


## “Proclamational” DBS: Biblical Preaching and Teaching in Discovery Bible Studies

By Jon T.

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In recent years many people from unreached people groups have come to faith in Christ. Reports of movements are exciting and encouraging but sometimes difficult to believe, even for the most optimistic of people. Yet such reports of virally multiplying fellowships of believers continue to emerge from some of the most resistant places in the world (Long 2020), and many workers have adopted new church-planting strategies as a result.

In the past few years, small movements have started to occur in Southeast Asia. These smaller movements can be traced back to larger movements in India and Africa through training networks of leaders which pass on similar approaches to multiplication, saturation evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development (see Vu 2012 regarding the movements in Africa).

My team and I had the chance to meet and listen to many of these Southeast Asian leaders. Their stories were impressive, but we were more impressed by their humility, as well as their insistence that these great

moves of God had nothing to do with their intelligence or unique gifting but rather boiled down to simple, reproducible principles and focus. They made a significant impression on our team, and after a lot of prayer, study of scripture, and an honest sense of desperation, we started to implement the same principles. God worked by birthing disciples who make disciples. A key part of our church-planting approach was discipling through “discovery groups.”

This new paradigm has produced many legitimate questions from people in the established church. One question is how teaching and preaching fit into a multiplication strategy. Based on biblical study and my own experience among Hindus in Southeast Asia, I argue that biblical teaching and preaching can be faithfully expressed through a strategy that features Discovery Bible Study (DBS).

## The Discovery Group Dilemma

Whenever a believer or unbeliever indicates interest in learning more about spiritual things and is willing to gather a group of friends or family to study together, a discovery group is formed. The group works through chronological and/or theme-based selections of scripture on a weekly or biweekly basis. Discovery groups follow a simple, reproducible format, with the leader thoughtfully guiding the group through a series of questions. The questions lead the group through accountability for obedience to principles discussed in the previous weeks; thanksgiving to God; prayer for difficulties and struggles; a simple, inductive study of the new passage; and a measurable declaration of how they will apply the passage’s principles in the coming week.

The continuation of a discovery group depends upon the group’s willingness to obey what they are learning and share it with others. If there are no attempts at obedience and sharing the principles with others, the group will be presented with a choice whether to continue. If there is still not a change, the leader will no longer meet with the group.

Within the typical discovery group, there is no prescribed period for a traditional time of teaching. No one stands up and shares for an extended time. There is no lecturing, charts, or systematic breakdown of the passage by one person. It is basically a shared process of discovering the truths in the passage and holding each other accountable to apply those truths.

Within our typical discovery groups, unbelievers often attended and participated in the group. In our experience, there was always at least one believer present, and the facilitator was also being coached and disciplined in a setting outside the discovery group. As unbelievers answered questions about what the passage taught, they were always asked to share the portion of the passage that led them to their observation. This practice modeled the principle that all doctrine, opinions, and teaching must have their source in scripture.

This is discipleship happening in community with new believers maturing and unbelievers growing in their understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. If it progresses to genuine faith commitment, the discovery group is shepherded toward developing into an “embryonic church” (Trousdale 2012). Many of the elements of a discovery group were designed so that they could easily shift toward fulfilling the biblical functions of church (e.g., worship, prayer, scripture learning, fellowship, accountability, service, etc.).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, even after the church is established, many elements of the basic discovery process and practice of the group, with some modifications, can often remain largely the same.

Here’s where the dilemma occurs for many who come from established evangelical church backgrounds. It is very difficult for some to wrap their mind around these key ideas: no pastor “up front,” no traditional preaching in a lecture style, untrained laypeople and unbelievers

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1 Steve Smith (2012) outlines a process by which group leaders can intentionally disciple their groups to study the nature and functions of the church in the New Testament, so the group can identify any missing elements and commit to developing into and identifying as a full biblical church.

sharing what they are learning from scripture, and the simplicity of some people's take from scripture (e.g., one man's application from the creation passage that he needed to take better care of his goats).

Objections can often be framed into two general questions, "What about the gift of teaching?" and "What about the preaching of the Word?" People's most basic ideas of what the conveyance of truth should look like in a church setting—communicating with authority from the pulpit or systematically from the lecturer's desk—are missing in the DBS approach. These objections cannot be dismissed as merely the misgivings of "traditionalists." Teaching is one of the major components of Christ's command in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:20). Preaching is all over the New Testament, and gospel workers are commanded to engage in this activity (see Matt. 26:13, Acts 17:13, 2 Tim. 4:2). If any gospel worker's main focus is making and multiplying disciples, yet their primary activities lack preaching and teaching, then a clear biblical response is required. Our strategies, no matter how innovative or successful, must be thoroughly biblical.

In the remainder of this article, I address the two objections that biblical preaching and teaching are absent from a model of church planting that features DBS. I lay out a short explanation of the biblical terms, followed by a discussion of how each critical component to gospel ministry is expressed within the DBS process.

## Proclamation and Preaching in the New Testament

The New Testament uses many terms for preaching or proclaiming the Word of God. In this article, I focus on two of the more notable terms, *kerusso*, "to proclaim as a herald, to announce publicly" (fifty-nine occurrences), and *euangelizo*, "to announce good news" (fifty-two occurrences), with additional reference to *dialegomai*, "to say thorough-

ly, to discuss” (thirteen occurrences) (Swanson 1997).<sup>2</sup>

The background of *kerusso* is the idea of a herald publicly “belting out” the latest important information. The word is not inherently theological; it was used in other writings of the time to describe making general announcements, conveying military orders, and giving public updates of information. In light of this, the meaning of *kerusso*, in the context of gospel proclamation, is not limited to proclamation from a pulpit or restricted to a church setting (Walvoord 1985; Rom. 10:14–15).

It is clear the New Testament use of this word focuses primarily on “the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world” (Dodd 1964, 7). It is used often to describe the activity of Jesus, his disciples, and John the Baptist as they proclaimed the gospel, the kingdom of God, Jesus’s crucifixion, and repentance. It is significant that only four of the fifty-nine occurrences of *kerusso* in the New Testament do not appear to refer explicitly to a proclamation about Christ, repentance, or the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

The word *euangelizo* is even more gospel-centric. While its meaning overlaps significantly with *kerusso*, *euangelizo* is directly related to the word for gospel (*euangelion*), carrying with it the added element of the purpose and content of the proclamation—announcing good news (e.g. Matt. 11:5, Luke 2:10, Acts 5:42). The word can be used to bring any good news, but in the New Testament, it refers especially to bringing the good news of the gospel (Thayer 1995, “*euangelizo*”). Unlike *kerusso*, the object (good news) is implied in the verb, and it is often translated as “bring good news” or “announce the good news” or “preach the gospel.”

Another New Testament word, *dialegomai*, is often used to describe reasoning and discussion with a view toward persuading listeners to act.

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2 Another is *kataggello* (eighteen times in the New Testament). *Laleo*, which means “to speak,” is also on rare occasions translated as “preach” or “proclaim.”

3 Acts 15:21, Rom. 2:21, 2 Cor. 11:4, Gal. 5:11.

Although this term can be used for general disputing or arguing, a great example of its use in regard to gospel activity is found in Paul's custom, in which he "**reasoned** with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas" (Acts 17:2-3 ESV, emphasis mine). In this usage, *dialegomai* is similar to *kerusso* in that it verbally states a truth that confronts the listener with a point of decision, like a fork in the road with a response required.

These words, especially *kerusso* and *euangelizo*, were used in the New Testament primarily to describe evangelistic activity, taking the good news about Jesus to not-yet-believers and announcing it openly to the world (Adams 1986, 5-6). Even though preaching occurred among believers (Rom. 1:15, Eph. 3:8, 1 Thess. 2:9), most preaching in the New Testament was specifically evangelistic activity toward unbelievers (cf. Acts 8:5, Rom. 10:14-15, 1 Cor. 1:23, etc.).

An interesting question for modern-day believers is how a term used primarily in the New Testament to denote proclaiming the gospel to not-yet-believers evolved into a term referring to an activity generally confined to church buildings with the audience being predominantly Christian. Why is a "preacher" generally thought of as the man standing behind the pulpit talking to Christians for thirty to forty-five minutes every Sunday? I greatly appreciate the rise of gospel-centered preaching and gospel-centered churches. Christians need to hear the gospel repeatedly because it is so easy for us to drift from its simple power and forget the implications of God's love for us. However, this does not change the fact that the bulk of New Testament words used for preaching and proclamation are within the "context of evangelistic proclamation to non-believers" (Griffiths 2017, 34).

The popular understanding of preaching as biblical exposition and exhortation, while rooted in biblical priorities, can obscure the historical,

biblical meaning of this term if we are not careful (Wood 1996, 950). (As we will see below, much of our modern usage of the word *preach* better corresponds to the biblical term for teach: *didasko*; see Adams 1986, 5–6). 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. Even in 2 Tim. 4:2, where Paul uses the strongest language to charge Timothy to preach the word, should be seen in the light of 2 Tim. 4:5, which highlights Timothy’s ministry as an evangelist (*euangelistou*). While some have tended to view Timothy as a pastor (e.g., 1 and 2 Timothy are called “pastoral epistles”), it can be argued that the pastoral functions Timothy fulfilled were temporary assignments undertaken in the larger context of his primary calling as an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5).

With this brief outline of the biblical terms for preaching/proclaiming, let us look at the ways these actions can be faithfully expressed in a DBS.

## Proclamation and Preaching in a DBS

In a DBS, biblical preaching/proclaiming happens in at least three ways. First, every week as people study the Scripture together, they are asked to share the principles they are learning with at least one other person outside the group. The majority of people in our discovery groups are first-generation believers, so most of their friends and family are from another faith. Since most of the early chronological story sets focus on the themes of redemption and repentance, many of the participants are telling unbelievers about how God saved his chosen people, how there is a promised redeemer who will come to bear our sins, how Jesus has power to forgive sins, and so on. These initial proclamations of aspects of the good news can pave the way for fuller proclamations of the good news later, just as Jesus, the disciples, and even Old Testament texts are described as “preaching the gospel” with partial information before it was fully clarified after the resurrection (see Mark 1:15, Matt. 10:7, Gal. 3:8).

Second, DBS participants are constantly challenged to take the next step in communicating the full message of salvation to others by starting a DBS series with them. The idea is usually presented this way to the participants, "If the way of truth is so important for you, what about the rest of your family? What about your friends? Shouldn't they be studying these important things about salvation as well?" I recently had a conversation with a discovery group participant along these lines. He is wanting to marry a girl, but she is still a committed Hindu. In their local culture, the wife follows whatever religion the husband is. So he said he will just wait until they get married, and then she will be forced to *ikut suami* (follow her husband). I reminded him from the stories we have been studying that everyone who genuinely experienced the true way wanted to share it with those close to them. I told him that those who follow Jesus need to share with others, in essence telling him to start a group with his fiancée. He agreed and committed to start studying with her.

Third, leading the group can incorporate additional elements of proclamation. Some explanations of DBS give the impression of group leaders being only passive question askers. In our practice, the group leaders (and sometimes group members) may at times confront the group with a proclamation of the gospel or some aspect of the gospel present in the text. This can also happen weekly during accountability time as gospel themes are emphasized by the leader. Similar to the Galatian believers, growing disciples in a discovery group also need to be reminded through preaching of the simple gospel truth that righteousness comes from faith, not works (Galatians 3). In sum, preaching, or gospel proclamation, is happening inside and outside of the discovery groups in a variety of ways.

Thus we can confidently say the DBS process fulfills at least some, if not the majority, of the biblical thrust of preaching and proclaiming the Word to all people. It not only teaches participants to engage in this activity, it also holds them accountable on a weekly basis to this commitment. Because of a simple format that does not rely on trained



exposition from an educated person, the discovery group reproduces easily so that more *kerusso* and *euangelizomai* does not remain confined to a group of believers in a church building but can more readily spread and multiply in unreached areas. Now we will turn our attention to how the DBS model incorporates biblical teaching.

## Teaching in the New Testament

Some popular-level presentations and trainings may create the impression that there should be no teaching in DBS. It is often said DBS leaders should facilitate and *not* teach, but instead let the Spirit of God directly teach groups through the Word. This sometimes leads to unfortunate misunderstandings that can be corrected by a careful understanding of the meaning of teaching in the New Testament.

The primary word used in the New Testament for teaching is *didasko*, “to teach, provide instruction,” a causative form of the verb *dao*, “to learn” (Swanson 1997). In other words, a key part of the meaning of *didasko* is “causing someone to learn.” *Didasko* is a common word that was widely used in the New Testament and in other writings of the day.

There are two aspects of teaching used in the New Testament. In one sense, teachers were a recognized group in the early church (e.g., in Antioch, Acts 13:1). God has specifically appointed people with the gift of teaching. In 1 Cor. 12:29, Paul rhetorically asks, “Are all teachers?” with the implied answer being “no.” These teachers were a group given to the church for equipping the saints and building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:10–12), with warnings and encouragement indicating they are distinct from other believers in gifting and role (James 3:1, 1 Tim. 5:17). The significance of the gift of teaching is seen in that it is the only gift that shows up in all of the gift lists from Ephesians 4, Romans 12, 1 Peter 4, and 1 Corinthians 12 (Walvoord, 1 Cor 12). Therefore, Scripture is abundantly clear in affirming the gift of teaching as important and necessary for local churches. However, we should also be careful again not to cast this gift into the mold of what teachers look and act like in our own isolated

cultural understanding. Teaching—like all the gifts—operates best when functioning contextually in the cultural setting.

However, there is a second aspect of teaching in the New Testament that opens it up as a responsibility for every believer. In Col. 3:16, we see that as the word of Christ dwells richly in each believer, it should lead to teaching (*didasko*) and admonishing one another. In 1 Tim. 3:2, the qualifications for an elder focus on character qualities except for one, the ability to teach (*didasko*). However, 1 Tim. 5:17 indicates that not every elder is equally engaged in the work of preaching and teaching, which suggests that not all elders have the gift of teaching. So it appears that even though not every elder/overseer will have the gift of teaching, he must be able to teach.

In 2 Tim. 2:2, Paul sets into motion a multiplying movement by commanding the entrusting of the message to other men who will be able to teach (*didasko*) others also. This multiplication is still happening today around the world and not just among those with the gift of teaching. In Titus 2:3, the older women of the local fellowship are to teach what is good (*kalo-didaskalous*); in doing so, they will train the younger women such that their obedient lifestyle adorns the Word of God.

Last but not least, Christ's own command to his disciples in Matthew 28:20 is to make disciples by teaching (*didaskontes*) them to obey everything Jesus commanded. The activity of teaching is connected to disciple making, and since the mandate for disciple making falls to every believer, the mandate for teaching does as well. Again, just as with the gift of teaching, this "everyman's teaching" may take on various styles and cultural forms (much like Jesus's teaching did), but it is a responsibility that no obedient follower of Christ should reject.

While teaching means causing someone to learn, teaching also overlaps with other modes of communication as well. In the New Testament, it certainly often included elements of proclamation (*kerusso*, *euangelizo*) and testifying (*martureo*) (MacArthur 1992, 8). As the early church experienced the ministry of prophets, apostles, teachers, and

pastors, it was understood that many of these gifts, offices, and functions could overlap from time to time (Utlely 1998). This is not to equate teaching with preaching but only to point out that teaching can and will employ various modes of communication in order to cause learning.

Jesus was the most skilled of teachers, and his example provides us with several insights for a biblical understanding of teaching. One truth is that teaching is not bound to one setting or approach. Jesus's methods were many and his classrooms diverse. He employed parables, current events, and contextual illustrations; he asked questions, proposed riddles, and liberally dispensed allegories and aphorisms to challenge his listeners to dig deeper for the truth (see Burbules *forthcoming*). He taught the disciples while walking, and he taught from boats. In the Sermon on the Mount, he gave a proper discourse and arguably the most famous sermon ever given. Jesus's example clearly shows us that biblical teaching occurs in a variety of models and places.

Another principle we learn from Jesus's teaching practice is a clear desired end of obedience and action (Matt. 7:24–27, John 8:31). Jesus was not looking for big crowds, nor hoping to be everyone's favorite, nor looking to market himself to the masses. His call to discipleship was a call to a complete realignment of identity with their Teacher. This teacher-disciple relationship was maintained by obeying the master's teachings. He did not want to teach a big crowd of people that were not committed to full obedience. It was the reason why he gave the "drink my blood" speech in John 6, why he told the rich, young ruler to sell everything he owned (Matt. 19:21), and why he often spoke in parables very few understood. "He focused instead on the few who believed Him when He said radical things. And through their radical obedience to Him, He turned the course of history in a new direction" (Platt 2010, 2). It is therefore not surprising that Jesus taught his disciples to do the same—to disciple by teaching to obey (Matt. 28:20). With this understanding of biblical teaching in mind, let us turn to the way teaching is expressed in a DBS.

## Teaching in a DBS

Within the DBS process, teaching does occur, but it often does not look similar to, or occur at the same pace as, what educated people from a Christian background have come to expect. Simple questions are asked so participants can dig into the Scriptures for themselves. DBS leaders are trained to purposefully guide this discovery process, without always needing to say too much, as an intentional pedagogical method. If there are some main principles in the passage that the group is not picking up on, they are taught to prompt with a question like, “Why is this phrase in verse 12 important? What does that mean for us?”

This method of teaching is a way to invite the Holy Spirit to work in a group dynamic to lead them to great nuggets of truth. I have been a believer for 23 years, grew up in Sunday School, graduated from Bible college, and yet there are things that a group of men from a Hindu background point out in Scripture that I have never noticed before. It is a work of God that encourages and surprises me.

A common concern is that false teaching will surely arise within the DBS approach, especially since unbelievers are often taking part in the discussion. This is a valid concern and deserves further attention. The best way to address doctrinal concerns is one of the strong suits of DBS, a focus on Scripture. When believers in a movement are constantly pushed to the Word, the overall effect will be biblical orthodoxy. It may not thoroughly impact every single group, but it will be the overall characteristic of the movement (see Smith 2014). In discovery groups that are functioning properly, every comment and observation shared during the group is usually accompanied by which verse of the passage the observation came from. If something sounds like it is not really grounded in the passage, the leader will ask something like, “Where do you see that in the passage?” This helps the group to self-correct.

Ideally the leader of the discovery group also meets at least once a week with a coach or discipler who is developing him as a leader. This

adds an element of outside correction in addition to the self-correction that happens in the group.

Many discovery groups operate among first-generation believers. They are concerned with the basics of the faith and living those implications out in community, not with wrestling with complex theological doctrines. Theological error can and does occur, but this does not warrant the complete dismissal of an entire approach to teaching and/or discipleship. As far as I know, theological error has occurred throughout the world in local churches, seminaries, parachurch ministries, and church plants of the apostle Paul, but I hope this reality would not cause us to broadly condemn *all* local churches, seminaries, etc., as failed systems.

Furthermore, DBS is just one tool as part of a larger strategy. The larger, long-term vision in church-planting movements is to provide ongoing, reproducible leadership training that equips movement leaders with the biblical and theological skills to shepherd their movements toward mature faith and protect them from false teaching (Lafferty 2020).

The DBS leader is often holding back a lot of information. The leader may want to teach so much more from a specific passage but knows that the participants are not ready for that level of teaching. Not fully explaining a concept can be difficult for the leaders, especially for those with the gift of teaching and a high level of education. However, the leaders are encouraged by the fact that Jesus went through a similar process. In John 16:12, he told the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." The leader may not always answer the questions people have, instead challenging them to continue in the teaching until they learn the answer to the question. This can be extremely difficult for teachers, especially those accustomed to an explanatory model of teaching. Jesus also refused easy answers to people that had serious questions (e.g., Matt. 21:27, Mark 10:17–21, John 6:52–53). This practice filters who really wants to follow through from who is just interested in arguing or asking endless questions.

These examples highlight the relatively slow pace at which knowledge is transferred in a discovery group. Many in discovery groups are not coming from a biblical worldview, so the information is completely new and, in some cases, antithetical to their cultural understanding. A slower pace helps to make sure that understanding and obedience are keeping up with the level of knowledge being transferred. Learning the appropriateness of holding back knowledge will allow those you are teaching to develop at a rate consistent with their current maturity level (Hull 1984, 223). Knowledge without any attempt at obedience has the potential to bring pride or to “puff up.” At the same time, a lot of enthusiasm and “worked up” worship experiences without obedience to the commands of Christ also misses the point (Heitzig 2017, 222). This is not legalism or salvation by way of morality. In the DBS approach, there is delight in following the simple (and often slow) process of teaching people the commands of Christ not only as conceptual knowledge but also practical application in the context of life-on-life discipling relationships.

So even though it looks different than some are used to, “Great Commission teaching” occurs every week in a DBS. The question is asked every week, “If this story from the Holy Book is true, what can I do this week to apply/obey these principles/commands in my life?” Another question gets asked at the beginning of each group, “How did you do in sticking to your commitment to obey from last week?” We have found that disobedient people without a desire to obey do not enjoy getting asked if they were obedient on a weekly basis. They usually fizzle out of the group. However, this is not a legalistic or works-focused approach to teaching and discipleship. Grace abounds when participants fall short, and our groups seek to celebrate steps of ongoing sanctification and even failed attempts at obedience. People who struggle with disobedience but have a serious desire for transformation tend to welcome the continued accountability.

In many ways, it is very fun for gifted teachers to take part in a DBS group. It is an interesting challenge to use leading questions and simple

observations that allow the participants to discover truth. Also, because of the group process and accountability, teachers get to see every week if the content is sinking in and the truths are being obeyed. And is that not the greatest test of an effective teacher?

If we use a biblical understanding of teaching or “Great Commission teaching,” the DBS approach does fit as it brings about obedience to all Christ commanded. The one challenge is for people with the gift of teaching, especially for those who conceptualize teaching as lecturing/presenting. Within a larger network of multiplying discovery groups, there are opportunities to gather discovery group leaders for mentoring, troubleshooting, and resourcing. This would definitely be an opportunity for those with the gift of teaching to exercise their gifts among others who are guiding groups in the discovery process. I would also maintain that the gift of teaching can indeed be exercised within a discovery group by asking questions, helping to make connections, bringing ideas from previous studies back to mind, or making observations in the text. Jesus’s teaching methods included similar strategies.

It is interesting to note that discovery groups do not have to be synonymous with basic teaching or beginner knowledge. I have been in discovery groups where the discussions get theologically deep. One of the greatest seasons of my personal theological growth was being in a discovery group that was made up of mature believers, each one bringing something different to the table: tons of ministry experience, MDiv degrees, a wealth of parenting skills, and Bible college educations. All of these things combined with a sincere love for the Lord and for people. Their observations and reflections taught me many deep truths, yet no one ever stood up and lectured for thirty minutes.

## Conclusion

Our ministry team has sensed God leading us to use the DBS process as part of our strategy to see disciples multiplied and churches planted in

our corner of Southeast Asia. I have argued that this approach, although somewhat different in style to traditional models, is very biblical. Teaching and preaching, understood biblically, are happening every week as we see groups of people, believers and sometimes not-yet-believers, sharing the truths about Jesus with one another and their community and also learning to obey practical truths from scripture. We constantly return to Jesus's words, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him . . . 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me" (John 6:44-45, ESV). We are seeing people coming to Jesus, being drawn and taught by the Father. It is amazing to see how powerful the Word of God can be in the hands of a person who is earnestly seeking to know the truth. It is also very humbling that much of our knowledge and experience is not what saves people, but rather people responding to the Word and the saving work of the Holy Spirit. We are learning to embrace this humble stance as God continues to bring people to faith.

## Questions for Discussion

- Do you agree with the author's exegesis and definition of biblical preaching and teaching? What aspects of biblical preaching and teaching are universally relevant, and which are culturally variable?
- Which model(s) of preaching and teaching have been most formative for you personally? Which model(s) do you believe are most missionally promising in your context? Why?
- Do you agree with the author that the DBS model faithfully expresses the full biblical meaning of preaching and teaching? What aspects of biblical preaching and teaching are universally relevant, and which are culturally variable?
- Compare this article with the article "Discipling Muslims Far as the Curse is Found" (by JF) in this issue of Seedbed. Are these two approaches divergent, or complementary? How so?



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