, p. 20). It is, he claims, “one of the least-developed concepts in discipleship” (p. 20). That concept is “how the environment of a group determines what grows or dies within that environment” (p. 20). He considers this “least-developed concept” as important in discussing discipleship because “the most important issues in spiritual transformation are the presence of acceptance, integrity of relationships, and trust” (p. 20).

Looking at all three streams of discipleship, Hull sees the classic discipleship movement as having mandated trust: “You must be accountable to me” (p. 20). He sees the spiritual formation movement as having required submission: “If you want to be a part of our society, you must subject yourself fully to it. No negotiations” (p.20). And although the third stream might be criticized by some as at least partially growing out of the therapeutic society around us, thoughtful Christians have realized that many of the concepts are actually very well-grounded in Scripture, introducing some very important insights that create trust and allow disciples to flourish.

Hull (2006) believes that “these three movements—classic discipleship, spiritual formation, and environmental discipleship—are now converging to create a new, full-bodied discipleship, with the potential to transform the church in the next twenty-five years” (p. 20).

The Three Streams Converging and the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Although I am not sure I see the convergence yet in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I do believe that that very convergence is what is needed to make a difference in our Laodicean condition, and move us along the path of true revival and reformation which is being all-but-stridently called for in our media. In many of the corners of our Church, classic discipleship is alive and well. And, some of those whose interest flagged at the end of formal discipleship classes and programs, have found more of a focus on spiritual disciplines to be like water on parched ground in their spiritual growth. But how do we take the true and right from both of those streams of thought, combine them, and move on to Latter Rain preparedness?

I believe the key is in the third stream—the environmental aspect of discipleship/discipling. Full-bodied Adventist discipleship/discipling must include more mature disciples, after they have been classically formed and spiritually transformed themselves, intentionally walking “alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ” (Ogden, 2003, p. 129).

I see this full-bodied and environmental discipleship/discipling clearly called for in [Eph 4:15, 16](#)—

“but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” (NASB)

The Shema and Discipleship

However, I find it first explained in the Shema in [Deut 6:4-9](#)—

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons 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 up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (NASB)

Religious educator, C. Ellis Nelson (2006) points out that the Shema is addressed to individuals who belonged to a distinctive community. The characteristics that defined Israel were its understanding of God, its worship, and a way for individuals to live according to laws and teachings from God’s representatives. Although we Christians live in a different era that seems more complex than ancient Israel’s, the situation is about the same. The church, as our community of people with similar beliefs about God, is our Israel. . . . Through adults in the congregation, especially parents, the Christian faith is

communicated to children first in their families and later in . . . church-related activities. (p. 15)

We might consider the Shema, then, to be addressed to adult disciples—not only parents—in a specific religious community who are being commanded to have God in their own hearts and then to sit, walk, lie down, and rise up always in a frame of mind of intentionally walking “alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip, and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ” (Ogden, 2003, p. 129). We might also conclude that the Shema is both the message and the method of discipling, as commissioned by Jesus in [Matt 28:20](#).

However, this form of full-bodied discipleship requires the classic study of the Word, the transformational transplant of that Word into one's own heart, and then the often “hidden curriculum” witness of a converted Christian life lived out in the everyday.

Nelson (2008) states that belonging to a congregation forms one's spiritual life because belonging influences a person to be like the group. Thus, the regular interaction of church members is a powerful form of education because it influences the perspective by which members interpret the Christian faith. (p. 97)

This full-bodied discipleship applies to church families as well as nuclear families and extended families. Spiritual children in the family of God can be physically any age.

Just as in the days of the Shema, local congregations (who are modern day Israel) must adapt to meet the current needs for Christian nurture and discipling in the midst of a culture that provides only negative influences toward a young/new Christian's developing a healthy image of who God is. A person's image of God is at the heart of their spiritual growth. The church then has a definite duty to help that “image” to grow and mature as the new Christian “experiences” the truth of God's Word in their everyday lives.

Of course, for Christian children, parents are the first patterns on which an understanding of God is formed in a child's mind—or as Hull would say it, the place where they experience the presence of “acceptance, integrity of relationships, and trust.” However, next comes extended family and Christian community. The premise is that one way that congregations help to shape the “image of God” for children is simply by group socialization. According to Paul, believers acquire the mind of Christ partially through participation in congregations as they “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” ([Col 3:16](#)).

This brings us back to the phenomenon of “environmental discipleship” and “how the environment of a group determines what grows or dies within that environment” (Hull, 2006, p. 20). It also roots us firmly back in the earliest mandates of Christian education found in Deut 6:4-9, and points out the need of the local congregation to be intentionally equipping the parents and families to resume their positions as the primary religious educators of their children, as well as being the second line of discipling as stated in Eph 4:15, 16:

"but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." NASB

Conclusion

I could not agree with Hull more fully that it is the combining of the three streams of discipleship thought that will change our Adventist church, hopefully in less than twenty-five years. We need to continue our Bible-based, doctrine-grounded classic approach to the study of God's Word and to the witnessing about the Truth that is found in that Word. However, we also need the intentionally transformational approaches that result in disciples' loving the Lord completely and writing His character of love on their hearts. From those hearts of love will come their intentionally involving themselves in inter-generational nurture and discipling within the local congregation, each member helping to create the full-bodied and authentic discipleship of each and every other “family member.”

It's all there in the Shema—both the message and the method of full-bodied discipleship. We've had it for a long time. Certainly we can finish the work of growing full-bodied disciples in full-bodied church families “into Him, who is the head, even Christ,” in less than twenty-five years—through His Spirit.


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I am super interested in this topic of environmental discipleship. As you described it I began identifying the ways that environmental discipleship played important roles in my conversion to Christianity as a teenager. Fascinating! I am curious, though, in what ways this form of discipleship could be manifested.

Posted by: Kessia Reyne | [December 25, 2010 at 07:25 PM](#)

Actually, Kessia, I believe that the last part of most of Paul's epistles outline how environmental discipleship should be manifested. He tends to talk in the first part of his letters about our relationship with God, and then in the last part about how we should relate with one another.

If you want to do an interesting study, search the New Testament for all the verses with "one another" or "each other" in them. You will find hundreds of texts that explain how the loving environment in which we relate together as God's children should manifest itself--everything from not gossiping to not being too pushy at potlucks :-)

It's also interesting to note that the aspects of discipleship that focus on deep Bible study, and transformational exercises are primarily about the first "great commandment" --Love the Lord your God with all your heart. But it is the "coming alongside one another to equip and encourage" type of discipleship (environmental) that fulfills the second great commandment--Love your neighbor as yourself. We often create a very unloving environment when we criticize one another for the way they are or are not "growing in Christ." I could go on and on.

Primarily, if ones discipleship is truly "heart work" it will spill over very evidently into the environment in which we "administer grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10, NIV) to one another. We are to be God's grace conduits to come alongside one another to equip and encourage to spiritual growth and good works. To my way of thinking, that is how environmental discipleship manifests itself.

Posted by: [Kathy Beagles](#) | [December 25, 2010 at 09:37 PM](#)

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