

Book Review

Aila Tasse and Dave Coles, *Cabbages in the Desert: How God Transformed a Devout Muslim and Catalyzed Disciple Making Movements Among Unreached Peoples*

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Abstract

Cabbages in the Desert: How God Transformed a Devout Muslim and Catalyzed Disciple Making Movements Among Unreached Peoples by Aila Tasse and Dave Coles provides case studies and explanations from in and around Kenya about Disciple Making Movements (DMM). Through his Lifeway ministry Aila Tasse has empowered many DMM practitioners who have established ongoing Disciple Making Movements. The case studies by these practitioners provide details and examples of contextualized and faithfully practiced disciple-making principles through which the DNA of fruitful movements can be established, multiplied, and sustained.

Key Words: DBS, disciple-making, DMM, movements, multiplication, simple church

Introduction

Cabbages in the Desert is a collection of epiphanies and paradigm shifts for Christian ministry that were worked out and acted upon across several African countries resulting in dramatic movements to Jesus in many communities. The shift to Disciple Making Movements (DMM) is portrayed through a series of case studies interspersed with sociological and theological reflections. The case studies reveal how God has used disciple-making principles and practices to establish his kingdom among people groups considered resistant to the gospel. The practices illustrated in the case studies are not given as an apologetic for a DMM methodology; rather, they are powerful descriptions of how a faithful and persistent appeal to the Lord of the harvest results in workers (Mt. 9:38) and are a fulfillment of Jesus's call to join him in his mission (Mt. 28:19, 20).

It is clear that this disciple-making process exemplified in *Cabbages in the Desert* is dependent on the movement of the Holy Spirit, the convicting power of the Bible, and the obedience and initiative of ordinary believers who answer Jesus's call to make disciples who make disciples. This multiplying mobilization, based on a vision of God's mission, has resulted in extensive growth in the kingdom of God. The importance of this book for churches and agencies worldwide lies in the paradigm shifts that provide a pattern and pathway for those called to obey the Great Commission by multiplying disciple makers.

Notable Features

Cabbages in the Desert is organized into eight sections with three appendices. The first two sections walk the reader through Aila Tasse's journey towards a commitment to DMM principles and practices. The DMM principles introduced in chapter 8 are illustrated by two case studies

(“testimonies”), which conclude the second section. The remaining sections dig deeper into these DMM principles. Each section begins with a chapter from Tasse explaining a particular concept followed by chapters describing case studies of flourishing movements that outline how the movements began and present the key principles and practices that were significant to the movement catalyst. The concepts explored in these sections are:

- Catalyzing Disciple-Making
- Biblical Foundations for Disciple-Making
- Disciple-Making in Practice
- The Disciple-Making Journey
- Unleashing Disciple-Making Leaders
- Disciple Making Movement Dynamics

Appendix A continues Aila Tasse’s personal story with a description of how the gospel impacted his family. Appendix B provides an overview of the training used by the Lifeway ministry to equip DMM practitioners. Lifeway is the mission organization started by Tasse to do outreach and plant churches, and whose primary focus today is to encourage Disciple Making Movements. Appendix C provides a series of “Creation to Christ” Bible passages for Discovery Bible Study (DBS) gatherings.

The book’s primary DMM multiplication orientation and process is described in the “Catalyzing Disciple-Making” section, supported biblically in the next section and analyzed as a seven-step process in chapter 20 in consideration of the “disciple-making journey.” Additionally, there are two practices detailed in the final two sections that reveal how the disciple-making multiplication process grows and is sustained. In the “Unleashing Disciple-Making Leaders” section, one practice focuses on levels of leadership development and outlines how to equip and empower DMM practitioners who train others to become disciple makers. These levels are illustrated succinctly in a graphic on page 284. The key to reading this diagram is to realize that it does not represent a hierarchy of status or power; rather, the diagram pictures positions of influence developed through relationships of trust as believers are empowered to create disciples who are also disciple makers. The relationships are expressed through an ongoing dialogical, discovery process as leaders at different levels meet to discern God’s will.

The second practice worth considering for any DMM practitioner is a determined response to potential breakdowns in the multiplication process that is explained in the “Disciple Making Movements Dynamics” section. For a movement to be sustainable, the disciple-making multiplication DNA must be passed down to each generation. Each movement has a life cycle and, in any generation, the multiplication DNA can be undermined so that the movement will plateau or even die. The fourth generation is critical “when fresh equipping needs to begin.” Equipping hubs “prevent the plateau and decline of the movement” (p. 317).

A chart in the conclusion summarizes the DMM process in “three critical areas—starting, multiplying, and sustaining” (p. 340). Although the chart is a helpful reference to the multiplication DNA that creates movements, it is the explanations and case studies in the rest of the book that capture the imagination and excite aspiring disciple makers. What brings the chart to life is active participation in the process.

Aila Tasse’s Life and Ministry

The primary disciple-making case study is Aila Tasse's life and ministry. His personal testimony of coming to Christ and his rejection by his Muslim family and community described in chapters 1-4 is followed by a narrated series of evangelistic and ministry attempts. Eventually Tasse let go of his approach and "embraced the idea of movements" through the "conviction and urging of the Holy Spirit" (p. 84), as described in chapter 8. In 2007, Tasse's "calling was ... clarified to multiplying disciples" (p. 92), and the "Lord inspired [his Lifeway team] to understand that if we multiplied disciples it would lead to multiplication of cell groups, leaders and ultimately churches" (p. 86). This vision of multiplication in disciple-making led to a comprehensive process that developed commitment (heart), strategy (head), and action (hands) in all levels of leadership, from the facilitators of DBS groups through to those designated "Global Catalysts" because they have successfully initiated a movement and are now launching new movements by using their experience to "catalyze, mentor, and coach the movement leaders" (p. 282).

Several experiences and epiphanies had prepared Tasse for this significant disciple-making shift. In chapter 4, he relates a three-part vision that shaped his life and future ministry. First, he discovered the release to love others through a time of prayer and forgiveness for all those who had persecuted him. Second, he was given a vision of a potter, which he interpreted as God's call to use him and shape him. Third, Tasse received the vision of cabbages in the desert that has given this book its title. The vision meant that God would bring eternal life to a place where life seemed impossible, and he understood this life-bringing task to be the one granted to him. The gospel was revealed as the water of life that changes people hostile to the gospel based on God "doing a new thing" (Isa 43:18-20).

Another key experience came after a successful evangelistic campaign when a woman came up and demanded, "Now who among you will remain behind to teach us about this God you've told us about?" (p. 51). Tasse confesses that "Her question haunted me, echoing in my heart and mind." It led to a conviction that the task required a move "from decision-making to disciple-making," through which he must multiply himself into the lives of others (p. 52). Indigenous people must reach their own group to be effective, and DMMs achieve sustainability when people embrace the gospel as part of their identity and not as something foreign.

Describing DMM

Each of the remaining 14 case studies ("testimonies") are from a "Global Catalyst" within the Lifeway network (p. 99). The case studies are intriguing due to their repetitive nature. While each has unique elements due to its context and obstacles faced by each team, the similarities underscore the importance of the DMM pattern for establishing a multiplying disciple-making process. Team-based problem-solving structures are established within each movement when leaders are called together to "evaluate the health of the movement" and identify weaknesses, strengths, and shortcomings (p. 254). However, there are few details of current struggles and how previous problems were overcome. Examples of problem-solving processes as well as a description of the difficulties that were overcome through this process would be helpful for those facing similar troubles.

The DMM process from start to movement is repeated throughout the case studies with some variation, but the basic outline is as follows:

When we introduce people to Jesus, they begin a journey of discipleship which involves making more disciples. It includes prayer, caring for others' needs, finding those who are

open (persons of peace), starting Discovery Bible Studies, gathering believers into groups, developing leaders, and catalyzing continuation of the process. We keep on encouraging that kind of multiplication. When successful, this process yields disciples who repeat the same process with others (p. 176).

Tasse describes a Disciple Making Movement as occurring when “the Spirit of God empowers teams of ordinary people to lovingly obey Jesus and rapidly multiply disciples who make disciples to at least the fourth generation, resulting in more than 100 simple churches” (p. 179).

DMM and the Holy Spirit

What is the relationship between this human organized methodology and the power of the Holy Spirit? Tasse insists that “Obedient disciples play an active role in the advance of a movement, but no human can control a movement or make it happen” (p. 179). Few would disagree with the theological underpinnings of Tasse’s position. God uses his people to accomplish his mission and has given Jesus’s followers commands, such as the Great Commission, to participate in his mission. However, the promised helper is the Spirit (Jn 15:26-27), without whom people’s hearts cannot be changed. From this orientation Tasse provides “Characteristics of Disciple-Making” (p. 179), a list that views DMM as a process not a method, fits with New Testament patterns, focuses on disciple-making as opposed to decision-making, insists on group discovery rather than experts sharing their knowledge, and measures success as obedience to God.

What is the difference between method and process? Tasse maintains that disciple-making is a process because it introduces “a person to a relationship, to follow Jesus.... [It is a] life-on-life experience...., [not] a program with Lesson 1, Lesson 2, and so on, until the student finishes the last lesson....” He further explains, “Method is a particular way of doing something. Process is the step wise actions involved in implementing the method” (p. 175). Tasse seems to be saying that DMM is not an automatic template that works like an algorithm. Rather, there is a relational, integrated focus that depends on the response of the person and the working of the Spirit. That is, there is a relational component through which a person does not merely learn *about* the Bible and *about* Jesus but through the Bible comes to know and believe in Jesus through obedience. This relationship includes a growing commitment to Jesus’s mission of making disciples.

DMMs: Anomaly or Normative Ministry?

Does the book’s DMM process have wider validity or is it context dependent? That is, are there factors in Tasse’s and the other case studies’ contexts that have led to such positive results—factors that may be missing elsewhere? Such a difference seems to be the case when we read in this book that disciple makers find people “open, very receptive” (p. 209), presentations of the gospel result in an elder of the tribe encouraging people to believe (p. 50), “people hear what’s happening in one place, and they send an invitation: Can you come and do the same in our community?” (p. 209), or a movement catalyst comments that “In our experience, a DBS often multiplies” (p. 202). All these scenarios would be considered unusual in some other contexts, e.g., many Western contexts familiar to some readers.

DMM catalyst “Mark” (chapter 21) makes the observation that culture determines how “best to enter a community” (p. 256), and this reality could imply that some people are more open and easier to reach than others and therefore movements are more likely to arise among them. However, his conclusion is not that a movement cannot happen in some contexts but that cultural

differences call for research, creativity, and prayer. If receptivity is the work of the Spirit, then it is inappropriate to assume that some people groups are “hard” and others are “receptive.” Even though most people in a community may not be receptive and many may be actively opposed, in these case studies there are always some people who are spiritually sensitive and hungry to hear about Jesus’s salvation and how to enter God’s kingdom. The question is understanding how a DMM practitioner can enter the harvest to identify and appropriately connect with those who are sensitive to God’s call to follow Jesus, with the intention to follow up with commitment and perseverance.

Furthermore, receptivity is only half of the issue. The other half is to use the right approach and process. Like landing an airplane, there are many ways to get it wrong and few ways to get it right. What these case studies emphasize are those key practices and orientations that cultivate impacting disciple-making DNA so that people respond positively and view the message as relevant to their lives. The right approach will provoke interest and provide a culturally resonant pathway to come to faith in Jesus.

The authors also emphasize that DNA drift from generation to generation is a constant danger (p. 254ff) through which groups lose the disciple-making commitment. Perhaps many churches in the West have been caught up with other pursuits so that disciple-making is not a priority. These DMM examples are then a challenge for such churches to awaken to the reality that they are missing Jesus’s primary calling to “make disciples.”

The Place of “Church” in Disciple-making

Throughout the book there is evidence of a struggle around the concept of “church” within DMMs. Both ecclesiological and pragmatic issues are addressed, but they are never fully resolved. Clashes with established denominational churches and pastors can be divisive and controversial (e.g., p. 88, p. 298), since DMM radically reinvents the forms and practices that constitute “church” in contrast to traditional and denominational models. The DMM model of “church” is described in biblically functional terms (p. 87), and Tasse (p. 189) considers the contrast an “organizational” (therefore cultural?) issue rather than theological: “The prevailing paradigm [of ‘church’] common in many churches makes church leaders and members see life and ministry through the lens of an organization. Anything that does not fit the organizational paradigm feels like a threat to the church system. Making reproducing disciples requires a paradigm shift.”

Lifeway attempts to mitigate this clash by emphasizing disciple-making rather than “church planting.” A discipleship emphasis is more acceptable to those committed to traditional models (p. 92), and in many of the movements the term “church” is avoided in favor of the more neutral term “gathering” so that “denominational thinking” (p. 203) is avoided. Unfortunately, the term “gatherings” does not carry the same weight or status as a “church” designation. Thus, many of the movements describe a “transition” from DBS group to identity as “church.” However, such a transition threatens the multiplication DNA of DBS groups since traditional “church” practices and beliefs about biblical organizational structures contend for dominance. Even though there is a professed emphasis on maintaining the discovery process as the primary engine for disciple-making, there is also a tendency in some of the case studies towards developing larger groups in which the discovery dynamic is diminished and lectures/sermons become a competing method for teaching Scripture. As “Ruth” notes, “If someone puts a preacher up front, the fruit is zero! That church will not grow as a disciple making church” (p. 106).

Tasse also adopts the term “Simple church” (p. 118 Footnote 32) to emphasize the radical ecclesiological shift that is at the core of the DMM process. The claim—and the evidence given in the book—is that traditional and denominational church models are much less fruitful in terms of disciple-making and expanding the kingdom than DMM. Tasse would like DBS groups to identify as New Testament churches but without the baggage associated with common understandings of “church” and without alienating those still committed to denominational models. This tension will require more dialogue to discover if the distinct expressions of church can exist with appreciation for each other.

Conclusion

Anyone in the worldwide Christian movement desiring to obey Jesus’s command to “make disciples” should take seriously the invitation extended in the conclusion to “come and join God in making disciples that make disciples” (p. 340). The DMM insights, guidance, and examples provided here are a gift and a challenge to those who are frustrated because they do not see multiplication within their ministry setting. In these pages we find a proven process that can be acknowledged by proponents and critics alike because it is not just a call for people to give their allegiance to Jesus, but a pathway by which people are invited to discover Jesus, embrace the call to be disciple makers, and so fully participate in Jesus’s mission to multiply God’s kingdom. God “takes things that look impossible and makes them possible. And he calls us to ... play our role in fulfilling that call” (p. 345).