

Continuing the Conversation on “Proclamational” DBS: Four Reflections from the Motus Dei Network

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From the Editorial Team: *The Motus Dei Network is a collaboration of practitioners, missiologists, researchers, and mission leaders who seek to build authentic relationships and coordinate scholarly research on global discipleship movements in order to promote quality missiology and effective missional praxis for the church among all nations. The following are four essays which originated in an email exchange among members of the network discussing the Seedbed (Fall 2021) article by Jon T., “‘Proclamational’ DBS: Biblical Preaching and Teaching in Discovery Bible Studies.” [Click here to read the original article.](#)*

DBS and Preaching: A Comparison of Two Discipleship Tools (by Emanuel Prinz)

From Seminary to Simple

In seminary I learned to preach three-point expository sermons.¹ I strove to hone this art of preaching during my years of pastoral ministry in my country of origin, Germany. When I later moved to serve among an unengaged Muslim people group in Sudan, I started doing Bible study with new disciples in a manner *much* too complicated and complex for their needs. As I kept honing my approach, I always watched for three indicators of needed changes. First, did our disciples remain engaged in the Bible study process, and what indicated they had disengaged? Second, did they live out what we had studied? Third, was the content of the study simple enough that they shared it with others? The more years passed, the simpler my approach became.

When I was first introduced to the Discovery Bible Study (DBS) method, I was taken aback. It was strikingly similar to the approach my team and I had developed! In hindsight we might call it “oral DBS.” In both evangelism and discipleship, we would tell a Bible story in a slightly animated way, then would invite those in the group to repeat the story as many times as was needed—often half a dozen times—until we felt they had accurately recalled the key elements in their retelling. We then asked a set of questions to help them understand the story. Our set of questions was as follows:

1. What does God/Jesus do?
2. What do we learn about him through this?
3. What is a good (or bad) example we learn from?
4. How will I obey what God has spoken to me?

Since then, I have studied the theory of learning in a PhD program in intercultural education and have gained additional lenses that have helped me understand and appreciate the benefits of the DBS model. I will summarize them briefly.

Learning Happens When Learners Do Something

Pedagogy and learning theory hold that learning happens when learners *do* something with the subject matter at hand (Ott 2019). In a DBS group, each learner plays an active role. They ask questions, they study, they discover, they articulate what they discover, they engage with what other group members say, they discuss, and they obey God by applying what they have discovered.

Their active response does not end when the group meeting ends. The final step of DBS is obedience. Every group member discerns prayerfully a step of obedience they feel compelled to take in response to the truth they have discovered during the DBS meeting. They communicate to the group what act of obedience they are committing to; then they go and do it. And additional learning occurs through the process of attempting to obey.

¹ Classic texts include Stadelmann [1996] 2013 and Chappell [2005] 2018.

Compare this with the three-point expository preaching model I learned in seminary. How much do congregants in a Sunday morning worship service *do*? How active are they as they sit in their pew or on a chair and listen to a sermon? (Passive listening is not considered *doing* something.) If we honestly assess common practice, do we find many churchgoers who leave a sermon resolved before God to take a step of obedience that is on their hearts? In consequence, how much learning and growth actually happens?

The Way We Do Church is Powerful: The Lens of the Implicit Curriculum

We will understand better how learning is happening when we take a closer look at how ways of “doing church” impact learning. The lens of the so-called “implicit curriculum” is immensely helpful for this (Jackson 1968).

Educators describe as “implicit curriculum” the things taught implicitly through the way teaching and learning happen. Educators commonly agree that the implicit curriculum *overrides* whatever may be taught in the explicit curriculum (Ferris, Lillis, and Enlow 2018). The lens of the implicit curriculum can help immensely in comparing DBS and preaching.

We do well to ask of both models: How does learning happen? What does the model teach implicitly . . .

- about the Bible?
- about the Holy Spirit?
- about how God speaks to and communes with his people?
- about ordinary disciples and the priesthood of all believers?
- about professionals/experts/clergy?
- about the nature of spiritual fellowship?
- about the nature of discipleship?

Before you read on, go back and consider each question as it relates to the preaching and DBS models. Why do I suggest this? To help you make some discoveries. These discoveries will stick with you because you made them yourself. This will be much more transformational than if you were to simply read *my* discoveries.

After you’ve considered each question above, you may compare your thoughts and perspective with mine below:

- The Bible: accessible to every disciple, versus only a few; nourishes the heart versus needs to be served as a ready-made meal.
- The Holy Spirit: speaks to all disciples through the Bible and through the body of other disciples versus mainly through a few professionals or clergy.
- How God speaks to and communes with his people: directly versus through a mediator.

- Ordinary disciples and the priesthood of all believers: a reality lived every time they gather together versus simply a beautiful concept.
- Professionals/experts/clergy: equip ordinary disciples for ministry versus feed the flock and perform the ministry themselves.
- The nature of spiritual fellowship: sharing discoveries of truth, commitments to obey, and accountability constitute the heart of the gathering versus an add-on after the actual service.
- The nature of discipleship: obedience to the truth one discovers versus listening to the truth someone else discovered.

The Missing Elements of Small Groups

You might think with regard to the traditional church model, “But what about small groups? Certainly participants in small groups are actively engaged and doing something with scripture. You should compare apples with apples.” Fair enough. Although there are amazing exceptions, I describe common practice in the traditional church model that includes small groups. A group meeting usually contains the following elements (each given different amounts of time in each unique group):

- Fellowship
- Worship
- Prayer
- Bible study

All these elements are important, and they resemble the biblical pattern of Christian community found in Acts 2:42. Let’s compare them with a DBS group meeting, having the following standard elements (Pestke 2019):

- Fellowship: sharing of joys and struggles
- Worship: thanking God specifically for what group members are grateful for
- Prayer: making requests for specific needs of the group and non-disciples that group members reach out to
- **Accountability**: asking and sharing with one another about the obedience step and the sharing with a non-disciple from last meeting
- Bible study: in the discovery format described above, culminating in...
- **Obedience**: committing to take a specific step in the coming week
- **Evangelism**: committing to share with someone in the coming week

While we see several common elements, the three circled elements of DBS stand out because they are not found in most small groups. These three lie at the very heart of discipleship, and where they are missing, the healthy formation of disciples is seriously impaired.

What We Don't Do in our Gatherings is Powerful: The Lens of the Null Curriculum

This realization leads us to explore what traditional models lack that the DBS model offers, as well as the significance of what is missing. We often assume that something missing is simply missing. It perhaps leaves a void. But what is missing actually plays a very powerful role in learning. It teaches people a lot. Educators describe this dynamic in learning as the “null curriculum” (Eisner 1985).

Through the absence of concrete obedience, regular gospel sharing, and accountability, traditional small group approaches communicate that such things aren't very important. They convey: “We value fellowship, worship, prayer, and Bible study. Gaining some new insights through studying the Bible is great. But concrete obedience to biblical teaching is optional. You needn't prioritize imminent sharing with someone outside the kingdom. And we will not keep you accountable, because follow-through doesn't matter much. We're happy if you demonstrate your faithfulness by showing up again next week.” Of course, no pastor or small group leader would say that explicitly. It is communicated, though, unwittingly and nonverbally through the null curriculum.

Conclusion

If we're serious about making biblical disciples, we need to wrestle with two vital questions:

- What do I want to communicate through the way I do church?
- What might be missing in my model that could help my disciples absorb strong biblical discipleship?

Keep discovering!

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A Global South Perspective on Preaching and DBS (by Sandro Oliveira)

The article on "proclamational DBS" stirred up a very healthy discussion in the Motus Dei Network on the issue of Christian discipleship and spiritual growth among believers. However, I did notice that some participants shared a level of discontentedness with the style of teaching commonly used by churches in the West (preaching and didactic teaching). For some, the form of teaching used in Western churches has not produced the results they would have hoped for in new believers. Those who do not endorse the Western style of preaching feel that a more inductive style of teaching, such as is used in DBS groups, would be better for teaching and discipling believers.

I sympathise with some of these thoughts, and I understand the need to evaluate the efficacy of different methods used in our churches. However, I think too much of our focus may be on teaching methodology.

I have spent the last twelve years serving as a church planter in the United Kingdom, and I have used both the traditional and Disciple-Making Movement models of church planting. I have led culturally homogeneous groups that were made up of foreigners. And I have also led groups that were made up of disciples from all over the world, including the UK. Through my experience in using both preaching and DBS, I've come to realise that both methods have their strengths and weaknesses.

Born and bred in the Global South, I came to know Christ in the context of a great spiritual awakening that is taking place in my part of the world. Where I come from, preaching and didactic teaching are the most common methods of teaching used by churches. Notably the efficacy of these methods in the discipling of believers seems much more positive and transformative in the Brazilian context than what has been observed by some coming from Western church contexts. Why is that?

Considering my personal experience and all that I see happening in those places where Christianity is experiencing growth and vitality, I wonder if the real problem is not the methods, curriculums, or systems that we use, but rather something deeper. Could the issue be something more pervasively cultural, spiritual, and ecclesiological?

I have observed that, for a good number of believers in the West, the Sunday service tends to be the only "church activity" of the week. Now I understand things are done differently from

community to community and denomination to denomination. However, based on my personal experience and observation from serving in England, what I have observed is true for a large part of the church membership, particularly among Reformed congregations.

In the Global South, however, as I have experienced it, church is more of a whole-life experience. When you come to Christ, you are brought into a new "family." In this context, relationships are very close, and people spend a huge amount of time together. There are also numerous church activities throughout the week. Because of the constant interaction a believer has with his/her community of faith, learning and transformation is not taught, but modelled, encouraged, and expected. New believers are held accountable for their spiritual growth. In this setting, the Sunday preaching is followed up with numerous and constant nudges to live out what we've been taught in the world.

On the other hand, I have observed with running DBS groups in the West that if a single DBS gathering is the only faith-based activity a new believer participates in during the week, there is comparatively less noticeable learning and transformation in their lives.

The above comparison is an example of why it seems to me that there are more variables to the discussion about teaching and discipleship in church than simply finding the best teaching model.

Another Look at the Biblical Meaning of "Preaching" and "Teaching" (by J. R. Stevenson)

I am a practitioner who does Discovery Bible Studies regularly in an Arab Muslim context. While believing this to be an effective evangelistic strategy in my context, I have some concerns about the long-term sufficiency of DBS in the life of the church. [Jon T.'s article](#), in my opinion, has significant credibility by acknowledging that the "objections [to DBS] cannot be dismissed as merely the misgivings of 'traditionalists'" (2021, 11), due to the clear presence of teaching and preaching throughout the New Testament. His serious approach to the issue is reflected throughout the article.

Jon T. also weaves practical helps for implementing DBS throughout the article. For example, he notes that in his team's practice, leaders do not only passively ask questions but may proclaim or confront using the text under consideration (15). Further, he trains leaders of DBS groups not only to ask the predetermined DBS questions but also to prompt the group to notice key truths in the text through questions such as "Why is this phrase in verse 12 important?" (19). I also appreciate his note that DBS is a tool that can help discovery groups to develop into churches (10), as well as the needed reminder that leaders often need to hold back information for which the group is not yet ready (20). His acknowledgement that DBS is a tool of a larger strategy also assuages some concerns that DBS could become the only way in which leaders access the Word (20).

Having said that, I would like to raise some questions about Jon T.'s biblical argumentation related to the meaning of preaching and teaching. First, I find some aspects of the biblical usage of preaching to be missing in Jon T.'s presentation. According to Griffiths's analysis of words for preaching in the New Testament—he includes *kerusso*, *euangelizo*, and *katangelo*, while Jon T. discusses *diategomai* instead of *katangello*—there are three features of preaching: “As used in the New Testament, the verbs typically [1] refer to the act of making a public proclamation; [2] the agent is generally a person of recognized authority; and [3] the substance of the proclamation is normally some aspect of Christ's Person and work, the implications of the gospel, or some other truth from God's word” (2017, 42).

Jon T. cites Griffiths's study at a few points but does not address points 1 and 2 in particular. Those points, in my opinion, are critical for evaluating if DBS can fulfill the role of preaching in the full biblical sense. Griffiths notes that of the fifty-nine occurrences of *kerusso* in the New Testament, all but a few of them refer to an agent of recognized authority. Griffiths concludes that “the New Testament nowhere calls or commands believers as a whole group to ‘preach’ the gospel” (2017, 51). Griffiths acknowledges that all believers do have a role in speaking the gospel to their communities (believing and unbelieving) but argues that “preach” (*kerusso* in particular) has a narrower semantic range than this general speaking of God's Word, a range limited by the three features noted above.

Jon T. does not engage with this conclusion and indeed states the opposite one: “The biblical use of *kerusso* implies an expectation for all believers to be engaged in proclaiming publicly the good news about Jesus, crucified and resurrected” (2021, 14). While I agree that all believers do have a responsibility to “give a reason for the hope that is in them” (1 Pet. 3:15), the biblical usage of *kerusso* does not support that all believers have a responsibility to preach. Perhaps Jon T. has another way of dealing with this data, but it is not presented in the article.

Second, in terms of the biblical passages regarding teaching and teachers, I have two primary reservations about Jon T.'s portrayal of the material.

(1) In my view, he relies on an unstated assumption—which I would question—when he says, “Teaching is connected to disciple making, and since the mandate for disciple making falls to every believer, the mandate for teaching does as well” (2021, 17). The problematic assumption, from my perspective, is that the command to make disciples is given to all believers in the same way.

The Great Commission has implications for the whole church, but it was given *directly* to the apostles, not to all believers. We all make hermeneutical connections from the apostles (who originally received the commission) to the rest of the church. Jon T. draws a connection directly to all believers, while I would draw a connection to the church as a whole, understood as an institution built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), whose work is guided by the leadership of elders. These different assumptions obviously affect whether “the mandate for teaching” in the Great Commission “falls to every believer,” or whether there are

some kinds of teaching that are the direct responsibility of those gifted and called by the Spirit (in distinction to the general responsibility of all believers to teach and admonish one another [Col. 3:16]).

(2) Some biblical examples of teaching in the context of the body of believers are lacking from Jon T.'s presentation that could helpfully inform the discussion. As an example, in 1 Tim. 4:1–16, Paul instructs Timothy to do several things in response to false teaching that was apparently being spread. He says he should “put these things before the brothers” (4:6), “command and teach these things” (4:11), devote himself “to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching” (4:13, ESV). I recognize that Jon T. acknowledges such elements can be incorporated into DBS (2021, 15). However, I would argue these elements are not inherently part of “discovery,” and that therefore the “discovery” element must be supplemented at some point if the full biblical picture is to develop.

For this reason, in my practice, I continue to use DBS as an initial evangelistic tactic and training tool for equipping believers to go out into their communities. However, as the church matures and Christ gifts it with teachers, I aim to encourage more direct forms of teaching and proclamation to eventually replace DBS in the gathered worship of the church.

Nonetheless, believers in a fully-formed church can continue to be empowered to use DBS as an effective strategy for engaging lost people in study of the Word. I agree with Jon T. that all believers have a role in spreading the Word—what Griffiths calls “the Word ministries of all believers”— and DBS, in my opinion, remains an effective way to activate believers in that.

In conclusion, Jon T. has brought out many wonderful aspects of the role of all believers in ministering the Word to each other, both in terms of biblical support and the practicalities of how DBS can facilitate that ministry. However, as I have described above, I find that the article inadequately deals with several nuances of the biblical material as it relates to the long-term sufficiency of DBS to express biblical preaching and teaching in a fully-formed church.

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The Role of Gifted Bible Teachers in Movements (Trevor Larsen)

An important question raised about Disciple-Making Movements is: “If disciples receive biblical content primarily through discovery, what role (if any) is available for mature believers who have the gift of teaching, as described in the New Testament?” I would like to provide some concrete examples which describe how one set of linked movements I am involved with uses

gifted Bible teachers. The result is a larger “Word system” which applies the equipping ministry described in Eph. 4:11 broadly in a way which supports movements which are expanding and branching out to other peoples and places.

Most Christians in the Western world are accustomed to a Bible teacher presenting a monologue to a listening audience of believers, most or all of whom have been believers for many years. Few Western leaders have grappled with how to best use teachers in a context where exponential growth is occurring faster than we can keep up with. So it can be hard for Westerners to imagine how to fit the teaching gift into movements that are expanding in ways similar to the pace and patterns we see in the book of Acts.

The dynamic of quickly expanding church-without-walls-becoming-movements is so foreign to the experience of most Western Christians that we tend to erroneously assume the fruit of such growth must be shallow. We then tend to read the Bible through that assumption, which can skew our interpretation of Scripture. A serious study of Acts shows that the early Church grew quickly and produced linked movements of churches-without-walls numbering thousands of believers. This happened in just a few years in each of these areas: Jerusalem; Antioch; and the provinces of Galatia, Ephesus-Asia Minor, and Macedonia. Strong growth also happened in the Judean province, Samaria, and Achaia.

I doubt any Bible teacher would claim that the fast growth described in Acts was wrong because it was shallow. Luke, as the divinely inspired author, repeatedly emphasized in periodic summaries that everyone was in awe of and celebrated the continuous growth of the church (e.g., Acts 2:47; 5:11–14). The nature of the growing linked-*ekklesia* mosaic described in Acts was expansive: growing in quality and quantity at the same time. We believe the same thing can happen (and *is* happening) in our time as well.

I would like to share the experience of one set of movements that prioritize multiplication of small groups in which participants discover God’s truth together from the Bible. *Teachers have an important role*, not in leading one small or medium-sized group directly, or speaking to large audiences, but in equipping small group leaders of somewhere between five and five hundred linked small groups.

The teachers’ concrete equipping activities include the following:

- 1) **Responding to questions about Bible texts from small group leaders.** Small group leaders, in their cluster of groups, voice questions that emerge in their groups which they do not yet feel they can answer well. Alternatively, the leaders of small regions may ask for help to answer certain questions from small group leaders. For example, in a Bible study series on the book of Mark, questions often arise about how to address issues Muslims have concerning the person of Christ.
- 2) **Introducing new Bible study series.** After picking three passages out of twenty-five in a series, teachers facilitate these leaders to discuss them in groups (e.g., five breakout

groups with four leaders each meeting in the corners of a room—or on Zoom). After discussing the text in groups, each group in the room picks a representative who reports to the larger group what they have discovered from their time in the Word. After hearing each group's summary, the overall facilitator then highlights anything else of significance in the text that was not yet reported by the groups' representatives. This teacher may use time at the end to highlight certain Bible study methods. For example, if the passage is Jesus' three parables in Luke 15, the equipping teacher will highlight Bible study methods specific to interpreting this set of three linked parables.

- 3) **Developing new Bible study series.** For example, within the group I'm involved with, some local leaders expressed the need for teaching regarding spiritual warfare and the demonic. In response, some teachers prepared a series from the Bible on Satan, demons, and our response to demonic issues. The gifted teachers appreciated this comprehensive series, but additional feedback showed us that a briefer version was needed for the majority of believers who had less time available to devote to this topic, which resulted in a shorter series called "Sixteen Traps of Satan."

In developing a series like this, people with teaching gifts may initiate the effort to develop the series and then connect with other teachers within the same set of believer groups to develop it together.

- 4) **Including the teacher's voice in inductive studies for groups.** Teachers work to protect our value that 90 to 95 percent of each series consists directly of Bible passages, teaching people to search the scriptures themselves. For the other 5 to 10 percent, the teacher develops passage summary titles and introductory and transitional remarks using the teacher's voice. The passages they select for the series, plus these remarks, frame the entire discovery process. They select passages that develop some aspect of disciples' spiritual growth, and in their remarks use terms familiar to local people, to convey the biblical meaning.
- 5) **Writing other Bible mentoring tools.** These include, for example, teaching on various Bible study methods, a dialogue showing how to answer common questions, or some light commentaries on critical issues. Such tools can vary widely.
- 6) **Working with IT experts to make sure their library of Bible study series and linked Word tools are available widely and inexpensively.** We put the entire Bible and our Bible study series within an app (available free from Android Play Store), in the most widely used language. (We hope to go into other languages, but this will require much additional work.)
- 7) **Developing short teaching videos on critical issues.** The idea is for these videos (which can be sent by WhatsApp attachment with low bandwidth) to have a particular equipping function, especially on sharpening skills in Bible study. For example, one

teacher prepared three short videos on three topics in Proverbs which were used to improve skills for reading and applying Proverbs.

8) Teaching in occasional medium-sized gatherings of twenty to two hundred people.

Such gatherings reach to a range of different kinds of believers and their contacts. One example is a teaching session regarding the celebration of Eid Al-Adha on the Islamic calendar, remembering Abraham's sacrifice of his son. At this gathering, teachers convey a walk-through-the-Bible teaching on true sacrifice from the Bible. During the fasting month, they give a similar teaching on true fasting. On other occasions, they hold one-day seminars on harmonious families.

Another example of this is a special twelve-hour generosity training to equip teachers which highlights passages in the Bible about giving. These trainings can be done face to face or by Zoom. Teachers intentionally try to model good Bible study methods in the way they address relevant needs and questions in their context in order to equip hearers in their own reading and application of the Bible.

In this particular network of rapidly expanding movements, gifted Bible teachers play numerous vital roles in equipping God's people and building up the body of Christ. Although the roles look different than what most Westerners envision teachers doing, these teachers exercise their gifts in forms of teaching that meet the needs of the fast expanding movements in which they serve.