

Discipleship in the Kingdom of the Heavens:

The Divine Conspiracy examined with reference to ministry among Muslims

by Don B. Little

1 Introduction: *The Divine Conspiracy's* Impact on the Muslim Ministry Context

Dallas Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy* (1998)¹ has had a profound impact on me and it is my conviction that the message it teaches has significant implications for those seeking to minister the Gospel among Muslims.² This paper is a careful description and assessment of the book and its message. This examination will be done with primary reference to the ministry context³ that I have been a part of for several decades—ministering in restricted access Islamic countries⁴ with the goal of establishing churches of Muslim Background Believers that can resist the enormous pressures of oppressive Islamic societies.⁵

Those of us serving Christ among Muslims have long known that effective discipling is a *primary component* in the establishment of enduring churches of Muslim Background Believers (MBBs).⁶ Unfortunately, the varied models of discipleship that are being used in ministry among Muslims today often appear to be more related to the idiosyncratic experience of the missionaries and the “camps” they come from, than to any Biblical and consistently effective principles. For example, Evangelicals emphasize knowing the Bible through group and individual study, whereas Charismatics tend to emphasize experiencing the Holy

¹ Willard, Dallas, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God*. I will henceforth speak of the book in this paper simply as *Conspiracy*.

² A version of this paper will be published in our AWM in-house publication and I intend to submit it to the EMQ.

³ I fully recognise that this is not the context that Willard was speaking to in his book. However, since Willard is setting forth what he believes are unchanging biblical certitudes which have application throughout history in every context, a good test of Willard's thesis is its application to the “frontline ministry” context of mission to Muslims. If it succeeds here, it will do well anywhere.

⁴ The term *restricted access country* is current mission jargon that means a country which does not welcome any kind of Christian missionary work. Western missionaries who DO live and work in such countries do so as professionals in various occupations. They are, using the Pauline term, tent-makers—those who largely work and support themselves while carrying out the Apostolic ministry of taking the Gospel into new territory.

⁵ For example, in the country in North Africa where I lived for a decade, national Christians have no official recognition of any kind. Their activities and meetings are all against the law of the Islamic state. Government sponsored persecution (imprisonment and torturing) of Christians is commonplace. With a population in excess of 30 million and with less than 500 national Christians, it is an ongoing miracle of God's grace that any converts continue on in faithfulness at all.

⁶ This term, Muslim Background Believers, is the currently popular term used to describe someone who has come to faith in Christ out of a Muslim background. This term is preferred over Muslim Convert for a number of reasons. It is a positive term. It also includes those who come to faith in Christ from a Muslim family and culture even though they themselves may have become Atheists and rejected Islam prior to their finding Christ. The abbreviation MBBs is widely used and will be used in this paper as well.

- Spirit.⁷ Some almost go as far as to disavow the need for any kind of Discipleship to Christ and instead suggest that Muslim believers in Christ should stay within their Islamic communities and be accepted as Muslims.⁸ What is more, it would not be an exaggeration to say that most of the models of discipleship that have been tried with MBBs in recent decades have failed as often as they have succeeded. It is far from clear that any approach has yet proven consistently effective.⁹

It is because of the frequent failures in discipling MBBs that *Conspiracy* gets me so excited. Willard has hit on something of considerable importance that could help transform the way we disciple MBBs. It is my hope that God will take this message of discipleship and use it to help all of us to be far more effective disciples and disciplers as we seek to see the Gospel of the Kingdom grow among Muslim peoples.

What is the Gospel about? What does it mean to be a Christian and how does one become one? Willard seeks to answer these two vital questions in *Conspiracy*. My own pilgrimage as a Christian has been fundamentally driven by a desire to understand and live out the answer to those two questions. The lessons I have learned through ministry among Muslims appear to validate Willard's answers to these questions. Discipleship to Christ is central to both the meaning of the Gospel and to what it means to be a Christian. Unless we can learn how to work more effectively to see former Muslims become transformed disciples of Christ, our efforts in evangelism and church planting among Muslims will continue to be disappointing.

The organization of this paper is straightforward. It will begin with a description of Willard's central thesis, and then present, in some detail, what Willard actually says and how he develops his case. Then the significant qualities, and shortcomings, of *Conspiracy* will be considered.¹⁰ The discussion throughout the paper will be applied to the context of ministry among Muslims. My conclusion will underscore the importance of *Conspiracy* for those called to minister the Gospel of the Kingdom among Muslims in the twenty-first century.

⁷ While somewhat of an over simplification, the above statement is not far from the reality. When a particular missionary emphasizes one element, I am not suggesting that they entirely neglect all other elements. All of us have struggled in trying to learn what it takes to disciple MBBs to maturity and stability in their faith.

⁸ Phil Parshall's 1980 book *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* brought the discussion of Contextualization to the table in a new way. The debate about contextualization in ministry to Muslims continues to be waged. Refer, for example, to the series of articles by Phil Parshall, John Travis & Dean Gilliland in EMQ, October 1998. Those most radical argue that Muslims who want to follow Jesus can do so while remaining Muslims in most senses of the word. For them, radical discipleship to Christ as the foundation of faith would be unthinkable. The goal is to try and keep the MBBs as much like their Muslim neighbours as possible in order to avoid offence.

⁹ In the country of my longest ministry residence, over the past 50 years the majority of Muslims who have come to faith, been baptized and invited into a local worshipping group, have, in time eventually returned to Islam. In ministry among Muslims to date, failure in discipleship is as common as success.

¹⁰ In preparation of this paper, I used Adler and Van Doren's *How to Read a Book* (1972). I followed the authors' advice closely. I kept the chart from pp. 163-164 close at hand as I carefully sought to absorb Willard's book and make it "my own." The structure of this paper reflects the fact that I used their methods of analysis on *Conspiracy*.

2 Rendering *The Divine Conspiracy's* Message

2.1 The Central Thesis

There is no difficulty in determining Willard's thesis since he states it clearly in his introduction: "My hope is to gain a fresh hearing for Jesus, especially among those who believe they already understand him" (p. xiii). Willard seeks to show that discipleship to Jesus is at the very heart of the Gospel (p. xvii). *Conspiracy* completes a trilogy on the Christian life in which Willard elucidates the nature of the Christian's spiritual experience (*Guidance*), the way in which Christians grow spiritually (*Disciplines*) and, in *Conspiracy*, the necessity and method of discipleship to Christ (p. xvii). The "secret plan" implied in the title "*Conspiracy*" is that God is working in human history to set up a Kingdom of transformed disciples of Christ working with Him to reign on the earth in *this* Creation. We function best when we understand who we are—Disciples of Christ, and what we belong to—the Kingdom of the Heavens.

2.2 The Core Content of *Conspiracy's* Argument

The flow of Willard's argument is easy to present: he explains why the Gospel *means* discipleship (Ch 1-3), then elucidates what discipleship means through an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount (Ch 4-8), then gives instruction on how to be a disciple and how to teach so that people actually turn into transformed disciples (Chs 8 & 9), and concludes with a look at our future (Ch 10). What follows is a presentation and analysis of the content of *Conspiracy*.

Introduction: Discipleship to Jesus is the Heart of the Gospel.

2.2.1 The Nature of the Kingdom we are invited to Enter (Ch 1).

The Kingdom of God is ultimate reality. The only answer to the meaning of life that is satisfactory is one that finds its meaning in connection to the "community of boundless and totally competent love" (p.11). Living in harmony with God in His universe is the only way of life that is ultimately true to reality. Living disconnected from God is not normal.

2.2.2 A Critique of Contemporary Alternatives to this Kingdom Gospel (Ch 2).

Willard offers a perceptive critique of two prominent versions of the Gospel as they are preached in American churches. Calling both of them "Gospels of sin management," Willard criticizes both the theological right's "gospel" of getting into heaven by *legal* removal of sin-guilt through believing the right things about God,¹¹ and the theological left's "gospel" of commitment to civil rights. Willard argues that the gospels of both the left and right are conceptually disconnected from and practically irrelevant to the personal

¹¹ Listen to Willard's critique of the right: "When all is said and done, 'the gospel' for Ryrie, MacArthur, and others on the theological right is that Christ made 'the arrangement' that can get us into heaven. *In* the Gospels, by contrast, 'the gospel' is the good news of the presence and availability of life in the kingdom, now and forever, through reliance on Jesus the anointed." (p.49)

lives of believers. *Real life* goes on for most Christians without reference to the "gospel." This sad reality is a *result* of what these "gospels" teach, not in spite of it (p.54)! Both "gospels" have led to the virtual disappearance of Jesus as teacher (p.57). Christ's teachings are unconnected to life as it is truly lived. Serious conceptual difficulties prevent people from rightly understanding Jesus and His Kingdom Gospel of discipleship. The rest of the book attempts to remove those barriers so that Christians can see Jesus anew and enter joyfully into the *life* of discipleship in Him.

2.2.3 Jesus' conception of God and the Kingdom reality in which he lived (Ch. 3).

In order to correct prevailing misconceptions about the nature of the Kingdom of God and the often totally inadequate views of Jesus held by many, Willard explores the fundamental nature of spiritual reality and puts forth a fresh, Biblical, view of God and Jesus. In this section Willard's training and experience as a philosopher shine. His analysis is sometimes breathtaking—one pauses and simply responds in worship—and always faith strengthening. In opposition to the dominant materialism of our day, Willard teaches that:

We ought to be spiritual in every aspect of *our* lives because our world is the spiritual one. It is what we are suited to.... As we increasingly integrate our life into the spiritual world of God, our life increasingly takes on the substance of the eternal. (p. 82)

Particularly refreshing is Willard's reinstatement of Jesus as the Master teacher. Willard restores a sense of awe at the unsurpassed wisdom that Jesus displayed in his teachings. The following quotation expresses Willard's vision of Jesus:

He is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it. He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life. (p.95)

Who would not but choose to commit one's entire life to such a Lord as Jesus?

2.2.4 The Sermon on the Mount: Jesus answers to the age-old questions about the nature of the good life and human goodness (Chs 4-8a).

Having set the stage in his initial three chapters, Willard now moves into the heart of the book.¹² He treats the reader to a genuinely *wise* exposition of Jesus' masterful teaching as it comes to us in the Sermon on the Mount.

¹² Encompassing 4 ½ out of 10 chapters, and 184 out of 400 pages (pp. 97-281) this thoughtful elucidation of Jesus' teaching is nearly half of the entire book. It contains a wealth of meaningful insight.

Through the years I have read and heard quite a few expositions of Jesus' Sermon. I found Willard's discussion captivating. It merits repeated re-reading and careful pondering. Given my purpose, this paper will only highlight two significant points from this middle section of the book.

Willard's handling of the Beatitudes is different from most that I have heard. His interpretation even seems to go against a "natural" reading of the text itself. Other expositions of the Beatitudes treat them as a list of characteristics that describe the ideal Christian.¹³ In contrast, Willard argues that the Beatitudes clarify Jesus' central message that God's rule and life is freely available to all through reliance on Him.¹⁴ The reason there is blessing/beatitude is that the rule of God from the heavens is available to all, regardless of natural ability or social standing (p. 122). The Beatitudes are a list of the varied kinds of people who are blessed *because they are invited into the Kingdom*—not because they evidence certain characteristics.¹⁵ For Willard, rightly understanding the Beatitudes leads to rightly understanding the Gospel:

The gospel of the kingdom is that no one is beyond Beatitude, because the rule of God from the heavens is available to all. Everyone can reach it, and it can reach everyone. We respond appropriately to the Beatitudes by living as if this were so, as it concerns others and as it concerns ourselves. (p. 122)

In the three chapters in which Willard elucidates Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, one of the central themes is that the goodness that Jesus makes available to his disciples is far beyond the goodness of the Scribes and Pharisees. In contrast to their external righteousness, the goodness that Jesus describes is the actual inner transformation of the heart and attitudes of the disciple so that the kinds of actions that Jesus talks about throughout the Sermon become the disciple's natural way of response and action. We misunderstand the Sermon if we take Jesus' exhortations as a new set of laws. For a disciple, true goodness is a natural flow of the Kingdom life of God into our inner beings. When our heart is

¹³ The pastor of our local church recently preached through the Sermon on the Mount. His perspective on the Beatitudes was similar to that of Martyn Lloyd-Jones (See especially his introductory analysis of the Beatitudes, pp. 9-41). Lloyd-Jones contends that: "... the Beatitudes ... are a description of the character of the Christian in general." (p. 24)

¹⁴ In my recent re-reading of Willard, I really grappled with his reading of the Beatitudes. I read and reread them. I read them in several different translations and languages. I consulted Lloyd-Jones (see next note). In the end I found that Edersheim (Pt 1, p. 529) and *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (p. 217) viewed them the same way as Willard. I was gradually convinced. In any case, I do not think that Willard's handling of the whole of the Sermon on the Mount stands or falls on his reading of the Beatitudes.

¹⁵ A proper understanding of the Beatitudes, following Willard, does guard against inappropriate guilt based on the sense that one can never live up to the "ideals" of the Beatitudes. See Willard's discussion of this p. 98-99. The more I work with Willard's writings, the more satisfactory his interpretation of the Beatitudes appears.

transformed it is natural to obey Jesus.¹⁶ It would be hard not to respond the way Jesus describes.

Throughout his exposition of the Sermon, Willard's discussion of the characteristics of the Kingdom heart is illuminating and engaging. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not permit sharing some of the profoundly evocative insights into anger and contempt, integrity, reputation, relationships, prayer, and so on, with which Willard fills this middle section.

2.2.5 Effective Discipleship (Ch. 8)

Willard's teaching on discipleship is his most valuable contribution. Willard first treats (1) the nature of discipleship, (2) how to become a disciple and (3) how to be a discipler, and then he explains what and how to teach so that others can actually become disciples. These two chapters provide desperately needed and dependable help for discipling MBBs.

2.2.5.1 The Nature of Discipleship.

We are all disciples of someone. Shaping our lives around the teaching and example of a person is to be his or her disciple. It is critically important that we not only believe in Jesus—we must obey him. Entry through the narrow gate into the Kingdom, which Jesus talks about in Matthew 7, does not come through believing the right things about Jesus (doctrinal correctness); it is through *obeying* Jesus. Entering into the Kingdom life is living in obedience to Jesus. It is our daily experience of interaction with and obedience to Jesus that is the source of the eternal life that we experience in the Kingdom. Nothing replaces obedience. In a helpful analogy, Willard warns against making assumptions about our spiritual state without obedience:

Anyone who is not a continual student of Jesus, and who nevertheless reads the great promises of the Bible as if they were for him or her, is *like someone trying to cash a check on another person's account*. At best, it succeeds only sporadically. (p. 273 Emphasis mine.)

Willard teaches that being a disciple of Jesus is an obvious and definite sort of thing. A disciple or apprentice is simply someone who spends a lot of time with someone so as to learn how to do what that person is capable of doing (p. 282). "I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. This is the crucial idea.... I am learning from Jesus to live *my* life as he would live it if he were I" (p. 283).

¹⁶ Here is one expression of this truth: "We are looking at how people live who stand in the flow of God's life now. We see the interior rightness of those who are living—as a matter of course, not just in exceptional moments—beyond the rightness of the scribe and Pharisee." p. 178.

2.2.5.2 How to become a disciple.

Though many desire to be disciples, it often seems inaccessible. The *precondition* to becoming a disciple is an appropriate attitude towards Jesus. One must have great admiration and love for Christ. One must see that being an apprentice to “the most magnificent person who has ever lived” is “the greatest opportunity one will ever have” (p. 292). When our soul condition is such that being a disciple of Jesus is the most precious thing in the world—we would give up anything to become like Jesus—then we are prepared to take practical steps that will help our journey into Christlikeness (pp. 292-5).

Willard proposes three things we can do in order to become his disciples (pp. 295-9). (1) We *ask*, emphatically and solemnly, that Jesus help us to become his disciple. (2) We *dwell* in his words and teachings.¹⁷ And (3) we *decide* to be a disciple—we must make it our definite plan. It is fundamental to how we function as people to have our will operative. As Willard stresses: “Intention and decision are absolutely fundamental” (p. 299).

2.2.5.3. How to be a discipler.

Willard suggests three essential elements for those who would be *disciplers* (pp. 299-310). (1) We must *be disciples*—it must be our own experience. (2) We must *intend to make disciples*—it must be our conscious deliberate objective. Even our Evangelism should be “discipleship evangelism.” (3) Finally, we must *ravish people with a new vision of Jesus and Kingdom life*—it is essential to change their belief system. This third point is fundamental and leads to Chapter 9’s curriculum.

Willard argues that belief systems govern behaviour. When teaching to make disciples we must pay attention to what people actually believe (looking at their behaviour is a good place to start!) and then explicitly challenge wrong beliefs. We must not dodge the serious issues—we must do justice to honest questions (pp. 305-310). We must proclaim, demonstrate and teach the reality of the Kingdom so that the belief system that governs their lives changes (p. 305).

2.2.5.4 What and how to teach people for Christlikeness (Ch 9).

Willard’s experience as a teacher serves him well here. Willard first shows the acute need in current Evangelicalism for a curriculum of

¹⁷ Willard fleshes this out quite a bit. We make Jesus the object of our study and passion. Also, “we will refuse to devote our mental space and energy to the fruitless, even stupefying and degrading, stuff that constantly clamors for our attention. We will attend to it only enough to avoid it” (p. 296).

discipleship.¹⁸ He then critiques four commonly held *inappropriate* objectives: (1) external conformity to Jesus' words, (2) profession of perfectly correct doctrine, (3) faithfulness to outward religious activities and practices, and (4) seeking certain experiences (p.320). In contrast, the two *primary objectives* of a discipleship course should be (1) bringing disciples to full confidence in the power and goodness of God, and (2) removing "automatic" responses against the Kingdom and replacing them with retrained bodies which automatically respond in Kingdom ways (pp. 321-3). Willard's presentation of the methodology of this curriculum is especially valuable.

The first objective is to bring the disciple to an ever-growing confidence in God—we need to enthrall their minds with God (pp. 327-341). Willard recommends that we work at enthralling the mind with God in three major ways: (1) through his Creation, (2) through his public acts in history (especially Jesus and the Gospels) and (3) through personal experiences of him in our lives. This work at the level of our belief systems is essential.¹⁹ Only a strong and accurate conception of God can result in a life of long term obedience:

And when it comes to the task of developing disciples into the fullness of Christ, we must be very clear that one main part, and by far the most fundamental, is to *form the insights and habits of the student's mind so that it stays directed toward God*. When this is adequately done, a full heart of love will go out toward God, and joy and obedience will flood the life. (p. 325)

This is vitally important in dealing with Muslims. If we don't work hard at this we discover that even after years of confessing faith in Christ, a person is still fundamentally Muslim in attitude and beliefs. Sometimes the pull of the old (Islam) overcomes the hold of the new (Jesus), because their belief systems have not been transformed, and they return to Islam.

With reference to ministry among Muslims, perhaps *the* most significant contribution that Willard makes is his explanation of *how*

¹⁸ Willard describes nondiscipleship as the "elephant in the church" (p. 301). It is the massive failure that is so pervasive throughout the church that no one even notices that it is there. It is accepted that one can be a Christian without needing to bother with following Christ. Little in our churches is designed to help believers become disciples. We must rethink our activities so that disciple-making comes to be the central purpose of our church life.

¹⁹ Willard's discussion of areas in which intellectual clarity is essential (pp. 327-341) is instructive. However, it is linked to the common misconceptions of *Westerners*. In applying these principles to discipling former Muslims, one would need to carefully respond to *their* misconceptions. The key to teaching to correct thinking is to remove the actual incorrect ideas. Willard makes this point emphatically himself: "We must study our friends and associates to see what they really do believe and help them to be honest about it. We understand that our beliefs are the rails upon which our life runs.... That means that we will directly confront opposing beliefs... We will name them, and we will state how and why they are misguided" (p. 309).

we are to help disciples break the ingrained bondage of the old ways and replace them with acquired habits of goodness. It is this element that is so often missing, fatally so, in our attempts to disciple MBBs. Believers who come to Christ from Muslim backgrounds struggle, often unsuccessfully, against sin habits of immorality, pride and deception (to name a few) which continually handicap them in their desire to become like Christ. Unless we can give them direction that will help them overcome these life-long habits, their faith is undermined and they do not experience freedom in Christ in any meaningful way. Our normal counsel in most cases is to tell them to read their Bibles, pray, fellowship and try harder.²⁰

Willard's explanation of how sin has power in our bodies, and of how that power can be broken through the exercise of the Spiritual Disciplines (pp. 341-364), is a crucial element in discipleship that most of us evangelicals know little about.²¹ Fortunately, there truly is help available to *change*. Willard explains that what is involved is changing habitual behaviour:

Now, in fact, the patterns of wrongdoing that govern human life outside the kingdom are usually quite weak, even ridiculous. They are simply *our habits*, our largely automatic responses of thought, feeling, and action.... It is rare that what we do wrong is the result of careful deliberation.... But the really good news here is that the power of habit can be broken. Habits can be changed. And God will help us to change them—though he will not do it for us—because he has a vital interest in who we become. (pp. 343, 345)

A typical response to such a statement would be, "Yes, in theory I believe we can change, but how do we do it?" In answer to this question Willard presents a very helpful diagram, the "Golden Triangle" (p. 347). This diagram ties together the three interacting elements that are involved in our inner transformation: (1) the action of the Holy Spirit, (2) the real events of our daily lives, and (3) planned disciplines for inner transformation. These three elements work together, as the disciple remains focused on Christ, in bringing about inner change. Absence of any element will, normally, not work—it will not result in inner change.

Most of us have no problem in relating to the first two elements in this

²⁰ This is not bad advice, it is just that it is insufficient. It does not take adequately into account how we are made up as humans and how we can change and grow.

²¹ Willard's second book, *Disciplines*, is devoted to this critically important subject. Willard gives a workable, practical way to obtain power over habits of sin. We are not powerless in the face of our bad habits, and neither are our MBB friends! It is possible to change, genuinely. Other classic works are helpful here as well. Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* and William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* are two that are worth reading, though they are not as practical as Willard is in relating the disciplines to daily life.

"Golden Triangle," but we don't understand what the Spiritual Disciplines have to do with it (or even what they are). Willard defines *discipline* as "any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort" (p. 353). For example, when practicing scales while learning to play the piano, the goal is not proficiency in scales, but the ability to naturally play whatever one desires. This is the same in the spiritual realm. For example, we spend much concentrated time meditating on Scripture with the result that the power and truth of God transforms our thoughts and attitudes. We fast from food to learn that there is another food that sustains us. Through regular exercise of appropriate disciplines we direct our bodies into activities that empower the inner and outer person for God (p. 354).²² Willard presents four core disciplines as examples of the way they work: solitude, silence, study and worship (pp. 353-364). He discusses how to practice them and what kind of an impact they have on inner spiritual transformation.

Willard concludes this discussion of curriculum with some practical steps for attaining the two central objectives and then concludes with a description of five stages, or dimensions, in living the eternal life now. They are (1) confidence in and reliance upon Jesus, (2) desire to be his apprentice, (3) obedience, (4) pervasive inner transformation of the heart and soul and, (5) power to work the works of the Kingdom (pp. 367-9).

2.2.6. Having a Vision of our Future in the Kingdom. (Ch 10)

Willard brings his masterful treatment of the nature of discipleship and life in the Kingdom of the Heavens to a conclusion with a heart-warming, vision-building discussion of what lies ahead for those who enter into the Kingdom with Jesus. Willard believes that an appropriately comprehensive vision of the future will help provide the motivation needed to press on in our lives as Kingdom disciples. Willard's comprehensive and deeply Biblical vision of the future is perhaps best summed up in his own words:

We should think of our destiny as being absorbed in a tremendously creative team effort, with unimaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast plane of activity, with ever more comprehensive cycles of productivity and enjoyment. (p. 399)

²² Willard's second book, *Disciplines*, develops the role of the Spiritual Disciplines more extensively. Of much use as well is Richard Foster's now classic *Celebration of Discipline* which explains and advocates the classic disciplines for a modern audience. Stephen Covey's emphasis on habit formation as the core to effectiveness is also helpful on this topic of discipline and character change (1989, 1992).

3. Assessing *The Divine Conspiracy*

3.1 Significant Contributions and Correctives

Now comes the task of weighing the value of Willard's exposition of discipleship. Among the many significant contributions, space only allows reiteration of three themes that have indispensable application to being and making disciples in Islamic contexts.²³

3.1.1. Discipleship at the heart of the Gospel

First is Willard's stress on discipleship as being at the heart of the Gospel. This is not new. Our ministry context often forces us to recognize that being a Christian is much more than having our doctrine right. Muslims have their doctrine correct, too. How are we as Christians different? Is it that we have the right answers and they have the wrong ones? Much more than getting the answers right, it has to do with transformed lives. If the Gospel we preach to Muslims leaves them the same (or worse!) than they were before, then how can it be seen as true or good? The impact of the Gospel on those who embrace Christ must be such that it turns them into loving, authentic, God-enthralled and genuine people. Discipleship to Christ has the potential to actually change people. Merely embracing Christianity as true and philosophically superior does not change people. Willard's stress on the necessity of authentic discipleship to Christ is essential in Islamic contexts, as in all other.²⁴

This stress on discipleship also speaks to the debate over contextualization. Our goal is to make disciples of Jesus. It is not to make "Western Christians"—in this sense discipleship makes possible authentic contextualization. But neither is our goal to make people who speak of a belief in Christ but remain firmly within the mainstream Islamic society. Disciples of Christ have transformed lives and no longer exhibit the values and behaviours typical in Islam—thus discipleship prevents inappropriate kinds of syncretistic contextualization. Teaching the Gospel as Discipleship guards against errors on both sides of the faith-in-context dispute.

3.1.2 Stress on the Kingdom of the Heavens

Also of much value is Willard's emphasis on the nature of the Kingdom that we enter through trusting Christ. Understanding and living as a member of the Kingdom of God, and accessing His power that is accessible in the context in which we live, can have a tremendously positive effect on MBBs. God is good and powerful, and our lives can draw on him and his grace resources whenever they are needed. The power of the Kingdom is available for us now.

²³ They also have wider application to all contexts, of course.

²⁴ Often, in my experience, those Muslims who come to faith initially as a result of being convinced intellectually of the truth of the Gospel often go for years with little or no positive change in their behaviour or attitudes. Typically, such converts eventually return to Islam under the unremitting pressure of their Islamic contexts. Believing in Christ simply because he is the truth is not a luxury that Islamic contexts permit.

3.1.3 Guidance on how to become a disciple & how to teach others to be disciples

As Western missionaries to Islamic nations, we bring the baggage of our own Christian heritage along. Since most of us come from something similar to one of the Christian traditions that Willard critiques, it is not surprising that we tend to approach the task of making disciples out of MBBs with naiveté. We have only been marginally successful at becoming disciples, so it is not surprising if we fail in teaching and modeling discipleship to our MBB friends as well.

Willard provides much needed guidance and instruction on how to go about setting up the conditions that will make disciples out of believers. We need a lot of help! Willard delivers. Willard also provides refreshingly valid psychological realism about human nature and the nature of eternal life that we are to experience now. He provides tools adequate to the task of seeing the Holy Spirit take Muslims who have come to trust in Christ and turning them into Spirit-empowered disciples who can impact their societies for the glory of God.

3.2 Deficiencies

Although there is much of tremendous value in *The Divine Conspiracy*, there are also a number of quite serious shortcomings. Reflection on some of these weaknesses suggests that they could have potentially serious implications for the overall strength and shape of Willard's discipleship thesis. The following discussion will treat three principal weaknesses. As will be suggested, all three are fundamental to what being a disciple is all about.

3.2.1 Discipleship is overly Gospels-oriented

Willard over-emphasizes the Jesus of the Gospels at the expense of the post-resurrection experience of the early church and the teaching of Paul and other apostles. Red flags went up when, in his lecture, Willard suggested that we should focus our reading and Scripture meditation more on the Gospels than on other parts of Scripture.²⁵ In *Conspiracy*, the role of the church and its relationship to the Kingdom is not discussed. It almost feels as if the church was an afterthought almost irrelevant to discipleship. All of the issues and struggles of the early church reflected in the epistles is hardly even referred to or acknowledged.

What is more, Willard stresses the second part of the Great Commission — "make disciples" — but hardly gives any time to the first — "Go into all the world." In all of Willard's discussion of the nature of the Kingdom, there is little sense of great commission urgency. The focus is on the individual walk with God — little seems to matter beyond that. There is no suggestion that a defining part of being a disciple of Jesus is being a Global Christian

²⁵ This is also suggested in *Conspiracy* p. 334.

with a heart for the world. There is none of the urgency that the Apostle Paul continually expressed in his continual efforts to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom to all of the nations of the world as soon as possible (Rom 15).²⁶ This oversight seriously misrepresents much of the tone and emphasis of the entire New Testament.²⁷

3.2.2 Downplay of the Intensity of Spiritual Warfare

Willard does not appear to take into account the extent to which the Kingdom of God is a battle against the powers of darkness, the Kingdom of Satan. As suggested by Boyd in his *God at War* (1997), the path of discipleship is largely a life of protracted spiritual warfare.²⁸ I doubt if Willard would disagree, but I struggle with his almost entirely positive portrayal of the life of discipleship. For Jesus the advance of the Kingdom of God was always at the expense of Satan's dominion. In Mark this theme is especially strong; Jesus has come to bind the strong man (Cf. Mk 1:21-28; 3:20-30). In Willard's treatment of the stages of the future between now and eternity (Ch 10)²⁹ there is no hint of intense spiritual warfare. Yet, throughout much of the epistles, and in more than half of the book of Revelation, the forward movement of the Gospel comes at great cost. We are not only disciples, but also soldiers waging serious warfare against Satan and his powers.

Were an MBB disciple unprepared for this element of life in the Kingdom, he could well be swept out of the battle. There is quite a bit more to faithful obedience than mere practice of the disciplines to grow. One must learn to wage effective warfare and to use the weapons at our disposal. In Willard's "Golden Triangle" there is not even a hint that the trials that one undergoes can be extremely severe and often cost one's life.³⁰ The present persecutions of Christians in places like Sudan³¹ often mean martyrdom.

²⁶ John Piper has a stronger sense of Biblical realism as he presents God's purpose in human history in both his classic *Desiring God* and in his more recent treatise on missions *Let the Nations be Glad!*

²⁷ See for example such texts as Matt 24:14, Acts 1:8, Rom 10:12-17; 15:20-24; 16:25-27, Eph 6: 19-20, etc.

²⁸ Boyd's book does an exhaustive study of the entire scripture in order to show how central this theme of spiritual conflict is to the entire Bible. He is quite convincing. Here are some typical assertions. "Where the Kingdom of God is being spread, the kingdom of darkness will be most at work." "In Paul's view, the devil and his kingdom are as pervasive in this fallen world as the air we breathe. The atmosphere of the world is diabolical, with the enemy persistently seeking to find an entrance into the believer's heart." pp. 278, 279.

²⁹ These stages are: (1) the time of steady growth, (2) the time of passage (death), and (3) the time of reigning with Christ.

³⁰ It is normal experience in ministry to Muslims to encounter extreme forms of demonic expression and dominion. Friends of mine have been working with and intensively discipling one woman for 6 years already and she is still often threatened with death and worse by demonic powers. Without power and authority exercised in the spiritual realm against Satan, most would-be disciples from Muslim backgrounds die or return to Islam. The conflict is intense. Downplaying this reality in discipling such people would be a serious mis-service to them.

³¹ Some estimate that as many as 1 million Christians have been put to death in the south of Sudan by the militant Islamic government. Apart from this dimension of intense spiritual conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, one has difficulty accounting for the "normalcy" of intense persecution of MBBs by their family and friends.

There is much more violence in Scripture and in Christian experience than is implied by Willard in his view of the future.³² True, in the end, God will usher in a reign of beauty and truth and gentleness, but to get there from here involves some pretty awful warfare in the spiritual realm.

3.2.3 Neglect of the corporate dimensions of the Kingdom

One gets the impression, from most of what Willard says in *Conspiracy*, that one can be a maturing disciple of Christ without contact with and submission to the body of Christ.³³ This is another consequence of being overly Gospels-oriented. Furthermore, there is no discussion of the relationship of the Kingdom, and the corporate Christian community, the Church, to the power structures of the world. If we teach our MBB friends only to follow Christ in the privacy of their individual lives, they will have little impact on their Muslim communities. Norm Lewis (1988) cites a telling incident that speaks a sober warning about discipleship that is only private:

David Shenk tells how a Muslim asked him, "Why don't Christians follow the way of Jesus? When I read the gospel I am overjoyed. The life and teachings of Jesus are wonderful, wonderful, really, truly wonderful. But please show me Christians who are willing to follow the way of Jesus. I have met a few, very few people who try to follow Jesus. But they follow Him only in their private lives. Consequently, your American society has become very evil. It seems to me that 'you Christians' do not believe that the way of Jesus is practical. That makes me very sad. (p. 88)³⁴

In *Disciplines* Willard addresses this issue in his final chapter, but in *Conspiracy* there is no attempt to place individual Discipleship into its wider, and necessary, corporate context.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that the weaknesses in Willard's otherwise brilliant elucidation of discipleship to Christ seriously undermine his

³² Willard's vision of the future of the Kingdom of God depicts the Kingdom as a gentle rule of God gradually moving all before it. Willard stresses the gentleness of the government of God: "Divine presence replaces brute power, and especially power exercised by human beings whose hearts are alienated from God's best" (p.381). Willard talks about "non-violent power" (p. 381). I have trouble with such imagery. The book of Revelation uses some quite violent imagery to describe Christ's vanquishing of his enemies. It portrays Christ vanquishing enemies by the sword and bloodshed and destruction accompanying Christ's final victory. (Cf. Rev 18:21-4; 19:11-21, etc.)

³³ Admittedly, Willard does treat some aspects of corporate life in *Disciplines*. A number of the disciplines that he discusses are corporate in nature. (Chap 9) One does not get the impression that Willard does not believe in the importance of the corporate dimension to discipleship. Thus, the almost entire lack in *Conspiracy* is all the more lamentable.

³⁴ Of course, Willard would probably agree with this Muslim's criticism of the lack of discipleship. It is interesting to note that in this book on the priority of World Evangelization, in spite of this telling quotation, there is no guidance of any kind given about how to make disciples, not even any teaching given as to what a disciple might look like, apart from being committed to reaching the unreached with the Gospel. This reflects our typical Evangelical preoccupation with the need to go, and our near total blindness about the need to make disciples.

argument. There is nothing inherently wrong with his argument for the centrality of discipleship. Willard's understanding of the Kingdom could be expanded to encompass the missing dimensions of missionary advance, spiritual warfare and corporate Church life without needing to be significantly altered.

Conclusion: Conspiracy is of great Consequence for Ministry in Islamic Contexts

Willard's insights and thesis about the Kingdom of God and the nature of life in that Kingdom have significant relevance to the Islamic ministry context. Having personally struggled for many years to learn how to effectively disciple MBBs, I am convinced that Willard's thesis about the goal and processes of Discipleship provides clarity and direction for those of us who live our lives among Muslims striving to help our MBB friends become mature, power-filled disciples. Thanks to Willard, we can now have a much better idea about how to make disciples of people from Islamic contexts.³⁵ I would go so far as to contend that *The Divine Conspiracy* should be required reading for everyone involved in outreach to Muslims.

In his May 2000 Regent College class, Willard used the following prayer. Since this prayer applies to all MBBs, and to all seeking to bring Muslims into a life of Kingdom discipleship, it is a fitting way to conclude this paper. It is my prayer:

That you would have a rich life of Joy and Power, abundant in Supernatural results, with a constant clear vision of never-ending life in God's world before you, and of the everlasting significance of your work. A radiant life and death.³⁶

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³⁵ Livingstone's 1993 book *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities*, one of the most up-to-date books on ministry among Muslims, has no guidance for how to disciple MBBs. This is typical. For Livingstone, once they become Christians the next task is to put them into churches. It seems to be assumed that discipleship will happen naturally in the context of church fellowship, though my experience suggests that this is the exception. Few Missiologists adequately address the very real challenges involved in making them into life-long disciples of Christ.

³⁶ As mentioned in the text, this is a quote of the prayer that Willard prayed for all of the members of the class. It is taken from my class notes.

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