

Response to Radius International's Criticism of Disciple Making Movements (DMM)

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Responding to: A Brief Guide to DMM: Defining and Evaluating the Ideas Impacting Missions Today

By Chad Vegas, Radius International

<https://radiusinternational.org/a-brief-guide-to-dmm/>

In Pastor Chad Vegas' web article, "A Brief Guide to DMM: Defining and Evaluating the Ideas Impacting Missions Today," Vegas presents appears to be Radius International's position on Disciple Making Movements. Vegas serves as a board member of Radius International and says that Radius does not recommend the DMM strategy to those missionaries they train. He concludes that the DMM strategy fails to demonstrate adequate biblical support, and even goes so far as to suggest that DMM is based on an understanding of the Gospel that completely rejects the Protestant understanding.

I have sought to briefly address some of Radius International's concerns about the DMM strategy in the following paragraphs. I do so, not because I am experienced in the DMM strategy, but solely on my reading of the same resources that Vegas has read, and my interaction with other DMM resources and practitioners as well.

1. Obedience-based Discipleship

Is obedience-based discipleship following Jesus' pattern?

Pastor Chad Vegas begins his criticism of the DMM strategy by taking issue with the emphasis on obedience, rather than knowledge as the aim of disciple making. Vegas claims:

"We simply never see a command, nor a pattern, from our Lord, nor his Apostles, where unbelievers are disciplined through regular obedience until they finally have sufficient trust in Christ to be baptized. Rather, the consistent method is the proclamation of the doctrine of the gospel. The proper response is faith and repentance, followed by baptism and teaching toward maturity in Christ. Yet, the proponents of DMM contend their method is learned from the Lord himself."

Response:

It seems to me that the question that needs to be explored is whether Jesus ever taught people to obey Him and the Word of God prior to these people clearly identifying themselves as believers in Him as Lord and Saviour. From my reading of Scripture, it appears that there are multiple examples of Jesus doing so, often to people who were clearly not believers or disciples.

- The rich young ruler – Matt 19:16-22, Luke 18:18-24
- The sermon on the mount – Matt 5-7. Not nearly all those who heard him were regenerated believers. See Matt 5:20, 5:22, 6:14-15, 7:13-14, 7:21-23, 7:26-27.
- The expert in the law who asked who was his neighbour – Luke 10:36-37.
- The Pharisees – Luke 11:39-41, 14:12-14

DMM proponents are obviously not against people repenting and professing Jesus as Lord when they first hear the Word of God. But they ask people to obey the Word from the very beginning, whether or not they have yet openly or clearly demonstrated that they want to be identified as believers in Christ. They believe it is essential to establish the clear understanding (the DNA) that obedience, not just knowledge, is the appropriate response to the Word of God. Why would anyone object to people seek to obey the Word of God before they come to saving faith? Was not one of the purposes of the Law to show the Israelites their own inability to do God's will in the flesh?

Is obedience-based discipleship a false Gospel?

Chad Vegas believes that obedience-based discipleship is falling into the same doctrinal heresy as that of the Roman Catholics during the time of the Reformation. He believes that the DMM advocates are equating faith with obedience, and are thereby adding obedience to the conditions for salvation.

Vegas: "It is the fourth and fifth element of the Watsons' gospel that OBD necessarily redefines in a manner not consonant with a biblical gospel. The definition of faith, and the basis of the "grace / faith" relationship with Jesus, in OBD is a false gospel."

Vegas particularly objects to the Watsons' definition of faith. "Faith is defined as the continuous act of choosing to be obedient to God's Word regardless of what it may cost, even our lives."¹

Response:

Probably the Watsons did not intend to equate faith with obedience, but rather to point out that faith is only visibly evident in obedience. A little later in their book, the Watsons object to the modern church practice of accepting as members all those who have made a "profession of faith" regardless of whether they have made any changes in their behavior in obedience to the Word of God.² In referring to a profession of faith, the Watsons are definitely not meaning a profession of obedience, but rather a profession of trust in Christ. A few pages further in their book, they say,

But discipleship requires faith: the faith to be a believer in and a follower of Christ, and the faith to do what Christ commands— the faith to say to others, "If you want to be a disciple of Christ, copy my life" (see 1 Corinthians 4: 16; Philippians 4: 9; and 1 Timothy 4: 12). Learning does not require faith, just intellect. Obedience requires faith. It is a faith that, when acted out, says to others, "I will obey all the commands of Christ regardless of the circumstances in which I find myself or the consequences of any actions I must take or the consequences of any words I must say in order to be obedient to Christ in all matters, public and private."³

Here, Watsons' understanding of the relationship between faith and obedience is quite clear. Obedience is the fruit of faith, and in fact, is the only fruit of faith that indicates true saving faith. Vegas may not agree with this, but it is not heresy. Jesus and John say something very similar in the following verses:

- Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. - *Matthew 7:21*

¹ Watson, David; Watson, Paul. *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (p. 37). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

² *Ibid*, p.39.

³ *Ibid*, p. 49.

- Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death.” - *John 8:51*
- Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. - *John 14:23*
- We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. - *1 John 2:3*

Here is another quote from Jerry Trousdale and Glenn Sunshine’s latest book that clarifies their position on the role of obedience as the necessary fruit of true faith:

The essential point here is that the grace that saves is also the grace that leads to inward transformation and holiness of life (Titus 2: 11– 12). Sola gratia properly understood thus covers the whole of salvation, which includes both justification and sanctification, not justification alone. Similarly, sola fide says that we are saved by faith alone, but true faith leads to obedience. In other words, faith results in both justification and good works. This is essentially what James 2: 14– 25 is saying: our works demonstrate our faith, and if our faith does not result in works, it isn’t genuine faith.⁴

2. Person of Peace

Is looking for a “person of peace” biblical?

Vegas believes that looking for a “person of peace” (POP) is an essential and central component of the DMM strategy, and furthermore believes that DMM advocates teach that finding and equipping the person of peace to lead Discovery Bible Studies is really the only task of the missionary.

He objects to the strategy of looking for “person of peace” on a number of grounds. He argues at length against the idea that the person of peace could possibly be an unbeliever.

“The phrase “son of peace” is not a description of an unbeliever who has been prepared for the gospel. It is a description of someone who, upon hearing the gospel preached, receives the gospel, and thus “peace” belongs to them. This POP is not someone who will slowly discover the gospel as he leads a Bible study in his home. The POP is not a spiritually interested unbeliever who is hospitable, and who will lead other unbelievers in the process of discovery. The “son of peace” is someone to whom reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ belongs.”

Vegas goes on to say that Cornelius (Acts 10), Lydia (Acts 16) and the Philippian jailer (also Acts 16) were clearly not Persons of Peace, as DMM defines them.

Vegas also objects against the strategy of equipping the person of peace to lead Discovery Bible Studies and sees this as in conflict with the strategy used by Jesus’ disciples and the apostles in Acts. I will address this objection in more detail in the following section under Discovery Bible Studies.

Response:

The expression “son of peace” is only found once in Scripture, in the instructions to the 72 (Luke 10:6). The NIV translates this expression as “someone who promotes peace” and the NET translates it as “a

⁴ Trousdale, Jerry; Sunshine, Glenn. *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus' 1st-Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church* (Kindle Locations 1327-1331). DMM Library. Kindle Edition.

peace-loving person.” I think it is difficult to say conclusively whether this expression refers to someone who is already a committed follower of Christ or not, and I am not sure that it mattered to the 72 disciples sent out by Jesus. Obviously the person so labelled was receptive to the message, and was in the process of learning more about and responding to the truth of the kingdom of God. This person provides a platform for the Gospel to be preached in his community.

It is true that the person of peace in Luke 10 does not lead a Discovery Bible Study in his home. But this is an anachronistic argument on the part of Vegas, and proves nothing. The New Testament had not yet been written down at that time, and people in Jesus’ day did not have ready access to copies of the Old Testament either, since this was prior to the time of printing presses.

Definitely Cornelius, Lydia and the Philippian jailer were not yet believers in Christ when the apostles came to them with the message, and yet they had been sovereignly prepared by God to receive that message. They each opened the way for the Gospel to be accepted within their households. So it seems that they filled the same role as the Luke 10 person of peace, regardless of whether Acts gives them that label.

In my observations of mission teams that have adopted a DMM strategy, I do not see the same strong emphasis on the absolute necessity of finding a “person of peace” that Vegas attributes to DMM advocates, and which admittedly is found in Watsons’ writing. If Vegas would see the “person of peace” as not the only possible entry point, but as one possible bridge to a new group of people, would he still be opposed to the concept? If the person of peace was seen as anyone who is receptive to the Gospel and who can open the door to larger groups and families studying the Bible, would he still object to missionaries working with such a person? I doubt it.

3. Discovery Bible Studies

Does evangelism necessarily need to be done through the spoken word of the missionary?

It seems to me that Vegas’ primary objection to the “person of peace” is because he objects to the idea that an unbeliever can lead a Discover Bible Study and share the Gospel with other unbelievers. Furthermore, he takes issue with the practice of missionaries who avoid serving in the role as the authoritative teacher.

He claims that:

DBS works on the conviction that unbelievers can study, understand, and obey scripture without an outside teacher. They need only the Holy Spirit. Trousdale exhorted his readers, “Do not teach or preach; instead, facilitate discovery and obedience. When people are simply exposed to the Scriptures, God will reveal the truth to them.”

This strategy is decidedly unbiblical to Pastor Vegas. He believes that the Biblical pattern is that the Scriptures must be taught by a well-prepared, Spirit-empowered teacher/pastor/missionary. In the absence of local believers who can fill that role, then the cross-cultural missionary is the one that needs to do the teaching. A few more quotes from his article:

The question is whether the Lord and his Apostles ever commanded or provided an example of Christian ministers facilitating a group of unbelievers to interpret scripture, obey scripture, and evangelize other unbelievers without the instruction of a Christian minister who has been sent in

the power of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel and teach the Word? Are we instructed to assume unbelievers, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, will self-correct in doctrinal error as they learn to read the Bible? The answer is an unequivocal, "No."

There is simply no evidence of any character in the Bible being commanded to, nor providing the example of, facilitating a self-corrected, untaught, Bible study. Further, there are no examples of the apostles, nor any other leader, employing unbelievers in the work of evangelism. Sadly, DBS is simply an unbiblical and untenable tool built upon the sandy foundation of OBD and POP.

Response:

This particular objection to the DMM strategy does seem a little self-serving, since Radius International is focused on training cross-cultural missionaries who will take the role of teachers and preachers in the places to which they go.

Again, Vegas' argument from the pattern of teaching in Biblical times is anachronistic. The completion of the canon, the invention of the printing press, the availability of digital copies of the Scriptures and the widespread prevalence of literacy in many cultures gives missionaries today opportunities that were unavailable to cross-cultural missionaries in biblical times.

But is Vegas accurate in saying that there is no Biblical evidence of self-corrected, untaught Bible study? What about Paul's, Peter's, John's and Jude's letters to the churches? Did they not expect that they would be read and that people would respond in obedience even if the apostle or his representative was not there in person to explain the letter to them?

Teaching can be done in many different ways. I would argue that cross-cultural missionaries are teaching and discipling, but they are doing so in other ways that teaching or preaching in a public, up-front role. Facilitating a Discovery Bible study is one effective means of teaching. Equipping someone else to do the facilitation is also a way of communicating the message, as long as the one doing the facilitating is receiving regular feedback as to how he could improve his facilitation. The missionary also provides guidance by choosing which passages of Scripture are studied in the DBS. Watson and Watson say:

If we see them going too far away from Scripture, we'll immediately introduce a new passage and lead them through the Discovery Group process on that passage.⁵

Remember we are not talking about asking people who have no knowledge of the Scripture to speak about whatever they deem to be most appropriate and to lead the Bible study in whatever direction they desire. The DBS format has some clearly defined parameters, and the facilitator is simply asking the questions that he or she has been instructed to ask. The content is the Bible, and yes, the missionary needs to ensure that the Scriptures are in the local language of the people and that the chosen facilitator can read and comprehend the text to be studied. If people can be saved through the reading of a tract, an evangelistic book or an evangelistic website, why would we object to people coming to faith by reading Scripture itself?

DMM advocates ask the cross-cultural missionary not to fill the role of pastor/teacher/preacher in order to avoid giving a false message about the nature of Scripture. If the missionary becomes the up-front

⁵ Watson & Watson, p. 151.

teacher, the unintentional message that is given is that ordinary people cannot understand the Scriptures unless an educated person from the outside explains it to them. This would fly in the face of the Protestant affirmation of the perspicuity of the Scriptures.

Quoting Roy Moran, Trousdale and Sunshine note that an insistence that human teachers must be involved in the process of evangelism could also be theologically problematic:

Protestants accuse Catholics of heresy because they see the Virgin Mary, the clergy-led Mass, confession and the sacraments as humans mediating grace. Yet the Protestant orthopraxy of connecting people to people before connecting them to God is also mediation. It is hard for us to conceive of connecting people to God without an intermediary. But theologically that is exactly what we believe. There is one God and one mediator (1 Timothy 2: 5), but somehow we feel the need to mediate the message to the uninitiated before Jesus can do His mediating work.⁶

The DMM missionary is seeking to reduce barriers in the communication process and to increase the probability that the message will be passed on. Possibly the content would be given more clearly and accurately if the cross-cultural missionary did the talking himself or herself. But by asking local people to facilitate the Discovery Bible Study, the methodology used conveys the message can and must be communicated by local people, rather than relying on the “professional”.

Conclusion

A much more thorough analysis of Vegas’ web article is probably needed. Nevertheless, my review of these points of objection leads me to the conclusion that the DMM approach is not built on a unbiblical foundation as Vegas has concluded. It seems to me that Radius International does not fully understand the DMM strategy, has not sufficiently interacted with those who have extensive experience with this methodology, and has too quickly concluded that this strategy is unacceptable. Yes, the DMM strategy is significantly different from what has been traditionally taught in missionary training schools, including the training that our organization has provided for church planters over the years. However, I believe that there clearly is sufficient biblical support for this approach, and at the very least, deserves to be accepted as a valid missiological strategy to engaging the unreached.

⁶ Trousdale, Jerry; Sunshine, Glenn. *The Kingdom Unleashed: How Jesus' 1st-Century Kingdom Values Are Transforming Thousands of Cultures and Awakening His Church* (Kindle Locations 4077-4082). DMM Library. Kindle Edition.