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The Prosperity Gospel and the Church in Africa: A Missiological Assessment in the Light of the Great Commission

Boubakar Sanou

ABSTRACT—*The wealth and health theology of prosperity preachers has rapidly gained ground on the continent of Africa. These preachers claim that success in all aspects of life is the right of all Christians. Thus, with its main emphasis on material wealth and good health, the prosperity gospel has had a negative impact on discipleship. This article evaluates the claim of the prosperity theology in the light of the Great Commission and draws some implications for a biblically-faithful discipleship in Adventist mission.*

Keywords: Prosperity Gospel, Health, Wealth, Discipleship, Mission

I. Introduction

Christianity is growing on the continent of Africa. However, it has been observed that “though virtually all forms of Christianity in Africa are experiencing explosive growth, the churches growing most spectacularly are the ones that are Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal or “Pentecostal-like.” ... [These] churches have one thing in common—a focus on achieving success” (Gifford, 2007, p. 20). Prosperity gospel preachers promise that God abundantly provides whatever needs believers ask for on the condition that they have enough faith to claim them. They also teach that God increases the material blessings of those who give liberally (Agana, 2016, pp. 5–6; Gifford, 2007, p. 22). This

Manuscript received Aug. 27, 2020; revised Jan. 5, 2021; accepted Feb. 10, 2021.

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perspective on the gospel—also known as “Health and Wealth” gospel, “Name it and Claim it” gospel, or “World of Faith” gospel—was born in the United States of America in the mid-twentieth century and exported to the Global South where the harsh economic conditions and the general quality of living readily gave it roots for its growth and rapid expansion (Bowler, 2013, p. 3; Lausanne Movement, 2010, para. 5). It is thus argued that “there is a link between the message of prosperity and the economic life of its adherents” (Agana, 2016, p. 6). With this swift expansion in the Global South, the prosperity gospel has become a global phenomenon. With its emphasis on spiritual, physical, and financial mastery, it has become “a decisive theological, economic, and social force” shaping global Christianity (Bowler, 2013, p. 9).

This article explores the impact of the wealth and health theology of prosperity preachers on the fulfillment of the Great Commission. It outlines a perspective on the Great Commission, briefly overviews the prosperity gospel theology, and evaluates it in the light of the Great Commission by exploring the subjects of health, wealth, and discipleship through the lens of Scripture. The article ends with some implications for effective Adventist mission in Africa.

II. The Great Commission, Prosperity Gospel, and the Current State of Discipleship

A. The Great Commission: An Overview of Its Key Dimensions

Between his resurrection and his ascension to heaven, Jesus recommissioned his disciples as he said to them, “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” (Matt 28:18-20). This recommissioning became known as the Great Commission. With the Great Commission, Jesus set the agenda for *the raison d’être* of the church in all eras and contexts. Besides clearly spelling out his disciples’ responsibility to spread his teachings to all people groups of the world, Jesus also assured them that accomplishing this daunting task was possible only because of his omnipotence and omnipresence available to them.

The task of making disciples is placed right at the center of the Great Commission as an imperative for the church in all ages and contexts. Christ's command was so central to the Early Church's identity that each of the four gospels ends with a version of it (Matt 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–20; Luke 24:45–49; John 20:21–23). Giving one's ultimate and unconditional allegiance to Christ and leading other people to make the same decision is still expected from all professed Christians today, no matter the challenging contexts they live and witness in.

Jesus' call to disciple all nations has been interpreted and applied differently over the history of Christianity. However, any approach to and practice of discipleship must be firmly rooted in principles derived from Scripture. Discipleship literature revealed the following three essential dimensions that should be emphasized in every effective approach to helping believers become committed followers of Christ: the rational, relational, and missional dimensions (Wilkins, 1988; Hull, 2006; Sparks et. al., 2014; Hirsch, 2006; Harrington and Absalom, 2016; Melbourne, 2007; Barna, 2001). Closely linked to each of these three dimensions of Jesus' call to discipleship was the understanding that at every stage of a disciple's life, there could be a cost to pay. For example, Darrell Block notes that "a Jewish person who made a choice for Jesus would alienate his or her family. ... A decision for Christ marked a person and automatically came with a cost" (1996, p. 1285).

The rational (communion) 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, p. 20). That person would attach themselves to a teacher for the purpose of acquiring both theoretical and practical knowledge (Brown, 19975, p. 484). The rational dimension stresses the need for a continuing transformation and growth even for those who have already become disciples. It is a call to all believers of all ages and stages of spiritual growth to continue their journey of discipleship. Because faith is formed and grows by the knowledge and application of the Word of God, meaningful ongoing communion with God through his Word, soul searching prayer, and other spiritual disciplines help consolidate the need for believers' continuing spiritual growth and transformation. 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, p. 431). It should however be noted that the goal of this continuing learning is not to just impart cognitive knowledge but to rouse total commitment to Jesus (Wilkins, 1988, p. 159).

The relational (community) dimension of discipleship develops in the context of a supportive community where accountability can take place. The New Testament portrays a very dynamic communal culture in the Early Church because of their understanding of disciple-making as a relational process. Because of its Old Testament roots, the Early Church continued to emphasize kinship as one of its core values. What was different about this new community was that kinship was no more defined in terms of blood lines and ethnicity but rather in terms of shared faith and fellowship in Christ. As a result, the church became an environment of inclusion, acceptance, and unity without discrimination on the basis of race, gender, or social status (Gal 3:28). Membership was open to all on the basis of professing faith in Christ as Savior and a public demonstration of complete allegiance to Christ through water baptism (Acts 2:37, 38). The Early Church expressed its values of corporate solidarity and kinship through the use of motifs such as the body of Christ and family of God to describe the interdependence between its members and to convey the close bond that enabled them to treat each other as family members (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12; Eph 4; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17). Their concern was not power but the development of a lasting sense of interdependence, corporate solidarity, and accountability among believers. This interdependence suggested that each member of the body had a unique role to play and yet was dependent upon all other members. By demonstrating a new way of living, multitudes were attracted to this new community of faith (Acts 2:46, 47). In such settings, being a disciple was not synonymous with only accepting abstract propositional truths about Jesus. Being a disciple of Christ was about learning from Jesus and modeling in life what they knew about him. Their brand of discipleship was both what they did on behalf of Christ and how they represented Christ in the world (Melbourne, 2007, p. 10). This communal culture of the New Testament, where believers were integrated members of supportive groups, became a fertile ground for the seed of the gospel to be sown and nurtured.

The missional (commission) dimension of discipleship is concerned with understanding the call to “make disciples” (*mathēteusate*) in Matt 28:19 as essentially a call for believers to duplicate themselves through their engagement in mission. This is the primary command of the Great Commission and it must remain the primary responsibility of the church in every context. Believers of the New Testament linked together their belonging to a community and their responsibility to share what that community stood for. Mission in the context of the Great Commission was understood as more than a call to share the gospel with those who do

not know Christ. It was understood as both a call to share one's faith and to disciple interested recipients to free them from the grasp of the devil so that they could fully and continually devote themselves to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Hence, the New Testament uses the word disciple to indicate a lifelong process rooted in a relationship with and total commitment to Christ. This comes as the result of learning and internalizing Jesus' teaching, being changed by constantly growing in his knowledge (2 Pet 3:18), living a life of total submission to his lordship through the power of the Holy Spirit in the context of a loving and supportive community (John 15:1-17; Phil 3:8), and helping others begin to taste, trust, and follow Jesus (2 Tim 2:2). In other words, discipleship refers to the way Christ's followers put their beliefs into practice in their relationship with Christ and each other, and how they are to practically reflect the kingdom of God to the world they are called to witness to. From this perspective, discipleship is not to be understood as a church program, because it is not an event in time. It is rather about believers embracing the lifelong journey toward fullness in Christ that transforms their cognitive, affective, and evaluative perspectives on life. Disciples of Jesus do not just profess certain cognitive beliefs in God; they also apply those beliefs to every aspect of their daily life.

B. The Prosperity Gospel: A Brief Overview

The prosperity gospel refers to the teaching that typically centers around the core themes of health, wealth, and good fortune to which believers who have enough faith are entitled through Christ's atoning sacrifice (Lausanne Movement, 2010, para. 1). In varying degrees, prosperity teaching cuts across denominational boundaries. Faith and financial contribution are understood as essential tools that activate spiritual power and draw divine blessings of all sorts into believers' lives (Bowler and Reagan, 2014, p. 20). Although the success which prosperity preachers see as the right of Christians covers all areas of life (Gifford, 2007, p. 20), the emphasis on material wealth and good health is paramount (The Pew Forum, 2014). It is widely taught and believed in those circles that believers should not only expect their faith to yield restored bodies but most importantly prosperous lives (Bowler and Reagan, 2014, p. 190).

A well-known flag bearer of the prosperity gospel on the continent of Africa is David Oyedepo who in 1983 founded the Living Faith Church Worldwide Inc., better known as Winners Chapel in Lagos, Nigeria. Like

his North American counterparts, the motifs of success and prosperity are the golden thread in Oyedepo's messages. Thus, millions of Christians perceive wealth, health, and good fortune as entitlements which they can expect or even demand from God (Gifford, 2007, p. 22). From their reading and interpretation of texts such as Deuteronomy 28, Isaiah 53, 60 and 61, John 10:10, and other isolated Bible passages, proponents of the Prosperity Movement look "to their own bodies and wallets for evidence of the power of God at work in their lives" (Bowler and Reagan, 2014, p. 190).

It is commonly claimed by prosperity preachers that believers' physical health, material wealth, and good life is a given as the result of Christ's atoning sacrifice. As such, it is up to believers to claim these blessings by faith. While Kenneth Hagin urges believers to "quit hoping" and "get [their] believing in line with what God's Word says" (1992, p. 25), Joel Osteen encourages them to enlarge their vision, that is, to raise their expectations and envisage more out of life from God. Osteen contends that the single barrier that prevents believers from prospering and living their best life now is their inability to look at life through eyes of faith and see themselves rising to new levels, their businesses taking off, their marriages restored, their families prospering, and their dreams coming to pass. What is assumed here is that if believers conceive life this way and believe it is possible, they will definitely experience it (Osteen, 2004, p. 4). In other words, believers' lack of faith and right perspective are the only barriers stopping them from becoming anything they want. It is also argued that "the Bible tells us that healing is the will of God. Healing is a forever-settled subject because God's Word is forever settled" (Hagin Jr., 1989, p. 1). Here again, if a believer does not get healed, it is not that God did not will it but rather because the sick believer did not have a victorious faith to claim their share of divine healing. Believers have to be successful, that is healthy and wealthy, unless something is wrong with them (Gifford, 2007, p. 20). This perspective leaves no room for praying that the sovereign will of God be done.

In contexts where everything experienced as inimical is attributed to witchcraft, believers invoke acts of bewitchment to explain their negative life experiences (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015, p. 25). As a direct result, this perspective "creates a mindset that attempts to account for misfortunes not in the actions, behaviour or attitude of [one who perceives himself/herself as] the victim, but rather in the activities of an enemy or malefactor. It is not uncommon to hear people exclaim in dismay in the

face of problems: ‘Who is doing these things to me?’ instead of ‘What is causing these things?’” (Akroong, 2007, pp. 59–60).

Kenneth Copeland, another strong proponent of the prosperity gospel, takes his perspective on healing to another level. From his interpretation of Deuteronomy 28, he boldly states the following: “Remember what was listed under the curse in Deuteronomy 28? Poverty of every kind, political failure, drought, war, every calamity known to mankind; and Jesus has redeemed us from it all. ALL sickness and ALL disease, even those not mentioned there, come under the curse. Therefore, we are redeemed from all sickness and all disease. You need to fight the temptation to be sick just as you would fight the temptation to lie or steal” (1976, p. 28). By perceiving sickness as a temptation, Copeland’s reasoning is that true believers cannot experience poverty or sickness of any kind. For him, a poor or sick believer is undoubtedly a cursed believer.

There are at least four theological concerns about the prosperity gospel. First, prosperity preachers do not take into account the potential impact of an individual’s lifestyle on their health and ability to acquire wealth. Second, they deny the fact that Jesus did not promise that all his followers would be healthy and wealthy (John 12:8; Matt 16:24-26). According to Revelation 21, only the new heaven and new earth will be sickness-free. Third, preachers of health and wealth treat God’s grace and miraculous power as if they can be manipulated by human techniques, actions, or rituals (Lausanne Movement, 2010, para. 2). Fourth, they wrongly assume that spiritual wellbeing and God’s blessings can only be measured in terms of physical and material wellbeing or that illness and poverty are signs of God’s curse or a believer’s lack of faith. The healing of the man born blind, whose condition Jesus did not attribute to his sins or that of his parents (John 9:1-6), and the healing of the crippled woman whose condition Jesus attributed to Satan (Luke 13:10-16) are two biblical examples that illustrate how the reality of the Great Controversy between good and evil can impact innocent people. Thus, from a biblical perspective, bad things happen to good people and the lack of prosperity or wealth in people’s lives is not necessarily an indication of any sin on their part.

C. The Current State of Discipleship

There is an agreement among Christian discipleship scholars that compared to the New Testament, the current practice of discipleship has, to a great extent, lost its primacy of focus among Christians. A Barna

report produced in partnership with The Navigators on the current state of discipleship in the United States points out that only one percent of church leaders (senior pastors and discipleship leaders) agree that “today’s churches are doing very well at discipling new and young believers” (2015, p. 10). The making of disciples has largely been watered down to merely moving converts to Christianity into church membership (Ogden, 2016, pp. 22–39; Lear, 2016, pp. 5–14; Barna and The Navigators, 2015; Willard 2006; Putman, 2010). Thus, some scholars perceive current church growth as largely numerical and statistical growth without much spiritual depth.

From his international ministry experience, Greg Ogden posits that generally speaking, Christians are much better at converting people than they are at helping these converts become disciples of Christ. He justifies his remarks about the lack of depth of transformative discipleship in Christianity by pointing to the weak impact Christians have on the moral and spiritual climate of their contexts even in countries where the vast majority of the population identifies itself as Christian (Ogden, 2016, p. 23). This echoes Bill Hull’s claim that “the crisis at the heart of the church today is a crisis of product” (Hull, 1988, p. 14). For Dallas Willard, there is a relationship between churches’ failure to make discipleship a core condition of becoming a Christian and the false but widely accepted assumption among a significant number of churchgoers that one can become a Christian without necessarily having to become a disciple of Christ. He observes that among too many professed Christians, it is believed that “one is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship. . . . So far as the visible Christian institutions of our day are concerned, discipleship clearly is optional. (2006, p. 4, emphasis in original). Thus, there is a lack of drive on the part of many Christians to prioritize an investment in their spiritual growth.

Although several factors contribute to the current low state of discipleship in Christianity, only the following two will be considered in this article because they are directed connected to the prosperity gospel: consumerism and the professional monopoly on ministry. These two factors work against the three dimensions of discipleship discussed above.

1. Consumerism

Consumerism in the context of this article refers to “the belief that meaning and satisfaction in life are to be found through the purchase and use of new consumer goods” (Goodwin et. al., 2008, p. 4). This global

phenomenon, associated with success and wellbeing, is driven by the obsession with the acquisition of the latest consumer goods. As a result, people's quality of life is often measured by what they consume or the latest gadgets they possess (Twitchell, 2002, p. 1).

A consumerist lifestyle thus poses a challenge to discipleship because of its competition with biblical values of stewardship, contentment, and simplicity. Because the consumerist mentality teaches people that they can have whatever they want, whenever they want it, and at the least cost to them (Metzger, 2007, p. 40), some believers become church shoppers in the sense that their "relationship with a church is based on whether it meets [their] needs" (Ogden, 2016, p. 33). Whenever such believers are challenged to make spiritual commitments that are not in harmony with their personal preferences and the comfort they seek, they move to another church. With so many churches competing for members, congregants can easily be perceived by church leaders as consumers to be wooed (Finke and Stark, 2005, pp. 8–9). As a result, some churches have become so concerned with satisfying worshipers' needs and preferences that they fail to focus their ministries on making biblically-faithful disciples. This is in line with Paul's prediction that "the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Tim 4:3-4).

2. Professional Monopoly on Ministry

Despite the teaching of the New Testament on ministry as the function of the total church membership (1 Pet 2:9-10), by the end of the first century, a shift from spiritual giftedness to that of formal church office as the basis for ministry had begun (Campbell et. al., 2017, pp. 14–19). Ministries that members of the Christian community once performed without official appointment started to be clericalized, and liturgical actions were turned into permanent offices. As a direct result, the possibility of lay people exercising individual ministries sharply declined, even to the point of extinction (Bradshaw, 1982–1983, p. 52). While the first century church was marked by a people without the hierarchical distinction between clergy and laity, in the second and third centuries a definite clergy/laity distinction was gaining ground. By the fifth and sixth centuries, the cleavage between clergy and laity had become entrenched (Stevens, 1999, p. 39). In the Middle Ages, with the establishment of a sacerdotal system of mediated grace, the laity became a submissive, docile part of the church with the priest holding authority over souls

(Borchert, 1996, p. 556). A sharp differentiation between clergy and laity had thus developed, degrading the ministries of the lay people and emphasizing the special function of the clergy. During that period, the laity became dependent upon the clergy for access to God's favor. Although the Protestant Reformation recovered much of the New Testament teaching (e.g., Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anabaptists), nevertheless, the laity were still often considered, and even considered themselves, a lower grade of Christians than the ordained ministers (Richardson and Bowden, 1983, pp. 318–319). For example, despite their strong emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, to some extent the Reformers maintained a clear and rigid distinction between the role of the ordained ministers and that of the rest of the believers in congregational involvement in worship. The ordained ministers were there to minister and the congregation was ministered unto (Bradshaw, 1982–1983, p. 56).

Regrettably, the same trend in ministry lives on in many Christian circles today. Instead of fulfilling their divine calling and giftedness to equip believers for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-12), the majority of pastors continue to monopolize almost all the ministry responsibilities assigned to the entire body of Christ. By creating a dependency of congregants on them for all aspects of spiritual care through the cult of personality they have cultivated, prosperity preachers implicitly teach believers that they pay to be ministered to. Greg Ogden is right to compare the contemporary approach to ministry to “a football game with twenty-two people on the field in desperate need of rest, and fifty thousand people in the stands in desperate need of exercise” (2016, p. 25). This approach to ministry, which fosters a spectator mentality on the part of the vast majority of believers, runs counter to the core principle of discipleship and the priesthood of all believers. As a result of spiritual caregiving being solely assigned to ministry professionals, the majority of believers are neither using their spiritual gifts nor maturing in their rational, relational, or missional discipleship experience.

III. The Cost of Being a Disciple of Christ

In his teaching on discipleship, Jesus regularly mentions the need to count the cost of following him. He makes plain the fact that following him could be costly. Luke 14:25-33 is one of the key texts in understanding Jesus' teaching on what it means for a person to follow him (see also Matt 16:24-26, Mark 8:34-37; Luke 9:23-25). In this passage, Jesus defines the terms of discipleship as follows:

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it*— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see *it* begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’? Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:26-33)

In verses 26 and 27, Jesus uses an extreme language to highlight the non-negotiable nature of the cost of following him: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.” He does not want a followership driven by the desire of only benefiting from his miraculous power. Following him for the gratification of personal desires would amount to an opportunistic relationship with him. Instead, he wants his followers to die daily to their self-interest, selfish desires, and ambitions that can hinder their relationship with him. His call to count the cost of following him is his invitation to his hearers to first and foremost understand and consent to the terms of following him. This includes distancing “oneself from materialistic attachment to the world” as “the will to renounce all possessions and to ally oneself totally to Jesus is the essence of discipleship” (Block, 1996, p. 1290).

Throughout his teaching on discipleship, Jesus always assumes the presence of some form of adversity or choice to make. The call to “hate” one’s loved ones in Luke 14:26 is not literal; it does not mean to abhor our family members. It is a hyperbolic way of saying “love less.” This was an offensive saying “in a society where honor of parents was considered virtually the highest obligation and one’s family was usually one’s greatest joy” (Keener, 2014, p. 219). Jesus uses this figure of speech as a call for his followers to prioritize their relationship with him over any other relationship. He wants all his followers to make him the most important person in their lives. He wants them to place him above all those nearest and dearest to them. While Scripture speaks of the

necessity of fulfilling our obligations to our parents, spouses, and children (Exod 20:12; Eph 5:25), our love for God should have precedence over our love toward any other person. Jesus is calling his followers to make their relationship with him a priority over family ties. Likewise, no other human relationship in a disciple's life should be more important than the one between them and their Master. Total allegiance to Jesus is to be each disciple's first love. It is the greatness of a disciple's love for Jesus that makes any other relationship seem like hate.

In Luke 14:27, Jesus also demands of his followers a devotion that surpasses their instinct to preserve their own lives. They must prioritize their devotion to Christ over life itself. As a symbol of an unavoidable and most excruciating death, taking one's cross to follow Jesus epitomizes a commitment to the highest possible cost of being his disciple. Just as carrying a literal cross was an act of submitting to the Romans, taking one's cross to follow Jesus refers to Jesus' call for his disciples' total submission to him. It is also important to note that "although the idea of bearing one's cross signifies first and foremost the willingness to ultimately die for Christ, it would also include (by way of application) a total claim upon the disciple's allegiance and the relinquishment of all his resources for the cause of Christ" (Tanner, 2013, p. 49). Discipleship is not having Jesus at our beck and call. It is rather about transferring to Jesus the ownership of everything pertaining to us. Jesus is upfront because he does not want anyone to sign up for discipleship with him and later on be surprised by the high cost for doing so. Jesus does not want his disciples to be possessed by anything or any person but him.

Two absolutes are mentioned in connection with the cost of being Jesus' disciple in Luke 14. The first absolute is "anyone" in verse 26 and "whoever" in verse 33. This means that the cost of being his disciple applies to every individual desiring to follow him, not just a select few. The second absolute is "renouncing all" that one has (verse 33). Renouncing all for the sake of following Jesus not only means physically giving up something but also letting go emotionally of what has been physically given up so that one is in no way possessed by that thing. Jesus is essentially challenging anyone who contemplates following him "to set aside their agenda—what they thought should be done or should happen—and to get on God's agenda" (Tanner, 2013, p. 47). This emphasizes the fact that a disciple should not let anything stand in the way of their total surrender to Christ. Jesus' expectation is that every person who desires to follow him must be absolutely willing to give up at any time all relationships, all possessions, and even their own life. He

requires from every individual desiring to follow him a change of attitude leading to a daily commitment to be his at any cost. This is a warning to every person desiring to be his disciple to refrain from trying to make him a means to their end. He expects them to exchange their will for his will and to fully surrender the control of their destiny to him.

In Luke 14:26-33 there is no guarantee whatsoever that disciples will be healthy and wealthy here and now as the prosperity preachers promise. Contrary to prosperity preachers who only highlight the benefits and blessings of discipleship here and now and conceal its true cost, Jesus urges any eager candidate for discipleship to first count the cost. He does not want the desire to follow him to be considered casually.

IV. The Reward of Being a Disciple of Jesus

Although following Jesus can be challenging and costly, there is also a reward attached to it. The Bible includes physical and material welfare in its teaching on divine blessing. For example, in Mark 10, besides the cost of following him, Jesus also makes mention of the reward of being his disciple. Jesus' teaching on material possessions, subsequent to the rich young ruler's rejection of his invitation to follow him as that meant literally distributing all his possessions to the poor, should not be interpreted to mean that riches are inherently evil or that poverty is inherently virtuous for Christians. It should also be made clear that the Bible does not teach that disposing of one's material assets is not always a condition of becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ. Material assets in themselves are not inherently evil. Jesus is simply warning against the spiritual snare of material possessions (Mark 10:17-24). This warning is not only addressed to rich people but to any who put their trust in material riches.

Alongside his promise of a reward, Jesus also mentions that even for his most faithful followers, life will not be without hardship (Mark 10:30). Jesus's teaching here also emphasizes that experiencing hardship is not necessarily a sign of ungodliness. This alerts us against the viewpoint that Christ's followers will be the most wealthy, healthy, and successful of all people according to societal norms. God is well disposed to fulfill his children's daily needs, not their wants (Matt 6:33). He made no promise that all his children will be healthy and wealthy. The ultimate reward of discipleship is redemption and eternity with God. Both of these are the result of God's grace. As a result of God's grace, Christ's followers should neither demand that God fills their lives with wealth and health as

if it were their right to these manifestations of divine grace, nor expect all aspects of their reward in this life. In light of eternity, it costs more not to follow Jesus.

Hebrews 11 lists many followers of Christ who “were commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (verses 39-40). In light of Luke 14:26-33, the reward of following Jesus should not be the primary motivating factor of our discipleship. Through these two parables, Jesus not only wants his followers to make him the priority in their lives, he also expects them to be ready to identify themselves with him and his suffering (Block, 1996, pp. 400–405). Christ’s selfless love for fallen humanity should be enough to motivate discipleship. Jesus rebuked those who wanted to crown him king either because of the signs they saw him perform or because of temporal, material gain (John 6:25-27). From this perspective, the core message of the prosperity gospel has a devastating impact on discipleship.

V. Some Implications for Effective Adventist Mission

Effectively discipling converts is the core of the Great Commission. Sound biblical teaching and preaching is a primary contributor to a wholistic approach to discipleship and determinant of believers’ spiritual health. As a way of drawing some implications for the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s mission in the context of the rapidly growing impact of the prosperity gospel, the final section of this article argues that there should be a shift from a baptismal model of mission to a discipleship model of mission, outlines a biblical model of discipleship, and makes suggestions for an effective discipleship model in local congregations.

A. A Shift from a Baptismal Model of Mission to a Discipleship Model of Mission

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church is right in decrying any unbiblical belief and practice associated with the message of the prosperity gospel, in its mission and ministry, it also needs to find effective and biblically faithful ways to anchor its converts, both old and new, in biblical beliefs and practices. This is a critical process necessary to prevent believers, even those struggling with existential needs, from being drawn to the brand of Christianity promoted by the prosperity preachers.

Some well-meaning converts buy into the message of the prosperity gospel because of existential needs they are trying to meet. To a certain degree, this comes as the result of an inadequate discipleship process before and after their acceptance into church membership. Because of this faulty discipleship process, converts do not experience completeness in Christ that is both culturally appropriate and biblically faithful. As such, it becomes difficult for them to continue to stand firm on biblical principles even if some of their pressing needs are not met. The use of a baptismal model of mission rather than a discipleship model of mission is a contributing factor to the inadequate discipleship of converts. In the baptismal model of mission, success is seen to have been achieved upon baptism. In the discipleship model of mission, baptism is an early part of a lifelong discipleship process. In a baptismal model of mission, much discipleship is hasty and incomplete. Many of those who show interest in becoming Christians are taught and then baptized. Because there is often little or no personal follow up, the event of baptism marks the end of the discipleship process for the majority of new members. Once accepted into church membership, there is an assumption that by regularly attending weekly worship services and other programs the church organizes, new converts “will naturally know what it means to be and how they are to practically live as disciples of Jesus Christ” (Lear, 2016, p. 8). Unfortunately, the sharing of Christian principles in these kinds of events usually does not effectively address the spiritual growth needs or deep issues some of the believers might be struggling with. These events also tend to focus heavily on cognitive knowledge with the assumption that a sound and articulate presentation of the Bible will inevitably lead to transformation and right Christian living. Sadly, there is no automatic transfer from cognitive knowledge about Christian beliefs and lifestyle to the actual practice of these aspects of Christianity. Thus, a person can fully ascribe cognitively to a set of right scriptural teachings without ever having their lifestyle transformed by them (James 2:14-26). Making disciples is far more than simply presenting biblical truth no matter how crucial that truth is. The process of discipleship involves more than just doctrinal correctness in information transfer.

Because prosperity teaching cuts across denominational barriers in varying degrees, to help its members withstand the temptation to give into the prosperity gospel mindset, the Adventist Church should be wholistic in its approach to discipling its converts so that they give their unconditional allegiance to Christ. Wholistic Christian witness and discipleship are associated with the truth, allegiance, and power dimensions of the gospel. Each of these three dimensions has its specific

concern in helping converts grow in their relationship with Christ in order to remain faithful to him no matter the context and the cost (Kraft, 2009, pp. 445–450; Hiebert, 2009, pp. 407–414; Wagner, 1988, pp. 43–56; Wimber and Springer, 1985; Tippett, 1971; Love, 1996, pp. 193–195).

The focus of the truth dimension is to counter ignorance and error in order to bring people to a correct understanding about Jesus Christ and what it means to be his disciples. The attention of the allegiance dimension is to bring people to undivided commitment and growing obedience to Christ. The power dimension, sometimes referred to as spiritual warfare or cosmic conflict, is concerned with releasing people from Satan’s captivity through Christ’s power and victory over evil forces and bringing them to allegiance to Jesus Christ (cf. Luke 4:33-35, 39, 5:13-15, 6:6-10, 18-19) (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2018, pp. 151-163; Kraft, 2009, p. 446).

Although each of these three dimensions of discipleship has its specific concern, all three need to be interrelated for wholistic spiritual growth. It should be emphasized here that though prominent in Scripture, truth is never an end in and of itself. It is always balanced by a concern for an intimate relationship with God and his power (Mark 10:17-27). The same is true when it comes to spiritual power; it is always balanced by a concern for a relationship with God and his truth (Luke 10:15-20). Any approach to ministry that promotes only one of these three dimensions of the gospel without giving sufficient consideration to the other two dimensions is not biblically balanced.

B. A Biblical Model of Discipleship

In the face of the reality about the current state of discipleship and the strong influence of the prosperity gospel, it is important to think about ways to reshape the practice of discipleship as intended by Jesus in the Great Commission. Before suggesting useful steps toward developing a scripture-shaped discipleship model, I will draw some biblical discipleship principles from 1 Thess 2:7-13. This text compares discipleship to a process of spiritual parenting. Paul uses the parent-child metaphor to describe principles of discipleship by referring to familiar things of life, which both the direct recipients and the wider readership of his epistle were conversant with (Burke, 2003, pp. 130–135; Thiselton, 2011, pp. 51, 52, 66, 67; Weiman, 2014). This parent-child metaphor is still a powerful means of impressing on people’s minds important spiritual principles about Christian discipleship. The approach to discipleship outlined in 1 Thess 2:7-13 can help achieve four things: (1) a

long-term commitment to the spiritual welfare and growth of believers; (2) modeling a spiritual walk with God to new converts; (3) personal attention to believers' spiritual growth needs; and (4) the teaching of biblical truth.

1. Long-term Commitment to the Spiritual Welfare and Growth of Believers

“Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you” (1 Thess 2:7, 8, emphasis added). The process of discipleship requires the investment of quality time in those being discipled. Paul and his missionary team cared for the believers in the congregations they established as a responsible mother would care for her children by intentionally committing themselves to their spiritual growth and welfare. This would have involved tenderly and patiently teaching the Thessalonians to walk with God. Their long-term commitment to the welfare of the believers at Thessalonica echoes Jesus' long-term concern for the growth of his early disciples. Before ascending to heaven after three and a half years with them, he assured his disciples of his continuing care with these words, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. . . . I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:1, 16-18). An important implication of these two examples is that it takes time and personal attention to make disciples.

2. Modeling a Spiritual Walk with God

“Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of *how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed*” (1 Thess 2: 9, 10, emphasis added). Paul's missionary team strove to be role models to the new believers through their shared life with them. If Hampton Keathley's perspective on discipleship is correct, about 90 percent of what a disciple learns or applies is caught from the discipler's life rather than from his/her teaching. As a result, he argues that “we should place our emphasis on being a friend and let people see how we deal with things, how we study, how we pray, how we love, etc. We don't want to just give him all the facts. We need to allow him to see how we work through various issues and help him work through the issues

himself” (2013, para. 26). Without any doubt, this was what happened in Jesus’ discipling ministry of the Twelve and his other early followers who so faithfully imitated him such that those who had observed them found no other way to call them but Christians (Acts 11:26).

Following Jesus’ example, mature Christians are called to be pacesetters, positively influencing new believers in their spiritual growth. Paul’s understanding of this principle of Christian growth led him to ask the Corinthian believers to imitate him just as he himself imitated Christ (1 Cor 11:1). He later challenged Timothy to “be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). This is a challenge to all mature Christians and church leaders to keep on growing in their relationship with Christ so that they can manifest godly character worthy of being imitated.

3. Personal Attention to Believers’ Spiritual Needs

“For you know that we *dealt with each of you* as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thess 2:11, 12, emphasis added). Paul’s team gave believers individual attention and instruction as a father would do to his children with the intention to help each of them with their unique needs. They understood that each believer’s uniqueness meant individual attention.

Hampton Keathley illustrates the need for personal attention to believers as follows:

When we bring a newborn home from the hospital, we don’t just put down the infant and say, “Welcome to the family, Johnny. Make yourself at home. The towels are in the hall closet upstairs, the pantry is right here, the can opener is in this drawer. No crying after 10 p.m. If you have any questions, there are lots of people in the family who would love to help you so don’t be afraid to ask.”

You laugh and say that is ridiculous, but that is what usually happens to new Christians. Someone gets saved and starts going to church but never gets much personal attention. We devote 18 years to raising our children, but don’t even spend six months helping a new Christian get started in understanding the spiritual world. As a result, many people have been Christians for many years, but have not grown very much. Hebrew 5:12 refers to this phenomenon. So, new believers need someone to give them guidance and help them grow. Like

a newborn, they need some personal attention. (2013, para. 10–11)

Keathley’s illustration highlights the fact that discipling converts is costly in terms of personal and time investment since it requires that each of them be given personal attention in such a way that their unique growth needs are understood and adequately addressed. Jesus’ three-and-a-half year, day-and-night investment in his disciples proves that there is no alternative to person-centered growth as a means of helping others mature as disciples of Christ. Disciple-making is not an event limited to a two-to-three-week evangelistic series or something that is taken care of in a formal teaching setting (e.g., baptismal class). 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 spiritual mentor is someone who is committed to a healthy spiritual relationship with another person for the purpose of mutual accountability and growth in Jesus Christ. This type of spiritual relationship between a mentor and a mentee can help keep both of them on track as they become accountable to one another.

4. The Teaching of Biblical Truth

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe” (1 Thess 2:13). Conforming themselves to the command of Matt 28:19-20, Paul and his companions made the Word of God an essential element of the Thessalonians’ discipleship process. They taught biblical truth using illustrations and metaphors their hearers were familiar with (2 Tim 2:3-5). This not only helped their hearers relate to their teaching but also to easily remember them.

First Thessalonians 2:7-13 clearly shows that although the teaching of biblical truth was essential, it was not the sole component of Paul’s missionary team’s discipleship strategy. While the teaching of biblical truth is an essential component of discipleship because a convert cannot fully mature spiritually without understanding biblical principles, it must also be acknowledged that a convert may have considerable biblical knowledge and yet remain spiritually immature. For this reason, the teaching of biblical truth must always be balanced with other components of biblical discipleship such as an intentional commitment to the spiritual growth and welfare of new believers, a modeling of a spiritual walk with God, and personal attention to each believer’s spiritual welfare and

growth needs. Congregational and small group teaching and personal attention to the believers are needed to encourage them along the road to their Christian maturity. Just as a baby needs an additional amount of attention, new converts also need someone to provide them with attention and guidance in the maturation process.

C. Towards A Wholistic Approach to Discipleship

Below are ten suggestions for developing an effective discipleship model in local congregations that takes into consideration the essential components of discipleship. These suggestions are like ingredients that different master chefs would use to produce different but top quality dishes.

1. Develop an Equipping Model of Ministry

Scripture does not support the view that only the paid ministry professionals should do the work of ministry while the rest of the church membership merely warms the pews and waits to be fed. Because both groups make up the church, they are called to minister according to their spiritual giftedness. From the perspective of the New Testament, every believer is equipped by the Holy Spirit to minister for other believers' edification in the body of Christ. First Peter 2:9, 10 and Rev 1:5, 6 are two important texts that helped shape the New Testament perspective on the priesthood of all believers. Peter points out that it is the entire church membership that is now called, commissioned, and empowered to perform the task of priests. For John, the eligibility in this new priestly order is no longer determined by gender, ethnicity, or position in the church, but exclusively determined by faith in Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

One way God has equipped every believer for his or her priestly ministry is through spiritual gifts. The fact that each believer has received at least one gift from the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 4:10) is an indication that each member of the body of Christ has a ministry to perform. An expectation from those in pastoral leadership is to resist the temptation of monopolizing ministry. Instead of doing all the work of ministry themselves, for whatever reasons, pastors and other official church leaders must be faithful to their calling "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:12).

This equipping of believers for the work of ministry starts by helping them discover their spiritual gifts. However, the process of spiritual gifts discovery should not stop with merely naming and defining believers'

gifts. They should be coached on how to effectively use them. Believers' awareness of their spiritual gifts can contribute to the establishment of gift-based ministries in the church (Dick and Miller, 2003, p. 29). Placing believers in their area of giftedness is vitally important for effective ministry in the local church. If they do not have a passion for the area in which they serve, they will see their responsibilities as burdensome rather than joyful. Gift-based ministries can fulfill a twofold function: (a) help each believer become an active participant in the body of Christ and (b) pay personal attention to spiritual growth factors unique to each believer in the body of Christ.

2. Prioritize a Personal Commitment to Developing a Growing Relationship with God over Participation in Church Programs

Although involvement in church programs may influence spiritual behaviors, only God can transform the human heart. 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” (Willard, 2002, p. 250). To be effective, the impact of worship services and other church programs needs to be designed in such a way that they address believers' spiritual needs, challenging them and suggesting to them practical ways and tools to take the next step in their spiritual journey.

3. Do Not Make Numbers or Regular Church Attendance 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, p. 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 and spiritual growth should not be seen as two separate agendas. Both belong to the same agenda. It is this 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, pp. 11, 12). 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.

4. Balance Any Seeker-Sensitive Approach to Discipleship with a Concern for the Overall Spiritual Growth of the Congregation

Well-established believers as well as religious explorers need to be comprehensibly 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 well-crafted program productions 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 et. al., 2014, p. 78).

5. Approach Discipleship as a Life-Long Process

Being a disciple of Christ is a lifelong journey, not an event in time. It is about “becoming a disciple rather than having been made a disciple” (Hull, 2006, p. 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 every day of their life” (Hull, 2006, p. 24). Since “the path to spiritual maturity is not correlated to age” (Hawkins and Parkinson, 2007, p. 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's total disengagement in the spiritual welfare of those along those stages (Hawkins and Parkinson, 2007, p. 42). Adequate attention and resources should be available to congregants at every stage of their spiritual journey to help them continue growing in Christ.

6. Make Mentoring an Essential Component of the Process of Discipleship

Beside the formal teaching settings, spiritual mentors should be available to share their spiritual journey and experiences (both positive and negative) with new converts. I once invited a renowned Adventist preacher to share her spiritual journey with a group of students I had mentored. She explained to us that throughout her life she always sought to be happy. Before she became Adventist, she searched for happiness through wrong means—to no avail. When she was converted and later became a pastor, she unsuccessfully sought happiness in the applause and approval of other people. One day, she finally found the answer to her quest in the following statement: “God made man perfectly holy and happy” (White, 1999, p. 9; emphasis added). It was only then that she understood that true happiness is only found in fully surrendering one's life with its past mistakes to God. My students really appreciated our guest being vulnerable in sharing her life experience with them. They understood that she did not get where she is currently in her spiritual journey at a click of a button. They also understood that they are not the only ones struggling in their spiritual journey. As a result of this open conversation with our guest, we all resolved not to let our past mistakes determine who we become in life. Rather, we need to daily open our heart to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

7. Motivate Believers to Invest in Intentional Spiritual Growth Practices

In 1 Cor 9:24-25, Paul uses the disciplined training of an athlete as an image for Christian living. Just as record-winning athletes are disciplined in their training, he encourages believers to be more so since the prize they have in view is eternal. The correct understanding of this training in the process of spiritual growth is rightly captured by Dallas Willard when he states that “grace is opposed to earning, but is not opposed to effort” (2006, p. 61). This diligent training for spiritual maturity can be enhanced by giving due consideration to the practice of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines refer to deliberate 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 (see 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, especially if they are practiced for self-glorification (Luke 18:9-14). 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.

8. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 229).

9. Local Congregations Should Become Genuinely Welcoming and Loving Congregations

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. As young adults account for the majority of urban congregations, hospitality, authenticity, and vulnerability should be among a local congregation's key values (Lear, 2016, p. 14). Since “the strongest argument in favor of the gospel is a

loving and lovable Christian” (White, 1909, p. 470), it is right to say that it is believers rather than 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, p. 109).

10. Effectively Respond to Community Needs

A biblical perspective on discipleship indicates that ministry success also relates to the positive impact believers have on the larger community they live in. From that perspective, Christ’s model of discipleship as expressed by Ellen White should be adopted by local congregations: “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, p. 143). Just as Jesus was incarnational in his ministry, so should we. We can be confident that such an approach “will not, cannot, be without fruit” (White, 1909, p. 144).

VI. Conclusion

With the current state of discipleship and the widening and attractive influence of the prosperity gospel, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its mission and ministry can no longer afford to rely on its church-centered programs and public evangelistic series as its main means of growing disciples. Programs do not disciple people; people disciple people. Becoming authentic communities who create intentional spaces where believers of all ages and stages in their faith journey can effectively and meaningfully connect with one another and with God, grow spiritually, and reach out to the world around them is of vital importance in a biblically faithful approach to discipleship. With the imperative of the Great Commission, congregations need to objectively do their own discipleship reality assessment in light of Jesus’ example and command. A thoughtful assessment of the gap between Jesus’ intention and current practices will help them make necessary adjustments to their approach to discipleship.

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