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-expected 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 mathētēs 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 institution-
ized 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 eclec-
tic 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, post-
modern 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 pro-
cess among postmoderns. Some of the most significant opportunities for
reaching them are found in their openness for real spiritual and commu-
nity 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 institu-
tionalized 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.

**Works Cited**


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