

Muslims, Christians, and Jesus: Stories of Faith

by Carl Medearis

Since many of the experiences Carl Medearis shared at the 2008 ISFM conference will appear in an upcoming book, the transcript of his talk will not appear here. Instead, we are reprinting the following “Stories of Faith,” excerpted from Carl’s new book Muslims, Christians and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships (Bethany House, 2008). In these stories, Carl recounts some of his family’s “most amazing experiences.” Many of these, he says, “occurred during our times in the Middle East, but I believe they will provide important insights—and inspiration—for the interactions and friendships you might have with Muslims anywhere” (p. 19). To order, see the William Carey Library ad on p. 186.

Snakes, Bibles, and the Hotel Staff

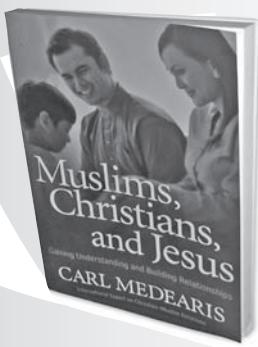
I was sitting in a hotel lobby in a small southern Iraqi town, rubbing my eyes after a short nap, when three young staff members walked over from the front desk and sat down. They were curious about me and my friends, who had left me to rest. “What are you doing in Iraq?” asked one of the guys. “Aren’t you Americans? My friend says you are Christians.”

“Yes, most of us are Americans,” I answered, “but we live here in the Middle East. What do you mean when you think we might be Christian?”

“You know,” he said, “Christians! People who believe in Israel and the Trinity, and don’t like us.” He said this without a hesitation, and unfortunately, it is a common opinion.

I had already learned not to defend all of Christendom—the good or the bad—so I said, “Well I can’t speak for others, but I’d love to tell you who we really are.” They were hooked (and obviously bored in their jobs) and pulled an overstuffed sofa closer to hear my story.

“We are people of faith. Like you. People who believe in the one true God. Like you. People who want to love their wives and children and do good. Like you. We take prayer seriously. We want to be godly and act justly. Like you.”



Medearis, Carl. *Muslims, Christians and Jesus: Understanding and Building Relationships* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2008), pp. 77–80, 92–96, 128–129, 141–144, 164–167. Used by permission of Bethany House.

Carl Medearis has extensive experience working and living with Muslims. A highly sought-after expert on Islam, he works with international government and business leaders and speaks at conferences and universities worldwide.

(A quick note: A great way to treat people in general is to assume that it's you who will learn from them. Say things that call them to a higher place. Don't belittle. Don't put yourself ahead of them. Don't be condescending. Treat them as you'd like to be treated.)

I continued: "We also try to follow the ways, teachings, and life of Jesus the Messiah. He's our model for all we do and think and say. We're not very good at it, but this is our goal. So we've come here looking to find out if Jesus is here already and what he might want us to do here."

They clearly loved what I was saying and asked for a story about Jesus. My Arabic is not very good, but I began to share the story Jesus told about the prodigal son. Everything was going great until I got to the part where the son returns home. In the Lebanese dialect I learned, the words for *village* and *snake* are very similar (at least to my foreign ears). So what they heard me say was, "As the boy approached his snake..." They gasped and, with worried looks, interrupted me to ask if he got bit.

It took me a moment to realize my mistake, but I corrected myself and tried to continue. Still, they wanted to know about the snake. "There's never been a snake in this story. It's a village," I responded, depleted of my original brilliant storytelling capacity. "No snake." They were confused but allowed me to finish what I consider one of Jesus' best stories. It says so much: the hurt, offended father waiting for his son; the father throwing a party and seemingly forgetting the offense; the boy repenting and coming to his senses; the juxtaposition between son and slave; the older son pouting. It's all there. Amazing drama side-by-side with deep theological teaching.

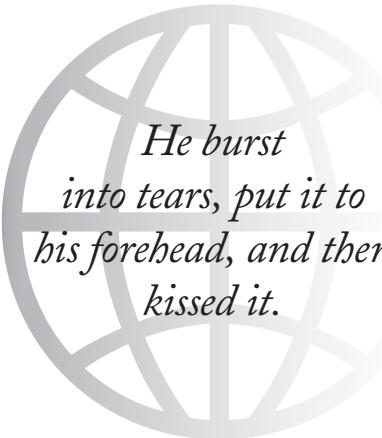
The points of the story hit home. I could sense the presence of the Holy Spirit. God was in that lobby.

Just then, one of the young guys spoke up. "When I was ten, a German man

gave my daddy a cassette of stories of Jesus. We gathered at our table and listened to that cassette every night for almost a year. Then it broke. The German man had told my father that Jesus had a book out, but he didn't have one to give us. He told us to look for it and someday we'd get one. Do you know about the book Jesus has?"

I could barely respond at first, but managed to say, "Yes, Jesus does have a book."

"But do you have one?" the young man said with desperation.



"Actually, I have one in my room. Can I get it for you?"

I nearly tripped on the way since I couldn't see through my tears. Thankfully, I had one gospel of Luke left. I brought it out and handed it to him. His eyes widened as he clutched the copy and read the title.

"Is this the real gospel of Jesus Christ?"

"Yes, it's the real one, written by one of his early followers, Luke. You'll love it."

He burst into tears, put it to his forehead, and then kissed it. Next, he surprised us all by running toward the front door. He yelled back, "I have to go show my father. He'll be so excited!"

Wow! The other guys turned to me and almost fell over themselves asking if I had more books. It was my last copy, I said, but I promised them books too.

We were still talking when the young man returned, out of breath. "I showed it to my father and uncles and they all agreed it is the true book of Jesus. But they said I had to get more for other family members and friends. Please, do you have more?"

This is a common response to the Bible in the Muslim world. It contains the very words of God, and when we treat them as such, people will be hungry for them. Who wouldn't want to read what God has written to us?

The Saudi Princess

A few years ago my friend Frank (not his real name) and I arranged to meet a Saudi princess through a mutual friend. There are possibly three thousand Saudis in the royal family, connected by direct lineage or marriage to the house of Saud. These people are generally affluent members of society, and many of them are well traveled and have some of the finest education available to them.

We met the princess at her home. She entertained us with traditional tea, and we sat down to talk. There were about six people present and, as usual, the conversation soon turned into the snake pit: politics. I hate talking about politics—somebody always gets hurt.

The princess had a unique perspective, however. She was a well-educated, highly intelligent member of the royal class, with a degree in journalism, of all things. Some of her work had been published in national presses, and she used her intellect and position to discuss women's rights, cultural instability, and the conflict between Westernism and entrenched Islamic traditions. Throughout, she remained respectful of Islam, as it was the religion of her people; at the same time, she clearly had a deep sense of offense toward the West—America in particular.

As she became more vocal and adamant, delivering one criticism after another in perfect English, we could tell it was personal to her—not merely

a political argument. It had become a monologue until Frank spoke up. "Look, one thing's really obvious about all of this."

Perhaps anticipating some retaliation, she snapped, "What is that?"

"Well," he said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, "you've been hurt very badly, and I'm sorry for that. I really am."

"Excuse me?" she said, taken back. "What do you mean?"

"I can tell you're very intelligent, and you're very knowledgeable about East-West conflicts. But I can tell your feelings on these issues don't come from your education or your work. They come from your heart... and your heart, Princess, is wounded."

I looked over at Frank and saw a glint of moisture in his eyes. I couldn't believe it. We were in the middle of a heated discussion and Frank was starting to cry. He was doing what Jesus does—looking at the heart with compassion—while I had been getting angry.

The princess broke.

After a few minutes she looked up and wiped her eyes. "You are right. I am hurt, and I see no way out of it. I'm trapped in the layers of politics and religion and culture." She paused. "I have spent all of my life to find some meaning, something to belong to, and it always circulates back to the same old things again. It's so disappointing. I try to reach the people of Saudi Arabia to give them hope, and I have no hope myself."

"But let me ask you a question, if I may," I interjected. "What if I told you there was a kingdom much larger than Saudi Arabia, much greater than America, much deeper than the culture of Europe, and much richer than the religious institutions of Christianity or Islam. What would you say to that?"

The princess looked over her shoulder toward her uncle, who was stand-

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ing nearby. We had to be wary—the slightest hint of irreverence would bring our conversation to an end. Her uncle nodded. He seemed to know that we meant no harm.

I continued. "Would you be interested in a kingdom of hope?"

"Certainly," she said. "Does God offer this hope?"

"Yes," I said, "and he has made a gateway to it—an entrance to this kingdom."

She looked suspicious for a moment. "Are you trying to tell me I should convert to Christianity?"

"No, we're not." I held up my hand for a moment. "Princess, what does the word *Muslim* mean to you?"

"Well ... in the traditional sense, it means 'submitted.'"

"Yes, but what does it mean to you? What do you want it to mean?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure what you're saying."

Frank picked up seamlessly where I left off. "Princess, what if 'submitted' could mean 'to belong to'? You spoke to us about hope, about significance, about meaning. If you can find these things with Allah, in this kingdom, would you not be the truest form of Muslim? Would you not truly be submitted to God?"

"Do I have to change my beliefs?" she asked. "Because this is not tradition. God is aloof; he is unknown by men."

"But he is known by men," I replied, "and by women. He has made this kingdom available."

"He has? Is it paradise? Our reward in death?"

"Princess, it is here, now."

Before responding, she again looked over her shoulder to her uncle, who nodded approvingly.

"How can I have this kingdom?"

"Allah sent a prophet. The Qur'an tells us he is the word of God, that he is a spirit from God and sits close to God. His name is Isa, and he is near to God now."

She nodded. "You call him Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah."

"Yes," I said. "We have spent our lives following him, belonging to his kingdom."

"How do you belong to his kingdom?"

"The first thing Isa preached was that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. I believe that to be truly submitted to Allah is to be with him in spirit, in his kingdom, and I believe that Isa can open that door for you because he is near to Allah."

She glanced once more at her uncle, then asked, "Can we pray to Allah and ask him to speak to us about his kingdom?"

And we did. Frank and I took turns asking God to reveal his kingdom to our new friend. As we prayed, the Spirit of God entered the room. Within moments we were all in tears. She then prayed for God's kingdom to enter into her heart through the anointed one—Jesus.

Bin Laden's "Cousins" Hear the Good News

The pitch-black night seemed to smother us as we walked down the narrow winding streets of Tripoli, Lebanon. I was accompanied by my Lebanese friend Hasher and my American friend John. We were going to meet with the top leadership of the Salafi Muslim sect. The Salafis are out of the same theological Islamic

mold as the Taliban of Afghanistan. They are basically first cousins to al-Qaeda and the Taliban from the Wahhabi tradition in Saudi Arabia.

By the time we turned a corner and stepped through a small narrow door into a small, dark room—well, I was wondering what in the world I was doing. (Once again.)

Inside I was shocked by the sight of about fifty men who looked exactly like Osama bin Laden. All with long beards and robes, they spoke only the classical Arabic, not the colloquial Lebanese version I was used to. My heart was pounding! These men had taken a vow to live according to the most extreme version of Islam. Yet it seemed God had put us right in their midst that very night.

The meeting, which had been set up by Hasher, was to discuss the differences between Christianity and Islam. As you know by now, I'm not big on starting with our differences but rather prefer to begin with the things we share in common—mainly Jesus.

So within minutes our conversation turned to him. We talked about Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, for nearly three hours. I finished by telling them that I loved them and that we know God loves them. They showered us with hugs, kisses, and well-wishes. It was another potentially scary situation that God turned into something powerful.

Their leader walked us out to the curb of the main street with these words: "You have broken down our stereotypes of what a Christian looks like and how they think. We so appreciate you taking the time to come here. I know it must have been hard. Would you please come back so we can talk some more about Isa al Masih? We love you and what you stand for."

Isn't it amazing that negative stereotypes go both ways! They have judged us as we have judged them. They are afraid of us like we are afraid of them. It's the love of Christ that breaks this

barrier down so we can see and hear the Good News that's available to all.

Being a Hope Broker

I met Mohsen one night at my friend's house. We were having a gathering of top-level Lebanese political leadership to discuss how these men could work with us in bridging the ever-widening gap between the Arab East and American West. Mohsen was a Sunni Muslim parliament member and a striking man in every way. He was articulate, handsome, well dressed, and I later found out, spoke seven

"Well, enough about me," he quickly replied. "Tell me something about you. What do you do?"

"I'm a hope broker." (I had never said that before and have never used it since, but it seemed appropriate to the situation.)

"Hmm. What does a hope broker do exactly?"

Since I wasn't used to this line of questioning, I didn't really know what to say other than the obvious: "I deal hope."

"Well, where do you get it? The hope. Where do you get your hope?"

"First, tell me more about why things are so bad in Lebanon and what it's like to be in your position. Then I will tell you where I get hope." So he did. But within five minutes he remembered what I said and came back to it.

"So explain this 'hope thing' that you mentioned."

I began: "It's so simple it's almost silly. Here's the idea. It's very small and quite unorganized. We gather a few people from various segments of society and meet about once a week. We do a few basic things. First, we try to pray for the country. We have university students, kids, professionals, businessmen, poor Palestinians, and anyone who wants to meet. These groups reflect Lebanese society, so they're a mix of Muslim, Christian, and Druze. We all say we believe in a god who can save people, so we thought we'd start where we agree—prayer! But lately we've realized we need more than prayer. We need something to bind us together. Something to focus on. To study. So we decided to study the life of a great person who we would all agree on."

I paused, not wanting to do all the talking, and asked if he could suggest someone to study.

"Mother Teresa."

"Wow, Mother Teresa is one of my heroes," I said. "She's amazing. Anyone else you can think of that would work?"

*Please come back so
we can talk some more
about Isa al Masih.
We love you and what
you stand for."*

languages and sang Italian opera. He gave me a five-minute appointment at his office the next week.

When I arrived at the time scheduled, he was just leaving. He had forgotten our meeting. Embarrassed, he invited me to join him for lunch—at his house.

If you know anything about Arabs, you know their hospitality is famous. Typically, only the most basic small talk is engaged in until coffee and sweets are served. But in this case, after entering his house, he slouched down, put his head between his hands, and sighed. "Life's hard."

I asked him what was going on. He simply retorted, "I have no hope. No hope for Lebanon whatsoever."

"That's pretty serious since you're a leader in the country. That's probably not good."

He thought for a while, taking this very seriously, and replied, "What about Gandhi?"

"You've picked two of my three favorite historical leaders ever to live. I love Gandhi. Big fan. You know ... I think these two people got a lot of their thinking from someone even further back, though. Sure you can't think of anyone else that might be good for our friends here to meet around?"

He must have thought for a full minute. All of a sudden he pounded the table—scared me half to death—and said, "I've got it. It's Jesus!" He nearly yelled it. Then he explained: "Muslims like Jesus. Druze like Jesus. Even Christians like Jesus." (I'm not making that up—that's exactly what he said, "Even Christians...")

"Of course," I replied. "Really. Jesus, eh? Hmm. Could be. I think you're on to something here. Are you saying that you think everyone loves and respects Jesus, although possibly not the religion of his followers?"

"Exactly!" he burst out. "That's what I'm saying. We would all love to meet and discuss Jesus. Hey, we should do one of these groups in the parliament. You can lead it."

And so we did—we started a little gathering in the Lebanese parliament. It didn't change the world. It didn't change Lebanon. I don't even know if it changed us. But it was good. We didn't meet every week, but we met often, and when we were together it was wonderful. We studies through the gospel of Luke.

Once again, I saw that while Muslims are often afraid of Christianity and maybe even Christians, they're more than willing to look seriously into the life of Christ.

The Basra Sheikh

I jumped out of our rented white Suburban in downtown Basra, Iraq, and yelled, "Who's in charge here?"

We do this sort of thing.

I jumped out of our rented white Suburban in downtown Basra, Iraq, and yelled, "Who's in charge here?"

A crowd formed instantly, and it was quickly apparent that someone named Sheikh Ali was the Big Man in town. By our third minute in Basra I found myself in the backseat of a stranger's black Mercedes going to meet a man I'd never heard of—the leading Shi'ite cleric of southern Iraq.

Sheikh Ali's domain was the largest mosque in the city; it easily rivaled the largest church campuses in the States. Among other things, there was a school, a college, a Sheikh training center, and housing for the poor.

Sheikh Ali was presiding over a large gathering of other Islamic leaders when we arrived, but in the good fashion of Arab hospitality he immediately stood up when he saw the four of us at the door and left his meeting to greet us.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. A fair question to ask an American in Iraq in May of 2003.

"Well, I'm not very good at it, but I'm trying to follow Jesus, and we've come here looking for him. Have you seen him?" (That got his attention.)

"We were in Lebanon a few weeks ago praying, and the thought came to us that Jesus might be in Iraq. Two thousand years ago he was always where the religious leaders of his day thought he wouldn't be. Have you seen him?" I repeated.

The Sheikh squinted over the top of his reading glasses, ruffled his beard, leaned toward his friends with a slight smile, and said, "Interesting question. No, we've not seen Jesus, but maybe the question should be, If he were here, what would he be doing?"

I was stunned. Maybe he had a WWJD bracelet. How'd he know that question? And then Sheikh Ali and his Under Sheikhs were off and running with the question.

We batted the idea around for about thirty minutes until they announced with an air of finality, "He'd be helping the children and taking care of the poor. Therefore, if Jesus would be doing that, maybe we should give more attention to the poor and to children—specifically, poor children." Sheikh Ali looked at me and smiled. "That was a good question you asked."

I basically said the next thing that came to my mind. "I have some more really Good News for you. Do you know that if you were my enemy, that'd be a good thing for you?" I think I was two for two on weird questions!

"How's that?"

"Well, Jesus clearly says to do three things with your enemies: love them, bless them, and pray for them. He said that anyone can love their friend or brother, but loving an enemy seems to be a higher and more noble thing. So ... you're not my enemy, but if you were, that'd be good since I'd basically be obliged by the One I follow to love, bless, and pray for you."

Sheikh Ali really liked that one. He stood up, pulled his large hand from beneath his long black robe, and said, "Well, then, your enemy I'll be," and he burst into a huge grin and hugged me.

Following no set order of progression, I decided to tell them the story of the Good Samaritan, where Jesus once again makes "good" guys look bad and "bad" guys look good. You know it: A man finishes his prayers in Jerusalem and is walking home when he's beaten up, robbed, and left for dead. Two "good" guys—a priest and a Levite—are too busy doing good-guy things to stop and help. But a "bad" guy—a hated foreigner—stops and spends a lot of time and money helping a stranger.

With the Sheikh, I personalized the story and said that if it were set in Basra today, I would be one of the good guys and he'd be the bad guy. In fact, I went so far as to jokingly tell him that if my friends knew I was meeting with him, they'd be praying really hard since he's the bad guy and I'd need lots of help as the good guy to overcome his

badness. He not only got the joke but promised to relay it to others!

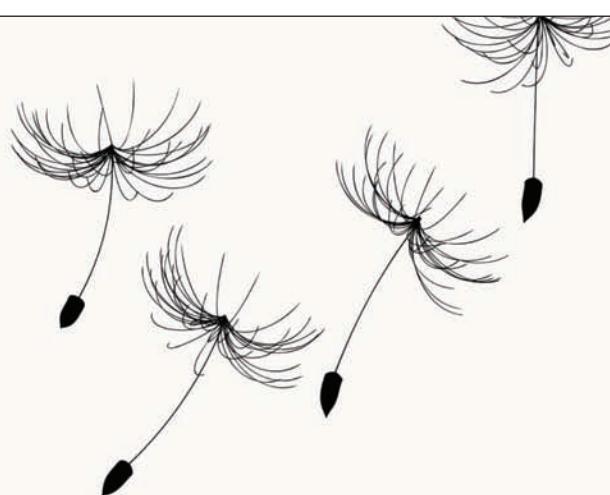
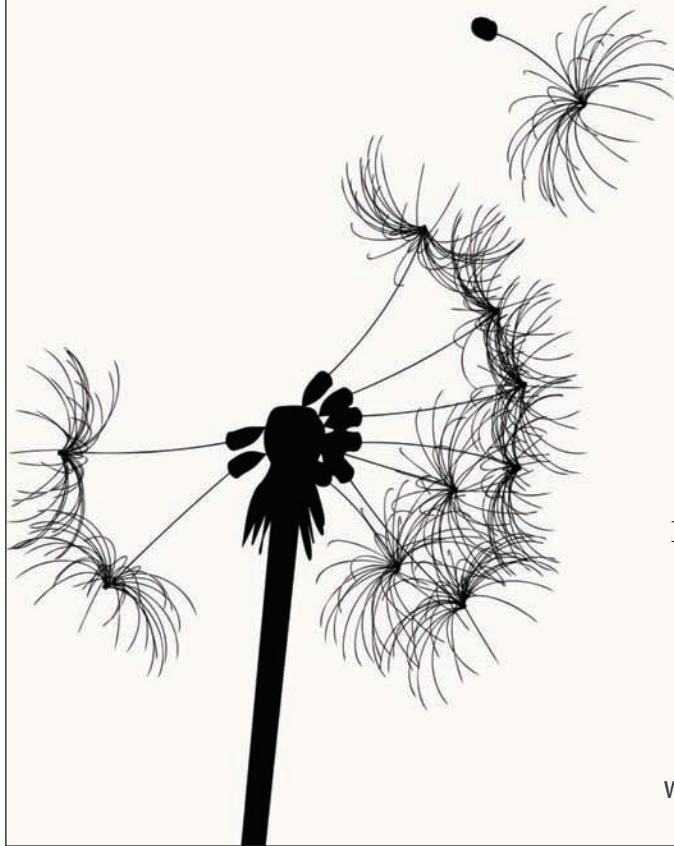
In the spirit of the story, he got up and extended his hand and said, "This is my city, and I give it to you and your friends. Whatever you want to do here I'll help. Come and stay with me. You can store your humanitarian supplies here. I'll tell everyone that you're okay and not to mess with you."

I jumped on this. "See," I said, "You're like the Good Samaritan to me. You're turning the table upside down and treating me like a brother. I came to help you, but you're helping me."

(Story update: This man has stayed faithful to his promise and has truly become a man of peace for the city of Basra.) **IJFM**

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