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Holistic Community: The Key to Real-life Discipleship

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Abstract

The word, “discipleship” carries different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. Adventist movement prides itself in proper teaching and understanding of Scripture. Thus, discipleship often translates into practical life characterized by learning the biblical truth, understanding biblical teaching with the emphasis on intellect and cognitive exercise. At the same time, holistic community is taken for granted, and not given proper attention. As a result, discipling of believers is more brain oriented than producing transformation of the heart. This article suggests that a loving community provides a natural environment for effective discipleship, in which people can learn cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the three-fold revelation of God (i.e., the Triune God, who is by nature a communal, relational God) helps us better understand how holistic small groups foster the growth and support of believers, encouraging them to bring others into God’s family. The way the members of the Trinity relate to each other is a model of the very essence of discipleship. While other elements of church life are important to discipleship, it is specifically through/ within holistic small groups that disciples are created, grown, transformed, and multiplied. Three elements (colors) of discipleship necessary for real-life discipleship are suggested: teaching, mentoring, and modeling.

Keywords: *community, discipleship, small groups, holistic, key*

Introduction

The word, “discipleship” carries different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In the context of teaching or education, it refers to “the condition or situation of being a disciple,

follower, or a student of some philosophy.”¹ In religious contexts, “discipleship is mentoring someone in their faith.”² In Jesus’s day, discipleship was commonplace. There were no schools as we know them today; there were no formal students, as such. Education happened through discipleship, and people learned by being discipled.

How much simpler it must have been to be a disciple of Jesus while He was on earth!³ His disciples were invited to walk with Him, observe His actions, listen to and contemplate His words, and imitate Him. Though there were no traditional schools, the disciples sat at Jesus’s feet while He taught in the synagogue, temple, or in nature’s classroom. It was for such experiences that they left everything and followed Him (Mark 10:28). Simply put, they “had to be with Him to learn how to do what He did.”⁴

The world today is vastly different than when Jesus walked and talked in human form. While there is an influx of information in our culture, people seem to make more imprudent decisions. There is an abundance of resources to build stronger relationships, and yet, an increasing number of families fall apart. Many people become Christians each year, but at the same time, increasing corruption, power misuse, and other issues surround us on every side.

In the discussion of discipleship, it seems that there is also a misunderstanding of this concept. Puttman observes thus:

Discipleship is so much more than just sharing the news about Jesus; it is also about teaching people to obey the commands Jesus gave us. Unfortunately, many churches have not taken this charge seriously; discipleship is critical if we want to save the church from the Sunday

¹ Dictionary.com, s.v. “Discipleship,” accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/discipleship>.

² Cru.org, s.v. “Discipleship,” accessed February 7, 2022, <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/help-others-grow/discipleship.html>.

³ See Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2006).

⁴ Willard, *Great Omission*, 6.

[or Saturday] morning show and make it a place where real relationship and real change take place.⁵

Indeed, there is a disciple deficit in our current culture.⁶ Ogden notes that today, there are more passive recipients of the Gospel than proactive ministers; people are more content to blend in rather than going against the flow, both spiritually and culturally. No wonder many Christians shy away from personal witness! On top of that, there is an increasing lack of Scriptural literacy among Christians, and for many, church attendance has become optional. For those in the Western world in particular, faith has become mostly a private matter.⁷

The disciple deficit may not look the same among the Seventh-day Adventists as it appears among the general Christian population. In fact, the 2017–18 Global Church Member Survey⁸ revealed that the overall spiritual state of Adventist Church members is encouraging. A majority of Adventists are committed to religious practices, such as Bible reading, personal devotions, and personal prayer. The survey also indicated that the vast majority of church members apply biblical teaching to their daily lives.

However, this global study revealed that there are areas of deficit, as well. A few examples include:

1. “Over 40% of members feel that their religious belief does not affect their daily life;” this indicates the need to strengthen the connection of “biblical teaching to the problems that members face in daily life.”⁹

⁵ Jim Puttman, *Real-life Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 21.

⁶ Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 21–38.

⁷ Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship*, 21–38.

⁸ Karl Bailey et al., 2017-2018 Global Church Member Survey Concerning the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Reach the World 2015-2020 Strategic Plan: Metanalysis Final Report (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2019), https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Resources/Global%20Church%20Membership%20Survey%20Meta-Analysis%20Report/GCMSMetaAnalysis%20Report_2019-08-19.pdf

⁹ Bailey et al., 2017-2018 Global Church, 10.

2. “About 47% agreed that keeping the Health Message guarantees salvation (only 38% disagreed).”¹⁰ This suggests that the implications of key doctrines, such as salvation through Christ alone, may not be well connected to actual practice.

3. Another example of a disconnect between adhering to church doctrines and applying them to practices is a troubling misunderstanding of “the unity of mind, body and spirit and state of the dead. A high proportion of church members from cultural environments that have an animist, polytheistic, or spiritualist tradition believe both that the dead are unconscious (the Adventist doctrinal position) and that the spirits of the dead are in heaven and can communicate with the living ”¹¹

4. Furthermore, “a high proportion of those from these contexts believe that Adventists can go to witch doctors and other spiritual healers.”¹² Despite hearing sermons about and receiving educating on the biblical teaching, some people continue to live with dual allegiance and, even over the time, do not reject their non-biblical beliefs/remove their non-Christian practices.

Over the last 50 years, the Adventist Church has grown and expanded from one million members to over 21 million, worldwide. What tremendous growth—a miracle of the Holy Spirit’s work in people’s lives! The prevailing focus of Adventist evangelism and discipleship, though, is on teaching Truth with an emphasis on understanding biblical doctrines and accepting specific beliefs in the hope that people will embrace a “biblical” worldview.

Evangelistic meetings, Sabbath School classes, sermons, theological education, and discipleship courses all focus on Adventist beliefs and doctrine. As a result, church members are expected to believe and behave accordingly. At the same time, an individualistic view of religion (a product of Western culture) is assumed or even pushed on people, often giving them the idea that

¹⁰ Bailey et al., 2017-2018 Global Church, 9.

¹¹ Bailey et al., 2017-2018 Global Church, 10.

¹² Bailey et al., 2017-2018 Global Church, 10.

salvation is strictly an individual matter—highly personal and very private.¹³

In this type of thinking, the value of community and the element of “belonging” can easily be neglected. And yet, belonging “is the central element in the biblical view of community;”¹⁴ because of that, belonging can easily become a precursor to believing and behaving. Rice is convinced that “if we start with belonging, then believing and behaving naturally fall into place. But if we start with believing or behaving, it is often hard to get belonging into the picture.”¹⁵

If we consider belonging as a central part of Christianity, we need to rethink our approach to evangelism and discipleship. Instead of holding meetings to change ideas (i.e., believing), the goal of evangelism shifts to including people in “Christian community, to share . . . the rich blessings of Christian fellowship. Once we are clear that belonging is our primary goal, we may show that it includes believing and behaving, but we will not make change in belief and behavior an end in itself.”¹⁶

In Western culture, we not only see Christianity as being individualistic; we also place an emphasis on head over heart, reason over emotion. We consider rational thinking a sign of maturity and a constructive approach for both religion and spirituality.¹⁷ This type of individualistic thinking negates the centrality of community and belonging; such involvement requires a certain level of vulnerability and “heart.” Before further considering the implications for discipleship, it is important to look at the theological foundation for our claim; by doing so, it becomes more evident that communal discipling and evangelizing are not just

¹³ Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, CA: The Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), 68.

¹⁴ Rice, *Believing, Behaving*, 110.

¹⁵ Rice, *Believing, Behaving*, 119.

¹⁶ Rice, *Believing, Behaving*, 121.

¹⁷ Margaret K. Nydel, “Beliefs and Values, Emotion and Logic in the Arab World,” in *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Westerners* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1987), 425.

an optional matter depending on cultural context but an essential element, springing God's character and biblical teachings.

The Triune God, A “Community” of Three-in-One

As Seventh-day Adventists, we firmly believe in Scripture, and we seek the God of Scripture. Five of Adventism's 28 fundamental beliefs deal with the Triune God, yet we often neglect to fully comprehend the doctrine of the Triune God. Only by understanding *and* applying this scriptural teaching can we begin to model belonging as a central element of Christianity.

The Jewish faith recognizes a single creed: *Shema Yisrael*—the belief in one God. The Ten Commandments stemmed from that belief in one God: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The other commandments reflected that first belief, and thus shaped everyday life. It was as if God was saying, “If I am your ONE God, this is how you will naturally live and behave. You will not honor or worship any images. You will honor My name. You will remember and spend sacred time with Me. You will honor your parents. You will not steal or commit adultery. You will not kill, lie, or envy.”

God is the ultimate object of love, admiration, and respect. To love God with all of one's heart, soul, and mind, means to worship Him, seek Him, and obey Him. The kind of God in which you believe and serve will be reflected in all aspects of your life. When Jesus came to earth, He provided new insights about His Father. However, Jesus made the very clear connection that He was “one” with the Father: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30, ESV). Jesus also said that no one can come to the Father except through Him (John 14:6), and that “whoever has seen me has seen the Father . . . I am in the Father, and the Father is in me” (John 14:9–11, ESV).

Before Jesus was crucified, He told His disciples that the Father would send a Helper, the Holy Spirit, who would “teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26, ESV; see also John 15:26, 16:13). And, before He ascended to heaven, Jesus commissioned His followers to make

disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the ONE name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19).

The Triune God is not comprised of three Gods but one God, revealed in three beings; each being plays a special role. Even the early Christian Church was very clear on this and never confessed three Gods. “The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not parts of the one God. Each person is the one God in all His fullness (Col 1:19; 2:9) . . . For us there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit (1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:4-6).”¹⁸ This is “not a matter of three friends getting together, each doing his part, to accomplish a common goal,”¹⁹ in fact, “they are one in the very midst of their difference.”²⁰ The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *together* in community are one God. The Triune God’s external actions proceed from the Father who initiates the Trinity’s indivisible operations, through the Son who accomplishes the Trinity’s indivisible operations, and in the Spirit, who brings the Trinity’s indivisible operations to their crowning effects.²¹

The Triune God is Love

When the Apostle John wrote his letters, he attempted to capture the essence of Christian faith, explaining what makes a genuine community (of God and of us who were created in His image). This section provides a theological foundation for being part of a community in which transforming discipleship happens. When we look closer at the first letter of John, we not only see that the whole letter is filled with references to the Father, Son, and Spirit (a triune community) but the whole epistle can be summarized in three words: “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Actually, several years ago I did a frequency test of all the words used in this letter. It was then I realized the three most frequently used words used in the Epistle are: “God” (64 times), “is” (103 times), and “love” (46 times).

¹⁸ Scott Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 59–60.

¹⁹ Swain, *Trinity*, 108.

²⁰ John R. Franke, *Missional Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 13.

²¹ Swain, *Trinity*, 110.

When John speaks about “the new commandment,” he is referring to loving each other (1 John 2:7–10); when he talks about walking in the truth, he is referring to love (1 John 3:18–19); when he discusses walking in light, he is emphasizing the importance of loving others (1 John 2:9–10). The absence of love results in fear and hatred, turning us into liars and causing us to live in darkness. These contrasts clearly set apart the values that fuel God’s operation and make God’s business of salvation work so powerfully.²²

God’s love is not just an emotion that alternately appears and then disappears. Scripture does not

present love as merely one of God’s characteristics (“God is loving”), rather it says, “God is *love*” (which means that love is the very nature of God). Since love is God’s nature John could also say, “Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16).²³

Love is at the center of who the Triune God is; each member of the Trinity exemplifies love in His own way but does not deviate from radiating pure love. If we are to come to know and understand God more intimately, understanding His endless, constant love is essential. Love is the fuel for discipleship and a distinctive signature of disciples (John 13:35).

The Triune God is a Missionary

The close link between the Triune God and mission has recently reemerged among theologians. Swain writes that mission, in the context of Trinitarian theology, “refers to ‘sendings,’ specifically the Father’s sending of the Son to redeem and the Father and Son’s sending of the Spirit to sanctify (Gal 4:4–7).”²⁴

“For God so loved the world” (John 3:16, ESV) that He sent His son. Our loving God is a sending God. Mission means to send

²² Petr Činčala, “The Legacy of God’s Leadership,” *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 10, no. 2 (2016): 8–14.

²³ Christian Schwarz, *The 3 Colors of Love* (Bloomington, MN: Church Smart Resources, 2004), 18.

²⁴ Swain, *Trinity*, 113.

or to be sent. God cannot help but keep reaching out to us humans because “mission is part of [His] very nature.”²⁵ Moreover, God’s love “expands beyond Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to include others.”²⁶ “God has a particular desire, arising from [His] eternal character, to engage with the world.”²⁷ “The mission of God reflects the inner nature of God as love . . . Mission starts with the Trinitarian love of God which overflows in love for the world.”²⁸

Throughout history, the connection between the Triune God and mission has been applied differently. Edgar reminds us that “for more than a thousand years, ‘mission’ was understood as an activity of the trinitarian God alone. A theological reference to the mission of the inevitably meant that the ongoing divine mission of disciple-making was unfulfilled.”²⁹ Mission was considered to be God’s business. However, as time progressed, the church became more powerful, and mission reemerged as an activity conducted by the church as opposed to the work of the Trinity.³⁰ With this shift came a tendency to focus more on denominational expansion through baptisms and less on engaging new people in the “ongoing process of applying the Gospel to all dimensions of life.”³¹

Later, mission societies began to appear. These organizations understood themselves to be fulfilling the most essential activity of the church; however, the church was involved indirectly—by “praying and paying.” Only then did the link between God, the missionary, and the church (i.e., every believer) become clearer.

The church itself . . . is sent. This means that mission becomes an activity of the whole church rather than of some societies or individuals who are sent out on behalf of the church. Consequently, a failure to engage

²⁵ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 6.

²⁶ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 18.

²⁷ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 4.

²⁸ Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity: Life in God* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 198–199.

²⁹ Edgar, *Message of the Trinity*, 195.

³⁰ Edgar, *Message of the Trinity*, 195.

³¹ Edgar, *Message of the Trinity*, 196.

in mission is not just a failure of the church in one of its activities, it is a failure to be the church.³²

It is through the Triune God, our loving and communal God, that the church and mission have become more firmly integrated. Scripture is viewed as the story of God's mission to the world; theology and mission are interlinked and can no longer go separate ways.

With an emphasis on living out the Triune God in all areas of church life, it is vital to build the capacity of local churches for mission; "the basis of mission is neither the church nor any human agent, but the Triune God."³³ Such a missional view of God, Zscheile argues, "offers rich resources" for local churches to faithfully participate "in the Triune God's communal, creative, and reconciling movement in the world."³⁴ "The church is a product of and participant in God's mission."³⁵ By understanding and working within the paradigm of the Triune God, we are able to participate with and engage in mission more fully. We know from Jesus's great commission in Matthew 28:16–20 that mission and discipleship go together. It is important to understand how closely mission and discipleship relate to each other in the context of a loving community (demonstrated by the Triune God).

In this section, we have examined the theological link between God, community, and mission (i.e., discipleship). In the next sections, we will take a look at how to strengthen discipleship through community and holistic small groups.

Discipleship Fueled by a Loving Community

We have seen that community is at the center of the Triune God, and it comes as no surprise that it should be at the center of mission. We have also seen evidence from the Bible that God's love is the driving force behind all what He does because love is who He is.

³² Edgar, *Message of the Trinity*, 197.

³³ Franke, *Missional Theology*, 7.

³⁴ Dwight Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 1.

³⁵ Zscheile, *Cultivating Sent Communities*, 6.

How can discipleship become a process that not only brings people closer to Christ but helps to grow their devotion into an allegiance that produces life transformation?

Imagine that you are missionary with a nice car. You drive the car over bumpy dirt roads and arrive at a remote village where people have never seen a car. Immediately, you will catch the attention of the villagers; it is likely that at first, they will stare at the vehicle from a distance. After some time, they will gather their courage and approach the car. When they get close, they will want to touch the smooth paint, smell the “new car” smell inside, and listen to you honk the horn. As you explain how the car works, you think to yourself how nice it would be to let the villagers experience the car in action; you decide to give them a ride. First, you begin by driving around some of the oldest, but then you see that the younger would like to try, so you give them a go, too. However, before you know it, your car runs out of gas and will not start. What happens if you do not have an extra tank of gas? You are stuck. There are not too many options left. Explaining how a car works is no longer interesting or important if the car does not operate. Will you convince the villagers to push the car the long distance to the closest gas station? Or will you leave the car there, not knowing if you will ever be able to use the car again?

Now, imagine you are called to make disciples. You preach and explain the truths about God and invite people to a house filled with loving people who care, feed them, and engage in Bible study with them. The hearts of newcomers are touched, and they want to come back again and again. If they do, they will not only learn more about God and His plans for their lives, but they will likely find someone to whom they can relate, someone who can connect with them and mentor them. At the same time, they will be able to observe how believers behave, keep the Sabbath, do missionary work, etc.

But what would happen if your house ran out of love? No more passion, no more care, no more deeper loving relationships, no more joy. You could talk about God, ask people to do mission and disciple others, but such a situation would be similar to having a

car without gas and asking people to push your car. Without love, they would soon get tired. Even if they understood the theory of community and how it should work, the fact that it did not work would be discouraging. Attending house church meetings would become a chore, perhaps even viewed as something one has to do to be saved. “Community” life would wear you out. Such experience takes more energy than it gives. Yes, discipleship without a loving community is like car without a gas. You can learn about it, touch it, smell it, but it will not get you anywhere. It is for this reason that Jesus said: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35, ESV). While discipleship can exist without mutual love, if that happens, it has nothing to do with Jesus and with the Triune God. In some cases, mission can become a tyranny as pointed out by Jesus who rebuked scribes and Pharisees: “For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matt 23:4, 15, ESV).

The Apostle John understood the argument of many unbelievers: “No one has ever seen God.” But his statements turned their argument upside down: “If we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12, ESV). If the Triune God is present, discipleship happens naturally, and mission happens all by itself. For too long, the emotional/ relational element has been taken for granted, and our world has reached a point in time when the love of many has grown cold—just as Jesus predicted (Matt 24:12). More information will not fix it; more programs will not solve it. Many of us need to experience a paradigm shift by getting involved in the therapeutic process of restoring our hearts for God and for each other, as well as for lost people who are yet to be saved.

Communal thinking may come more naturally in some places, but in the society from which I come and the one in which I currently live, more attention needs to be paid to the value of community. This is not just to “run” more small groups. Frazee writes, “You can have a small group and not experience community, but you

cannot have community apart from a small group experience.”³⁶ Gorman reminds us, “God is a person in community.”³⁷

To be baptized in the name of Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit meant—and still means—to be immersed in community. To allow God’s community be part of our life may be the most fulfilling thing that has ever happened in our life, but also the most difficult, uncomfortable, and to some degree, painful thing. To fully benefit from community, we must first be willing to leave our comfort zones, as Christian community goes against today’s culture in almost every way possible. This is how true disciples can be multiplied. Community is a “fuel” for impactful discipleship.

Towards a Real-life Discipleship Model

When Henderson elaborated on a model for making disciples, he drew upon John Wesley’s class meetings. It was in the 18th century that the Wesleyan movement brought revival and renewal to the Christian circles through discipleship “within the context of an intimate fellowship, accountability for spiritual stewardship, ‘bearing one another’s burdens,’ and ‘speaking the truth in love.’”³⁸ Although Wesley’s method of discipleship was “classroom” oriented, it was not without success. “John Wesley was able to recapture the spirit of *koinonia*, the supportive fellowship of primitive Christianity.”³⁹

When forming discipleship groups, Wesley developed a system of interlocking groups (“societies”), some of which operated in a cognitive mode, other “classes” operated in a behavioral mode, and finally, “bands” that operated in affective mode. In other words, while some of Wesley’s groups were focused only on teaching, other groups focused solely on changing behavior and yet others on building relationships.

³⁶ Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 22.

³⁷ Julie Gorman, *Community that is Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 24.

³⁸ D. Michael Henderson, *A Model for Making Disciples: John Wesley’s Class Meeting* (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki Books, 2016), 14.

³⁹ Henderson, *Model for Making Disciples*, 15.

Wesley's system operated amazingly well in those days, even though he separated the cognitive, affective, and behavioral functions. "He carefully kept the various functions of his movement separate by limiting each group level to one major function: class meetings to alter behavior, societies to present information, bands to perfect 'affections,' and so on."⁴⁰

Today, Christian leaders emphasize a holistic approach, in which all three elements are integrated together into small groups. Holistic small groups are not just small communities; they are miniature churches. Just like churches, small groups have different focuses in their mission. Some small groups focus on nurturing a person and his/her relationship with Jesus. Others focus on outreach and/or ministering to others. Schwarz even suggests that "differences in focus at the small group level is one of the greatest resources of a local church."⁴¹

Despite their various focuses, each group needs to have all three vital functions: thinking (head), feeling (heart), and doing (hands) are all equally important. Three questions must be addressed in holistic communities:⁴²

- What do you think (head)?
- How do you feel (heart)?
- What will you do (hands)?

To address these naturally, discipleship is needed that has not only cognitive learning (focused on understanding the Scripture, and believing the Truth), but also on affective/emotional learning (focused on a strong sense of belonging) and behavioral/practical skills learning (focused on ministering and mission).

⁴⁰ Henderson, *Model for Making Disciples*, 142.

⁴¹ Christian Schwarz, *The 3 Colors of Community* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 2012), 14.

⁴² Schwarz, *The 3 Colors of Community*, 11.

My friend and colleague John Kimball in his book *Disciplemaking: Helping Local Churches Understand What Disciples Are and How to Make Them* gives a practical example:

When people come into our church family and then see us loving one another, being at peace, welcoming one another, caring for each other, being patient, serving one another, forgiving each other, comforting each other, provoking each other toward good deeds, confessing to one another, receiving forgiveness, and teaching and admonishing one another so that we all grow, there is a draw that is hard to resist.⁴³

For that dynamic to become a new normal, intentional discipleship must occur. Barna writes, “Jesus is seeking people who are absolutely serious about becoming new creations in Him.”⁴⁴ To do so not only takes a commitment to Jesus and His Church (made by our heads); it also takes devotion to Jesus and His Church (made in our hearts).

A Three-Color Paradigm

We live in an age of unprecedented technological advantages. Most people have access to computers, smartphones, or other similar devices. Using these devices, we can easily capture memories through digitally created and stored pictures. These colored pictures beautifully reflect the spectrum of colors that you see around you with your eyes. It is fascinating to take in consideration that behind these digital colorful pictures are only three colors: green, red, and blue.

If you look inside a computer or TV screen, you’ll see they contain only three colors of light: red, green, and blue. The three specific cone cells in our eyes work together, allowing us to translate these three colors of

⁴³ John R. Kimball, *Disciplemaking: Helping Local Churches Understand What Disciples Are and How to Make Them* (Bloomington, MN: Next Step Resources, 2019), 42.

⁴⁴ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: Water Brook, 2001), 41.

light into millions of different colors . . . When all three primary colors of light are combined, we see white light.⁴⁵

If one or two of the three colors on your screen stops working, you will see a distorted picture. Light occurs only when all three colors are present.

Light is made out of three colors. There is a reason for this. God Himself is light (1 John 1:5) and “reveals Himself in a three- fold way.”⁴⁶ As a matter of fact, “The confession of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is what distinguishes Christianity from all religions.”⁴⁷ To reflect our belief in Triune God and to be “the light of the world” (Matt 5:14), Schwarz suggests we use a “Trinitarian Compass” to apply the three-fold revelation of God into all areas of our life.⁴⁸

Without even realizing it, we may already have a preferred color. Like Martin Luther, we may prefer some passages of Scripture over the others, which can easily lead to a skewed understanding of Scripture, resulting in malpractice. To avoid living in darkness, all three colors need to be present! Let’s see how the Trinitarian Compass may apply to a discipleship.



⁴⁵ “Science at Home,” Museum of Science + Industry Chicago, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://www.msichicago.org/science-at-home/hands-on-science/three-colors-of-light/>.

⁴⁶ Christian Schwarz, *The Threefold Art of Experiencing God: The Liberating Power of Trinitarian Faith* (Bloomington, MN: Church Smart Resources, 1999), 7-9.

⁴⁷ Schwarz, *Threefold Art*

⁴⁸ Christian Schwarz, *Color Your World with Natural Church Development* (Bloomington, MN: Church Smart Resources, 2005), 46-79.

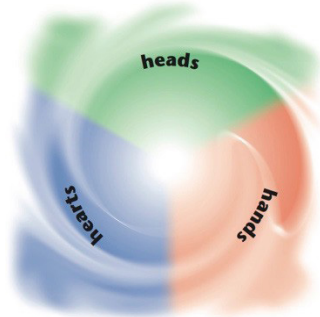
Three Colors of Discipleship

When it comes to discipleship, Edgar reminds us that a triple mission is involved:

First the Father sends the Son to proclaim and embody the kingdom and to reconcile all things to God. Then the Father and the Son send the Spirit to empower, to create community, to conform people to the image of the Son and to give gifts to the church. These gifts, including the presence of the Spirit, enable the church to engage in the third act of the divine mission in which the church is sent to make disciples of all nations.⁴⁹

As disciples, we are participating in *Missio Dei*⁵⁰; in other words, we are part of God’s mission. As such, discipling includes acquiring information, transforming our heart, and adopting new practices. “Head, heart, and hand are forged together in an unbreakable chain. What begins in our head will soon find its way into our heart and eventually come to be expressed through our hands.”⁵¹ Thus, a real-life discipleship consists of three essential elements (colors).

Teaching (head). Sharing information and communicating the Gospel leads to cognitive learning. The aim of this process to decide to follow Christ. “A disciple has surrendered to Jesus as Savior and Lord of his or her life. A disciple is one who says, ‘I know He is Lord and Savior and I accept Him as my authority.’”⁵² This area of discipleship is associated with



⁴⁹ Edgar, *Message of the Trinity*, 198.

⁵⁰ *Missio Dei* means that God is a missionary God. Mission originates in God. Mission precedes church. Church is a result of God’s mission; the church participates in God’s mission. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390.

⁵¹ Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Mosman NSW: Bridge Point Books, 1998), 300.

⁵² Puttman, *Real-life Discipleship*, 32.

green, the color of Creation because this is how discipleship is formed/created.

Mentoring (heart). Mentoring requires people to form personal relationships with another person, just as a father does with his son to understand his emotions and provide encouragement. Mentoring comes naturally and much more easily in the context of a biblically based community, as discussed earlier. Intentionality is important; it is vital that someone makes himself available to be a mentor. Mentoring is helpful for the internal process of heart change, a process which takes time. Through this process, we see that when you tend a tree, it bears fruit (i.e., reveals its character) (Matt 7:17-20). When we as disciples “spend time following Jesus, He changes us internally—He changes who we are.”⁵³ Mutual mentoring, helping one another, and a communal spirit make all the difference. This area of discipleship is represented by the color blue and is the realm of the Holy Spirit’s work.

Modeling (hands). Modeling is an equally important part of discipleship. Some call it “apprenticing” when a disciple can observe how things are done and is trained “hands on” to do it. It is not enough to learn what our spiritual gifts are; it takes someone to show us how we can use our giftings. Involvement in “in-house” ministry is just the beginning, but involvement in mission is the ultimate goal of discipleship. When we are disciples of Jesus, God’s mission becomes our mission. “Our hands are for His service.”⁵⁴ This area of discipleship is associated with the color red, represented by Jesus coming to us to show us the way.

Conclusion

The Western individualistic mindset, with its emphasis on reason and cognitive development, has resulted in a discipling deficit. Despite a strong emphasis and faithful practice of devotional life, we have seen that Adventist believers do not always know how to put their beliefs into practice. Although they often demonstrate a clear understanding of Church doctrines, not all are devoted

⁵³ Puttman, *Real-life Discipleship*, 32.

⁵⁴ Puttman, *Real-life Discipleship*, 33.

to the teachings in their heart, which is then reflected in their Christian experience (or their lack of). Their maturation process is also weakened. This may ultimately negatively impact church growth and mission potential (particularly within Western context).

These factors indicate challenges in the discipling process. Based on this fresh look at Trinitarian theology in terms of mission, this paper attempts to reconsider discipleship in the context of holistic community. Discipleship done without community is like a car (not) working without a gas. Community is the key to discipleship because community means God is present and involved.

God is, has always been, and always will be in community—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The family is a community—husband, wife, and children. And the church is a community made up of the family of believers. The church, so defined, is the family to which a disciple of Jesus is devoted.⁵⁵

To address the discipleship deficit, a real-life discipleship model is proposed which operates in three colors or modes, reflecting a threefold revelation of God: teaching (head), mentoring (heart), and modeling (hands). Such a discipleship is transformational and leads to balanced believing, behaving, and finally, belonging.

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⁵⁵ Kimball, *Disciplemaking*, 41.