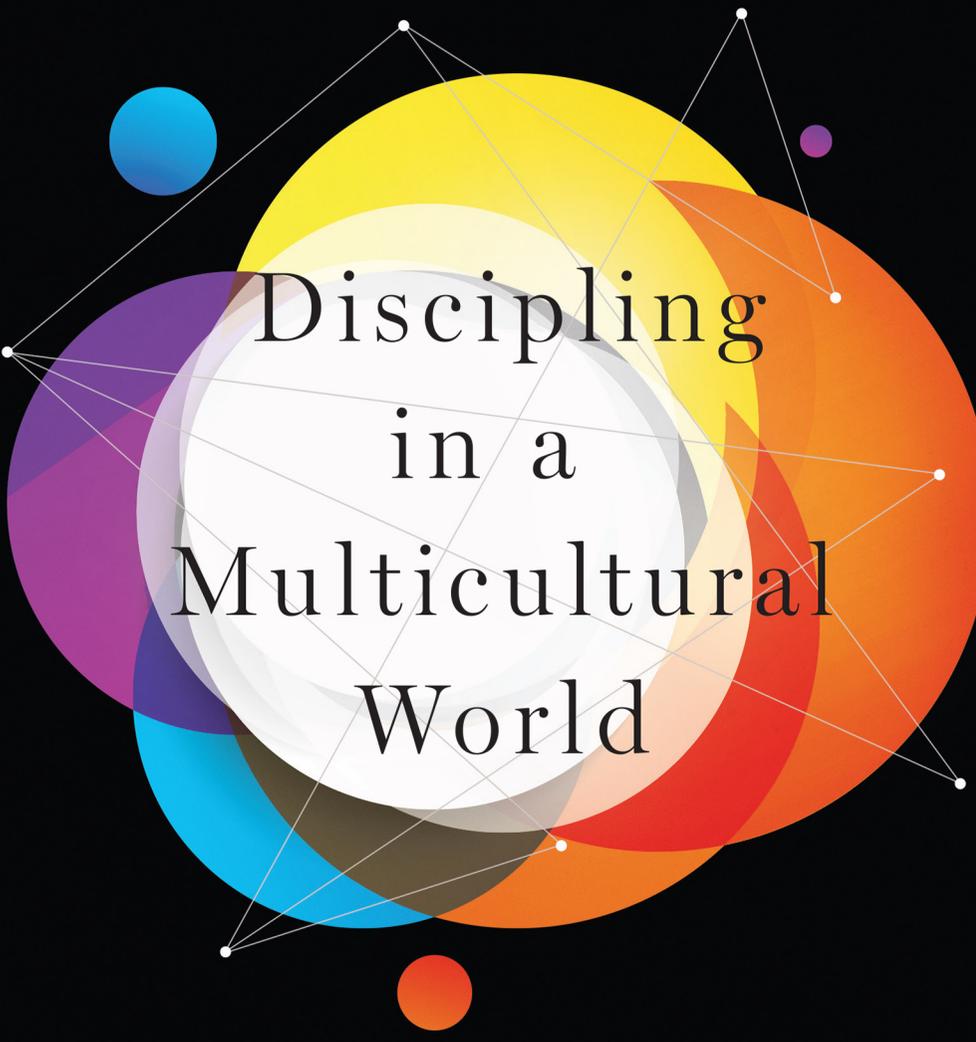


"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." **Matthew 28:18-20**



# Discipling in a Multicultural World

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AJITH FERNANDO

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*Foreword by Robert E. Coleman*

“A gifted teacher, communicator, and evangelist, Ajith Fernando has produced a most timely resource to equip today’s generation. In recent decades the church in the West has struggled to develop mature disciples. We have retreated into our dwindling communities with the occasional foray outside in the attempt to make converts. Fernando calls us to the task of developing mature disciples, and through the deepening of our faith we are better equipped to engage in the wider world.”

**Stephen Skuce**, Director of Global Relationships, The Methodist Church in Britain

“Grounded in Scripture, rooted in decades of ministry, and colorfully illustrated from Sri Lanka and around the world, Ajith Fernando’s *Discipling in a Multicultural World* will enrich God’s people as we seek to make disciples among all nations. Much more than a classroom guide, it will motivate us to follow Fernando’s example, pouring our lives into others’ just as others poured their lives into his.”

**David Greenlee**, Director of Missiological Research and Evaluation, Operation Mobilization

“How do we make disciples of Jesus in contexts of increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity? Few people are as qualified to answer this question as the global Christian statesman Ajith Fernando. Drawing upon four decades of ministry worldwide and a seasoned scholar’s understanding of Scripture, Fernando provides us with a rich and wise guide to forming disciples among those from various cultural backgrounds. Essential insights for effective ministry today!”

**Harold Netland**, Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Intercultural Studies, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“In *Discipling in a Multicultural World*, Ajith Fernando moves beyond techniques and programs to the life-on-life realities of discipleship in the emerging context of multiculturalism. This book is a gem for those who are prepared to come face-to-face with the real cost of discipleship. Filled with practical examples, the book is a real-life tutorial from one of the great giants of discipleship in our day. A truly formational book!”

**Timothy C. Tennent**, President and Professor of World Christianity, Asbury Theological Seminary

“Ajith Fernando has been living the message of this book for more than four decades, and now he shares his insights in this comprehensive work. Integrating thorough biblical study, extensive experience, deep understanding of cultural dynamics, and vulnerable storytelling, *Discipling in a Multicultural World* is essential reading for any leader who—like Paul the apostle—aspires to ‘present everyone mature in Christ’ (Col. 1:28).”

**Paul Borthwick**, Senior Consultant, Development Associates International; coauthor, *The Fellowship of the Suffering*

“If I were selecting someone to write a book titled *Discipling in a Multicultural World*, Ajith Fernando would be my first choice. I know of no one more qualified to address this topic. Fernando has a scholar’s mind, a pastor’s heart, and a practitioner’s skill—all of which have been tested and proven in the crucible of multicultural experience. These chapters reflect not an ivory-tower author but one who knows the joys and heartaches of real life in the trenches. I heartily commend this book to all who want a deeper understanding of and motivation for ‘making disciples of all nations.’”

**Timothy K. Beougher**, Associate Dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Overcoming Walls to Witnessing*

“Ajith Fernando has written a very helpful, deep, mature, and biblical book on disciple making in real life from a multicultural perspective. He draws from his many years of ministry experience in preaching and teaching, evangelism, discipling, and mentoring, especially with Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka. I highly recommend *Discipling in a Multicultural World* as essential reading for all Christians!”

**Siang-Yang Tan**, Professor of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary; Senior Pastor, First Evangelical Church, Glendale, California; author, *Counseling and Psychotherapy*

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Discipling  
in a  
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World

Ajith Fernando

Foreword by Robert E. Coleman

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To the community at  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School  
with gratitude for  
a generous sabbatical to write this book  
and delightful friendships



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# Foreword

Jesus taught that everything commanded in the Law and the Prophets comes down to loving God and neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:37–40). From this Great Commandment flows the Great Commission given by Christ to his disciples before he ascended back to heaven to take his place of authority at the right hand of God: “Go . . . and make disciples of all nations . . .” (Matt. 28:18–20).

The word “disciple” could be translated as “learner,” in the sense of an apprentice, and in the Christian context means a follower of Jesus. So Jesus’s invitation to persons wanting to become disciples was simply “Follow me.” Here was the essence of his plan to change the world. By following him, disciples would learn both his way of life and his vision for the nations.

With this objective in view, love finds its most relevant expression in reproducing the ministry of “the Son of Man [who] came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). This is not to say that one can replicate his atoning sacrifice. That work was finished once and for all at Calvary. But the way Jesus prepared disciples to bring the good news of his completed mission to the ends of the earth can be repeated. It is called discipleship.

The disciples could understand what Jesus expected for they had seen Christ’s last command lived out before their eyes. In principle, by following the patterns of Christ’s servant ministry, we can make disciples today. The Great Commission is not a special call for privileged saints to become clergy or overseas missionaries; it is a command to the whole church to adopt a servant lifestyle by which all Christians can experience their priesthood.

To be sure, developing this commitment to kingdom living requires all the resources of grace that one can summon by faith. Love is costly. Learning to shoulder the cross and follow Jesus is not easy. Obedience is learned through suffering and self-denial. Mentoring disciples is like raising children, and there is no exemption from duty.

Helping baby believers find their footing in salvation is a necessary first step, of course. But there is much more to learn in the deeper dimensions of holiness and Christlikeness as teacher and follower grow in grace and knowledge together. The more difficult task may come in igniting satisfied church members to become active disciple makers. Your joy comes when persons in whom you invest begin to bear fruit, with much more to come.

That is why this book is so welcome. It offers practical help where needed most—in bringing disciples into daily life. Ajith Fernando’s concern is not with programs or fast tracks to success. Rather, building on the biblical principles of growing a spiritual family, he weaves the Great Commission into the way we live out our ministry in our homes and work places, helping people we love “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13 NIV).

Giving the study a ring of authenticity is Ajith’s personal pilgrimage of disciple making. He tells it like it is, both the good and the not so pleasant. Whether that is leading in a small church of multicultural converts, mentoring young people hooked on drugs, or raising leaders to take over the work he leaves, it’s all for real.

What he doesn’t talk about are the many books he has written or the great conferences he has spoken at around the world. Even with all his recognition, he has not lost identity with the poor people of Sri Lanka, where he lives and continues to minister. I think most noteworthy is that his children follow in his steps.

We can learn from this man. Experienced disciples especially will appreciate some of the delicate issues he comes to grips with in telling his story. Thankfully, God is not finished with any of us yet.

I would be challenged and blessed to sit at Dr. Fernando’s feet. This book affords us all that opportunity.

Robert E. Coleman  
Distinguished Senior Professor of Evangelism and Discipleship  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

# Preface

This book on discipling seeks to help nurture Christians to maturity and fruitfulness while taking into account an exciting challenge we face today. Many who come to Christ, even in the West, may have different cultural backgrounds from those who disciple them. They may be from other faiths or no faith. In the non-Western world the church is reaching people from other faiths. At the same time, there is a growing phenomenon in the West of religiously unaffiliated people who are called the “nones.”<sup>1</sup> Recently the periodical *Christian Century* reported that 29 percent of Americans between the ages of 30 and 39 would classify themselves as religiously unaffiliated. The figure rises to 38 percent when it comes to the ages 18–29. Starting with 8 percent of those above 80 years old, the figure climbs steadily for each age group.<sup>2</sup> This trend is more marked in Britain,<sup>3</sup> and even more so in other Western countries.<sup>4</sup> So disciplers in the Western or the non-Western worlds may be called upon to disciple people whose approach to life and religion has been quite distant from the Christian approach. I try to be alert to this challenge in this book.

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1. James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014). White wrote later, “A recent survey of thirty-five thousand Americans by the Pew Research Centre found that the rise of the nones has grown to encompass 23 percent of American Adults.” White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 11.

2. Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI (website), September 6, 2017, <https://www.prii.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>. The figures for other age groups are 40–49, 23 percent; 50–59, 18 percent; 60–69, 16 percent; 70–79, 12 percent. I am grateful to my friend James Moore of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for instructing me about the religiously unaffiliated.

3. “A Majority of Britons Now Follow No Religion,” *The Economist*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2017/09/09/a-majority-of-britons-now-follow-no-religion>.

4. See Gabe Bullard, “The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion,” *National Geographic*, April 22, 2016, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/>.

My intention was not to write a “how to” manual on discipling. I hope to give biblical principles about discipling and to present examples about how they apply in daily life and ministry. The exact way in which a person disciples varies according to the personality of the discipler, the personality and maturity of the disciplee, and the context in which the discipling takes place.<sup>5</sup> The diverse histories and cultures of churches or organizations can result in different ways in which they do interpersonal work. My hope is that people reading this book will become convinced of the biblical principles for discipling and find ways of putting those principles into practice in their situations.

Over the years I have been asked to write handbooks on how to do various aspects of ministry. Such books can be very helpful. But I believed that my calling was first to teach biblical principles of life and ministry with vibrant practical application and then to present that material in written form. I have left it to hearers and readers to apply the principles they have learned in their situations. Hopefully this has helped nurture many people who are continuing to serve God wherever they are.

There are many excellent, biblically based, practical books about discipling.<sup>6</sup> The fact that so many of them have been written within the past ten years reflects a welcome trend to emphasize the importance of discipling in today’s church. Some of the books deal with some aspects of discipling more comprehensively than my book does. Two books

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5. See below, p. 20, for how I use the terms *discipler* and *disciplee*.

6. E.g., Christine Dillon, *1-2-1 Discipleship* (Sevenoaks, Kent: OMF; Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2009); Edmund Chan, *A Certain Kind: Intentional Disciplemaking That Redefines Success in Ministry* (Singapore: Covenant Evangelical Free Church, 2015); Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1963, 1964, 1993); Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016); Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978); Bobby Harrington and Alex Absalom, *Discipleship That Fits: Five Kinds of Relationships That God Uses to Help Us Grow* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016); Walter A. Henrichsen, *Disciples Are Made Not Born: Helping Others Grow to Maturity in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1974); Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor: Leading Others on the Journey of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988, 2007); Lam Kuo Yung, *Total Discipleship: Experiencing Jesus and His Abundant Life* (Singapore: Katong Presbyterian Church, 2017); Dennis McCallum and Jessica Lowery, *Organic Discipleship: Mentoring Others into Spiritual Maturity and Leadership* (Columbus, OH: New Paradigm, 2012); Rainer Mittelstaedt, *Ministering Forward: Mentoring Tomorrow’s Christian Leaders* (Winnipeg, MB: Word Alive, 2017); Greg Ogden, *Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016); K. Thomas Resane, *Mentoring: A Journey to the Best One Can Be* (Kempton Park, South Africa: AcadSA, 2010); Dann Spader, *Discipling as Jesus Discipled: Seven Disciplines of a Disciplemaker* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016); Paul D. Stanley and J. Robert Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992); and David L. Watson and Paul D. Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015).

written recently are from the missionary/missiological community: *Making Disciples across Cultures*, by Charles A. Davis<sup>7</sup> and the more academic *Intercultural Discipleship*, by W. Jay Moon.<sup>8</sup> Using different approaches, they contribute significantly to the literature on biblical and culturally sensitive discipling. I decided to focus on a few key areas that need special attention today and to reflect on them biblically and practically. My main concern has been on nurturing godly and fruitful disciples of Christ, and I have tried to address some challenges faced when doing this.

As an ardent advocate of discipling in my preaching and teaching for many years, I have come to realize that discipleship is not something that people take to naturally. Many Christian leaders in Sri Lanka and abroad have told me that, despite the wide-ranging discussions on discipling in books and seminars, few people are really doing it. There seems to be something about our culture that resists this activity. All of this has made me think a lot about the cultural, spiritual, ministerial, and personality issues that render Christian leaders all over the world so reluctant to give themselves to this ministry. I hope to address these issues in this book.

I must pay tribute to those who have disciplined me. First and foremost is my mother, who taught her children the Bible from the time we were little. It was she who led me to experience personal salvation when I was in my early teens and who taught me the basics of the Christian life. Around that time, we were blessed with a wonderful pastor, Irish missionary George Good, whose influence helped me decide on vocational Christian work and convinced me of the glory of the Christian life, of preaching, and of worship. My father was a model of hard work and commitment to excellence in all he did. In my later teens, I became a volunteer in Youth for Christ and had the privilege of being disciplined by our leader Dr. Sam Sherrard. He taught me many of the practical principles that undergird my ministry today.

As a student at Asbury Theological Seminary I had the amazing privilege of coming under the influence of Dr. Robert E. Coleman, who

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7. Charles A. Davis, *Making Disciples across Cultures: Missional Principles for a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

8. W. Jay Moon, *Intercultural Discipleship: Learning from Global Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

had written the classic book on discipling *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. I fear that, though much of what I have written in this book has been influenced by Dr. Coleman's book, I am not able to give sufficient documentation of that fact. His teaching has become part of my life and thinking. He was firmly committed both to theology and evangelism, and he helped me develop the theological convictions that have undergirded my ministry. I did graduate studies in New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary and had Dr. Daniel Fuller as my mentor. He mentored me in the fullest sense of the term, spending unhurried time alone with me, giving me godly counsel, and teaching me how to study and argue for truth. Dr. Fuller's influence is seen in all the study and writing I do today.

Shortly after returning to Sri Lanka following my studies in the United States, I married Nelun and had the privilege of living close to one who practiced what I preached better than I did.

To these personal influences I would add my three brothers—Kumar, Duleep, and Priyan—and my sister, Anusha; my seminary teachers; my colleagues in Youth for Christ; my friends and accountability partners; the many pastors and other Christian workers I have befriended; and the biographies I have read. All of these have deeply influenced me in my walk with God. I have tried to footnote the sources of my ideas, but I am painfully aware that the influence of many people has not been acknowledged.

Since I have been so blessed by the discipling of others, it should be no surprise that discipling is very much a part of my ministry too. It has been one of the primary tasks I've engaged in while serving in Youth for Christ, first as a volunteer beginning in 1966 and then as a staff worker beginning in 1976. For the past thirty-five years, this ministry has primarily (not exclusively) been with first-generation Christians from other faiths. My grassroots ministry is in a church we have been involved in for over thirty-five years. Most of the members there are converts from other faiths. Since stepping down from the national directorship of Youth for Christ in 2011, I am giving more time to discipling and mentoring than ever before. Because I see this as an urgent need in Sri Lanka, I have had to reduce my preaching to devote more time to personal work. From disciples and my own children, Nirmali

and Asiri, I have learned a lot about Christian nurture and living. A day's meeting with those I disciple and mentor shortly before I left on sabbatical gave me many helpful ideas about discipling.

Many lessons that I have learned have come through failure. Some of those I have disciplined have not turned out as I wished they would, and with everyone I have disciplined I have made many mistakes. They have also suffered from the disadvantages that come from my own weaknesses. I will generally not mention the failures, as I would like to protect the privacy of individuals involved. Sometimes I use an example having changed the details of the story to guard the identity of the persons concerned. My failures and weaknesses have convinced me that those I disciple should be exposed to the influence of others who will compensate for my limitations.

This book was written on the campus of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, in the United States, which offered me an unbelievably generous six-month sabbatical package. The kindness that my wife and I experienced from the Trinity community is a wonderful example of God's unmerited favor on us. We were blessed not only by the material facilities they gave us but also through interaction with some of God's choice scholars who teach there. We were also warmly welcomed and enriched by the Arlington Heights Orchard Evangelical Free Church family of which we were a part during our time in the United States. My friends Brian and Ellen Relph kindly gave me a book grant to purchase books for this sabbatical. I also wish to thank my friends who supported us financially during the sabbatical and prayed for the writing of this book.

I am grateful to be working with Crossway once again, and with Thom Notaro, whose meticulous editorial work greatly improved this book.



Investing personally in people's lives can be done in different ways with differing intensity. Paul Stanley and Robert Clinton have a helpful classification of different types of discipling, mentoring, and coaching in their book *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need*

to *Succeed in Life*. In this book I am using the word *discipling* to refer to most kinds of personal investing in others. When I distinguish between discipling and mentoring, *discipling* will refer to intensive caring for relatively new believers and *mentoring* will be used for less intensive caring for more mature believers.

In this book, I use the terms *discipler* and *disciplee* rather than *master* and *disciple*. The discipler's aim is to help his or her disciplees to become disciples of the Master, Jesus Christ. Our aim is not to nurture "our disciples" but to help people to become faithful disciples of Christ. I believe this approach helps overcome some of the dangers of discipling that I will describe. *Disciple makers* is another good term used in several books for those I refer to as disciplers.

However, I must say that in the Bible people are called disciples of groups or individuals other than Jesus. The Pharisees and John the Baptist had their disciples (Mark 2:18). The Jews considered themselves disciples of Moses (John 9:28). But the Gospel of John records that John the Baptist oriented his disciples toward Jesus (John 3:25–30). John's disciple Andrew, impressed by John's comment about Jesus, followed him as he walked, and the ensuing conversation resulted in Andrew becoming a disciple of Jesus (John 1:35–41).<sup>9</sup> Most of the other instances of the word *disciple* (*mathētēs*) are for followers of Christ, and it often is a synonym for Christians in general.<sup>10</sup> So I trust I have adequate reason for using the terms *discipler* and *disciplee*. The ambition of the discipler could be described in the words of John the Baptist: in the life of the disciplee, Christ "must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

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9. I am indebted to Edward L. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor: A Model for Preparing Spiritual Leaders* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 5, for these insights.

10. Smither, *Augustine as Mentor*, 5.

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Part I

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INTRODUCING  
SPIRITUAL  
PARENTHOOD



# Spiritual Parenthood

*So Needed, but Why So Neglected?*

I find that every church I go to is talking discipleship and disciple-making as a core value—but I somehow don't see it. It is what I call a preferred value rather than an actual value, much like evangelism is in many church situations. It's what we are supposed to do—rather than what we do, and I guess it is because our culture of individualism sees it as a program rather than a lifestyle of sacrifice and inconvenience.

*Richard Brohier*<sup>1</sup>

The above words from my Australian pastor-friend Richard Brohier aptly describe a crisis facing the church. And they get to the heart of the problem: “Our culture of individualism sees [discipleship] as a program rather than a lifestyle of sacrifice and inconvenience.”

At the start of this book, I want to present discipling as a kind of parenting. Parenting is messy and inconvenient. Many couples today opt out of parenting because of the inconvenience, stress, and

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1. Richard Brohier, Geelong, Australia, email message to author, July 2, 2017.

disruption to life that children bring. If people are opting out of literal parenthood, it would not be surprising to find Christians opting out of being spiritual parents of people with whom they have no biological or other “essential” tie.

In this chapter and the next, I will explore the biblical model of spiritual parenthood and the challenges it brings. This may give us a clue to why so many Christians are reluctant to launch a ministry of discipling.

### **Introducing a Metaphor**

The Bible says that people are “born again” when they are saved (John 1:12–13; 3:3–8; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23). A newborn child needs to be cared for by parents. Most basically, God is our Father (John 1:12), but God often uses people to mediate the blessings of his fatherhood in our lives. So we shouldn’t be surprised to find that the Bible often refers to the nurturing of believers using the metaphor of parenthood. It fittingly describes the relationship between disciplers and disciples.

Even though there wasn’t much of an age gap between Jesus and his disciples, he sometimes referred to them as his children (Mark 10:24; John 13:33; 21:5). Paul sometimes spoke of whole congregations as his children (1 Cor. 4:14; Gal. 4:28; 1 Thess. 2:7, 11). But Paul especially named people he had personally disciplined as his children. He mentioned Timothy in this way—six times (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1)—as he did Titus (Titus 1:4) and Onesimus (Philem. 10). And Peter referred to Mark as his son (1 Pet. 5:13).

Peter used the common Greek word for son (*huios*) when referring to Mark. This word appears 380 times in the New Testament. But Paul, when referring to his spiritual children, used a less common word, *teknon*, which appears ninety-nine times in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> *Teknon* can be used for “a person of any age for whom there is a special relationship of endearment and association,”<sup>3</sup> and this seems to be the way Paul used it when alluding to those he disciplined. The term conveys the affection that exists between discipler and disciple.

2. In John 13:33, John uses a related word, *teknion*, when presenting the words of Jesus. This word appears seven times in 1 John also, each translated “little children” in the ESV. In John 21:5 we find the unrelated word *paidion*, which, like *teknon* and *teknion*, also carries the sense of an affectionate relationship.

3. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 109.

As William Barclay says, “Over and over again, there is affection in Paul’s voice when he speaks of Timothy.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul’s affection for Timothy is more strikingly presented in 2 Timothy, where he refers to Timothy as “my beloved child” (*agapētō teknō*), after which he says, “Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy” (2 Tim. 1:2, 4 NIV). Here we see both the joy and the pain of parenthood. Of the runaway slave Onesimus, Paul says, “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. . . . I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart” (Philem. 10, 12). The word translated “very heart” literally means “bowels,” which were considered the seat of feelings in those days. This “word is repeatedly used by Paul to convey the sense of affection.”<sup>5</sup> The brilliant upper-class scholar had become “a very dear friend and intimate companion”<sup>6</sup> of a slave who had run away from his Christian master; and he looked at his leaving as similar to losing his very heart!

Paul’s affectionate, parent-like love is vividly described in 1 Thessalonians 2:7–8, where he uses the mother metaphor: “But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.” “Affectionately desirous” is the translation of a single Greek word (*homeiromenoi*) that appears only here in the New Testament and was “rare even in the literature of the era.” It was “found in such contexts as a funerary inscription that tells how the parents long for their deceased son.”<sup>7</sup> Paul yearned for the Thessalonians and, he says, that is why he opened up his own self to them.

In this book we are looking at discipling as an affectionate relationship of caring between people who see themselves as having a parent-child relationship. The way I generally describe a discipling

4. William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 25.

5. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 214.

6. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2008), 412.

7. Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2002), 128.

relationship is to say that the discipler “looks after” the disciplee. As Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Act 20:28). The metaphor used for leadership here is that of a shepherd. This is another very good way to describe discipling, and the idea of shepherding will appear occasionally in this book, as well. Drawing upon an intimate knowledge of the life and work of a shepherd, biblical scholar Timothy S. Laniak has brilliantly described this aspect of leadership in his book *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*.<sup>8</sup> The truths in Laniak’s book have influenced me more than the footnotes can indicate.

### **Multiplication**

The fruit of a ministry of spiritual parenting must not be underestimated. Spiritual parenting is the key to multiplying disciples. As the famous discipling text says, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Four generations of Christians are mentioned here. (1) Paul teaches (2) Timothy, who in turn teaches (3) faithful men, who will be able to teach (4) others also. It is a process of multiplication rather than addition of disciples.

In the mid-1960s, when the ministry of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka was a few months old, its founder, Sam Sherrard, was looking at a list of all those who had committed their lives to Christ at the various evangelistic events we had conducted. He was suddenly struck by the fact that he had almost no contact with most of the scores of people who had made “decisions” for Christ. Around this time, he read two books that had a marked impact on him: Robert Coleman’s *The Master Plan of Evangelism*<sup>9</sup> and Waylon B. Moore’s *New Testament Follow-Up*.<sup>10</sup> Sherrard decided to start discipling a few people.

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8. Timothy S. Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks: Forty Daily Reflections on Biblical Leadership* (n.p.: ShepherdLeader, 2007). Laniak has written a more scholarly book, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

9. Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1963, 1964. References to this book hereafter will be from a newer, 1993 edition.

10. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963. A newer edition is dated 1984.

Plans to move into new cities were shelved until he was able to nurture a group of leaders in Colombo. The international leaders of Youth for Christ were initially puzzled by this approach, but they wisely did not insist that he change it.

I was a member of the first group that Sherrard disciplined. Gradually more and more leaders emerged, and the ministry started working increasingly with people who had no contact with churches. These were disciplined and channeled to churches. Some stayed on as volunteers in the work. Because there is a shortage of leaders in the churches, we decided generally not to look for volunteers and staff from outside the movement. Today we have about eighty staff and about 450 volunteers in ministries all over the country. New ministries start when a center has leaders they can release to go to a new area. In addition to nurturing our own staff and volunteers, hundreds of people disciplined in this ministry are active in leadership roles in churches. About eighty-eight are serving in pastoral roles, and a large number serve in other Christian organizations. This is significant, considering that the total Protestant population of the country is less than three hundred thousand.

I was leader of this work for thirty-five years, and since stepping down seven years ago, I have served as a kind of mentor and Bible teacher in the movement. It has not been easy to keep up this emphasis on discipling. Sometimes a local ministry would lose its discipling momentum. And if remedial steps were not taken, that would be the death of that work. We are a youth evangelistic movement. When one generation of youth graduates from that work and gets settled in churches, we have to find a new generation from outside the church—that is, through reaching the unreached. And those who are found need to be disciplined till they are settled in churches. If we don't do that, the ministry will have to close up. Each division of the ministry is always one generation from closing down!

I have felt the need to preach to and teach our staff and volunteers about discipling all through my forty-two years in this work. It is so easy to let a program orientation eclipse discipling as everyone gets busy seeking to reach the lost. While programs are vital for our survival, if the discipling drops off, those who are reached through the programs will fall away. And the ministry will be left without youth to

carry it through to the next generation. So each year we need to keep stressing the importance of discipling.

### **Commitment: The Key to Parenthood**

If spiritual parenthood is so needed, why is it so neglected? In the rest of this chapter we will look at the main reason why people are reluctant to launch into a ministry of discipling, and the next chapter will take up additional reasons.

#### *Commitment to Discipling, Deemed Too Costly*

If affection is the characteristic ingredient in spiritual parenthood, the fuel that keeps it going is commitment. When I am teaching on discipling, I often ask the audience how one can nurture affection, like that of a parent toward a child, among those who are not physically related. The most popular response I hear is that the discipler needs to spend a lot of time with the disciplee. In this busy world, that takes a lot of commitment. Let's look at how can we foster such commitment.

We must first clarify that we cannot actively care for everyone in the world. Only God can do that. Even when Jesus was on earth, he needed to concentrate on a few. Similarly, we can pay the price of commitment to a few people. Parenthood is inconvenient, but most parents unhesitatingly take on the inconvenience because of their commitment to their children. We like to have our lives nicely ordered and planned. But when a child gets sick and needs to be taken to a hospital, her parent does not say, "That wasn't on my schedule." Though we cannot keep breaking our plans for everyone, we will for our children—both biological and spiritual. That calls for commitment.

Yet every culture has some features of Christianity that believers find difficult to follow. One of the key countercultural features of Christianity today is commitment. Christianity is a religion of commitment. We are committed to Christ and his cause and to the people God leads us to. But many view Christianity from the viewpoint of consumers. They choose a church based on what the church has to offer. If the church loses its attractiveness and what they consider its usefulness, they simply change churches. That is how many choose their Christian friends also. With such an attitude toward Christian community, it is

difficult to muster the kind of commitment that nurturing spiritual children requires. We may do so for physical children because we must. But many Christians view discipling as an option. And many opt out.

Consequently, many people in the church today live with disappointment over leaders who abandoned or ignored them when they most needed help. Jesus talks about this in John 10:12, where he says that the hired hand abandons the sheep and runs away when he sees the wolf coming. Many sheep in the church have suffered because those they trusted abandoned them at tough times in their lives. How can one be healed of consequences of such abandonment? In the next verse, Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Wounded sheep can be healed through the costly commitment of a shepherd. Disciplers follow Christ and adopt this kind of commitment.

Those who have grown up with rejection by family and society will tell you how hard it is for them to believe that even God is truly committed to them. But some, seeing the costly commitment of their disciplers, become open to the fact that they are worthy of somebody’s commitment. That, in turn, opens the door to accepting that God is truly concerned for their welfare.

There is a crisis in many churches today because many members are not committed to the church and its program. People are unwilling to pay the price of costly involvement. Often churches organize mobilizing campaigns and seminars to resolve this problem. While these can be helpful, they do not strike at the root of the problem. We need a culture of commitment, and leaders must model that. The key then is leaders who will lay down their lives for the sheep. If the leaders die for the people, the people will die for the church! Paul said, “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of *your faith*, I am glad and rejoice with you all” (Phil. 2:17). He was willing to die for the faith of the Philippian Christians and even happy to do so. Jesus said, “For [the disciples’] sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:19). The context shows that the consecration Jesus was taking about was his death.<sup>11</sup>

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11. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 567.

### *The Strain of Caring for Both Family and Disciples*

There is another problem that causes people today to shun costly commitment to people in the church. Many children of Christian leaders say that their parents cared for so many other people that they didn't have time for them. Often these children have abandoned the church because of this. Such neglect of family is clearly wrong. Caring for our family members is a primary responsibility of church leaders. One older translation of 1 Corinthians 14:1 says, "Make love your aim" (RSV). My great ambition in life should be to serve my wife and children and do all I can to see that they are satisfied and happy. But I also have a call to serve others. We must attempt to do both.

But we are not messiahs. We have physical and emotional limitations. Therefore, as I will show below, we must keep our responsibilities at a manageable level. We must make sure we do not take on too many people to disciple. We must make sure we do not take on too many public assignments and committee responsibilities. If we have too much on our plates, our disciples, our families, and we ourselves suffer.

Even if we have been wise in taking on responsibilities, the balance may be difficult to maintain. A principle I have found helpful is that the balanced life is our cross. When I speak of the balanced life, I don't mean doing everything in moderation. Rather, the balanced life is found in obedience in all areas of life. We are to care for our families and our disciples and do a lot of other things. That is not easy. It could be quite tiring. It is our cross. But if we know that the cross is an essential part of the Christian life, we will pay the price of our commitments without being upset about it.

When my children were youths, they would sometimes ask me whether I could pick them up late at night from a party. Sometimes I was very tired and was looking forward to going to bed early. But, to my knowledge, I never refused such a request. Why? Because I know that it is God's will for me to cheerfully serve my children. It was a cross for me in that I was tired. But the Bible says that the cross is an essential aspect of a Christian's life; it is God's will for us. Because the will of God is perfect, we will not only do it; we will also be happy doing it.

That kind of approach should help to avert the impression that children are neglected because their parents are committed to ministry. And because we have a place for such difficulty in our theology, we won't be disillusioned by the inconvenience it brings on us.

## **The Vulnerability and Strain of Being Parents**

### *Openhearted Ministry Can Be Painful*

Discipling also makes one vulnerable to hurt and stress. Caring for people can be emotionally strenuous. Today we find much good advice on how to avoid stress. Given the competitiveness of our society and the drivenness it has produced in people, we should heed this advice. The driven, competitive kind of stress harms us and often leads to burnout. But discipling produces a different kind of stress—the stress of love. Speaking of his ministry in general, Paul says, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?” (2 Cor. 11:28–29). He addressed the Galatians as “my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” (Gal. 4:19). When you love people, you yearn for their welfare, and you hurt when they are hurt or have failed.

This kind of affection is the fruit of an openhearted approach to ministry. It is also expressed in these words from Paul:

Make room in your hearts for us. We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I am acting with great boldness toward you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy. (2 Cor. 7:2–4)

His feelings run deep, and he is not ashamed to express them.

I have heard people say that we must exercise some reserve to avoid making ourselves vulnerable to hurt from the people we serve. There is some truth in this. Pain must be kept at a manageable level. But, as we shall show below, while those who minister deeply with people

cannot avoid vulnerability to hurt, God equips them with the strength to face the pain.

### *The Goal of Discipling*

Paul tackles these issues well in Colossians 1:28–29, where he describes the goal of discipling: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28).<sup>12</sup> The goal is to “present people mature in Christ.” Paul uses the same verb, “present” (*paristēmi*), and the same tense (aorist) in verse 22: “You . . . he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.” Scholars like F. F. Bruce have shown that in both these verses Paul seems to be talking about presenting people to Christ at the second coming.<sup>13</sup> Just as parents do all they can to help their children succeed in exams, disciplers do all they can to present their disciples mature in Christ at the ultimate final exam: the second coming and its accompanying events. It will be our great joy to present the fruit of our labors to God at the judgment. On that day, the people we have invested in will be to us what the Philippians were to Paul: “my joy and crown” (Phil. 4:1).

When my daughter was little, I used to take her to her preschool each morning on my motorcycle (the standard means of economical transport for middle-class people in Sri Lanka). I would often see a lady who brought four or so little children to school in a passenger van. They would get off the van with her and then hold on to her, each one holding a finger, as she led them to school. I often think that this is the way I would like to go to heaven—taking along with me several people in whose lives I have invested.

### *Toiling*

But preparing people for the second coming involves hard work. Paul goes on to say to the Colossians, “For this [goal of presenting them mature] I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works

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12. There is a more comprehensive discussion of these two verses in Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy and Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), chaps. 27–29.

13. Bruce, *Colossians, Ephesians*, 87.

within me” (Col. 1:29). Two key verbs express the challenge of discipling here. The word translated “toil” (*kopiaō*) takes the meanings “work, work hard, labor . . . ; become tired, grow weary.”<sup>14</sup> Discipling is hard and tiring work. Any discipler would agree that often we feel we are too tired, too weighed down with other responsibilities, to respond to the needs of disciples. But the work must be done, though it is tiring.

We may need to visit our disciples when it is not convenient to do so. Sometimes we must work hard to equip them for a challenge they face. A disciplee may be struggling with an issue unfamiliar to us, like homosexual temptation or harmonizing Christianity and science. A disciplee may have a problem understanding a biblical passage. We may have to do some homework to find out about these issues so that we can help him or her adequately. We may need to ask someone else for advice on an issue. We may need to read up on the issue. This looks like a big price to pay, with everything else we have to do in this busy world.

### *Struggling*

The next verb is “struggling” (*agōnizomai*). It can mean wrestling, fighting, battling, and struggling. This reminds us that we are battling for the souls of people. I have experienced many failures in my discipling, when people I have worked with have begun to behave badly or backslide. All disciplers face such struggles. A disciplee falls in love with a nonbeliever. Another seeks revenge against someone who has hurt her. Another fails to have a regular time alone with the Lord or is too lazy to do the study needed for an upcoming exam.

Sometimes when they behave badly, people blame us because of our connection with them. When we refuse to give up on them, they think we are naïve and blind to their faults. Being called a naïve simpleton is hard to take. But just as Jesus bore our shame, we are called to bear the shame of our disciples and work with them to help them grow to maturity. We must not condone the bad actions of our disciples, but we can defend their sincerity and continue to hope in the possibilities of grace in their lives. One will need to pay a price to do so.

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14. Barclay M. Newman Jr., *Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (n.p.: United Bible Societies, 1993), electronic version in Logos Bible Software.

This is particularly true of youth work. Young people often make mistakes and are rejected or severely criticized by the church. Then they often become alienated from the church and leave. At such times, they need older Christians who will stand by them and support them and help them grow into mature servants of God. I often tell the Youth for Christ community that taking on the shame of our youth is part of the call of youth workers. The one thing we must strive to ensure is that those we disciple are truthful. We can work toward solving the problems of those who are honest with us. They deserve our taking on shame on their behalf. (We will look at the issue of truthfulness in chap. 11.)

Sometimes you have to carve out a time in your already busy schedule to make an unplanned visit as a disciplee is facing some special crisis. Perhaps he has angrily left a meeting, not wanting to talk to anyone. You may need to go to him even though it is late and you are feeling weary. When you catch up to him, he may tell you he has decided to leave the church. You may have to grapple with him for a long time until he gives up his intention to leave.

Then, there are some who backslide. And often when that happens, guess whom they blame? Their discipler! It dismays us when people come and tell us what our spiritual child is saying about us. Yet the loving shepherd, like our heavenly Father, leaves the ninety-nine in the fold and goes in search of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10–14). We sometimes romanticize the idea of going after lost sheep, forgetting what a difficult job searching the rugged terrain is without knowing where the sheep have gone. But that is what we must do. Even though they may be speaking ill of us, we don't hit back. Instead, we will use every legitimate method to persuade the backslidden to return to the Lord. (I will talk about battling for people in prayer in chap. 9.)

### *Strength from God*

Will having to spend so much energy on discipling, with all the other work we have to do, harm us? Will we end up burned out through overwork? It should not harm us permanently, because God always compensates for the price we pay doing it. Paul ends Colossians 1:29

saying the toil and struggling is done “with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” Discipling is primarily a spiritual exercise, and for that we need spiritual energy. God “powerfully works [that energy] within” us. But we must be in vital touch with God. There is no better preventative to burnout than time spent with God in the Bible and prayer.

I believe the major cause for burnout among leaders is insecurity, which can make us drive ourselves to achieve results that prove our worth. Time spent with God addresses this insecurity. We sense the reality that

the eternal God is [our] dwelling place,  
and underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deut. 33:27)

That truth attacks our sense of inadequacy. As David put it,

Those who look to him are radiant,  
and their faces shall never be ashamed. (Ps. 34:5)

As the radiance of God heartens us during our time with him, our shame is taken away, and our insecurity defused.

Unhurried time set apart to be alone with God also has a way of slowing us down and restoring our equilibrium after the battles of life have caused imbalance. If the time with God is a nonnegotiable aspect of our daily schedule, then we will set this time aside, however busy we may be. And we do not have to rush, because the same amount of time has been reserved whether we are busy or not. That fixedness of the time with God has a way of ministering to our tired and rushed souls and letting the peace of Christ restore our equilibrium.

I have said that the stress caused by discipling is the stress of love. We can always be equipped with the love needed for this work because God’s love is an inexhaustible resource. As Paul says, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Kent Hughes explains that the word translated “poured” carries “the idea in the Greek . . . that God’s love has been and continues to be poured out within our hearts. This is a picture of unstinting lavishness. The old commentator Bengel uses the

Latin word ‘*abundantissime*.’ Our hearts have been filled to overflowing with divine affection.”<sup>15</sup> There is no shortage here.

My biggest battle relating to mixing interpersonal work with a preaching and teaching ministry has been the battle for time to prepare my talks. I strongly believe that if we are to reflect the glory of God in what we do, our talks must be well prepared. Now and then an emergency has resulted in my having to preach while completely unprepared. Once on Pentecost Sunday in our church the preacher didn’t turn up. I was leading the service and hoping that he would come in time for the sermon. He didn’t. So I took my Bible and went through the second chapter of Acts, expounding it. I had preached on this text many years before. With the outline already in the back of my mind as I was going verse by verse, I somehow delivered a sermon, and I believe the Lord used it. This is one way in which the Lord gives us strength for preaching. But that is an exception to the rule.

Usually we preachers and teachers need to be well prepared. For me, finding time to prepare is often a struggle. I know I need God’s grace for this. I have a group of friends who pray for me, and I often send them urgent text messages explaining my need to be prepared. Sometimes, partly because of my bad planning and partly because of unexpected personal ministry or family needs, I’m forced to be up almost the whole night in order to be ready to preach the next morning. Of course, I come home and have a good sleep in the afternoon. (The ability to sleep anytime is a gift God has given me.) We must not ruin our health by having insufficient sleep.

I have been preaching for over fifty years, over forty of them as a full-time worker. Somehow God has seen me through. I have experienced the reality of Paul’s statement that God’s grace is sufficient and that our strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). My sense of desperation and weakness makes me depend more on God, which in turn becomes an occasion for God’s grace to be unleashed. I have found that preparing talks is an exhilarating task. Indeed, it is tiring and involves the demanding work of careful Bible study and relevant application. But handling the truth has a way of bringing freshness to our lives. After all, as David said,

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15. R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 109.

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul. (Ps. 19:7)

If you struggle with having to combine person-to-person work with study, preparation, and proclamation, I want to encourage you not to give up. It is demanding work, and you must be careful to arrange your schedule so that you will not hurt yourself by unplanned living. But God will see you through. The energy he supplies is sufficient for you.

### *The Necessity of Suffering*

The preceding discussion has responded to the main reason why discipling is not as popular as it should be in the church. Many are unwilling to pay the physical and emotional price that it entails. Sadly, with all the emphasis on “the blessings of God” in the church today, we are woefully lacking in a biblical understanding of the necessity of suffering in the Christian life. Many Christians think that if someone is suffering from emotional pain, tiredness, stress, or inconvenience, something has gone wrong. Such problems have not been factored into their understanding of a fulfilling life.

Paul would disagree. He followed his Master’s teaching and example, and included suffering as an essential aspect of his life. In light of that, when suffering came, he was not disillusioned, nor did he try to avoid it. Instead, he had learned that deeper than the pain of suffering was the joy of the Lord. The joy of the Lord gave him the strength to face the pain of suffering. It was from prison that he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). How could he say that from a bleak Roman prison? The answer comes a few verses later: “Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil. 4:11). He was in prison; but he was not in need, because there was something deeper than every situation he faced: the Lord and his sufficiency.<sup>16</sup>

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16. I have dealt in some detail with the issue of experiencing joy and pain at the same time in my book *Call to Joy and Pain*, chaps. 1–8.

I have seen some people start the work of discipling and then give up before long. If they had remained close to the Lord and his ways, and if they had applied to their commitment to their disciples the biblical teaching about suffering, they may not have needed to give up.

*Our multicultural world needs  
countercultural disciplers.*

People from all over the world are coming to Christ from a variety of backgrounds. This requires more people who are willing to commit to the effort and sacrifice it takes to invest in new believers.

Rooted in over four decades of multicultural discipleship experience, Ajith Fernando offers biblical principles for discipling and presents examples showing how they apply to daily life and ministry. He addresses key cultural challenges, such as the value of honor and shame, honoring family commitments, and dealing with persecution, and helps us think realistically about the cost and commitment required for productive cross-cultural ministry. This practical guide to discipleship will help us help others grow into mature and godly followers of Christ.

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“Grounded in Scripture, rooted in decades of ministry, and colorfully illustrated from Sri Lanka and around the world, this book will enrich God’s people as we seek to make disciples among all nations.”

*DAVID GREENLEE*, Director of Missiological Research and Evaluation,  
Operation Mobilization

“Fernando provides us with a rich and wise guide to forming disciples among those from various cultural backgrounds. Essential insights for effective ministry today!”

*HAROLD NETLAND*, Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Intercultural  
Studies, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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DISCIPLESHIP

