



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

Available August 2015

\$30, 350 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-2470-0

"Seventy-five disciplers were interviewed for this book. These mentors have walked the road of discipleship with more than three thousand Muslim-background Arabs. This is substantial data."

— **Miriam Adeney**, associate professor of global and urban ministries, Seattle Pacific University, author of *Kingdom Without Borders: The Untold Story of Global Christianity*

The Toughest Challenges Facing Ministry to Muslims in the Twenty-First Century

In 2006, David Greenlee published a seminal collection of research into how and why Muslims are coming to faith in so many Muslim contexts around the world titled *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way* (Greenlee et al. 2006). This movement forward in ministry to Muslims is heartening. At the same time, most of those working with new believers coming out of Islam soon discover how difficult it is for these believers to stay in their new faith and to grow into maturity as Christians. One senior colleague with more than twenty-five years of experience discipling converts out of Islam in North Africa told me that more than three-quarters of the believers eventually either faded out of Christian fellowship or returned to Islam. In his discussion of church planting movements among Muslims instigated through the Camel Method, Kevin Greeson makes this disturbing, and confirming, observation: "Throughout the history of missionary outreach to Muslims, reconversion has been a consistent problem, with as many as 90 percent returning to Islam" (Greeson 2007, 168). In the conclusion of *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way*, David Smith stresses the need for more work on discipleship: "Some Christian workers would say that if the task of bringing people to an initial commitment is hard, the process of enabling them to grow and develop as believers who are integrated into some kind of Christian fellowship is often even harder" (Smith 2006, 290). Smith then goes on to explain the challenge we face in discipling in Islamic contexts.

The research carried out by Patrick Sookhdeo of the Barnabas Trust some years ago suggested that the proportion of new believers who return to Islam is remarkably high. Could it be, therefore, that alongside the analysis of the testimonies of those who have come to faith there needs to be a more rigorous and honest study of the reasons why many do not continue in their Christian faith? Many of the reasons are no doubt obvious. . . . But if we can admit that it may sometimes be *our* failings that make them go back, we might have to rethink much of our practice and our proclamation. (290-91)

When one surveys the rapidly increasing number of books on ministry to Muslims, one uncovers surprisingly little written on the subject of discipling believers from Muslim backgrounds, even though it is widely recognized that effective discipleship is a crucial element in the establishment of believers from Muslim background (BMB) churches. Muslim society far too often makes it socially and spiritually repressive for those who are called to be disciples of Christ in their communities. Discipleship for BMBs is an especially challenging task, especially when they continue to live in the communities of their birth.

Having worked in international transdenominational mission communities for more than thirty years, I have observed that the way we approach discipling Muslims who come to

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faith in Christ often naturally reflects the way we ourselves were disciplined or the way in which our local church or ministry group in our home country disciplined. Many workers among Muslims come to the task of discipling BMBs with little training and with almost no previous experience as disciplers. Moreover, those who have some previous experience discipling often have not disciplined cross-culturally, nor have they thought much about what discipleship is and how it is best carried out in Muslim contexts. We tend to disciple by instinct. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit is often at work shaping our instincts so that there can be lasting fruit. Though church planters in certain denominational mission agencies tend to have clearer ideas about how their church teaches them to disciple, I have not observed that they are any more effective than those of us working in interdenominational groups. The key factor seemed to be whether or not we learn from our failures and work together to do a better job than we did in the beginning.

At the same time, I believe that all of us, whether believers from Muslim backgrounds or disciplers of believers from Muslim backgrounds, can benefit from prayerful reflection and research into the nature of spiritual growth and discipleship that reflects on the special challenges and opportunities of Muslim contexts. If BMBs living in such contexts are to stand strong and reach out in love to their families and communities, then clear, biblically grounded, historically informed and culturally appropriate approaches to discipleship must be a central feature of ongoing church and ministry life.

— *Except adapted from the Introduction, "The Quest for Deeper Understanding of Discipleship and the Need for Seasoned Discipling Practices"*