

Jesus in Samaria

A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims

The ministry of Jesus in Samaria is of supreme importance to church planters among Muslims. Not only does Jesus show us how to evangelize estranged peoples, but he also shows us how to approach the task of establishing his church among “resistant” peoples.

by Stuart Caldwell

Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well has long been a gold mine for Christians seeking to follow his example as effective communicators of the Gospel. But his ministry to the entire Samaritan village through the woman shows Jesus not only as an evangelist, but also as a church planter. John 4 is, therefore, of supreme importance to church planters among Muslims, for it chronicles the way the Master himself approached the task of establishing his church among a “resistant” people. Consider the tremendous parallels between the obstacles Jesus faced when reaching Samaritans and the obstacles Christians face reaching Muslims.

Worship Location

Samaritans and Jews had separate centers for worship. Islamic worship revolves around the *qibla*, i.e., the direction one faces to worship God. One source of conflict between early Muslims and Jews was over the issue of whether the true worshipper should face Mecca or Jerusalem.

After acknowledging Jesus was a prophet, the Samaritan woman's first comment resembles Islamic regard for place in worship, “Must worship really be offered in Jerusalem to be acceptable, or is Mt. Gerizim, where our fathers worshipped, sufficient?” As we seek to reach Muslims, this same issue of place for true worship emerges. How did the Master establish his church in this context?

Scripture

Samaritans and Jews shared a similar Scriptural tradition, along with significant differences. Like Jews, Samaritans accepted the five books of the Pentateuch, but they disregarded all additional books in the Jewish canon. Furthermore, the Samaritan pentateuch differed from the Jewish Pentateuch at several important points. For example, the prophecy of a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-18 in the Jewish Pentateuch) has been displaced in the Samaritan pentateuch to Exodus 20:21ff. In fact, Edersheim states that it was by “impudent assertion and falsification of the text of the Pentateuch” that Samaritans claimed the superiority of Gerizim (1971:396).

One of many obstacles in evangelism among Muslims concerns our view of Scripture. Like Samaritans and Jews, Muslims believe we share a common Scriptural heritage, but disagree about who holds the “true Scripture,” i.e., the complete and uncorrupted

version. Christians believe the Qur'an distorts clear Biblical revelation, and Jews surely felt similarly toward Samaritans. How did the Master establish his church in this context?

Religious Vocabulary

Samaritans and Jews shared many theological concepts and terms, but some had very different meanings. For example, all Jewish sects believed in some kind of Davidic Messiah. The Samaritans, however, did not share this messianic expectation in quite the same way. They expected the *Taheb* (Teacher) would come to restore true worship, assumed to be on Mt. Gerizim. There was no Davidic connection to the *Taheb*, which should not surprise us given the historical conflict between Judah and Samaria.

Like Jews and Samaritans, Christians and Muslims share a similar religious vocabulary and main theological concepts. Yet, few would deny that we often use the same words to mean different things. How did the Master establish his church in this context?

Ritual Purity

While they were similar in many ways, Jews considered Samaritans so “unclean” that association with them resulted in defilement (Jn. 4:9). Similar

concerns for ritual purity arise between Muslims and Christians. After entering a village mosque at the invitation of a Muslim friend, there was great anxiety about my presence as a foreigner. I soon learned that they were not worried about my faith, but about whether or not I was circumcised. If not, their mosque would be desecrated and their prayers nullified. They were much relieved to hear that I too bore the sign of God's covenant with Abraham, and I was much relieved that they did not demand proof! Similar issues of purity and pollution among Muslims involve eating pork, using the left hand, washing after intercourse, and numerous other examples—many of which were equally important to Jews and Samaritans. So how did Jesus establish his church among people with so many complex issues? Surely we have much to learn from his example.

Jesus' Approach to Place of Worship

As with Jews and Samaritans, we can not underestimate the importance of place to Muslims during worship. While the woman may have been dodging Jesus' very personal remarks about her marital status (Jn. 4:17-18), her response

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reveals a very pointed question: Which religion is true? Notice how Jesus answered her—and how he did not.

Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks." —Jn. 4:21-23 (NIV)

Jesus responded that the Father desires neither Jerusalem nor Gerizim to be central for worship. Did he thereby nullify worship both in the Jerusalem Temple and on Mt. Gerizim as false and unacceptable to God? Did Jesus repudiate all physical *qibla*, or (direction for prayer), in favor of a spiritual *qibla* ?

Given that the earliest Jerusalem church and the Apostles continued meeting in the temple for prayer (Acts 3:1), we must conclude that Jesus' closest followers, though they were surely among those who "worshipped in spirit and truth," did not interpret Jesus' teaching in the strict literal sense. Rather, they understood the real force of Jesus' teaching: Regardless of "here" or "there," true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. In other words, "place" is not the main issue—the heart is.

So Jesus initially answered the question of which religion is "true" by suggesting that neither religion's location of worship was "the place." Still, having heard him say "neither-nor," his disciples did not apply this in a literal sense. They continued worshipping at the temple. Considering they were Jews, this does not seem so odd. But what of the Samaritan followers of Jesus? Did they continue worshipping on Mt. Gerizim? What did Jesus teach about these matters to all the Samaritans who came from town to receive him as the promised Savior of the world (Jn. 4:39-43)? Jesus spent two full days teaching these new Samaritan believers. Surely, they must have been filled with questions similar to the woman at the well: How do we worship? Will Jerusalem become our place? Where is our *qibla* today?

Outside of Jesus' instructions to the woman at the well, Scripture is silent about what Jesus taught these Samaritans during those two days. However, his Jewish followers, having heard him say "neither in Jerusalem," continued to worship in Jerusalem since they understood the real meaning of his teaching. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume Samaritan believers also understood Jesus' teaching and continued to worship in spirit and truth on Gerizim. Just as the Jewish followers of Jesus continued to participate in the cultural and religious life of their Jewish community, we can safely assume Samaritan believers did likewise, with one major difference: they were now disciples of Jesus.

Historical evidence is scant to prove Samaritan believers continued to worship within the Samaritan religious system, but if they did not, there is a strange silence about this in Acts 8 where the Apostles do not mention a "proper place" for worship, or an alternative to Samaritan religion. We see instead a believing, Spirit-filled community apparently within Samaritan society. Why don't we see the Apostles extracting believers out of Samaritanism? Unlike Judaizers, the Apostles were simply follow-

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ing the same approach they personally observed from Jesus when he ministered in Samaria.

In spite of Jesus’ example in Samaria, many hesitate to do similarly in Islamic contexts. They explain that Islam is different from Samaritanism. Islam was founded by a false prophet, who may have borrowed from Biblical revelation but nevertheless ended with incomplete and inaccurate conclusions about Scripture and the Messiah. However, this is precisely how Jews saw Samaritans in the first century. Jesus’ ministry in Samaria is therefore highly applicable to our work among Muslims.

Samaritan Scriptures

Jesus handled the issue of different Scriptures in a way that is both more simple and more complicated than his response to place in worship. Jesus simply avoided direct confrontation about her concept of scripture, though he alluded to the superiority of Jewish Scripture when saying, “salvation is from the Jews” (Jn. 4:22). Jesus addressed the matter in another way. This is where the issue becomes more complicated, partly because Jesus was, in a very real sense, “making scripture” as he lived. Jesus gave Samaritan believers two days of “living Scripture” through his direct teaching and presence. Indeed, Jesus left this very living Scripture with his disciples, which eventually became the New Testament Gospels we so treasure today. Nevertheless, we have no evidence that denigration of Samaritan scripture was ever part of Jesus’ ministry.

In a later mission to Samaritans (Acts 8), we see that the Apostles followed Jesus’ example. Peter and John taught Samaritan believers what Jesus taught. And once again, we hear no debate over whether use of the Samaritan pentateuch was to be discontinued or not. Based on Jesus’ clear statement that salvation is from the Jews who know what they worship, whereas the Samaritans do not, we know the Samaritan version of the Pentateuch was unacceptable to Jesus. Nevertheless, Jesus’ approach did not greatly emphasize or debate the errors of the Samaritan scripture.

Jesus’ Approach to Contextualizing Language

Jesus used Samaritan religious terminology freely. We might miss how contextualized his dialogue about “living water” really was, but Samaritan wisdom literature contains numerous references about “living water” (Brown 1971:459). Jesus chose to

redirect the metaphor toward himself.

Jesus also used Samaritan religious terminology critically. Samaritans, as mentioned above, expected a *Taheb* to appear and restore true worship, on Mt. Gerizim in particular. It is therefore no accident that Jesus addresses the theme of true worship, but note the context in which he does this. Samaritans believed the *Taheb* would be the prophet promised by Moses (Dt. 18:15-19. Cf. Brown 1983:171-172). The woman’s declaration that Jesus was a prophet therefore implies she may have believed Jesus to be the *Taheb* (Jn. 4:19). By following her declaration with a question about true worship—a subject about which the *Taheb* would know since he was expected to restore true worship (cf. Brown 1983:171-172)—she further reveals her hunch that she is standing before the *Taheb* himself. Jesus answered her question about true worship, and, in effect, let her believe he was the *Taheb*—the one come to restore true worship. However, Jesus did not affirm the Samaritan belief about Gerizim; he directly corrected and transformed it (Jn. 4:21-24).

So we see that while Jesus freely uses and even assumes the religious vocabulary and concepts of Samaritanism, he does so critically. Every Samaritan belief is not accepted. There is correction and

transformation as he ultimately brings the focus back to himself.

Jesus' Approach to Ritual Purity

In the Muslim-Christian encounter, the Muslim, whom we seek to reach, is very sensitive about ritual purity. The situation is reversed in John 4. In order to reach them, Jesus exposed himself to—from a Jewish perspective—an “unclean” Samaritan. He did not observe the cultural and ceremonial (i.e. religious) taboos that separated them.

But what might Jesus have done in the opposite situation? Would he have adopted ceremonial cleanliness in the eyes of those he was trying to reach to minimize barriers to the Gospel? While we do not see Jesus doing this in the Gospels, Paul surely did and had Timothy do the same when being circumcised to gain Jewish acceptance (1 Cor. 9:19-23, Acts 16:3). In Paul's own words, he lived “as under the law” among Jews and “as not under

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the law” among Gentiles. And just as Paul urges us to follow his example as he follows the example of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1), I have no doubt that Jesus would have adopted ceremonial cleanliness to reach people even as he set aside such ceremonial purity to reach Samaritans.

Following Jesus' Approach to Ministry

Let us summarize these lessons from Jesus' approach to ministry and apply them to our work among Muslims today.

1. *Indigenous Worship in Community.* At the time of Jesus, Samaritans represented a distinct religion with their own focus of worship. They were at best heretical in the eyes of Jews. More often, they were viewed by Jews as demonized. In reality, Jews felt about Samaritanism much the same way as many Christians feel about Islam. In spite of this fact, we see no command from Jesus to leave Samaritan “religion.”

Jesus, and later the Apostles, apparently planted a community of believers within Samaritan society. This was to be a community that would worship in spirit and truth, following the teachings of Jesus. Application to an Islamic context seems clear: Expect God will raise up a believing community of true worshippers who follow the teachings of Jesus within Islamic society.

We have seen how Jesus stayed with the Samaritans for two days then left. No one was there to organize this new community of believers or make decisions for them. They put their faith in the truth Jesus revealed during his time with them and were left to develop “on their own.” Answers to questions about worship practices and other matters were not in the hands of outsiders or “missionaries.” Such answers could not even be found by observing the example of “a missionary,” because none remained long enough to observe. The “missionary” (in this case, Jesus) was gone. In contrast to the uneasiness of mission leaders today to leave new believers to themselves after only two days of teaching, Jesus did not seem overly concerned about their propensity toward syncretism. I believe this was because Jesus trusted the “Truth-impacting-lives” process enough to leave Truth on its own, even in an environment that did not seem conducive to the flourishing of truth—i.e., a different religion, different scriptures, and a different content for similar theological concepts.

2. *Giving Scripture Without Polemics.* Samaritan scripture differed from Jewish scripture in both content and form. How did Jesus handle this extremely challenging issue? We don't find Jesus debating Samaritan leaders about the superiority of Jewish scripture. Instead, he provides two full days of living Scripture, teaching truth and letting it do its own work in Samaritan hearts.

Although every believer is a temple for the Holy Spirit, we are surely in no place to duplicate “living Scripture.” We are not Jesus and our words will not be canonized as Scripture. Nevertheless, the principle we learn from Jesus remains: Give what biblical truth we can (written, audio, video, verbal, etc.), then let his Truth do its work in the hearts of Muslims. My repeated experience has been that when a new Muslim believer begins to drink in the Word, there is no need to argue about the Qur'an.

3. *Adoption and Transformation of Religious Terminology.* Samaritans and Jews had theological similarities akin to Christians and Muslims. We saw how Jesus assumed and used Samaritan terms both freely and critically, while correcting and transforming erroneous concepts. This is how Jesus established his church among Samaritans.

In our work with various Muslims, should we use Islamic terms? If so, what will it mean to use such terms both freely and critically? We may freely adopt, for example, terms for Jesus such as *Mahdi*, or Qur'anic titles for Jesus such as *Kalimat-ullah* (Word of God), and *Ruh-allah* (Spirit of God). But to use these terms critically will mean that new biblical content must reshape and revise a Muslim's understanding of these terms. Just as Jesus assumed the role of the Samaritan *Taheb* and in the process transformed the word (Jn. 4:21-23), so too we can freely and critically adopt Islamic terminology. Like Jesus' own example, the end result of our effort must always point to him.

4. *Adjusting to Islamic Ritual Purity.* Jews believed Samaritans were unclean. But to accomplish his mission, Jesus was willing to cross this line and accept water "polluted" by an unclean and adulterous Samaritan woman. These taboos were not merely cultural. The distinction between culture and religion may seem reasonable to our Western and disintegrated view of life, but such distinctions were and are meaningless and absurd to peoples whose worldview was and is more holistic, like the Jews of Jesus' day and Muslims today.

Adjusting to Islamic concepts of ritual purity may require low usage of our left hand, abstinence from pork, and women dressing according to Muslim views of modesty. But how will we pray? Should we do ablutions or prostrations, use a prayer liturgy, kiss our Bibles before reading them, or wrap the Bible with special cloth and keep it on the highest shelf?

Church Planting or Kingdom Sowing

Let us question an assumption that has rested quietly throughout this article. I stated that Jesus' mission in Samaria can rightly be seen as a model for church planting. But was Jesus really "church planting"? Our answer to this question depends greatly upon our understanding of the "church planting" metaphor, which in turn rests upon how we understand its component words "church" and "planting." In our minds these are shaped, I believe, not so much by the Bible as by our mental images of what "church" means and what we think it takes to "plant" one.

As a young boy, I used to spend summers riding motorcycles in the desert. One day I was sitting on the back while my cousin drove. I noticed an interesting rock and pointed it out to my cousin over the handlebars. Immediately our motorcycle veered in the direction of the rock and we ended up picking cactus needles from our backsides. The point is that we tend to head for what we look at. Many church planters among Muslims are consciously or unconsciously looking at a "model" that may not be what Jesus had in mind at all.

Consider the idea of "church." Surely, few missionaries head out today armed with the cultural imperialism of earlier times. We are prepared to think in terms of "dynamic

equivalent" Bible translations and "planting indigenous churches." But I am convinced that hidden in the word "church" for many of us are concepts that are not entirely biblical, but are rather identified with our experience of church as independent, isolated, and self-contained congregations. We therefore run the risk of equating that experience with the essence of "church."

While Jesus mentioned "the church" (*ekklesia*) only three times, he spoke far more about "the kingdom" (*basileia*). However, Jesus' portrait of the Kingdom is far removed from what most of us think of as "church," influenced as we often are in the West by a congregational polity. There certainly is a "congregational" element to the meaning of church, especially in Paul's use of *ekklesia*. But I am convinced that we need to balance this with a recovery of Jesus' view of the Kingdom. Although these two concepts (*ekklesia* and *basileia*) are certainly not identical, they nevertheless should not be held in isolation from each other. Let us look briefly at Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom of God in Matthew 13.

The Kingdom is like seed sown in various types of soil. Sowing seed requires letting go. It assumes a natural process of growth. How different from thinking of church as an organization to be built, structured, trained, coached and

coaxed. Sowing is also very different from “gathering” believers. Sowing puts seed “down and in,” quite the opposite of gathering wheat at a harvest.

The Kingdom is like wheat growing in a field thick with tares, which the owner hesitates to separate. Here the “gathering” or “harvesting” (i.e., what we often think of as “church planting”) is something assumed to come at the end of the age. Until then, let the wheat (and notice it is good wheat from good seed) grow right there among the tares. There’s no fear of syncretism. Why? Because wheat can not become tares; it remains wheat. Good seed is sown, takes root and grows—among the tares. This occurred as Jewish members of the Way (wheat) continued worshipping God at the Temple and synagogues with fellow Jews (tares) who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah. Their fellowship with other believers occurred elsewhere (Acts 2:46-47), so Muslim followers of the Way may well do something similar today, as did Samaritan believers in their day.

The Kingdom is like a mustard seed. It starts small, very small according to Jesus. But it grows until birds can fill its branches. Thus, the Kingdom can be considered “planted” even when very small and insignificant. Some missionaries talk about not having “planted a church” because there are only two believers. This kind of thinking seems totally foreign to Jesus’ view.

The Kingdom is like yeast in dough. Again the imagery is something “down and in,” which then permeates all throughout. The Kingdom spreads and grows, transforming all it touches. In stark contrast, many of us who work among Muslims expect a church will form or be gathered by extracting

members from a people rather than transforming members in a people.

The Church, when understood from a Kingdom perspective, is not so much a congregation, as it is a movement, a life, an organism, a seed. According to Jesus’ metaphors, the church lives and grows amidst all sorts of other things: weeds, rocks, and dough. To plant the church among Muslims we must recover the imagery Jesus used for the Kingdom.

“Planting,” the other word of the “church planting” phrase, is by itself is a good term and carries everything Jesus envisioned. However, when coupled with the word “church,” which we functionally understand as something structural and organizational, we seem to subtly distort the natural and organic element of the metaphor. When we use “planting” after “church,” we usually refer to the *building, organizing, gathering* and *establishing* of a church. These concepts are of course part of the overall mix of mission—we do seek to “gather” communities of faith. But overemphasis on the “gathering imagery misses the full import of Jesus’ vision of “planting.”

Therefore, I propose we use a new metaphor called “Kingdom sowing.” To plant something we focus on a single location and often on a single plant. But to sow, we scatter, broadcast, and spread seed widely and freely. Sowers trust that in many cases, though not all, their seeds will take root and grow. So, perhaps it is time to return to the actual language of Jesus’ parables and advocate the metaphor of “Kingdom sowing” rather than “church planting.”

A “Kingdom sowing” metaphor is consistent with Jesus’ actual practice in John 4. All that we saw in our study of John 4 flows perfectly from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 13 about how the Kingdom spreads. Jesus not only envisioned a spreading, growing, organic movement that would be sown like seed, grow like wheat, and spread like yeast, but everything he did promoted that end. It is wise to ask ourselves whether or not there is such congruence between our own mission theory and practice.

Because metaphors have inherent power to guide and shape our destinations, it is crucial to use ones that actually describe where we want to go. For this reason, I believe “Kingdom sowing” is more appropriate. At the very least, it seems necessary to refill the time-honored term “church planting” with the fresh biblical content.

Kingdom sowing is incarnational, adopting the religious and cultural forms of our Muslim friends. A community of believers will remain in their world, though not of it.

Conclusion

Jesus' example of Kingdom sowing in Samaria provides us with several applications in an Islamic context. Kingdom sowing means we seek and expect a believing community to form and remain within the religio-cultural world of the Muslim community, at least for some time. As in the early Church's eventual break from Judaism, so too believers may eventually break away from the Muslim religious community. However, I believe this should be instigated from the Muslim side, as it was in the first century from the Jewish side.

Forming a community of believers within the religio-cultural world of Muslims will include Islamic places and patterns of worship. This is what happened in Samaria (Jn. 4; Acts 8), and it seems to be what Jesus expected when he taught about Kingdom sowing in parables, especially the parables of the yeast in the dough and the wheat and the tares.

Kingdom sowing in an Islamic context means that no confrontational effort to replace the Qur'an with the Bible is needed, at least not at the beginning. While Jesus must have believed the Samaritan scripture were insufficient, he made little mention of its deficiencies. God's Spirit will lead his people into all truth. As Jesus trusted his truth to have its own power and sway, so too we can trust his Truth to be like yeast that transforms the dough. Therefore, we will be passionate about getting his Truth to our Muslim friends in effective styles and forms they can access, whether in print, audio, video, or orally memorized or even chanted.

Kingdom sowing means Truth will be communicated in the language of Muslims, including their religious vocabulary. In so doing, concepts will be changed from the inside out. Though Jesus assumed the role of the Samaritan *Taheb*, he transformed the concept as well. We need not fear syncretism, for the heart of Jesus' Truth will transform whatever vocabulary it encounters.

Kingdom sowing is incarnational, adopting the religious and cultural forms of our Muslim friends. A community of believers will remain in their world, though not of it. Many behaviors, customs, and values will be retained by a believing community, and will need to be adopted by the cross-cultural missionary. But unbiblical values will also be challenged and changed from within, by believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 16:13).

I know that much of what I have proposed in this article has been addressed and debated elsewhere. Nevertheless, I humbly submit that the teaching and practice of Jesus, especially in Samaria, point us unmistakably in this direction. Obedience and faithfulness to him beckon us to walk in his steps toward the fulfillment of his vision for the Kingdom in the Muslim world.

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