

Little, Don. *Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities: Scripture, History, and Seasoned Practices*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2015. 350 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0830824700

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Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities by Don Little is a contribution in the dearth of academic treatments of the issue of discipling believers from Muslim backgrounds (BMB). Having myself worked with BMBs for over a decade, speaking several non-Arabic languages of Muslim communities, and being married to a BMB made me quite interested to read such an academic work. The author has 25 years of experience in North Africa in church planting and discipling. Little observes that a great many Muslims that come to faith in Christ end up reconverting to Islam. Likewise he notes the lack of experience that many missionaries have in discipling BMBs. Furthermore, many disciple “by instinct” with little explicit understanding of how the process works. This book is divided into two parts: making explicit the theological framework, and discussing practical issues related to discipling BMBs.

Part 1 centers on a theology of conversion and discipleship within the confines of the church – the *how* of the process of discipleship. Little states that “the fundamental nature of discipleship to Christ is the same in all Muslim and non-Muslim contexts and throughout history (Kindle location 2446).” Little then explores discipleship in contemporary evangelicalism and mines historical sources from the Orthodox and Catholic traditions. Noting the way conversion impacts the ongoing pattern of discipleship and the large worldview shift that must take place for BMBs, Little emphasizes that conversion should not be rushed and also advocates for a delay of baptism – measured in months or even years (Kindle location 371 and 398). His model for conversion is Acts 2:38—repent, believe and be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit (which is given at baptism) (Kindle location 324). Little brings Paul’s understanding of

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the Spirit in Galatians as well as Orthodox and Catholic understandings of discipleship to bear against conceptions of discipleship as teaching. Little emphasizes that discipleship must be done in the confines of Christian community. Noting that both Westerners and BMBs all emphasize the importance of conversion, transformation, and community. Little concludes that this disproves the “oft-repeated charge” that Westerners impose their baggage and cultural mindset on others (Kindle location 2023).

The majority of the research that Little conducts comes to the forefront in Part 2, which examines issues in discipleship exceptional to Muslim contexts. The research consists of 75 interviews of BMB’s and expatriate workers. Extrapolation to Muslim and not merely Arabic speaking contexts (the primary context of the research) is reasonable, Little assumes because *as Islam is the means for the transfer of Arabian tribal culture that this tribal culture is now not only a feature of Islamic culture but is itself Islamic* (Kindle locations 2439-2448). Little is circumspect in drawing conclusions from his research and offers his conclusions as “educated guesses” based on his analysis of the interviews (Kindle location, 5542). In light of these presuppositions regarding discipleship and the nature of Islam, Little examines obstacles to discipleship, issues of identity, persecution, demonic oppression, money, family, and the role of expatriates. Interestingly, persecution, money, and the demonic are addressed primarily with the aim of educating or offering a corrective to the Westerner in areas where they perhaps lack experience or are deficient. The identity of the BMB vis-à-vis the existing Christian community and their past is often controversial, Little presents a variety of different opinions from his interviews. Little strongly resists BMBs as continuing to identify as Muslims, a feature of Insider Movements. He notes the great majority of BMBs are in agreement (1596-1737). In terms of the role of the expatriate, Little also allows the interviewees to speak in an unfiltered way—some of which may be difficult to hear, but draws no firm conclusions himself.

However, there is room for critique. Little’s understanding of discipleship as not changing over time or across contexts grants great authority to the theology he provides, and thereby demands accuracy. Little advocates for a delay in baptism after conversion, but holds that discipleship is by the Spirit’s empowerment. How progress in discipleship is to progress to the point of baptism where the Spirit is actually received is not

explained. Little's observation that Galatians is not about justification, but about sanctification is an attempt to make use of the contribution of N. T. Wright. Such a usage requires a redefinition of justification. Wright's work would point to justification as covenant membership and would be pertinent to Little's work on identity. Instead, Little may have inadvertently and unknowingly *redefined* justification as a process and indistinguishable from sanctification. Little acknowledges, while perhaps not fully understanding, Wright (Kindle location 494). While sympathetic to Little's desire to incorporate varying traditions, one is left with the feeling that they have been mixed and matched without recognition of points of mutual incompatibility. As Little's theology is not culturally specific, then perhaps summarization from a respected source dedicated to the issue would be better.

Little's deeming of the 7th century Arabian tribal culture as Islamic due to Islam having been the medium for its transfer leads to a negative evaluation of the cultures of Muslim communities, though distinctions are made. The practical issues that must be faced in discipleship are primarily obstacles to overcome, rather than as differences that one must take into account. Little's understanding of Muslim family relationships and even structures are almost entirely negative (Kindle locations 4520, 4771, 4790, and 5754). None of the questions asked in research are in regards to such elements, but I would suspect that more than a few BMBs would find Little's conclusions at least mildly offensive. Of course Christ changes cultures, but will also enables the realization of many Muslim values and aspirations rather than merely repudiating them. The conservative understanding of contextualization paired with the negative tenor of the evaluation of culture is a recipe for the importation of Western cultural norms in the name of Christianity. This certainly exacerbates the problems with identity that Little identifies, and must make the discipleship process extremely slow and difficult. This slow process directly contributes to Little's resistance to the Church Planting Movement methodology and its hope for rapid multiplication (5238-5318). A different perspective on culture may alter Little's ambivalence about the role of foreigners.

Late in the book Little notes that his goal was to disciple locals to be church planters themselves (4822). No attention, however, is given to how churches are planted and therefore how to disciple BMBs to do such a thing. There is actually very little

attention given to how to effectively disciple BMBs other than through the general notion of modeling. However, as the resident culture is “Muslim” (negative) rather than “Eastern (different) modeling is therefore Christian with little to suggest such modeling may be different in the East. Consequently, there is no mention of culturally appropriate ways to model, to persuade, to teach, or to correct. There is little mention of the differences, if any, in discipling oral learners. There is no reference to notorious problem areas such as the Trinity, the crucifixion, the corruption of the Bible, or the divinity of Christ. There is no reference to the radically different ideas as to the roles of the Bible and the Quran in their respective traditions. There is no discussion on the priorities in instruction in discipleship. Any discussion of effective discipling in Muslim contexts should at least express cognizance of these issues.

Due to the above shortcomings I would be hesitant to recommend the book widely or to the uninitiated. There are certainly useful portions, namely those on identity, persecution, money, as well as the responses of the interviewees. Little’s own experience that he graciously and transparently shares is that spending one’s life discipling BMBs is seemingly to little avail except in terms of personal sanctification (Kindle location 5166). Perhaps reexamining the theological premises and understanding of culture could lead to different results – results that Little himself would surely welcome.