

Toward More Meaningful Interaction: Rethinking How We Articulate the Gospel

by *Bradford Greer*

Over the past thirty years, we foreign Christian workers have demonstrated an amazing zeal when it comes to contextualizing our approaches. We have been eager to contextualize our lifestyles by wearing different clothes, eating different foods, learning a different language, and learning how to be hospitable at any time of the day. We have been eager to contextualize the ways we communicate about our faith by using local folklore and the Qur'an. We have been slower to contextualize our worship styles and adapt to the implications of insider movements. However, the thought of contextualizing the central core of the gospel has not even occurred to a number of us; and, we explain it in programmatic ways, working within our own cultural-theological framework. We assert that God is holy and he cannot tolerate anything which is sinful in his presence. We are all sinners by nature, separated from God, and worthy of punishment. The good news is that Jesus was punished in our place on the cross. When we put our faith in Jesus, God forgives us and puts us in a relationship with him (see Cate 2005, 288-289; Geisler and Saleeb 2002, 289; Moucarray 2001, 161-162; Tanagho 2002, 119-127).

The problem with articulating our faith in this way is that it employs three themes that are often misconstrued by our Muslim friends: 1) sin, 2) substitutionary punishment, and 3) forgiveness. Do we have to talk about the human condition and about what Christ has done for us in this way? It is not necessary. However, a number of us have been unaware that alternatives exist.¹

In this paper I will identify how the use of these themes is a hindrance to evangelism and I will suggest alternative ways to articulate the gospel, adjusting to our Muslim friends' understanding in order to make the biblical message more intelligible.

Sin and the Sinful Nature

Muslims do not believe that humankind is inherently sinful and they reject the doctrine of original sin. A considerable number among us have not been content to let Muslims acknowledge that they are sinners; rather, we insist that they

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recognize their inherent sinfulness. We assume that a defective understanding of the sinful nature will impair their healthy spiritual development (see Cate 2005, 287-288). This assumption limits us (see Cooper and Maxwell 2003, 233-234).

All the Muslims with whom I have interacted have with acknowledged that they were sinners. In addition, they also have accepted that they have something within them that motivates them to do what is wrong. They did not conceive of this as a “sinful nature,” but they did acknowledge that an inward disposition toward sinning exists.² My friends and acquaintances have recognized that they are not what they think they should be. This consciousness of failure, of being a sinner, and this inward weakness drive the system of *sawab* (merit). People have to earn merit to counter the wrong they do. Though some find consolation in this system of merit, others remain unsatisfied.

In this light, what is essential for our Muslim friends to accept? Must they accept that they were born sinful or is it enough for them to acknowledge that they are sinners in need of the Messiah’s help?³

Another difficulty that arises when talking about sin is that some Christian workers have resisted acknowledging the social linguistic dimensions of the words for *sin* in local contexts. The word that Christians like to use for sin in my local context is *gunah*. *Gunah* generally refers to the “big” sins, like adultery and murder. The word that refers to “lesser” sins is *ghalati*, which is typically translated as mistake. Christian workers have tended to ignore the social linguistic dimension of the word *gunah* because they dislike categorizing sins in this dichotomizing manner. In their view all sin is sin.

Two problems have resulted from this reluctance to adapt to the social linguistic dimensions of the words for sin. The first problem has been that some Muslims have asserted that they

do not sin (*gunah*). By this they meant that they have not committed adultery or murder. In hearing this, workers have misinterpreted it as a declaration of sinlessness. The second problem is that when workers have talked about their past life as sinners separated from God, they have described their lives as being filled with *gunah*. Locals have interpreted this to mean that the workers had committed the big sins and had been drunken adulterers.

Thus, due to our fixation on imposing meaning upon an established linguistic form there has been an unfortunate



degree of misunderstanding. Also, due to our expectation that Muslims must understand their nature is inherently sinful we have created an unnecessary intellectual obstacle. It is enough that our friends acknowledge that they need what Christ offers (see Woodberry 2005, 30).

Substitutionary Punishment

What is it that Jesus offers through his work on the cross?

The first difficulty that we encounter when we broach this subject is the rejection of the idea that Jesus died on the cross. Since the cross is fundamental to our faith and salvation, we wholeheartedly embrace its reality. We fortunately have found creative ways to address the reality of the cross (see Brown 2007, 66; Moucarray 2001, 137-138).

Aside from the issue of whether Jesus was crucified or not, we run into a mental obstacle when we talk about

what happened on the cross. This is because we have limited ourselves to describing it in substitutionary terms, by saying that Jesus took the punishment of our sins upon himself.

I have encountered two problems associated with this. First, almost every Muslim I have ever talked to about this issue questioned how God could let his prophets suffer. Second, they could not understand how someone could be punished for what another person has done. They cannot accept the notion of substitutionary punishment. Are there ways around these barriers?

1. The Problem of Suffering/Defeat

Let us look at the first objection. How could God let a prophet suffer? The notion that God does not let prophets suffer is a false one. Within Islamic sacred history, the prophet of Islam suffered. He suffered while in Mecca and he suffered difficulties even in Medina. Thus, prophets do suffer.

Even though the suffering of Jesus is voiced as an objection, the primary issue behind this objection is probably the ignominy of defeat (see Mallouhi 2000, 235; Moucarray 2001, 139-141). In our friends’ worldview, the death of Jesus represents a defeat for God. We also would struggle with such an idea. What makes it different for us is that we know that Jesus did not lose. He won. The cross is the place where Jesus took on our fiercest enemies and defeated them. First, he triumphed over Satan and all his minions. Second, he set us free from the power of sin. Third, he was victorious over death (see Romans 6; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15). His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation demonstrate that he was victorious in defeating these powerful enemies (see Reid 1993; also Aulén 1969; Green and Baker 2000, 123-125).⁴

Though the Scriptures portray the cross as a place of victory, some of us have been slow to acknowledge the importance of this. The overpowering influence of the western theological tradition has focused all our attention

on the forensic metaphor of justification, limiting us from embracing the fullness of the scriptural testimony about the atonement.⁵ In addition, many of us are very cautious about making changes in our theological framework. We are afraid of syncretism and of not communicating the true faith. Our caution is well-founded. However, if God has truly called us to communicate the gospel meaningfully, we should prayerfully and reflectively address our fears about contextualizing the message. We should be willing to make adjustments if they are biblical.

There may be other reasons for our reluctance to contextualize our message. Some of us have theological misgivings about describing the cross as a place of victory. First, if we acknowledge Jesus' victory over Satan, then we have to admit that Satan and the demonic hosts exist. Some believe it is more accurate to interpret Paul's spiritual forces of wickedness in Ephesians 6:12 as structural evil (see Linthicum 2003, 115-128; Wink 1986). This interpretation provides a good rationale for ignoring the existence of spiritual beings and for addressing tangible structures of evil. However, ignoring the supernatural is not a healthy missiological approach. If people believe in supernatural forces and beings, they will employ traditional ways to allay their fears even if their foreign friends are convinced that these things do not exist. Hiebert, Shaw and Tiéno refer to this as the Flaw of the Excluded Middle (1999, 88-92). Other workers are uncomfortable with teaching that a spiritual reality coexists with the physical even though they understand the negative impact of ignoring local beliefs about the supernatural. Their discomfort may be similar to mine. My discomfort stems from the challenge of how to acknowledge the presence of spiritual forces and beings while at the same time exposing beliefs and practices that are nothing more than superstition. It is not easy to deal with

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a realm which appears only partially developed in the Scripture and which is somewhat subjective. The subjectivity in discerning what is true from what is superstition is difficult for us because we train ourselves to objectively evaluate things. However uncomfortable we are with the supernatural, ignoring it is not a long-term, healthy missiological option.

Second, many of us also have a problem with talking about Jesus conquering sin. This sounds too much like holiness teaching with which a portion of us are uncomfortable. Some of our personal histories and theological traditions have given us great liberty to talk about Romans 7 but have placed boundaries on how we can articulate the content of Romans 6 and 8. To positively affirm what Romans 6:5-14 teaches, that we are free from sin's domination, appears to us as a denial of the reality of the struggle that exists within us. Does this reluctance limit our creativity as we explore the richness of the Scriptures and think about how we can present salvation in a meaningful way? Can we affirm the victory of Jesus over sin, affirm that he has set us free from its dominion even though we still find ourselves struggling with evil desires? In addition, the content of Romans 8, of walking by the Spirit, sounds too subjective for those of us who are comfortable with the objective. Again, do our own struggles limit our ability to adequately contextualize the message?

With regard to our friends' objection of the humiliation of the cross, Evertt Huffard has suggested that we reconceptualize Jesus' suffering and death as an event that was fundamentally honorable, revealing God's glory (Huffard 1989).⁶ Huffard's reasoning and sensitivity to Arab culture is excellent and we should reflectively listen to

his advice. I have only one reservation with his ideas. Hebrews 12:2 reminds us that the cross was an event of public humiliation: "who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, *disregarding its shame*" (NRSV). The shameful of the cross is integral to understanding its significance for our lives (see Green and Baker 2000, 26). This is a dimension of the cross we must integrate into our contextualized message. The question is *when* it should be integrated.

2. The Problem of Substitution

Let us look at our friends' second objection. Substitutionary punishment is an enigma to our Muslim friends. They cannot understand how anyone can suffer punishment for another. Their schema for thinking about punishment is shaped by the premise that the one who does wrong is the one who should be punished. They have biblical justification for thinking this way. The fundamental thrust of Ezekiel 18 is that the one who sins is the one who will be punished. How then can we adjust to this deeply embedded presupposition?

To make an adjustment on this point is difficult. Substitutionary punishment for sin is such an integral feature of our western theological tradition that we feel compelled to integrate it into scriptural passages, even when it is not warranted. A colleague of mine was telling a small group of foreign workers how he talked about Abraham's sacrifice of his only son to his Muslims acquaintances (Genesis 22:1-19). His purpose in telling the story was so he could link it with Jesus being the one who was sacrificed for our sins on the cross.

There are two problems with evangelistically using this story. First, it assumes that our Muslim friends view *Id-i-Qorban* (the annual Festival of

Sacrifice) as a sacrifice for sin (see Parshall 1980, 145-146). This is a common but false assumption.⁷ Let me illustrate this.

I was teaching a class of twenty-five students. *Id-i-Qorban* was approaching, so I asked them what the meaning of the *Id* was.

They unanimously replied, "There is no meaning, sir. We do it because Abraham (peace be upon him) did it."

I was dumbfounded. Due to my upbringing, I was compelled to assume meaning existed behind every religious practice. However, the students insisted that no meaning existed behind the annual sacrifice.

Second, we fail to notice that the Genesis 22 passage makes no mention of sin. In spite of this, our minds seamlessly connect this account with Jesus' atonement for sin. An outsider may see the connection as forced. We forget how our enculturation into the faith has impacted our perceptions of the meaning of a passage.

In contrast, the focus of the Genesis 22 account is on Abraham and his remarkable willingness to sacrifice his only son (see 22:2, 12, and 16). It is to this parallel that Mark subtly draws his readers' attention when he records God speaking from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9-11; see Moloney 2002, 37).⁸ We only discover the significance of this parallel as we walk with Jesus through the chapters of Mark.

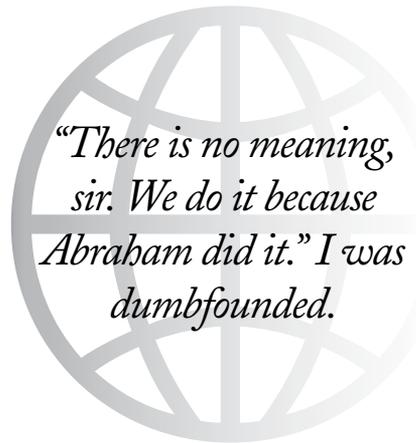
Besides triumph or victory, the Scripture provides us with alternative metaphors to substitutionary punishment, such as redemption and ransom (see Green and Baker 2000, 97-108). Linked to the metaphor of redemption, the Scripture teaches us that Jesus achieved a new exodus for us (Enns 2000, 150; Pao 2000; Watts 2000, 484-487). He frees us from our slavery to Satan and to sin and brings us into his own kingdom (see Luke 9:31; Colossians 1:13). This motif of the new exodus has largely been

omitted from our explanations of the cross. However, the new exodus describes the work of Christ in a way that is potentially much more comprehensible to our friends than substitutionary punishment.

When we limit ourselves to conceptualizing the atonement in penal substitutionary terms, we limit ourselves in the ways that we can describe it.

Forgiveness

The way that we present forgiveness of sins is also difficult for Muslims to accept. A conversation I had with



a Muslim acquaintance illustrates the problem.

I asked, "In your opinion, what is the major difference between Islam and Christianity?"

He answered, "We believe that when we do right, we are rewarded. When we do wrong, we are punished. But you believe that when you do wrong, you are forgiven."

What is the problem with the idea that we are forgiven? Our asking this question indicates that we have missed what is embedded in his statement. Muslims know that they do wrong, and they will be judged for their wrongdoing. Therefore, there is a compelling reason for them to compensate and do right and earn merit. On the other hand, from my Muslims friends' perspective, Christians have no compelling reason. They are free to do wrong and not worry about the conse-

quences because they are forgiven. Forgiveness as we have proclaimed it is seen as a license for sin.

We reinforce this misperception with the biblical passages we use to describe forgiveness, such as the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the story of the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11). The story of the prodigal son reinforces the perception that Christians can go out, do wrong, and get away with it because the prodigal was forgiven. He never suffered any consequences. The story of the adulterous woman in John 8:1-11 reinforces this misperception as well. The woman undermines the social stability of the community by committing adultery, shames her family, and gets away with it. We are concerned with forgiveness, and our friends are concerned with maintaining social order.

Thus, we do not automatically hear the same message in these stories. To illustrate this, I asked a man who had heard a presentation of the story of the prodigal son by another worker to explain what he had heard. He reiterated the story and then he concluded by saying: "It is good to obey your father." As I had him explain what he meant, he pointed out that all the parties in the story had done wrong. The younger son had obviously done wrong. The father had done wrong by forgiving the son. Finally, the oldest son had done wrong by opposing his father because a father can do whatever he wants, right or wrong.

Why then are we so devoted to using these stories since we do not hear the same message? We forget the impact our religious heritage has on our view of reality. Protestantism grew out of a Roman Catholic, medieval environment that was concerned with personal sin and guilt. In that context justification by faith was a radically transformational truth. We use these stories about forgiveness because we assume that the listeners feel guilty for the wrongs that they have committed and are looking for a way to

find forgiveness from God. For such a category of listeners, these stories are immensely meaningful. However, many of the people we talk with do not fall into this category. For some reason it has not dawned on us that we work in cultural contexts that were not shaped by medieval Christianity.

An MBB who was in full-time ministry was talking to me about the importance of forgiveness of sins. I asked him if the Muslims he worked with were concerned about the issue of forgiveness. His expression froze for a moment; then, he looked at me and said they were not. I proceeded to ask him if he had been concerned about it when he became a believer. It had not been an issue for him. He had only become concerned about it after he had become a believer.

Putting aside the fact that finding forgiveness is not an issue of concern for many, what do we mean by forgiveness? Do we mean that we are free to go out and do wrong in confidence that God will forgive us? No. We actually mean that we are reconciled with God, recipients of his grace, and restored to his fellowship. Therefore, what steps can we take to avoid this misunderstanding and meaningfully present the gospel?

First of all, let us not assume that finding forgiveness of sins is a felt spiritual need of the people with whom we talk. Let us take the time and learn what their felt spiritual needs are.

One felt need of Muslims I have interacted with is being oppressed by their fears and worries. Many are afraid of evil spirits, disease, and the evil eye. Many are worried about not being able to pay their bills, about death and hell. Another need is the sense that their life is not what it could be, or that our lives demonstrate qualities that they wish they had. Woodberry, Shubin and Marks have indicated that, according to the research conducted among 750 Muslims who follow Christ, the

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primary reason most Muslims turned to Jesus is because of the lifestyle they saw among Christians (2007).

If this is the case, let us explain why our lifestyles are different. Many Muslims have been told that our lives appear better because Satan does not bother us. Satan afflicts Muslims because they are the faithful of God. A conversation I had with a friend illustrates this. He was telling me about the many experiences he and others had of evil spirits. I was eager to learn because in all the years I had been working on the field I had had few encounters with evil spirits. I mentioned this and he quickly replied, "Oh, you people don't have these problems." In his mind Satan does not bother Christians because we are not the people of God. In my mind, Satan does not bother us because Jesus puts a hedge of protection around us, shielding us from so much of what can happen in the supernatural realm.

In this light, let us draw our friends' attention to the transformational power of the gospel (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20). This will require that we be more holistic as we talk about what Jesus has done for us. His death on the cross is but one aspect of the "Christ-event," an event which includes his life, resurrection, ascension, exaltation at the right hand of God, and the giving of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' life gives us the ultimate standard of how we are to live our lives (1 John 2:6). We cannot live such a lifestyle without being released from the dominating powers of our fears, our evil desires, and evil spirits. This does not mean that we have no more fears or evil desires, but it does mean that they no longer control us. This deliverance does not happen as a result of our willpower or strong faith. It happens because of the gift of

the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:27; John 3:3-8; Acts 2:38; Romans 8:3-11). One of the reasons Jesus ascended into heaven was so that he could receive from God this privilege of giving us the Spirit (Luke 3:16; John 16:7; Acts 1:5).⁹

Let us also draw their attention to the fact that one aspect of this Spirit-transformed life is that we have been given a love for God's *Sharia* (Law) (see Greer 2008).¹⁰ We know that no one can disobey God's *Sharia* and avoid the consequences, in this life and in the hereafter (Romans 1:18-32, 2:6-11). We affirm with Paul that what a person sows is what that person will reap (Galatians 6:7-9). Due to what Christ has done for us, we have a love for the *Sharia* and we faithfully study it (Romans 12:2), seeking to live according to it by the power of the Spirit (see Enns 2000, 150-151). In this way we can help our friends understand us, contradicting the negative stereotype that Christians are forgiven and are unconcerned about morality.

A transformed life is not a perfect life; it is a life in process. However, it is a life that can access and enjoy the transforming grace of God on a daily basis. In spite of our imperfections, it is due to the reality of our ongoing transformation that our Muslim friends are attracted to Christ. Thinking this way may scare us because it appears to elevate our responsibility in the church planting process and we are all too aware of our shortcomings. Yet, we must remind ourselves that God asks us to have complete confidence in his ability to work in and through us.

Conclusion

The traditional themes that we use to explain the atonement, i.e., the inherent sinfulness of humankind, the substi-

tutionary punishment of Christ on our behalf, and the subsequent forgiveness of all our sins are themes that Muslims doubt, reject or misunderstand. These themes are so embedded within Christian missional discourse that a number of us have not thought about searching for alternatives. This lack of reflection has allowed the intellectual barriers to the gospel for our Muslim friends to continue. The time has come to rethink the atonement in light of the Word so that we more meaningfully talk about it, using biblical metaphors that may resonate better with the spiritual needs of our Muslim friends. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹ Some are searching for a salient alternative in the areas of honor/shame (see Muller 2006, 247-262) and defilement (see Jabbour 2006). I have not found either theme to resonate with the spiritual needs of people in my context. With regard to the honor-shame paradigm, though honor and shame function significantly on the social level, they do

not appear to impact how people perceive their standing before God. This may be because one's standing before God is conceptualized within a paradigm of deeds and merit, not upon reputation.

² Dudley Woodberry has pointed out that this inward disposition to sin, referred to as *al-nafs al-ammara bil-su'* (which means "the soul which is inclined to evil"), recurs within Islamic theological and philosophical literature (1989, 158).

³ If a person operates from a bounded set paradigm of gospel proclamation, then making this adjustment is difficult. However, if a person operates from a receptor-oriented, centered set paradigm, then this flexibility exists (with regard to bounded and centered sets, see Hiebert 1994, 110-130; with regard to receptor-oriented communication, see Kraft 1997, 67-80).

⁴ While not overtly addressing the theology of this issue, Livingstone's illustration of a contextualized discussion of salvation demonstrates the value of using the metaphor of victory (1993, 151-152). Christine Mallouhi also alludes to the metaphor of victory (2000, 235).

⁵ For an example of this, see (*Virtue that Counts: Why Justification by Faith Alone Is Still Our Defining Doctrine* 2007).

⁶ See also Bill Musk's discussion on honor and shame (Musk 2004, 110-113).

⁷ There appear to be some contexts where Muslims think that their sins are forgiven by the *Id* sacrifice. Therefore, it is wise to research the local context to determine the local belief rather than assuming it. On another note, some workers have advocated talking about the *Id* sacrifice as a sacrifice for sin prior to or during the *Id* celebration. I would caution people about doing this because it could appear insensitive. How would we like it if we invited a person of another faith over to our house as we celebrate Christmas and have our guest instruct us about his/her understanding of what Christmas really signified?

⁸ When God refers to Jesus as his *beloved* in 1:11 the word *beloved* parallels its usage in Genesis 22:2, 12, and 16 in the Septuagint, where the Greek word for "beloved" is used to translate the Hebrew word for "only" (Donahue and Harrington 2002, 65).

⁹ Years ago, Phil Parshall in *New Paths for Muslim Evangelism* wrote that it was vital to talk about the Holy Spirit with our Muslim friends (1980, 243-246). Don McCurry reiterated the importance of this (2001, 311-313). The Spirit dimension to our faith stands in stark contrast to conversion and life as a Muslim. When we become followers of Jesus we do not just adopt a new set of beliefs and recite a new creed. We are born of the Spirit and we are to walk according to the Spirit. Yet, for some reason, many of us have been reluctant to talk about this vital Spirit-dimension of our faith.

¹⁰ *Sharia* in this context refers both to the commands of Jesus and the instructions by the writers of the NT (such as Matthew 5-7, Romans 12-14, Ephesians 4-5, Colossians 3) as well as to the totality of the Word of God. *Sharia* is used in a similar manner to the Hebrew word *torah*.

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