

Going Public with Faith in a Muslim Context: Lessons from Esther

by Jeff Nelson

Missionologists and practitioners among Muslim converts continue to grapple with the question of self-identity within threatening religious environments.¹ I suggest that we take this discussion of identity a step further and begin to explore the manner and timing of a convert's self-disclosure. This article examines the story of Esther and her mentor, Mordecai, to explore a *critical strategy* of advising secret believers, a *critical decision* concerning self-disclosure, and the influence of a *critical mass* of public believers in leading many others to faith. The article also considers the role of *critical mentorship* in advising Muslim background believers on the timing of self-disclosure.

How or when should a secret believer make her faith public? At what point should a man identify himself as a Christ follower? Those working among Muslims often struggle to know how to advise converts on this issue because of the tension between biblical commands to confess one's faith and the cultural realities of persecution or martyrdom.

The story of Esther from the Hebrew Scriptures has parallels with the issue of self-disclosure of Muslim converts and implications for their mentors as well. The parallels include a people group threatened due to their identity with God; laws that support the persecution and death of the people of God; encouragement by a mentor to conceal identity for a time and later to reveal identity, even though disclosure might lead to death; and the hand of God in giving grace to the believer in their moment of disclosure.

Critical Strategy

God Allows Certain Believers a Season of Hidden Faith

The heroic missionary narrative of Esther begins with proud, powerful King Xerxes' impulsive banishment of one queen and the ensuing search for another. He selected Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her older cousin Mordecai, as his new queen. Xerxes was unaware of Esther's true identity

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because Mordecai, a godly prophet, had forbidden her to reveal her nationality or family heritage to anyone (Esther 2:10, 20).

The concept of secrecy regarding one's faith is not unique to Esther. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea (John 19:38) kept their belief in Christ secret, and Naaman's request regarding bowing down in the temple of Rimmon may suggest that he intended to keep his belief in God secret (2 Kings 5, particularly 17–18). It should be noted, though, that keeping one's faith secret is the exception in Scripture; public confession of one's faith in God or Jesus is the norm.

The issue of self-disclosure for Esther and Mordecai came to the forefront shortly after King Xerxes promoted Haman to the highest position among the noblemen. The king ordered that all royal officials bow down and pay homage to Haman at the king's gate. Mordecai chose to obey God rather than bow to Haman (Esther 3:2). If he had not done so previously, this act definitely disclosed Mordecai's identity as a Jew. His godly behavior, however, not only put his life in danger, but the lives of all those who followed his God as well (Esther 3:5–6).

Haman devised a demonic plan and presented it to King Xerxes, advising him that a certain group within the provinces threatened his kingdom, power, and rule. He informed Xerxes of his plan to remove the rebels and offered to put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the annihilation of the group (see Esther 3:8–9). The king, true to his nature, consented to the edict to “destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews” (Esther 3:13).²

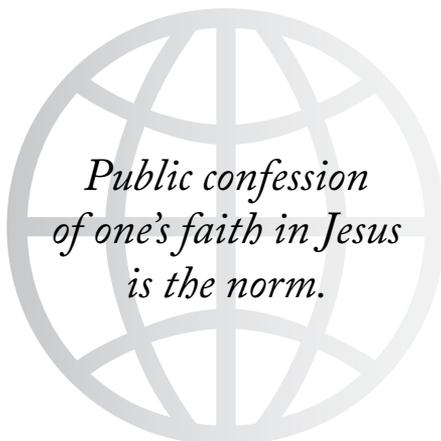
Mordecai learned of the edict and appealed to the only source he knew who could intervene: the God he boldly served (Esther 4:1). In sackcloth and ashes, he interceded for his people. Esther heard of his heartache and prayer but did not know the cause. She sent him food and clothing and encouraged

him to return to joy (Esther 4:4–5). Did Esther's concern spark an idea? Did Mordecai begin to see God's vision? Did he suddenly understand God's purpose in bringing Esther to the palace, which up to this point had been a mystery to him?

Critical Decision

God Requires of Every Believer a Time of Public Confession

Mordecai sent word to Esther telling her of the edict to annihilate all the Jews in Persia on a single day and urging her to plead with the king for her people (Esther 4:8). Esther replied that death awaited anyone who went to the king uninvited (Esther 4:11). Mordecai, her mentor, sent a second word, “If you



remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish” (Esther 4:14).³ The same person who had advised Esther to conceal her identity (Esther 2:10, 20) now advocated exposure. He also urged her to take a most dangerous step. Her self-disclosure as a follower of God and a member of this people would likely result in her death.

How could Mordecai make such a horrifying recommendation? Was it not bad enough that his actions had “caused” Xerxes to issue the decree against God's people? Now he suggested that his innocent relative sacrifice herself to save God's people

from the destruction decreed as a result of his actions. Identifying with the Jews that Xerxes had condemned to die would bring death for her as well. The logical response would have been to continue to remain silent concerning her identity, especially during this time.

However, a believer must not only consider the personal risk resulting from disclosure, but the risks to others as well. If Esther revealed her identity, she would have a positive impact on many. If she continued to conceal her identity, she would have a negative influence on many. Esther may have reasoned, “God loves me so much that he led the king to choose me as queen. I live in this palace with servants waiting on me. Mordecai's advice to keep my identity secret has certainly proved to be providential. Even though Xerxes' forces may kill all of my people, I alone will be saved. God must love me more than the rest of my people.”

Rather, Esther sought the mind and will of God. She heard the words of her trusted confidant, “And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). She determined that she and all the Jews in Susa would fast and pray for three days, after which time she would approach the king in the inner court, even though the law forbid her to do so without his summons. She concluded, “And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16). Esther had chosen to “live dead.”⁴

God carefully orchestrated Esther's self-disclosure. God (whom Scripture does not name in the narrative) continued to give Esther his gift of favor before the king. Xerxes extended his scepter to her uninvited approach and asked what she desired from him (Esther 5:2). Esther replied that she wanted to invite the king and Haman to a banquet (Esther 5:4, 8). They accepted her invitation, and during the course of the banquet, the king asked, “What is your petition?” (Esther 5:6).

Again, Esther invited the two men to a second banquet the following day. At the appropriate moment during the second banquet, Esther disclosed her identity when she asked the king to spare her life as well as the lives of her people. She identified herself with the condemned people of God (Esther 7:3–4).⁵

The moment of truth had come for Esther. She did the unthinkable, the unlawful, and the illogical: she gave up her right to life in order to identify with the God she loved and to save the people he loved. She had made the commitment to “live dead” three days prior. Now she acted on that commitment. She could not turn back. She had confessed her faith in God under a legal system and in a culture that condemned those of that faith to death. She stood ready to die for her faith, her confession, and her God.

David Shenk points out the importance of self-disclosure for Muslim converts as well, even in the face of persecution. “Many in our group have suffered much persecution after conversion. Yet, the precious prize of knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior, and God as father, was a gift worth suffering for Yet, in every culture and within every person, the center point of conversion is the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and that God is our loving Father. It is the Holy Spirit who reveals that Jesus is Lord and brings to pass a new creation that is the fruit of repentance and commitment to Christ.”⁶

Critical Mass

God Uses the Public Confession of a Believer to Strengthen the Faith of Others

Esther’s confession allowed her to “live dead” from that moment forward. She no longer lived as a secret believer. The Jews proclaimed her name throughout the kingdom. Her fame gave hope to the fearful and faith to the doubting.⁷ Her declaration set a people free, changed an empire,

and brought revival. Esther launched one of the greatest unsung missionary movements of the Old Testament. “And many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them” (Esther 8:17).

Esther’s critical decision to move from secrecy to public disclosure of her faith created the opening for others to reveal their devotion to God. Sparked by one woman’s faith and profession, a critical mass of believers stood boldly, resulting in many others coming to faith.

Kevin Greeson notes a similar phenomenon among Muslim background believers: “Most of these secret believers are waiting for a critical mass of believers to form within their community before they are willing to come out of hiding. Missionaries need new strategies that will reach behind closed doors to disciple these secret believers.”⁸ He emphasizes the important concept of “critical mass.” When believers reach a point of critical mass, some may then be willing to publicly disclose their identity in Christ.⁹ Esther took a step of faith and made her identity public. Her public statement of faith not only gave other children of God courage to stand up and identify with God, but also resulted in many Gentiles believing in her God and identifying with her people.

Critical Mentorship

God Uses Mentors to Prepare Muslim Background Believers for Their Moment of Public Confession

Muslim converts face the delicate question of the right time to boldly identify with Jesus Christ. Their mentors must prayerfully consider how to advise their spiritual children in this matter.¹² As with Mordecai, a mentor may at times advise secrecy and at other times advise openness. When the right time comes, may mentors boldly and prophetically encourage their disciples to “declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’” (Rom. 10:9).

Those mentoring Muslim background believers must pray for godly wisdom

to advise converts under their care.¹³ The story of Esther and Mordecai indicates that God does at times allow for secrecy regarding one’s faith in him. A mentor may suggest secrecy for a time to a Muslim background believer, but as Esther’s life demonstrates, a critical moment may come in that believer’s life when God no longer wants their faith in him to remain secret. Esther’s choice to publicly confess her identity with God and his people involved personal risk. But she chose to please God and rest in his care rather than protect herself and lose God’s approval. The story of Esther demonstrates that at times God protects a believer’s life even against laws, culture, and hatred. However, this may not always be the case. For example, God rescued Peter from prison and death in Acts 12:7–10, and yet he allowed King Herod to put James to death with the sword in Acts 12:2. Esther’s story also demonstrates that the bold public confession of even one follower of God often results in (1) emboldening the faith of those who have previously hidden their belief in God and (2) turning others to faith in God.

Mordecai made perhaps the most difficult decision of his life when he advised his innocent mentee to reveal her identity at the risk of her life. But this decision took on historic proportions for the people of God. As mentors, missiologists, and practitioners among Muslims, we must strive to have the wisdom, prayer life, and boldness of Mordecai as we advise those God allows us to influence. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹ "In my experience with Muslim background believers, their self-identity is a multifaceted issue that defies simple explanation and often frustrates external expectations. As cultural outsiders, we often see the issue in false clarity, imposing simplistic understandings of terms and relationships. We have great expectations for young believers to 'take their stand' in a society hostile to the spread of Christianity within its ranks, where the struggle for survival is more intense than we outsiders will ever understand. But for many Muslim background believers, identity is fluid, taking the most appropriate form for the situation. For instance, where Christianity has strong negative connotations, Muslim background believers may avoid a 'Christian' label and identify themselves in different ways according to various perspectives and situations." Bernard Dutch, "Should Muslims Become 'Christians?'" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (2000) 17: 15. The debate that Dutch addressed in 2000

continues to the present. Gary Corwin observes, "For the last decade there has been an ongoing debate in mission circles on appropriate limits to contextualization among various socio-religious groups—Muslim peoples in particular. . . . The crux of the issue has to do with the identity of new believers." Gary Corwin, "Issues of Identity in a Muslim Context: Common Ground?" in *Envisioning Effective Ministry: Evangelism in a Muslim Context*, ed. Laurie Fortunak Nichols and Gary R. Corwin (Wheaton, IL: Evangelism and Missions Information Services, 2010), 139.

² All Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, Today's New International Version ® TNIV ® Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica, <http://www.biblica.com>.

³ Mordecai's theology agrees with that of Paul and Jesus. Paul's statement in Romans 10:9–10 ties salvation to declaration: "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." Jesus' statement in Matthew 10:32–33 also connects public confession to heavenly introduction: "Whoever publicly acknowledges me I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever publicly disowns me I will disown before my Father in heaven."

⁴ The term *live dead* refers to a concept in which individuals follow Jesus' instruction to give up their life and follow him (Luke 9:23–26). In Esther's case, she chose to give up her right to live for the sake of her God and her people. From that moment on, she no longer lived for herself, but for her God. A recently launched church planting initiative among unreached people groups in East Africa calls their project *Live Dead* to describe their commitment to their task. For further information on this group, see <http://live-dead.org/>.

⁵ Bilquis Sheikh recounts a conversation with her Muslim family and friends, one of whom advised, "Don't declare your Christianity publicly."

"You mean keep my faith a secret?"
"Well. . ."

"I can't," I said. "I can't play games with God. If I must die, I die." Bilquis Sheikh and Richard Schneider, *I Dared to Call Him Father: The Miraculous Story of a Muslim Woman's Encounter with God* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2003), 87.

⁶ David W. Shenk, "Forms of Change," in *Encountering the World of Islam*, ed.

Keith Swartley (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2005), 241.

⁷ Parshall also discusses the importance of a critical mass of believers in a Muslim community: "Our goal is to see a small cluster of believers within a given geographic area. When the ideal of sociological strength, plus maturity on the part of the believers, is reached, it becomes possible to consider baptism. Premature baptism has often sparked off intense persecution from the Islamic community." Phil Parshall, "Discreet Witness," in *Encountering the World of Islam*, ed. Keith Swartley (Colorado Springs: Biblica, 2005), 242.

⁸ Kevin Greeson, "Church Planting Movements among Muslim Peoples," *Mission Frontiers*, March–April 2011, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/church-planting-movements-among-muslim-peoples> (accessed August 20, 2011). Greeson's book *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ!* has elicited intense discussion in the mission world. While Greeson does make some controversial statements, his identification of indigenous church planting movements is refreshing. Missionaries involved in the Muslim world must further investigate the concept of critical mass. Kevin Greeson, *The Camel: How Muslims Are Coming to Faith in Christ!* (Arkadelphia, AR: WIGTake Resources, 2007).

⁹ Morin relates a story of two Christian workers in a Muslim community whom God used to miraculously raise a girl from the dead. The miracle resulted in thirty Muslims following Isa al-Masih that day and the establishment of a church of five hundred believers in a year. This type of public demonstration of God's power and the movement of a critical mass of people can produce the impetus for church planting. Harry Morin, *Muslim Ministry in the African Context* (Springfield, MO: Africa's Hope, 2007), 112–114.

¹⁰ "Knowing the Bible's teaching on suffering will help us prepare Muslim converts to endure suffering." Thabiti Anyabwile, *The Gospel for Muslims: An Encouragement to Share Christ with Confidence* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 159.

¹¹ Bilquis Sheikh studied the story of Nicodemus as she wrestled with ways to mentor new Muslim background believers. Sheikh and Schneider, 135.