

## A DISCIPLE-MAKING ECCLESIOLOGY FOR SOUTH ASIA: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS, THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXTUAL APPLICATION

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### *Introduction*

The church's primary identity and enduring mission are centered on making disciples who are grounded in the gospel, formed by spiritual practices, and sent to embody Christ's life and witness in their social worlds. In South Asia, shaped by intense religious plurality, strong family and kinship systems, caste hierarchies, and rapid socioeconomic change, disciple making must be articulated as an incarnational, communal, and reproducible process rather than a programmatic church activity.

Drawing on Old Testament formation, the life and pedagogy of Jesus, and apostolic practice in Acts and the Epistles, this paper argues that disciple making is fundamentally relational, communal, and missional. It then develops a theological framework that understands the church as a formative community, a "school of disciples", in which Word, sacrament, spiritual disciplines, and shared practices shape believers into Christlikeness.

This paper further engages distinctive South Asian dynamics, including religious pluralism, family systems, caste, persecution, economic precarity, migration, gender, youth, and digital culture. The paper concludes with a strategic roadmap and practical recommendations for cultivating sustainable, reproducible, and contextually faithful disciple-making movements across South Asia.

### *I. Biblical Foundations of Disciple Making*

#### *A. Old Testament Foundations*

The Old Testament provides deep and enduring roots for a biblically grounded vision of disciple making. Formation in Israel was woven into covenant identity and daily life (Deut 6:4–9; Exod 12:24–27). Christopher J. H. Wright observes that Israel's identity was shaped through a community formed by God's saving acts and governed by God's teaching.<sup>1</sup> Ritual practices, festivals, Sabbath, sacrifice, prayer, and communal remembrance functioned as embodied pedagogy (Lev 23; Exod 20:8–11; Ps 78:1–7).

Formation in Israel was fundamentally intergenerational and domestic. The household served as the primary space of moral teaching, where faith was transmitted through storytelling and daily practices. Parents were commanded to teach their children at home (Deut 6:4–9; 11:18–21). Formation in Israel was also corporate and public. The gathered assembly, the reading of Torah, and the prophetic address established communal norms and reinforced covenant identity (Neh 8:1–8; Deut 31:9–13).

Relational apprenticeship also marked Israel's formative life, for example, Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, and the wisdom tradition (Exod 24:13; 2 Kgs 2; Prov 1:1–7).

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 88.

Michael Wilkins describes that biblical discipleship is fundamentally relational and apprenticing in nature.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the Old Testament offers a framework for contemporary disciple making. It demonstrates that formation is most transformative when it is holistic, integrating household discipleship, communal worship, and relational mentorship into a cohesive process that shapes identity, virtue, and mission. As Wright summarizes, Israel's formation was a "thoroughly communal and missional shaping of a people called to embody God's character among the nations."<sup>3</sup>

### *B. New Testament Foundations*

**Jesus and the Gospel Narratives.** Jesus stands at the center of New Testament discipleship. N. T. Wright notes that Jesus forms a renewed Israel around Himself through practices of teaching, healing, and table fellowship.<sup>4</sup> The call to "Follow me" (Matt 4:19; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11) establishes discipleship as relational apprenticeship. Jesus teaches not only through formal instruction but through a way of life observed closely, his prayer habits (Mark 1:35; Luke 11:1), compassion (Matt 9:36), table fellowship (Matt 9:10–13), healing ministry, and engagement with the marginalized. Dale Allison observes that discipleship in the Gospels is a way of training-relationship in which the transformation of a learner occurs through sustained relational apprenticeship.<sup>5</sup> Michael Wilkins similarly notes that the disciples learn by "traveling with Jesus, observing his actions, and aligning their lives to His pattern."<sup>6</sup> Thus, transformation occurs through sustained participation in Jesus' way of life.

Jesus employs an integrated teaching approach through parables (Matt 13), symbolic actions (Mark 11), extended teaching (Matt 5–7), and participatory mission (Matt 10; Luke 9). His teaching is inseparable from practice. He consistently places the disciples in situations where they must participate in ministry and grow in trust, obedience, and dependence on God. Dallas Willard describes this integration as "training for a kingdom life," and not merely the transfer of information.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus frames formation within a missional course. The disciples are not simply learners; they are apprentices being prepared for participation in God's mission. The sending of the Twelve and the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20) frame discipleship as preparation for participation in God's redemptive mission. Thus, formation culminates in multiplication. Disciples learn a Jesus-modelled life for the sake of the world, embodying the values of the kingdom in word and deed.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Following the Master: A Biblical Theology of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 33.

<sup>4</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 275-276.

<sup>5</sup> Dale C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 155–156.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins, *Following the Master*, 218-219.

<sup>7</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 279-281.

**Apostolic Practice in the Book of Acts and the Epistles.** The Book of Acts portrays a Spirit-empowered movement marked by teaching, fellowship, prayer, sacramental life, and mission (Acts 2:42–47). As Eckhard Schnabel notes, Acts portrays a missionary community shaped by teaching, fellowship, sacramental life, prayer, and mission in dynamic interplay.<sup>8</sup> Formation emerges not as a single method but as a network of practices sustained by the presence and power of the Spirit.

Households function as primary centers of disciple making (Acts 10; 16; Rom 16:5). Conversions frequently lead to the establishment of household churches, where instruction, worship, and mutual care were experienced. These communities reshaped believers' social identity around Christ.

The epistles function as formative curricula, anchoring identity in Christ (Rom 6), shaping moral life (Rom 12–15), and cultivating the fruit and gifts of the Spirit (Gal 5; 1 Cor 12). Richard Hays emphasizes that Paul's letters serve as "pastoral strategy in epistolary form," shaping the imagination and habits of early Christian communities.<sup>9</sup> It is obvious that formation in the apostolic writings is inseparable from participation in the life of the Spirit—cultivating virtues, discerning gifts, and building up the body (Gal 5:22–23; 1 Cor 12:1–11; Eph 4:1–16).

Paul's ministry exemplifies multiplying leadership. His mentoring of Timothy, Titus, and others (2 Tim 2:2; Titus 1:5) displays layered mentoring through encouragement, correction, delegation, and commissioning (2 Tim 1:6–7; 2:1–2; Gal 2:11–14; Acts 13:1–3). Michael Gorman describes Paul's ministry as "cruciform leadership," where theological reflection, pastoral care, and moral formation converge.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, James Dunn notes that Paul forms communities capable of continued self-reproduction, rooted in the gospel and empowered by the Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the apostolic pattern forms communities capable of continued self-reproduction across cultures.

### *C. Key Biblical Motifs of Formation*

Several motifs emerge from the biblical witness that together provide theological consistency for contemporary disciple making. These themes frame the biblical vision of how God forms a people who embody the life of Christ in the world.

**Imitation.** Believers are repeatedly called to imitate Christ and mature leaders (1 Cor 11:1; Eph 5:1–2; Phil 3:17; Heb 13:7). Imitation in Scripture is a relational participation in the life of Christ. As Richard Hays notes, imitation functions as a narrative-embodied ethic,

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<sup>8</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve*, vol.1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 407-416.

<sup>9</sup> Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 22–24.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 23–27.

<sup>11</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 331.

shaping communities through the practices of Christlike self-giving.<sup>12</sup> Paul's repeated appeals to imitation stress the embodied and relational nature of formation.

**Koinonia (Shared Life).** Community is central to what it means to be Christian (Acts 2:42–47; Rom 12:3–8; Eph 4:1–6). Formation occurs within networks of mutual support, correction, and love. Koinonia creates the relational space where transformation becomes possible.

**Apprenticeship.** The teacher-disciple pattern evident in the Scriptures highlights relational transmission of character, wisdom, and skill (Num 27:18–23; 1 Sam 3; Acts 16:1–5; 2 Tim 2:1–2). Dietrich Bonhoeffer stresses that Christian formation takes place in shared life under the Word, where mentoring relationships call believers into concrete obedience.<sup>13</sup> Apprenticeship thus reflects a deeply relational learning.

**Sending.** Formation is shaped by and for mission. The church is shaped not merely for personal growth but for participation in God's redemptive work (Matt 28:18–20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). Andrew Walls describes mission as “the outward impulse of the gospel,” where formation equips disciples for witness across cultural boundaries.<sup>14</sup> Thus, formation culminates in participation in God's mission.

**Transformation.** The ultimate goal of discipleship is conformity to Christ—spiritual, moral, and missional renewal wrought by the Spirit (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19; Col 3:9–17). Gordon Fee emphasizes that transformation is the Spirit's work, producing new identity and new practices.<sup>15</sup>

Taken together, these motifs serve as evaluative criteria for contemporary discipleship practices. These discipleship models need to remain grounded in Scripture and oriented toward holistic transformation.

## II. Theological Foundations for Disciple-Making Ecclesiology

### A. The Church as a School of Disciples

The church exists primarily as a formative community shaped by Word, sacrament, and shared practices (Acts 2:42–47; Eph 4:11–16). Formation is not referred to specialized programs but is embedded in the whole life of the congregation, including its mission. Lesslie Newbigin points out that the church exists not as a vendor of religious goods but as the community where the gospel takes visible, embodied form.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, formation is oriented toward the development of mature, multiplying disciples. Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the church as a community under the Word, where mutual

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<sup>12</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 45–46.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 17–39.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 811–13.

<sup>16</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 227–33.

exhortation and shared practices cultivate obedience to Christ.<sup>17</sup> James K. A. Smith similarly argues that formation occurs through “thick practices”—liturgies, habits, and embodied rhythms that shape desire and character.<sup>18</sup>

The “school of disciples” model requires churches to reorient their priorities. Success is not measured primarily by attendance, programs, or buildings but by the transformation of lives and the multiplication of leaders (Matt 28:18–20; Eph 4:12–16). Michael Gorman emphasizes that the church’s vocation is “cruciform formation,” shaping a community whose life mirrors the self-giving pattern of Christ.<sup>19</sup> In this, disciples are not consumers of religious experiences but participants in a lifelong journey of formation into Christlikeness through the power of the Spirit.

### *B. Anthropology and Sanctification*

Human beings are created in God’s image yet profoundly distorted by sin (Gen 1:26–27; 2:18; Ps 8; Rom 1; Eph 4). Sanctification is the Spirit’s renewing work by which believers are conformed to Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). J. I. Packer emphasizes that sanctification is both “God-dependent and effort-demanding,” integrating divine initiative with human participation.<sup>20</sup>

Formation engages the whole person: intellect, affections, habits, body, and social identity. Communal belonging is required for growth as it involves practices of fidelity, transparency, and shared life (Heb 10:24–25; Gal 6:1–2). Spiritual disciplines function as means of grace through which the Spirit reshapes desires and habits.<sup>21</sup> James K. A. Smith argues that these disciplines recalibrate the heart by reordering the loves that define human identity.<sup>22</sup>

### *C. Word, Sacraments, and Spiritual Disciplines*

The Word and sacraments constitute central means through which Christ forms his people. Preaching forms theological imagination and obedience (2 Tim 4:1–2). The sacraments embody the gospel in tangible form. Baptism incorporates believers into the life of the Triune God (Rom 6:3–4). The Eucharist sustains communal identity and participation in Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Cor 10:16–17; John 6:53–58). A disciple-making church, therefore, treats baptism and Eucharist not as ritual formalities but as formative practices that shape communal memory, belonging, and identity.

Spiritual disciplines complement Word and sacraments by creating attentiveness to God’s presence in daily life. Spiritual disciplines function as means of grace that reshape

<sup>17</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 31-32.

<sup>18</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 276–278.

<sup>20</sup> J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1984), 103-105.

<sup>21</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 6.

<sup>22</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 25.

desire and cultivate Christlike character. Dallas Willard describes these disciplines as “grace-filled exercises” that reshape the inner life and reorder desire.<sup>23</sup> Together, these practices create a formative environment of discipleship.

#### *D. Authority, Leadership, and Multiplication*

In a disciple-making ecclesiology, authority serves the purpose of equipping and multiplying disciples rather than controlling or centralizing power. Jesus frames leadership as service rather than domination (Mark 10:42–45; John 13:1–15), grounding authority in humility and self-giving love. Leadership exists to equip others for ministry and multiplication rather than to consolidate power (1 Thess 2:7–12; 1 Pet 5:1–4). Leaders model practices, mentor emerging disciples, and cultivate environments where new leaders can mature.

Multiplication is not optional but intrinsic to faithful discipleship (Matt 28:18–20; 2 Tim 2:2). Leadership pipelines must be relational, character-centered, and missionally oriented. As noted earlier, Christian leadership is “cruciform,” reproducing leaders who embody the character and mission of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Authority is exercised through service rather than domination. Pastoral leadership fosters community, protects unity, and supports the development of others (Eph 4:11–16). Servant leadership leads to Christian formation, in that leaders serve in order to help others grow and flourish.<sup>25</sup> Shared leadership structures encourage participation, discernment, and resilience.<sup>26</sup>

#### *E. Missional and Incarnational Theology*

Disciple making is inseparable from the church’s missional identity. The church is called to participate in God’s mission by embodying the presence, compassion, justice, and truth of Christ within specific cultural contexts (John 20:21; Matt 5:13–16; 2 Cor 5:18–20). Lesslie Newbigin argues that the church is the hermeneutic of the gospel, a community whose life interprets and displays the good news.<sup>27</sup> The church is called to embody the gospel in and for the world.<sup>28</sup>

In South Asia, where religious identity is deeply embedded in kinship networks, caste structures, and communal traditions, missional discipleship requires cultural intelligence, patience, and deep discernment.<sup>29</sup> Paul Hiebert’s principle of “critical contextualization” calls for a careful engagement with culture that neither dismisses it entirely nor embraces it

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<sup>23</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 126.

<sup>24</sup> Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel*, 23–27.

<sup>25</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), 7.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 130–132.

<sup>27</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222.

<sup>28</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 125–127.

without discernment.<sup>30</sup> Mission is always “translation,” requiring the gospel to take flesh in particular cultures without losing its essence.<sup>31</sup>

Mission calls for both faithful presence and prophetic critique. John Stott emphasizes that Christian witness is authenticated by Christlike humility and Christlike service.<sup>32</sup> Andrew Walls observes that the church lives as a “pilgrim people,” deeply embedded yet never fully at home in any culture.<sup>33</sup> Thus, missional discipleship involves both deep identification with one’s context and a transformative witness within it.

### *III. South Asian Contextual Considerations*

South Asia presents one of the world’s most complex religious, cultural, and social environments.<sup>34</sup> Disciple making in this region requires not only biblical and theological grounding but also deep attentiveness to contextual dynamics that shape identity, relationships, and public life. Lamin Sanneh suggests that Christianity in local contexts must be understood as a translation movement, taking root within indigenous cultural forms while remaining faithful to the gospel.<sup>35</sup> Murray Demster observes that effective mission in the Global South demands strategies that integrate theological fidelity with contextual wisdom—addressing poverty, injustice, and cultural belonging as integral to gospel witness.<sup>36</sup> The disciple-making frameworks for South Asia must deal with regional complexity with clarity, grace, and resilience.

#### *A. Religious Pluralism and Communal Identity*

In South Asia, religion functions as a corporate marker of identity. Conversion often disrupts kinship networks (Matt 10:34–36). As Andrew Walls observes, religious belonging in many non-Western contexts is “corporate before it is individual,” making discipleship inherently communal and socially visible.<sup>37</sup> M. M. Thomas emphasizes dialogical engagement that recognizes the dignity and spiritual longing present within South Asia’s

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<sup>30</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1985), 186.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 30-31.

<sup>32</sup> John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1975), 31.

<sup>33</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8–9.

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey A. Oddie, *Religious Transformation in South Asia* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–2.

<sup>35</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 15-18.

<sup>36</sup> Murray Demster, “A Theology of the Kingdom: A Pentecostal Contribution”, in Samuel and Sugden, *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1999), 45–48.

<sup>37</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 51–62.

religious traditions.<sup>38</sup> Disciple making, therefore, requires relational witness, interfaith literacy, hospitality, and pastoral support.<sup>39</sup>

### *B. Family Systems, Caste, and Social Structures*

Family and kinship networks remain the primary units of social organization in South Asia. Decisions about faith, marriage, vocation, and social belonging are deeply interconnected with family obligations, caste identity, and socioeconomic expectations.<sup>40</sup> Thus, conversion often affects and is evaluated by the entire household (Acts 16:31–34). Caste continues to structure social life.<sup>41</sup> The gospel calls the church to embody a reconciled community across caste boundaries (Eph 2:14–22; Gal 3:28; James 2:1–9).<sup>42</sup> Collectivist cultures experience faith not as an isolated choice but as a relational realignment within a web of kinship.<sup>43</sup> Where literacy varies widely, oral pedagogies, storytelling, proverbs, songs, communal memory practices, and dramatization become invaluable tools for formation.<sup>44</sup> These methods resonate deeply with South Asian learning styles and allow the gospel to be shared in culturally accessible and memorable ways.

### *C. Persecution, Marginalization, and Resilience*

Believers in many South Asian contexts face legal restrictions, social stigma, economic discrimination, or episodic violence.<sup>45</sup> Discipleship must include a theology of suffering and practices of resilience, small groups, mutual aid, and spiritual disciplines. As Glenn Penner argues, Christian suffering is not an aberration but an anticipated dimension of faithful witness.<sup>46</sup> Resilience is both spiritual and social (Ps 22; Acts 4:23–31; Heb 13:3). Bryant Myers notes that resilient communities thrive through shared resources and relational strength.<sup>47</sup> Lamin Sanneh notes that persecuted communities often develop “deep reservoirs of hope.”<sup>48</sup> Resilience, therefore, is a Spirit-formed capacity to maintain witness, compassion, and unity in the face of marginalization.

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<sup>38</sup> M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1969), 62–63.

<sup>39</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 216–19.

<sup>40</sup> Patricia Uberoi, *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000), 6-10.

<sup>42</sup> David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 96.

<sup>43</sup> Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, 96.

<sup>44</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 95-97.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 121-122.

<sup>46</sup> Glenn M. Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice, 2004), 22-27.

<sup>47</sup> Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 234-236.

<sup>48</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 111.

#### D. *Inculturation and Indigenous Expressions*

Authentic disciple making requires contextualization (Acts 2:5–11; 1 Cor 9:19–23; Rev 7:9) that enables the gospel to take cultural flesh. As Stephen Bevans argues, all theology is “contextual theology,” shaped through the interaction of gospel and culture.<sup>49</sup> Festivals in South Asia create fertile spaces for Christ-centered reinterpretation.<sup>50</sup> Christian communities need to evaluate cultural practices with both appreciation and biblical critique.<sup>51</sup> Theological discernment is required to avoid syncretism.

#### E. *Urbanization, Migration, and Digital Culture*

Rapid urbanization and migration generate new patterns of mobility, anonymity, relational and spiritual opportunity across South Asia.<sup>52</sup> Mobility, rather than being an obstacle, can become a catalyst for believers to transmit faith as they move across geographic and cultural boundaries.<sup>53</sup> In South Asia, adaptive and portable disciple-making strategies are essential for nurturing resilient, multiplying communities.

#### F. *Gender, Youth, and Economic Realities*

Across South Asia, patriarchal norms, gender-based expectations, and generational divides shape how women and youth participate in church and community life. In many contexts, women face constraints on public leadership, mobility, and decision-making authority, while carrying significant responsibilities in households. Young people navigate tensions between traditional expectations and the pressures of globalization. Economic uncertainty shapes participation in church life. As Bryant Myers notes, poverty is fundamentally a distortion of relationships with God, self, others, and creation, which directly shapes how disciples grow.<sup>54</sup> Women and youth are strategic agents of discipleship. Empowering and equipping women in biblical literacy, pastoral skills, and community leadership strengthens the whole church. These are some of the issues that need to be addressed individually in detail.

#### G. *Theological and Practical Challenges in South Asia*

Disciple-making movements in South Asia face several ongoing challenges that require sustained discernment, pastoral sensitivity, and theologically grounded responses. These challenges arise from the region’s complex religious landscape, socioeconomic pressures, communal identity structures, and rapidly changing cultural environments. Andrew Walls observes that Christian formation in the Majority World is shaped by “the meeting of the gospel with deeply rooted social and cultural systems,” requiring wisdom rather than

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 20-21.

<sup>50</sup> Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 56-58.

<sup>51</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 186-190.

<sup>52</sup> Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 41.

<sup>53</sup> Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 29-30.

<sup>54</sup> Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, 86–88.

simplistic strategies.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Darrell Guder notes, missional communities must continually engage in “self-examination, repentance, and renewal” to remain faithful to the gospel within their contexts.<sup>56</sup> Addressing these challenges is essential for cultivating resilient disciples who can embody the gospel with integrity and perseverance across South Asia’s diverse environments.

#### H. Contextualization and the Risk of Syncretism

Every expression of Christian faith is contextual by nature, shaped by the interaction of gospel and culture.<sup>57</sup> Yet contextualization carries inherent risks. Without theological clarity and communal accountability, contextual practices may drift toward syncretism. Syncretism can distort core doctrines, redefine Christian identity, or obscure the uniqueness of Christ’s saving work.<sup>58</sup> Andrew Walls also notes that while the gospel must take root in local soil, it must also critically transform that soil to maintain fidelity to the apostolic faith.<sup>59</sup>

#### I. Leadership Burnout and Accountable Multiplication

Rapid multiplication can place significant strain on leaders, especially in contexts marked by persecution, economic hardship, or high mobility. Disproportionate responsibilities without adequate support create exhaustion, isolation, discouragement, and moral failure. For disciple-making networks to grow sustainably, leadership formation must address emotional health, spiritual resilience, and relational accountability, not merely ministry skills or numerical outcomes.<sup>60</sup> Thus, effective networks cultivate structures that protect the well-being of leaders while fostering responsible multiplication.

#### J. Navigating Legal and Social Constraints

Anti-conversion laws, restrictions on assembly, social hostility, and surveillance create complex environments for disciple-making movements in South Asia. These pressures arise due to complex issues, such as religious nationalism, communal identity, political mobilization, and grassroots power structures. These issues are experienced every day in community life. In such situations, disciples need to understand local regulations, practice relational sensitivity, and cultivate trust within their communities. Glenn Penner emphasizes that Christian witness under pressure requires both courage and strategic wisdom, not reckless action that jeopardizes vulnerable members.<sup>61</sup> Service, compassion, and moral integrity often speak more powerfully than arguments, especially in contexts wary of proselytism.<sup>62</sup> Such a witness aligns with the biblical call to “live peaceably with all” while remaining faithful to Christ (Rom 12:18). Churches, therefore, need to strengthen resilience

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<sup>55</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 9-12.

<sup>56</sup> Guder, *Missional Church*, 135.

<sup>57</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 58-59.

<sup>58</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, 185-186.

<sup>59</sup> Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 8-9.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 33.

<sup>61</sup> Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross*, 132-133.

<sup>62</sup> Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 131.

by developing communal practices that safeguard believers while maintaining a consistent, non-confrontational witness.

### *K. Interfaith Sensitivity and Prophetic Witness*

South Asian disciples need to navigate a delicate balance of respecting neighbors of other faiths while maintaining clear allegiance to Christ. The region's religious diversity creates daily opportunities for interreligious encounters. These interactions require humility, hospitality, clarity, and discernment (Rom 12:18). Holding these commitments together forms the heart of Christian engagement in pluralistic contexts.<sup>63</sup>

The temptation either to withdraw from interfaith relationships for fear of compromise or to adopt uncritical syncretism out of desire for acceptance needs to be resisted. Lamin Sanneh reminds that Christian witness requires "translation" into local contexts without erasing the distinctiveness of the gospel.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, M. M. Thomas emphasizes dialogical engagement that takes both the spiritual beauty and the brokenness present in South Asian religions seriously.<sup>65</sup> Such a balanced witness strengthens credibility, sustains long-term relationships, and reflects the incarnational posture of Jesus, who engaged his cultural world with both deep compassion and transformative truth.

### *L. Strategic Roadmap for Disciple-Making Ecclesiology in South Asia*

1. **Strengthen households as centers of discipleship, equipping parents and elders for leadership:** Clarifying a shared vision rooted in the Great Commission and the identity of the church as a formative community.

Household-based formation is both biblical and culturally resonant in South Asian contexts. House-church and small-group multiplication are particularly suited to South Asian social structures shaped by households and close relational networks. Rooted in New Testament practice, these models foster intimacy, flexibility, and rapid reproduction. Their decentralized leadership and emphasis on ordinary believers enable discipleship to flourish in villages, urban slums, migrant communities, and diaspora networks.<sup>66</sup> Simplicity and reproducibility remain essential for sustainability and multiplication.

2. **Invest deeply in mentoring and leadership pipelines that develop character and competence:** Developing apprenticeship-based leadership pipelines that integrate training, participation, and accountability.

Apprenticeship-based leadership development mirrors biblical patterns and ensures long-term sustainability.<sup>67</sup> Mentoring, apprenticeship, and leadership pipelines form the backbone of leadership development. Drawing on biblical precedents from Moses and Joshua to Paul and Timothy, leadership is shaped through shared life, guided practice, and character

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<sup>63</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 172-173.

<sup>64</sup> Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 97-101.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Neil Cole and Phil Helfer, *Church Transformation: Changing Your Church Organically from the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 155-156.

<sup>67</sup> J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988), 130-132.

formation.<sup>68</sup> Apprenticeship integrates ministry participation with theological reflection, while peer supervision and communal oversight nurture ethical integrity and resilience.<sup>69</sup> In South Asian contexts, where learning is relational and communal, such pipelines ensure continuity and long-term depth.

3. **Practice contextualization with theological discernment, avoiding both syncretism and cultural irrelevance:** Establishing simple, reproducible pathways accessible across literacy levels and social classes.

Healthy contextualization engages local culture while remaining anchored in apostolic faith.<sup>70</sup> Worship and contextual liturgical formation serve as primary engines of discipleship. Worship shapes communal identity, moral imagination, and spiritual practices. Contextualized worship expressed through local languages, festivals, art forms, drama, and storytelling allows faith to be experienced as both authentically Christian and culturally rooted.<sup>71</sup> Such worship strengthens participation, emotional engagement, and theological formation while shaping believers into a visibly distinct people.<sup>72</sup>

4. **Cultivate communities of practice that shape daily habits and communal identity:** Fostering communities of practice through Scripture immersion, shared spiritual disciplines, mutual care, and everyday missional engagement.

Shared practices, prayer, hospitality, confession, and service create an ecology of formation that nurtures Christlike character. Formation through service and social engagement integrates compassion, justice, and mission as essential components of discipleship. Service functions as a “living classroom” where Christlike virtues are embodied and refined.<sup>73</sup> Long-term community development initiatives, theological reflection cycles, and local leadership empowerment foster sustainable transformation.<sup>74</sup> This approach emphasizes dignity, agency, and local ownership rather than dependency.

5. **Utilize digital tools strategically, ensuring they remain relational rather than consumeristic:** Strengthening networks and partnerships among churches, mission agencies, and development organizations to enhance resource sharing and resilience.

Digital media enhances learning access but requires integration with on-the-ground relationships and community structures. Media and nonformal learning environments significantly expand access to discipleship. In oral and semi-literate contexts, story-based learning, repetition, community interaction, and digital platforms enable flexible, mobile, and

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<sup>68</sup> Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 44.

<sup>69</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 205.

<sup>70</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 44-46.

<sup>71</sup> Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 75.

<sup>72</sup> Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 115-116.

<sup>73</sup> Wright, *The Mission of God*, 312-314.

<sup>74</sup> Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power, and the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, CA: MARC/World Vision, 1994), 139–141.

relational formation beyond the classroom.<sup>75</sup> These tools extend the reach of mentoring networks and support discipleship amid geographic mobility.

#### 6. **Design Evaluation Systems That Measure Spiritual Fruit, Not Just Activity:**

Adopting balanced evaluation frameworks for combining qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Assessment should monitor growth without reducing discipleship to metrics, prioritizing the Spirit's work in character and community. Evaluation and sustainability are framed not primarily in numerical growth but in faithfulness, character transformation, community witness, and endurance. Ethical evaluation integrates both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Financial and organizational sustainability depend on indigenous funding, decentralized leadership, and locally stewarded resources that strengthen resilience and reproducibility.<sup>76</sup> Empowerment, not charity, produces lasting transformation.<sup>77</sup>

#### *Conclusion*

A disciple-making ecclesiology is essential for faithful Christian witness in South Asia. The biblical narrative presents formation as covenantal, relational, communal, and missional. When churches integrate theological depth, contextual discernment, and embodied practice, they form resilient disciples who embody Christ through humility, service, justice, and love (Phil 2:1–16).

Disciple making is ultimately not a program but a way of life, participation in God's mission to renew all things in Christ (Eph 1:9–10). As South Asian churches embody this vision, they become communities of hope, rooted in the gospel and empowered by the Spirit for the flourishing of all.

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<sup>75</sup> Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 115–116.

<sup>76</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor ... and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 197–199.

<sup>77</sup> Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed*, 183–184.

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