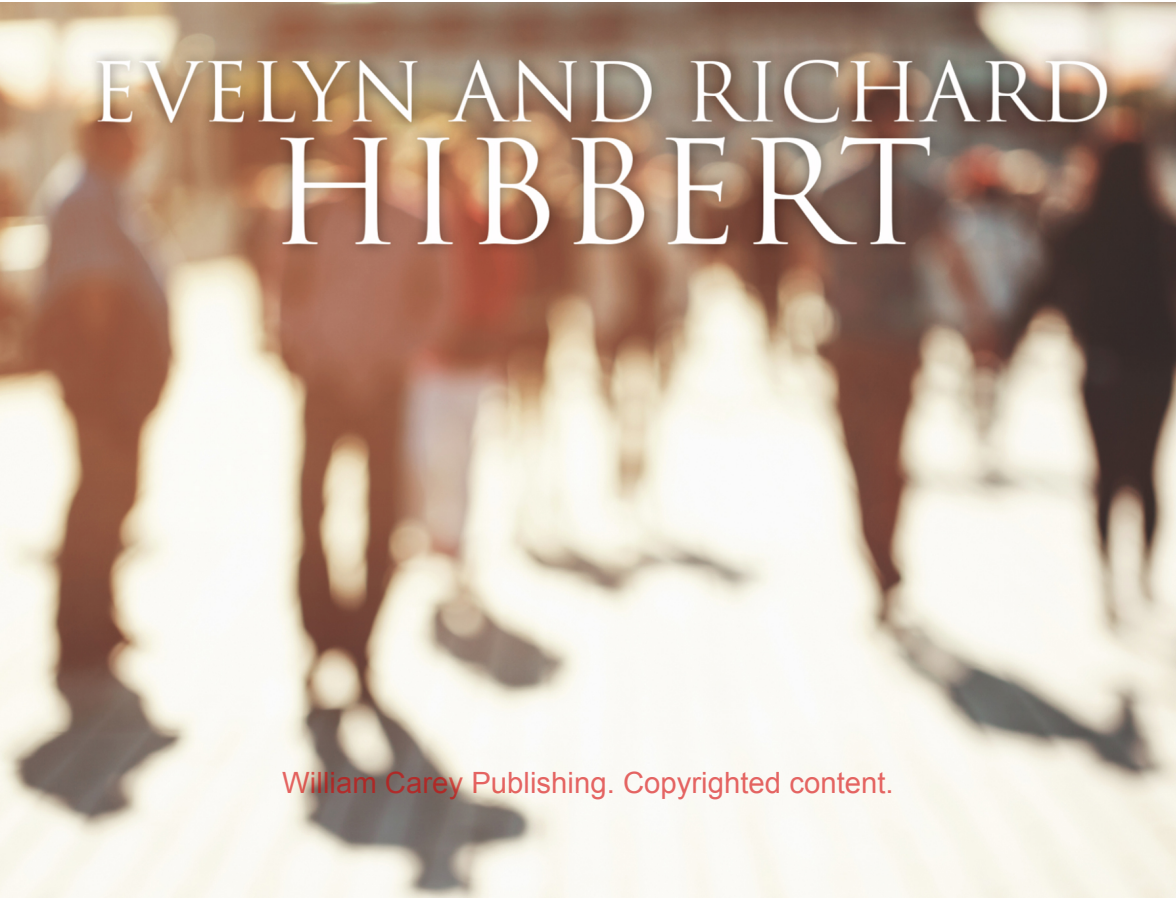


EVELYN AND RICHARD HIBBERT

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WALKING TOGETHER ON THE JESUS ROAD

DISCIPLING IN INTERCULTURAL CONTEXTS

Walking Together on the Jesus Road: Discipling in Intercultural Contexts
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Chapter

1

Walk alongside Disciples

The imperative to make disciples is crystal clear in Jesus' final commands to his followers. He told them to "go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you" (Matt 28:19–20a). In order for the good news about Jesus to be proclaimed beyond the groups of people where the church is already established, Jesus' followers have to cross cultural boundaries. The discipling they do is intercultural discipling.

Despite Jesus' clear command to make disciples, church leaders and missionaries in many parts of the world feel that this vital ministry is being neglected. Leaders in Thailand, for example, see making active disciples as the most pressing need in Thai churches.[1] In many parts of Africa, a failure to disciple people is a major reason for the lack of growth in Christians, according to Kenyan theologian Nahashon Gitonga.[2]

In places where discipling is being done, it makes a defining impact on whether people continue to follow Jesus. Being discipled by a more mature Christian was found to be the most important factor in new Taiwanese believers continuing to grow in their faith.[3] Church leaders in China observe that for Chinese students who go to study in the West and become Christians there, being discipled overseas "is key to returnees integrating effectively into churches back in China."[4]

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[1] Daniel Daesoon Kim, "An Urgent Plea Concerning Undiscipled People Groups: A Thai Perspective," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, no. 1 (2011).

[2] Nahashon Gitonga, "Making Disciples in Kenya," in *Making Disciples in a World Parish: Global Perspectives on Mission and Evangelism*, ed. Paul Wesley Chilcote (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 30.

[3] Allen J. Swanson, *Mending the Nets: Taiwan Church Growth and Loss in the 1980s'* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1986).

[4] Henry E. T., "Returnees Committing to the Church in China," *ChinaSource* 18, no. 3 (2016), http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/returnees-committing-to-church-in-china.

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Many Christians serving cross-culturally struggle, however, to find a good way to disciple people. Most discover that the approaches and methods they rely on when discipling people from their own culture do not work well when they try to disciple people from another culture. Finding an approach to discipling that suits people from other cultures is challenging. "My greatest struggle was to identify a practical methodology of cross-cultural discipleship," a Korean missionary wrote after serving in Africa for thirteen years.[5]

Very few resources address the felt need for help in this area. There are many excellent books on making disciples in a Western context.[6] There is also a growing number of resources that guide Christians in how to disciple people from particular religious backgrounds and in how to communicate across cultures.[7] But the emphasis in the discipling literature has been on Western methods of discipleship. Christians working with people from cultures other than their own are consequently left with little guidance about how to implement biblical discipleship in other cultures.

Our aim in this book is to address the felt need of Christian workers for help in how to disciple people from cultural backgrounds other than their own. We explore the impact of cultural differences on discipling, outline principles that can help disciplers navigate these differences, and consider the practical implications of the cultural challenges they will face in discipling people from another culture. To do this, we draw on the insights of others who have written about discipling and on interviews we conducted with more than thirty intercultural disciplers, most of whom have served or are currently serving as missionaries. We asked intercultural disciplers the following questions:

- Can you tell me about how you began to disciple someone from another culture, how you came to be a cross-cultural discipler?
- Can you walk me through what happened and how the discipling worked?
- What are some things you did that you felt were particularly helpful?
- What were some of the major challenges you faced in discipling this person/people?
- What would do differently now?

[5] Paul Sungro Lee, "Multiplying Discipleship in Cross-Cultural Contexts," *Lausanne World Pulse*, no. 10 (2010); Ray Register, "Discipling Middle Eastern Believers," *St Francis Magazine* 2, no. 5 (2009): 1.

[6] "Western" is a word often used and rarely defined in relation to cultural traits. It is frequently used to refer to people from Western Europe and Anglo-Saxon-background culturally-dominant countries, but has been used in relation to countries which are economically prosperous with highly educated populations. It is also sometimes used to refer to people who have experienced education in systems which have been modeled on Western European values and approaches to knowledge. Anglo-Saxon/Western European education reflects a low-context orientation to knowledge which focuses on the specific content of words over other contextual information. It values (decontextualized) written words over other forms of communication. We leave you, the reader, to decide for yourself who is "Western" in this sense.

[7] A list of books that we have found particularly helpful on disciple making in a Western context, communicating across cultures, and discipling people from particular religious backgrounds can be found at the end of this book.

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- What has happened to the person you discipled?
- How are they going now?
- What have you learnt about cross-cultural discipling which you think it would be good for others to know?

We also draw from our own experiences of discipling Turkish and Millet believers.[8]

What Is Intercultural Discipling?

Intercultural discipling is the long-term, intentional process in which Christians from one cultural background walk alongside people from another culture, sharing life with them in order to help them in their journey of getting to know Christ and growing in their relationship with Him. Intercultural discipling involves new and complex challenges beyond those we face when discipling someone from the same cultural background as ourselves. The questions and issues that people wrestle with in their journey of coming to faith in Christ differ from culture to culture. Intercultural disciplers need to be able to adapt their approach to address these questions and issues in a way that takes into account disciples' cultural values and learning preferences.

To understand intercultural discipling, we first need to understand disciple-making. Jesus is the expert disciple-maker. When he was on earth, his disciples learned by watching him, listening to him, and doing the practical assignments he gave them (Matt 10; Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–17). Jesus' example shows us that discipling revolves around the relationship between disciples and discipler in which they spend a lot of time together. The kind of discipling we focus on in this book is similar to the discipling Jesus did with the small group of men who were with him almost all the time for three years (Matt 28:16–17; Mk 3:13).

The word "disciple" is a translation of the New Testament Greek word *mathetes*, meaning "learner." Disciples of Jesus are people who are learning from and becoming more like Jesus. The overarching purpose of intercultural discipling—and indeed all discipling—is that disciples become more and more like Jesus. Intercultural disciplers do everything they can to "present [disciples] to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ" (Col 1:28). They invest in disciples so that they can become more and more like Jesus in their character and priorities, including growing to love God and people more and more (Matt 22:37,39).

[8] The Millet are a marginalised, Turkish-speaking, traditionally Muslim, people group. They are spread across several countries in Europe, including Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, and Greece. Since the late 1990s many have migrated to northern and western Europe for work. About 10,000 Millet came to faith in Christ during the late 1980s and early 1990s with the fall of communism.

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Disciples have different personalities, backgrounds, gifts, and strengths. But there are certain areas that every disciple should be growing in. These include:

- BOW—Putting Jesus first in their lives (Luke 14:25–26; Matt 16:24)
- RESPOND—Responding to God's word (Jn 8:31; Acts 2:42)
- GROW—Growing in their relationship with God (Jn 15:5–8; Col 1:9–10)
- LOVE—Loving fellow believers and other people (Jn 13:34–36; Eph 5:2)
- BE FRUITFUL—Evidencing love, joy, peace and all the fruit of the Spirit (Jn 15:5–27; Col 1:10)
- REPRODUCE—Making more disciples (Matt 28:19)

Discipling is a process in which disciplers help disciples along a journey of transformation from their old way of life to a new life as a member of God's family. This journey is deeply relational. It is helpful to think of this journey as being like people walking along a road together. We call this the "Jesus Road." Every Christian is a disciple who is walking on the Jesus Road together with other disciples. The intercultural discipler walks together on this road with those they are discipling for as long as their individual pilgrimages toward heaven intersect. This is shown in figure 1 below. The discipler, shown in black for easy visibility, is walking along the Jesus Road with a group of disciples from another culture (Culture A) who are shown in white with grey outlines.

JESUS' DISCIPLES LEARNED FROM BEING WITH JESUS 24/7: WATCHING, LISTENING, AND DOING PRACTICAL ASSIGNMENTS.

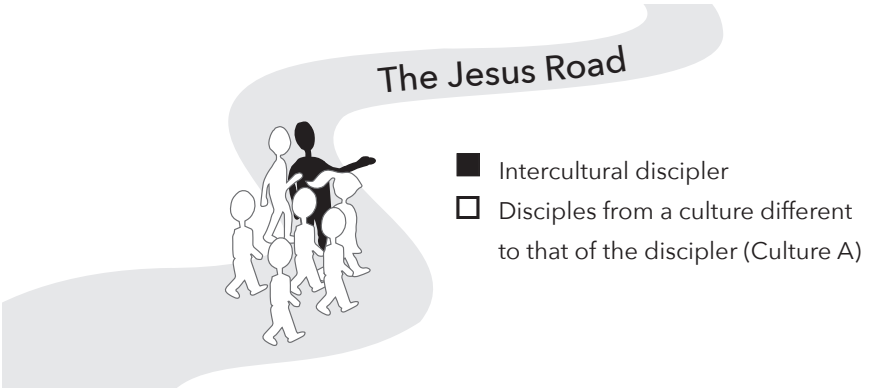


Figure 1. Disciples and discipler walking together on the Jesus Road

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The Challenges of Intercultural Discipling

A major challenge in discipling people from other cultures is the need to let go of our own cultural biases. Our culture deeply influences everything we do as well as the way we think. It also shapes the way we approach discipling. The model of discipling promoted in books written on this subject by Westerners has, unsurprisingly, been deeply influenced by Western cultural emphases and assumptions. Some of these emphases, such as intentionality, obedience, and multiplication, are positive; they reflect biblical emphases.

Other Western cultural emphases though, can hinder the growth of disciples from other cultures. One of these is an over-emphasis on the written word. While it is important to have the Bible available in written form, reading the Bible is not the only way that people learn what it says. Many cultures have a rich heritage of oral teaching and learning. Using an oral approach to discipling in these cultures can be far more effective in helping people to understand God's ways than insisting on using written materials. When disciplers insist on text-based methods of learning, they unwittingly exclude some disciples who are keen to learn and prevent them from growing in their faith. Educated young people who are comfortable with Western methods of learning then become the focus of disciplers' attention. Older, wiser disciples who are respected by others in their community can be bypassed or ignored. This can result in the Christian message being devalued in the eyes of the community because it is not endorsed by its leaders.

Another cultural emphasis that is a challenge to effective intercultural discipling is individualism. While individualism helpfully encourages personal responsibility, it downplays the importance of groups and the relationships, belonging, and identity they give. When Western disciplers unthinkingly apply their individualistic orientation to discipling, disciples from more group-oriented cultures can feel pressured to ignore or leave their group. This decreases the opportunity that other group members have to hear about Jesus and removes accountability structures, making the disciples more vulnerable to moral failure. It can also lead to disciples feeling extremely lonely, partly because disciplers and churches from individualistic cultures can rarely replicate the quality and intensity of community that more group-oriented cultures provide. The end result can be that disciples ultimately abandon their faith.

BELONGING TO GROUPS IS VERY IMPORTANT.

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