

Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History and Seasoned Practices

By Don Little

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We have seen it all too often: a beloved Muslim friend comes to believe in Jesus, but whether due to persecution, the temptation of the enemy, or the cares of this world, he returns to his old way of life. Former *Seedbed* editor, Don Little, sees the prevalence of these stories as a sign that our discipleship is flawed. Much effort is placed on evangelism, Little notes, but a distressingly large percentage of those who make a profession of faith fall away. He calls us to examine our assumptions about discipleship, and seek out the broad counsel of the Bible, Christian history, and missiology to more effectively disciple BMBs. Little aims to equip those of us serving among Muslims to be more effective disciplers so that those who come to believe will not only remain but will also grow and disciple others.

Seedbed readers are, of course, familiar with Don Little. He spent ten years discipling former Muslims in North Africa, then eight years

in mission leadership. He holds a DMin. from Gordon-Conwell, and currently serves as a missiologist with Pioneers. He teaches students and practitioners all over the world through the Lilius Trotter Center at Houghton College (New York), and is discipling all the time. His experience, sharp mind, and warmth of heart are evident in *Effective Discipling*.

The work is divided into two parts. In part one, Little builds a discipleship model that incorporates key portions of the New Testament, mines discipleship insights from diverse streams in Christian history, and engages contemporary methodologies. Little sets the stage by arguing that the Bible teaches that discipleship begins at conversion—a conversion that involves sufficient gospel understanding, repentance, and baptism. Little then surveys Paul’s understanding of discipleship in Galatians and Philippians, followed by a survey of discipleship as presented in Luke-Acts.

Chapter four transitions to a discussion of contemporary approaches to discipling. Little critiques “modernist” approaches (exemplified by organizations such as the Navigators), which typically concentrate on a very individualized course of teaching, Bible study, and mentoring designed to train evangelists and leaders. He commends approaches which emphasize classic spiritual disciplines and spiritual transformation, with an extended treatment of Dallas Willard’s approach. In chapter five, Little discusses three historical approaches to discipleship from diverse Christian traditions: Orthodox, Benedictine, and Anglican. Chapter six is Little’s view on contemporary contextualization debates, which amounts to a compelling critique of the ministry approach that encourages and promotes insider movements.

With these building blocks in place, Little articulates his model for discipling BMBs (believers from a Muslim background). Little draws on his research among BMB disciplers to outline a vision for discipleship, essential growth processes, the ideal role of the discipler, and a four-stage view of discipleship. With that vision in mind, Little presents his diagram of a “Living Pyramid of Relational Communal Discipling

of BMBs,” a visual that pulls everything together for a comprehensive discipleship model.

Part two brings the Living Pyramid discipleship model together with Little’s research among seventy-five seasoned disciplers of BMBs in the Arab Muslim world. Interviewees were spread across the Arab world, with sixty-seven percent men, fifty-one percent westerners, forty-five percent Arab world nationals, and thirty-one percent from a Muslim background. The discipleship challenges they listed are summarized in chapter nine. The following chapters then take an in-depth look at each of the most commonly named challenges discussed in separate chapters: negotiating a new identity, persecution, demonic opposition, money, family issues, and the discipler’s role. The book concludes with a summary of Little’s model and a stirring vision for faithfulness in the long-haul of discipling BMBs.

Strengths are numerous, but for the sake of brevity, here are just two. First, this book is filled with what we might call “principled realism.” Little and his interviewees have decades of experience discipling BMBs. While principles and ideals come through, they are never unrealistic and always practical. This also means that, while the book can stand up to scrutiny, it is not dry or overly academic. Instead, it is written in a mostly engaging style with numerous examples, and the focus is always on applying principles to the realities of life.

For example, in a section on contextualization, Little advises disciplers to avoid extracting BMBs from their culture and to consistently strive to integrate them into culturally appropriate churches. Yet, he acknowledges that “far too often, the ongoing residence and witness of BMBs within their own families and communities is impossible, at least in the short term, and disciplers must not force new disciples to carry burdens heavier than they can bear” (Loc. 2246). In short, disciplers must set forth the ideal that BMBs remain in their home community, while being ready to provide biblical counsel and care if the BMB is expelled.

In my context in coastal North Africa, we saw an example of this when a young woman was completely rejected by her family when she made her new faith known. The young woman moved away from home and continued following Jesus, but she continued to patiently reach out in love. Years later, during a significant family event, she was invited back in, and her Christlike care in a tough time cemented her place in the family.

Second, Little's model of discipleship is built on a firm, broad foundation. The model takes into account the teaching of both Jesus and Paul, incorporates elements of Christian history, utilizes careful research, and engages with missiological issues. It is nuanced and sensitive to the complexities of discipling BMBs, with insights from a diverse group of BMB disciplers. The result is an emphasis on sometimes overlooked essentials such as the importance of participation in a local church, baptism, and communal worship. This foundation also gives persuasive weight to the recommendations in part two.

Weaknesses are few and do not detract from the overall value. I was a bit puzzled by Little's choice to study the Orthodox and Benedictine traditions in the historical section. The Benedictine tradition is bound up in monasticism, which inevitably involves retreat from the wider community. Yet the foundation of Little's model is that the disciple remains inside their Muslim family and community. In another example, Little explains the "Jesus Prayer" in Orthodox spirituality, writing, "The Jesus Prayer works correctly only when it is used within the context of ethical action and in participation in the life of the church" (Loc. 1365). Little commended the prayer for BMBs, when I expected him to critique the idea that this prayer "works correctly," as it seems to be a mechanistic form of discipleship at odds with the Galatians-inspired dynamic life in the Spirit expounded in chapter two. Finally, in chapter twelve on demonic opposition, Little extensively quotes pastor-theologian Greg Boyd, whose quotes at times so emphasize the reality of a spiritual war they seem to undersell the weight of God's sovereignty. Nonetheless, there is much to commend in a chapter that takes on a topic vital for effectively discipling BMBs.

Some might find a few of Little's opening arguments in chapter one controversial. Relying on Gordon Smith's (2010) book *Transforming Conversion* and examples from Acts, Little argues that discipleship begins at conversion. This conversion involves genuine repentance, being baptized, and is closely linked to receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit. Baptism, furthermore, is associated with joining Christ's body, the church. For Little, the conviction that discipleship begins only after conversion is not merely an issue of semantics. Little sees genuine conversion as the foundation of effective discipleship. These emphases go against the grain of methodologies which teach us to begin discipling before a person becomes a believer, picturing discipleship as a process of gradually increasing obedience and understanding. Rather, Little argues, discipleship is about walking with the Spirit who is received at conversion.

Furthermore, because baptism is so important, Little advises that it should be delayed until it can be ensured that the BMB has a sufficient understanding of the gospel and can be incorporated into a real-life fellowship of believers. Little likens this to the church-planting movements phrase, "go slow in order to go fast," as he believes delayed baptism tends to lead to fewer converts falling away and thus results in greater long-term growth (Loc. 395).

While part two is specifically focused on application to the most challenging areas of discipleship, relevant applications for practitioners can be found throughout the book. In chapter four, Little exposes what he calls "modernist" approaches to discipleship as individualistic, mechanistic, and formulaic. What was well-contextualized for 20th century Americans is likely not the best approach for most 21st century BMBs.

Another application is the call to model and teach Spirit-led courage in those we disciple. Little's experience, and his research, point to the fact that BMBs are more likely to persevere and grow in the faith if they share their faith with someone very soon after they believe. Of course, we must be very careful not to exert pressure on what are often heart-wrenching or even life-threatening circumstances, situations

non-BMBs can never fully comprehend. However, it does mean we should prepare BMBs to walk in faith in the face of suffering and persecution by focusing our early discipleship on truths about God's sovereign power, complete trustworthiness, and commitment to be with us always (cf. Matt. 28:20, John 16:33b).

Little also advises us to emphasize grace-based, Spirit-led discipleship. Most BMBs come from a background that drills law and works-based religion enforced by the community. It often takes years for the grace-filled freedom of the Spirit to displace the voice of the law (often felt as the voice of the community). We must be constantly alert for the legalism that weasels its way into our thinking and the thinking of those we are discipling. Little writes, "It is critically important that those who disciple BMBs continuously strive to keep the focus on the dynamic and life transforming reality of walking by the Holy Spirit" (Loc. 555).

There are other inspired tips. In one place Little writes: "the evangelist/discipler must make every effort possible to get to know the whole family of the interested seeker long before the person comes to faith. Then, when an individual in the family does come to faith, the family will know the source of the 'contagion' and will have learned to like and trust the people through whom the message of Christ came to a member of their family" (Loc. 3205). In other places, he shares that he found worshipping together in song to be a vital element of BMBs' growth and spiritual formation, worth doing even if it means sneaking out into the countryside to do it.

In sum, I highly commend *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities* and believe it should be read by everyone seeking to make disciples and plant churches among Muslims, and especially Arab Muslims. For those who find it hard to read a book of this length, I would recommend at least reading the practical chapters of part two. For teams, part one is excellent background reading to formulate a team discipleship strategy. The chapters in part two are ideal for team meetings and should generate lively and engaging discussions. In short, it is a treasure of practical wisdom

for discipling BMBs. If we put this wisdom into practice, we will increase our effectiveness in making disciples who make disciples. May it be so.

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