

# Reaching Muslims with the Gospel

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Since the terrorist attacks on our country over a year ago, many bookstores in America have had trouble keeping books about Muslims and Islam on their shelves. At one point the top three bestsellers were all related to the Muslim world. The terrorist attacks on our country have caused many to become more aware of the strong Muslim presence in our own midst. Many were surprised to discover that Islam is the second largest religion in the world with over one billion adherents. In America Islam is vying with Judaism to become the second largest religion with over 5 million followers. Christians have begun to discover that they have Muslim neighbors. They work with Muslims, and their children play with Muslims. As Islam continues to grow (the United Nations estimates that after 2055 over half of the world's population will be Muslim) we will be faced with more and more opportunities to share the gospel. For this reason this paper will focus on how Christians can reach Muslims with the gospel by examining:

- 1) the barriers that surround a Muslim
- 2) how the gospel smashes all barriers
- 3) Christ's example of breaking down barriers
- 4) specific ways in which we can reach Muslims with the gospel

## The Barriers that Surround a Muslim

Before conversion the same great barrier lies before all who do not believe. In Romans the apostle Paul makes this point clear: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (8:7). It is completely impossible for a man without faith to love or trust in God on his own. 1 Corinthians 2:14 states, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." When we speak of man's natural condition there is only one barrier. That barrier is one's own sinful rebellion towards God.

However, humanly speaking, we can say that different groups of people have different barriers that prevent or discourage them from giving a fair hearing to the gospel. A Muslim may face several barriers. If we understand some of these barriers, perhaps we will be able to better share the gospel with them. The four barriers that often create a formidable obstacle are 1) the teachings of Islam, 2) misinformation about Christians, 3) family, and 4) culture.

### 1. The Teachings of Islam

The teachings of Islam are derived from the Quran<sup>1</sup> and have much in common with Christianity. However, they differ drastically in the most important truths. Islam teaches that the Bible (the Old and New Testament Canon) as God's Word is corrupt, and only the Quran is the revered and perfect Word of God (Allah). One can not know the truth about Allah without the Quran. Those who reject the Quran as the divine Word of God, reject the truth. They are in the dark.

Since Islam rejects the Old and New Testament in favor of the Quran, it is not surprising that many of its teachings are contrary to Scripture. To begin with, Islam denies that man is sinful by nature. In *Reaching*

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<sup>1</sup> "Quran" is often transliterated into English as "Koran" as well.

*Muslims for Christ* William Saal explains Islam's teaching on sin: "We were created weak. Our tendency to sin results from an act of God. There is no sin nature. Although this sin is serious, it is not insurmountable."<sup>2</sup> Like the common cold, sin is only a weakness. With enough effort man can overcome this weakness and attain everlasting life.

Because sin is not seen as a serious problem, there is no need for a Savior. In fact Islam denies that Jesus is true God and Savior, and instead teaches that he was just another great prophet. Surprisingly, Jesus himself denies his divinity in the Quran. Chapter 5 verse 116 says, "And then God said, O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people, take me and my Mother as two gods apart from God? He [Jesus] said, Glory be to you, I cannot say what is not my right to say." Only Allah has the right to say that he is God. There is no God apart from Allah. In fact it is considered the greatest sin (*shirk*) to associate the divinity of God with humanity in anyway. The Trinity is also denied. Since Islam formed as a reaction to the polytheism of Arabia in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, there is a strong emphasis on the "oneness" of God. The doctrine of the Trinity is seen as a polytheistic doctrine. God can not be three in one. He is only one, and Christ can not be God.

Interestingly enough, the Quran teaches that Allah gave Jesus power to do miracles, to live a morally righteous life, and to speak the word of God. It praises Christ as one of the greatest prophets, and even calls him the "Messiah." But this does not mean that Jesus was the great mediator between God and man who came to save mankind from its sin. In fact Islam teaches that Jesus didn't even die on a cross. Rather, the crucifixion was a hoax, and many believe that someone else took Jesus' place on the cross at the last minute, because it would be unacceptable for a prophet to die in such a way.

Instead of pointing to Jesus as the Savior, Islam teaches that Allah gives salvation based on one's obedience to the Quran. The five great pillars of obedience are the great confession, prayers, almsgiving, the fast of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. The great confession lies at the heart and core of Islam. A true believer must confess that "there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." If one says these words as he breathes his last breath, he can be assured that he will not be sent straight to hell. Prayer is also required for salvation, and the Quran requires that one face Mecca and pray five times a day. Almsgiving consists of giving two and a half percent of one's wealth, as well as other voluntary gifts. True Muslims fast during the month of Ramadan. Fasting must be observed during daylight hours, and if one drinks, eats, or has intercourse during Ramadan, he breaks the fast. Finally, it is necessary that a Muslim make a pilgrimage to Mecca. "The Quran requires every man and woman who is physically and financially able to make at least one haj [pilgrimage] in a lifetime."<sup>3</sup> A Muslim is told that the only way to draw closer to God is to submit to these laws of God. In this way a Muslim can put up a screen from hell.

There is no free and unconditional grace as Christians know it from Scripture. Rather, Islam is a religion based on obedience. A person who is obedient can earn eternal life, and a person who is disobedient reaps hell. This concept of obedience makes it an attractive religion to many because it fulfills the urge that sinful man has to earn his own salvation.<sup>4</sup> When a Christian shares the gospel with a Muslim, he can expect that this urge will die hard.

## 2. Misinformation about Christianity

Christianity and Islam share a history that is filled with hatred, wars, and rumors of war. Unfortunately, the atrocities carried out in the name of Christianity a thousand years ago in the Crusades have never been forgotten. In more recent history the open hostility between Muslims and Christians in places like Bosnia, Albania, and the Philippines has furthered animosity, and the debate over the Holy Places in Israel has kept tensions high.

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<sup>2</sup> William J. Saal, *Reaching Muslims for Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 190.

<sup>3</sup> George W. Braswell, *What You Need to Know about Islam & Muslims* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 36.

<sup>4</sup> This tendency is referred to as the *opinio legis* in Christian Theology.

Because the past has been riddled with conflict, many Muslims believe that Christians hate them. In fact in Indonesia Muslim parents tell their children that “Christians are people who want to kill you.”<sup>5</sup> Even if Muslims don’t believe this lie, they may see an attempt to share the gospel as nothing more than a western advance on their culture. Unfortunately, Christianity often looks like Western imperialism. It goes without saying that it will be difficult to reach those who have such presuppositions.

### **3. Family**

Family is also a barrier that a Muslim will face when considering Christianity. If a Muslim becomes a Christian he will most likely be alienated by his family and community. Even though this alienation may not be as strong in America, it is still a factor. If a Muslim student studying in America is converted to Christianity, he can expect that his family will disown him, and most likely, he will not be allowed to enter the home of his youth. If the convert was a member of an Islamic community, in many cases, this community will remove all support. The first years, as a Christian, could be lonely and discouraging, and there will be many temptations to return to Islam.

### **4. Culture**

Muslims in America retain much of their eastern culture through the mosque and its community. Even an American Muslim will be familiar with eastern forms of worship, prayer, and teaching. The worship that he experiences in a Christian church may seem strange and even irreverent. Christian artwork may seem too controlled and polished, and the way that a Bible Information Class is taught, or the way that a sermon is delivered, may seem uninteresting and hard to follow. Often times those from an eastern culture are more prone to understand truth when it is presented in a story or picture. All of these considerations, along with many others that were not mentioned, may make a Muslim convert feel out of place in a Christian environment.

## **Gospel is the Power of God**

After looking at all of these barriers, one may wonder, “How will we be able to reach Muslims with the gospel?” To find our answer we need to look no farther than the life of the apostle Paul. In 1 Timothy chapter one the apostle Paul describes himself as a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. He goes on to call himself the chief of sinners. Before his conversion, Saul of Tarsus, was Christianity’s greatest enemy—he killed Christians. To think of it in present day terms, maybe we could even say that Paul was like a member of al-Qaeda. He was as opposed to the message of Christianity as anyone could be; nevertheless, Christ Jesus showed his unlimited power in Paul. Paul says it best himself, “The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:14). God showered his love on Paul by bringing him to faith. He gave him salvation through Christ, and turned him into the world’s greatest missionary. In the life of Paul we see that God is powerful enough and merciful enough to bring any sinner from death to everlasting life. Certainly God can also lead Muslims to love and trust in him.

The Lord leads people to love and trust in him through the gospel. It is the power of God, the dynamite, that crushes all barriers and bestows faith. When we share the message of forgiveness with others, we can be certain that it is power. God has given us the promise that through the gospel he carries out his purpose. This is our confidence as we reach out to Muslims.

## **Christ Gives Us an Example of Breaking Down Barriers**

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Missionary Pieter Ried’s Mission and Ministry presentation *Outreach to Muslims in Indonesia, 2002*. Missionary Reid served in Indonesia (Indonesia is 90 percent Muslim) for 8 years.

The gospel is the power of God. It works despite us. But as ministers who carry the message of Christ in jars of clay, we will seek to remove all human barriers as we proclaim that message. Like Paul we will seek to be all things to all people.

In his discussion with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, Jesus gives us an excellent example of how to break down barriers. Jews hated Samaritans, and Samaritans hated Jews. The woman at the well admitted this obstacle when she said, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (John 4:9b). Instead of acknowledging this seemingly huge barrier, Jesus got to what was important. In verse 10 he answers the woman saying, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” With this statement Jesus pointed the woman away from her earthly concerns to more important spiritual concerns. He let the woman know that she had a great spiritual need. She needed living water. He then continued by telling her that he was what she needed. He was the living water that wells up to eternal life. He was the Messiah—the Savior from sin. No earthly concern about the relationship between Jews and Samaritans could get in the way of that saving message.

When we share the gospel with Muslims we seek to follow Jesus’ example of pointing sinners to the one thing needful—a Savior from sin.

### **How can We Reach Muslims with the Gospel?**

As Christians who live in the western world we may feel some reservations about reaching out to Muslims with the gospel. Their religion seems so strange. Their culture is so different, and after all, “Didn’t Muslims attack our country?” However, “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Corinthians 5:14). Christ died for Jews. He died for Gentiles. He died for Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, and Muslims. He died for you and he died for me. This is the only motivation that we need to share the message of Christ with all people. But what is the best way to share this message?

Several general principles can prepare us for sharing the gospel with Muslims. We will continue by focusing on three ways that we can reach out to Muslims. We can: 1) be a true friend to a Muslim neighbor, 2) witness with our lives, and 3) speak the truth with sensitivity.

#### **1. Be a true friend**

Muslims living in America have experienced much animosity since September 11<sup>th</sup>. Muslim stores have been vandalized, Muslim children have been mocked and spit on at school, and many lives have been threatened. There may never be a better time to reach out to a Muslim as a friend. Harsh treatment has done nothing but furthered the Muslim’s belief that Christians hate them. By befriending a Muslim one can break down this stigma and begin to build a relationship of love and trust.

If a Muslim neighbor is living outside of an Islamic community, he may feel especially alone and vulnerable in these times. 1 John 3:18 encourages us to show genuine love towards others: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” A Christian can show love with actions and truth by listening to his neighbors cares and concerns, and by looking for ways to help and defend him against outside attacks. Listening will not only help build a friendship, but it will also help us understand our neighbor better, so that when the opportunity presents itself, we will be prepared to share the gospel in a meaningful way. Protecting him against outside threats will also lead him to trust us as a true friend.

As a friend we can inquire about a Muslim’s beliefs. When the apostle Paul walked through Athens he tried to learn everything that he could about the Athenians. He even used their false religion to lead into a presentation of the gospel. When we learn more about our neighbor’s core beliefs, we ready ourselves to meet and greet his spiritual concerns with respect and sensitivity. It is quite possible to listen to someone explain their beliefs without making it appear as though one is in agreement. A Christian will want to treat a Muslim’s

beliefs with respect, but at the same time make it clear that he does not agree. If objections are raised in a loving and caring way, a Christian may gain an opportunity to present the truth of God's Word.

Passages of life, such as, birth, marriage, and death are very important to Muslims. These events provide a unique opportunity for Christians to be there with love, concern, and support. Doing so not only fulfills the command of Christ to love one another, but it also breaks down false stereotypes that a Muslim may have about Christians.

We can learn something about reaching out in love from our Christian brothers and sisters in Indonesia. Indonesian Christians have held eyeglass clinics where free exams and glasses are given to all who come. They have improved the roads in neighborhoods surrounding their churches, and have even paid for Muslim children to go to school. Acts such as these have caused many, who formerly despised Christians, to reevaluate their beliefs. Some Muslims have even defended our churches against radicals. They wonder, "If Christians are really such evil people, why do they do all of these nice things?" It shocks a Muslim to see such unconditional acts of kindness, and some have even been led to ask the more important question: "What do these Christians believe that causes them to do such things?" Such displays of Christian love will also cause Muslims living in our country to ask the same question.

## **2. Witness with your life**

Many Muslims despise the immorality of American culture. Since they view America as a "Christian state," they believe that the sexually promiscuous lifestyle promoted on television and in the movies is a result of Christianity. In the face of such misunderstanding it is important for Christians to live God-pleasing lives. Christians can even go the extra mile by being careful not to offend. Some Muslims believe that it is a sin to drink alcohol, to eat pork, or for husband and wife to show public affection. Even though Paul was speaking about fellow believers when he said, "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat you are no longer acting in love. Do not by eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died," (Romans 14:15) the principle holds true as we reach out to Muslims. We must be careful not to let something as insignificant as food or drink get in the way of the proclamation of the gospel. Instead we can show love by refraining from things that may cause offense and put an end to a relationship.

When the apostle Paul wrote the Corinthians he told them, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." By living God-pleasing lives the Corinthians were a letter that testified to the power of the living God. Christians today, as well, are letters written with the Spirit of the living God when they live according to God's will. Since Islam is all about outward obedience and proper living, a Christian who lives his faith is a powerful testimony to the work of God. Such a life could cause a Muslim neighbor to inquire about the reason for living in such a way. Once again this is our hope and prayer.

## **3. Speak the Word with Sensitivity**

We could call the first two points pre-evangelism. They prepare the soil. However, if the seed is not planted, if the Word is not shared, then there can be no growth. Earlier we were reminded that the gospel message is the power of God. Everything that an evangelist does will be working towards the goal of sharing the gospel.

How long will it take before one has the opportunity to share God's Word with a Muslim? Only the Holy Spirit has the answer to that question. However, based on experience, Missionary Pieter Ried said that in Indonesia it often takes 3-5 years of being a Christian friend before one is given the opportunity to share the Word with a Muslim. This reminds us to be patient when working with those who come from an entirely different background. Only the Lord knows when his message will tear through the heart of an unbeliever. The

opportunity could present itself in a few minutes during a neighborhood canvass, or it could come after many years of being a faithful friend.

When the time comes to share God’s Word, it seems best to avoid apologetics. The history of Christian-Muslim relations has been filled with much fruitless argumentation. When an evangelist lets the Word of God speak for itself, he gives the hearer the opportunity to listen to the truth of God’s Word, and avoids offending the listener with argumentation. However, since a Muslim has come from a very different religious background one can expect certain objections. It may be helpful to be prepared to explain:

- 1) The fact that Scripture is the inspired and inerrant (uncorrupted) Word of God.
- 2) The doctrine of the Holy Trinity and Scripture’s emphasis on the unity of the Godhead.
- 3) The fact that Jesus is God’s Son, true God and true man.

Learn more about Islam. Someone who understands the basic teachings of the Quran could even use arguments based on Islamic teaching to move into a presentation of the truth. For example, when defending Scripture as the uncorrupted Word of God, one could point to passages in the Quran<sup>6</sup> that speak about God being the guardian and protector of the holy books (this would include the Old and New Testaments in the minds of many Muslims). Why would God allow the Old and New Testament to become corrupted? An evangelist could build on the high view of Scripture that many Muslims have to lead into a presentation of God’s Word.

The Quran also uses names like “Messiah,” “Word of God,” and the “Spirit of God” to speak about Jesus. It even attributes many miracles to him, including healing the sick, and raising the dead. Most Muslims hold Jesus in high regard. One could use this by saying, “Do you know why the Jesus is called the Messiah?” Or “Do you know why God allowed Jesus to do miracles?” Both of these questions would make an excellent transition to speaking about our Savior as the Son of God.

The many parables and stories of Jesus may also appeal to a Muslim. The stories are eastern in nature and at the same time convey truth in a vivid and concrete way. They may strike the interest of a Muslim and cause him to give an open hearing to the message that he needs to hear.

A Christian could also use natural law to appeal to a Muslim’s conscience. In religions like Islam where obedience is key, there is often much doubt and despair. Muhhamed himself did very little to alleviate despair. In the Quran the threat of hell dominates the promise of heaven.<sup>7</sup> Islam is a dark religion, and Muslim’s hearts are obscured with the fear of eternal punishment. There is no Savior. There is no peace. There is no hope. A Muslim feels the weight of the law.

The message of God’s free and unconditional love for all people shines brightly in the context of such darkness. The gospel is a welcome message. Christ died for every sin—for every failure to obey perfectly. The basic message of John 3:16 is truly a sweet sound in the ears of those who are despairing of their own works. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” Eternal life is ours through Christ. He removes all guilt. There is no hopelessness, no despair, and no doubt. God works through this message of forgiveness to bring souls from life to death.

## **Conclusion**

As Christians “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In Christ we have been given the peace that transcends all understanding. This peace is something that we can not keep to ourselves. Christ’s love compels us to find a way to share this message with all people. It is our prayer that we find ways to reach Muslims with the saving message of the

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<sup>6</sup> Quran 15:9 says, “We have without doubt sent down the Message. And We will assuredly guard it from corruption.” And 18:28 says, “And recite and teach what has been revealed to thee of the Book of the thy Lord. None can change His words, and none wilt thou find as a refuge other than Him.”

<sup>7</sup> Braswell, p.143. There are 312 verses where heaven is mentioned and 367 where hell is mentioned.

gospel. Then they too will have the eternal peace of knowing Christ as their Savior. May we never tire of such work as we look forward to sharing the mansions of heaven with Muslim converts.

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