

Discovery Bible Study: Real Discipleship or Foundational Problems?

By Dave Coles

In reading the April–June 2021 issue of EMQ, I was struck by the great contrast between the first two articles: “[Why Discovery Groups?](#)” by Steven Steinhaus and “[Disembodied Discipleship: A Critique of the Discovery Bible Study Method](#)” by Aubry Smith. I appreciate EMQ setting the two side by side, so we can easily compare the two perspectives on Discovery Bible Study (DBS).

Steinhaus presents 10 reasons for Discovery Groups, while Smith claims that “the Watsons’ non-incarnational, disembodied theology results in devaluing the biblical role of teacher, leads to egregious hermeneutical issues, and violates principles related to contextualization by unconsciously importing foreign cultural values. These issues may affect long-term health of churches emerging from DBS groups.”

Contrasting foundations

Many of Steinhaus’s reasons for Discovery Groups consist of important missiological truths, often overlooked yet vital for reaching the world’s remaining unreached peoples. Among these are “Most people come to Christ after a long *process* in which they discover who he is,” and “Discovery Groups are a *group* process and most people around the world come to Christ with their groups.”

Smith, rather than highlighting missiological principles, focuses on the Watsons’ statement, “Jesus is no longer flesh and blood, as we know ... he has no color, no ethnic heritage, and no cultural distinctions except the holiness and righteousness of God.”ⁱ She then accuses them of claiming “a now-disembodied Jesus,” and states that the Watsons “have essentially stripped Jesus of his humanity, proposing that he shed his resurrected body at the Ascension, an assertion made nowhere in Scripture.” While we might consider the Watsons’ claim poorly worded, Smith accuses them of a claim they didn’t make (“he shed his resurrected body at the Ascension”) and frames that as what amounts to an accusation of heresy: “essentially stripped Jesus of his humanity.” I consider it quite unhelpful to push the Watsons’ statement one step beyond what they actually wrote, then frame the new version as a denial of essential biblical truth. This divisive approach to theological and missiological interaction engenders unnecessary controversy rather than helpful proclamation of the gospel.

Smith then ties her accusation of a disembodied Jesus to accusations of disembodied spirituality leading to a method of disembodied discipleship. However, her attempt to substantiate those accusations fails the test of real fruit, since the millions of Jesus’ followers who have come to faith though DBS believe in an embodied (both human and divine) Jesus, and live out an embodied spirituality through concretely embodied discipleship. Their discipleship tends to be passionate, contagious, and very practically lived out in everyday life: much more “embodied” than the faith of millions whose spirituality consists largely of showing up once a week to hear good worship music and a well-crafted sermon.

Smith acknowledges that “self-theologizing practices...help locals discover culturally-appropriate ways of praying, worshiping, and ministering in their culture.” Yet she claims (without apparent evidence) that the DBS model’s “disembodied nature effectively cuts the budding church from the entire tradition of Christianity.” This misrepresentation calls for two fact checks.

First, the movements of people coming to faith through DBS actually *do* have and value a sense of connection with the historic and global Christian church. Leaders of these movements tend to be well-networked with others in the body of Christ, as evidenced by the scores of movement leaders who founded the [24:14 Coalition](#). They are not at all cut off “from the entire tradition of Christianity.” Further evidence of this can be seen in case studies of movements such as those found, for example, in [24:14 - A Testimony to All Peoples](#) and the forthcoming *Motus Dei: The Movement of God and the Discipleship of Nations*.

Second, Smith seems to conflate two very different issues: a church’s identity as part of the historic and global body of Christ, and basic discipleship for new believers. She claims “values of simplicity and quick replication leave new believers in spiritual poverty, cut off from the rich heritage of the great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1).” Ironically, the “great cloud of witnesses” described in Hebrews 12:1 refers, first and foremost, to *biblical* heroes of the faith such as those described in Hebrews 11. New believers are not at all left “in spiritual poverty” by being pointed to biblical heroes of the faith. I’m struck by the audacity of the claim that new believers, having Christ (“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”) and his word (as a lamp for their feet and a light on their path), are left “in spiritual poverty” if they don’t grasp “the entire tradition of Christianity.”

Contrasting models of discipleship

Scripture certainly portrays an important role that more mature believers play in discipleship. In the Discovery model, that role often takes place through guiding a group of new believers to appropriate biblical texts to study next, and personal mentoring of group facilitators (as Smith acknowledges in footnote 13). Steinhaus comments:

Those...critical of the discovery learning paradigm often don’t realize how much effort disciple makers put into selecting passages for their groups to study....Each new group is tethered to leaders outside the group who seek to ensure the quality and viability of the group through mentoring (discipling) the key inside leader(s). This also ensures that new churches formed are tied to the global Body of Christ.

New believers’ greatest needs include clear truth from God’s word and clear applications of that word within their life context. The DBS model offers those things first and foremost. I don’t know of anyone claiming that the greatest need for a new believer is learning “the various expressions of Christianity throughout history and across cultures.” I would have thought we could agree on considering such understanding more appropriate for those already rooted in the essential foundations of biblical faith. We steer people in an unhelpful direction if we conflate essentials of the faith (obedience to foundational biblical truths) with human patterns and constructs (“various expressions of Christianity throughout history”).

Smith acknowledges that passing on various expressions of Christianity throughout history “certainly does bring a great deal of complexity.” Her complaint that the Watsons’ presentation of DBS is too simple, too reproducible, and too lacking in complexity seems to reflect a misunderstanding about the appropriate role of theological education. In reality, new believers all need effective discipling in the kingdom life of Christ. They don’t need an immediate infusion of complex theological and historical knowledge that has accrued over 2,000 years of church history. As people grow in the faith, they can appropriately learn more and more. But attempts to apply to new believers from unreached people groups a pattern of discipleship heavily weighted with theological and historical details only perpetuates a pattern of painfully slow kingdom growth among their people group. Rapid reproduction of disciples does not imply shallow discipleship, as can be seen in numerous examples of serious discipleship among those coming to faith within current disciple-making movements. Smith then raises this concern:

The DBS method needlessly dichotomizes learning from the Spirit and learning from a human teacher. This also comes from the core theological issue of disembodiment. Teaching by humans is inferred to be corrupting, while teaching by the Spirit alone is pure and free of error – a belief that may be Neo-Gnostic at its core.

Speculative name-calling such as “Neo-Gnostic” tends to decrease rather than increase helpful discussion of missiological issues. Steinhaus offers a different perspective concerning our source of spiritual truth, writing: “The Word itself is more powerful than our best sermons and explanations,” citing Hebrews 4:12’s statement that God’s word is powerful and “stronger than any double-edged sword.” As Steinhaus observes, Scripture’s power does not depend on the skill or presentation of a human teacher.

Both Steinhaus and Smith acknowledge that God uses human teachers. And as Steinhaus points out, “Jesus often encouraged people to discover through Q&A and stories rather than one-way lectures.” And “Discovery is just good pedagogy.” Facilitating discovery does, in fact, constitute one method of teaching. As already mentioned, Smith acknowledges this in footnote 13, which ironically argues *the opposite* of her main point in the paragraph ended by that footnote.

Smith goes on to assert: “Another consequence of the disembodiment is that the hermeneutical method of DBS ignores contextual complexities inherent in Bible interpretation.” Here again Smith seems to fall into an error sometimes heard from those with some formal theological education. She fails to distinguish between the amount of hermeneutical understanding needed for an unbeliever to come to saving faith or a new disciple to become rooted in the faith, and the amount of hermeneutical understanding needed for Christ’s church as a whole and for leaders in the church to discern issues of greater complexity. Certainly theological education has great value in helping believers grasp complex contextual issues that occur when reading an ancient text with vast differences of time, place, and culture from the contemporary reader’s. But trying to give deep hermeneutical understanding to unbelievers and new believers would hand them hermeneutical Saul’s armor: too much equipment for their most essential job at that moment – living in transformational obedience to the basic messages they see Scripture telling them.

Smith takes great offense at the Watsons’ claim that “heresy is usually caused by one person who is charismatic and has some education.” She writes: “This outlandish claim...fails to consider the

many heretical groups throughout history that have existed and broken away from Orthodox Christianity.” It seems to me that considering the names of groups such as Apollinarians, Arians, Sabellians, Marcionites, Montanists, Henricians, and Pelagians, along with liberal Christian teachers of recent centuries, tends to confirm the Watsons’ claim more than Smith’s vehement denial.

Contrasting views of obedience

Concerning obedience to God, Steinhaus offers this description: “We emphasize loving accountability because the basis of our obedience to God is love (John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:14; 1 John 5:3).” Smith offers numerous objections to this, starting with the speculative: “The members of the group *may* be saving face for the facilitator, themselves, or for the entire group, and *may* have no qualms about lying in order to protect honor” (emphasis added). She also, based on a statement from the Watsons’ book, offers this objection:

The sole focus on obedience leads to an unreflective performance orientation over true spiritual maturity, which they call “autonomic obedience” – obedience one does not have to think about. This concept over-simplifies not only the complexity of the Bible, but also the complexity of life. Obedience to Scripture is sometimes simple, but sometimes requires serious reflection for true faithfulness in complex, modern situations that the Bible does not address directly. It cannot always be autonomic.

I agree with Smith that “obedience to Scripture is sometimes simple” and “sometimes requires serious reflection.” But she appears to think DBS, as described by the Watsons, does not allow for “serious reflection.” I would think (with Steinhaus) that a group discussion process with accountability among close relations would provide for substantial serious reflection – especially among those in a group-oriented society. For new believers, many “simple” commands are the most important: things like “stop lying, stealing, and committing adultery; start being kind and loving others.” I believe God’s priorities prefer helping *many* lost people come to obey his simple and clear commands over teaching a few about all “the complexity of the Bible” and “complex, modern situations that the Bible does not address directly.” Both have value, and the need for the more complex should not diminish our passion to accomplish the simple.

Smith’s objection to “autonomic obedience” seems like the least charitable understanding possible, of the Watsons’ not-quite-precise description on the subject. Certainly, in this life none of us reach the point where obedience *always* happens *automatically*. Yet developing patterns of automatic obedience constitutes a significant realm of true discipleship: the regular habits of a renewed mind (Rom. 12:2). As Dallas Willard wrote: “Our character is that internal overall structure of the self that is revealed by our long-run patterns of behaviors and from which our actions more or less automatically arise....But character can be changed. And that, of course, is spiritual formation in Christlikeness is all about.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Contrasting applications

Steinhaus ends with an upbeat summary of good relationships coming out of Discovery Groups and an invitation to readers to welcome unbelievers to study God’s word together. In contrast, Smith concludes with a mixed assessment: “Practitioners love the DBS method because they have seen nonbelievers interacting with Scripture in powerful ways. However, at the theological

center of the method is a disembodied spirituality, rather than an incarnational pattern of discipleship, that needs to be carefully assessed for the long-term health of the churches established by this method.”

I deeply appreciate Smith’s acknowledgement that many who actually use the DBS method “have seen nonbelievers interacting with Scripture in powerful ways.” The powerful testimony of numerous field practitioners carries significant weight. We can rejoice greatly that, in our day, huge numbers of unreached people are experiencing the power of God’s word through inductive study. Especially in the Muslim and Hindu worlds, more people than ever before in history are coming to saving faith in Christ. They don’t immediately become perfectly mature, as is true of all believers everywhere. But when we learn of a tool that demonstrably brings many not-yet-believers to learn of salvation through studying Scripture, we would do well to accept an invitation like Steinhaus’s. We might even end up joining those who, as Smith writes, “love the DBS method.”

The concern Smith expresses for “the long-term health of the churches established by this method” joins appropriate concern for the long-term health of *all* churches established by *every* method. However her accusation of “disembodied spirituality” falls far short, when set next to the actual discipleship taking place in disciple-making movements.

Conclusion

The most significant difference between these two articles about DBS consists of clear field experience versus interaction only with written material. One describes actual practice in disciple-making movements, in many parts of the world, while the other speaks based on concerns arising primarily from just one written description of the DBS model. One speaks of real discipleship bringing salvation and kingdom growth in reaching unreached peoples. The other speaks of *possible* problems that could *potentially* result from DBS, based mainly on a negative reading of, and extrapolation from, one source on the subject.

Theological caution and concerns have an appropriate role in missiological discourse. But real world discipleship among the unreached has enough challenges without speculating about problems that could theoretically arise. May we invest our best thought and effort in using approaches that bring many to Christ, and addressing the real discipleship issues that arise from such fruitful ministry.

ⁱ Watson and Watson, *Contagious Disciple-Making*, 9–10.

ⁱⁱ *Renovation of the Heart*, 142