“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 Mayers’ 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.