

From Prophethood to the Gospel: Talking to Folk Muslims about Jesus

by Perry Pennington

My own approach to communicating the gospel to South Asian Muslims began in a simple conversation late one evening with my neighbor, Dervesh. He is a Sufi teacher who, on that occasion, began to explain to me the logic of Sufi prayer. He laid out how the prayers of folk Muslims seek blessing from God through the intercessory prayers of Sufi saints. He also explained that the efficacy of those prayers is related directly to the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad. Prophethood, blessing and the hope for a better life were themes he wove together into a portrait of his local Muslim world. His thinking was “prophetological”¹ in the way he pictured these core Muslim concerns, and that picture has shaped my perception of how biblical themes of prophethood and blessing should take a primary place in our presentation of the gospel to South Asian folk Muslims.

Missiological discussions about Islam often address Islam as a whole, presenting it as a monolithic system, and ignore the cultural and religious diversity within the Muslim world. These discussions fail to take account of the folk Islam that influences most Muslims,² or if they do recognize the place of folk Islam, they give it only a token of the attention it deserves in any strategic deliberation over contextualizing the gospel. If contextualization is to be truly effective in bringing the truth of the gospel to bear on the central difficulties and concerns for South Asian Muslims, then I believe we must focus on the unique perspective of folk Islam. So, let me first introduce what I see as the source and purpose of contextualization. I want this to be clear before I proceed to develop the key cultural concerns of blessing and prophethood in this particular context. These cultural themes are then the basis of my proposal for a theological contextualization of the gospel for South Asian folk Muslims.

The Gospel from a Muslim Perspective

The source of the gospel message is the saving activity of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The theological work we do in communicating

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the gospel's message in new cultural settings is at the heart of this process we call contextualization. The contextualization of this message is to find a biblical and culturally relevant way to introduce Jesus, explain the reason for and the result of his death, and call for a response.

Missionaries have sometimes approached the task of contextualizing the gospel for Muslims through a process of theological bridge building. In "bridge-based" contextualization, areas of similarity between Islam and the Christian faith are sought. Then a theological bridge is built from that area of commonality to the gospel. It is hoped that by framing the presentation of the gospel in terms of an element within Islam (one which does not contradict, but rather corresponds to Christian faith) the gospel will then be more easily understood and accepted. Shared bodies of beliefs make such efforts possible.³ Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians promotes mutual understanding, dialogue, friendship building, and even the sharing of the gospel. Yet the purpose of contextualization is not merely to increase the palatability of the gospel, but to focus on heightening the comprehensibility of the gospel in a particular cultural context. If an audience clearly comprehends the message of the gospel but sees in it only the "offense of the cross" (Gal. 5:11),⁴ this may be recognized as an effective contextualization of the gospel, because the message was clearly understood.

The strength of bridge-building contextualization is that it uses something familiar to the audience to explain the gospel. The weakness of this approach is that the aspect of the local culture being used as a bridge may or may not turn out to be an important part of that culture. This is especially true when a cultural outsider is choosing what cultural aspect or truth might become the bridge. If a peripheral cultural element were selected for use in contextualization, then the

gospel message would be unhelpfully associated with something of only minor importance in that culture. Frankly, this is the situation when the theological theme of sacrifice is used as the cornerstone for any presentation of the gospel to folk Muslims in South Asia. The offering of an animal sacrifice is made each year by South Asian folk Muslims, but that act of sacrifice is of relatively minor importance in their culture. Sacrifice is not viewed as either atoning or saving, so by framing the gospel in terms of sacrifice (or any other familiar term of minor importance), the message of the gospel may actually be obscured.

In contrast to "bridge-building" contextualization, I believe a better contextualization of the gospel begins



by identifying the very deepest fears, hopes, and frustrations of a Muslim society. Contextualization seeks to squarely address those pressing cultural concerns with relevant themes from the Bible that will illuminate the gospel. To locate the core concerns and fears within a culture is to discover what is considered important in that context. Attempts to address and solve these deepest cultural concerns, fears, and hopes are like a powerful engine that generates enormous amounts of energy.⁵ When the gospel is presented in a way that connects with these core concerns, the power already being produced by a recipient cultural "engine" promotes an investigation of the gospel as a potential solution. Because this

approach to contextualization focuses on major concerns and needs, the gospel will be expressed in terms of an issue or theme that is of vital importance to the Muslim society, leading to clarity and comprehensibility.

Using the contextualization strategy described above, this article will seek to answer certain questions: What are the central concerns, fears, and hopes of South Asian folk Muslims? Which biblical themes correspond to and most directly address those concerns? And are those biblical themes also sufficient to explain the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin? How may those themes be used to present the gospel?

Blessing and Prophethood in Folk Islam

Understanding the worldview of folk Muslims is essential for developing an appropriate theology for their context. As I will show below, the search for blessing is the primary driving concern in the worldview of South Asian folk Muslims. In addition, prophethood is the principal means of grace through which blessing is distributed among them. For South Asian Muslims, therefore, prophethood and blessing are central concerns of daily life.

For most South Asian Muslims, daily life is a persistent struggle. The Indian government appointed a commission to study the socioeconomic conditions of the Muslim community, which numbers over 150 million in India. The Sachar Commission reported that their analysis

shows that while there is considerable variation in the conditions of Muslims across states . . . the Community exhibits deficits and deprivation in practically all dimensions of development.⁶

The indicators studied included educational, economic, and employment conditions, bank credit accessibility, access to social and physical infrastructure, poverty, standard of living,

access to government employment, and access to government affirmative action. The difficulty of daily life for most Muslims in India creates a deep need for a practical framework for understanding, explaining, and solving life's difficulties.

In their folk religious contexts, doctrine and orthodoxy take a back seat to a more pragmatic response to the immediate concerns of daily life.⁷ Folk religionists generally assume that blessing may be sought that might provide a solution to any of life's difficulties. The worldview of South Asian folk Muslims is deeply concerned with obtaining blessings of various kinds through the help of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, this blessing might possibly be the ultimate concern and aspiration of folk Muslims in South Asia. I would like to examine three categories of blessing which South Asian folk Muslims wish to obtain: general well being, salvation, and social status.

Seeking Blessing in Folk Islam

All Muslims seek blessing from God. But unlike orthodox Muslims, folk Muslims seek blessing not only through the observance of orthodox Islamic practices, but also through unorthodox "magical" means. Many rituals of South Asian folk Muslims are simply animistic practices that have been adapted and given an Islamic veneer. Brown writes,

Folk Muslims...tend to be...concerned with averting demons and evil and with gaining supernatural favors, and they view rituals, both Islamic and traditional, as means to these ends.⁸

More specifically, they believe that blessing can be obtained from places or objects with a connection to the prophets. *The Encyclopedia of Islam* states:

God can implant an emanation of *baraka* [blessing] in the person of his prophets and saints: Muhammad and his descendants are especially endowed therewith. These sacred personages, in their turn, may communicate the effluvia of their supernatural

Dervesh prays according to "all the prophets and all the holy books," including Jesus. Even this kind of prayer relies on the help of Muhammad.

potential to ordinary men, either during their lifetime or after their death, the manner of transmission being greatly varied, sometimes strange.⁹

Practitioners of folk Islam gain legitimacy in transmitting blessing by relying on Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. Unlike Sufism, which is considered orthodox, folk Islam is viewed as unorthodox because of the way it mixes orthodox belief and ritual with animistic practices. In the history of Islam in South Asia, local Sufi mystics received special respect, especially from folk Muslims. They continue to be venerated as those who are especially close to God, and a genuine Sufi is considered a channel of blessing from God. Sufis are visited regularly by people who need advice, healing, or even help with getting their children to go to sleep at night. Sufis belong to Sufi "orders" or brotherhoods, which should be distinguished from Christian monastic orders, as they represent certain schools of thought handed down by Sufi masters who each have taught their mystical approach to God according to a particular pattern.¹⁰ All of the Sufi orders trace their spiritual lineage back to Muhammad through a chain of succession that continues to the present day.¹¹

As I mentioned in my opening remarks about my former neighbor, Dervesh, the efficacy of Sufi prayers is directly related to the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad. Dervesh also introduced me to an interesting logic regarding Sufi intercession: According to him, for every work there is an accompanying *vasila* (means). For instance, the *vasila* for reading is eyeglasses; for writing, a pencil; for drinking, a glass. Prayer, he made clear, also requires a *vasila*. "Which *vasila* do you use when you pray?" I asked

him. Dervesh explained that he prayed in the name of (with the *vasila* of) all the prophets and holy books. *Vasilas* are required in prayer, Dervesh said, because prayer is talking to God, who is mighty and powerful. He is full of blessing, but his power is so great that direct contact with him is fraught with danger. God, he continued, is like an electricity-generating power plant. It produces such a powerful form of electricity that it is useless for ordinary household items like radios, for its power would destroy them if connected directly to them. No one powers a radio directly at the power-generating plant. Instead, the electricity is taken from the generating plant to an electrical grid. From there, the electricity goes to a transformer, after which it is sent into homes. Once the safe electricity has been sent into the home, the radio may be used without fear. In prayer, Dervesh concluded, God is like the generating station, the prophets, like the grid station, and Sufis, like the transformer. They are a conduit for the blessing and power of God that flows from them to their followers in a manageable form. Regular people are the radio itself. They can pray for and experience God's power and blessing, but only through the mediation of prophetic figures.

Dervesh prays according to "all the prophets and all the holy books," including Jesus. Even this kind of prayer, however, relies on the help of Muhammad. He understands that Islam teaches that the prophets themselves, including Jesus, depend on Muhammad in prayer. Muslim tradition tells us that the prophets prayed according to the *vasila* of Muhammad, from the time of Adam.¹² Because Muhammad is the "point of 'association' within Islam between God and the human world,"¹³ every *vasila* in South Asian

folk Islam leads back to Muhammad. Receiving blessing from God, including having prayers heard and answered, is a *prophetological* process in the folk Islam of South Asia.

Securing One's General Well-Being

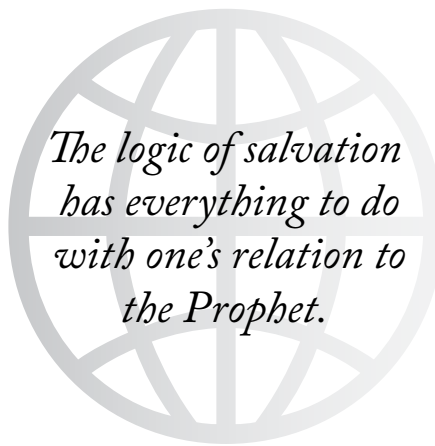
Folk Muslims in South Asia display the typical pattern of occasionally visiting the *dargah* (tomb) of a Sufi saint, where they may pray and ask the saint to intercede for them. They hope that the saint will carry their petition forward by speaking to his own masters and guides in the school of Sufism, in a chain reaching back to Muhammad, who can then intercede with God for them. The physical relic of the saint is venerated because of its perceived spiritual connection to Muhammad. Like other folk Muslim practices in South Asia, *dargah* worship is a means of obtaining blessing, via intermediaries, through the ultimate source of help, the Prophet Muhammad. *Vasila* is the operative concept in understanding how South Asian folk Muslims seek to obtain spiritual power and blessing through a spiritual networking of these practices.

Shi'a Veneration

In South Asia, Shi'a and Sunni folk Muslims share the operative concept of *vasila*, though the particular *vasilas* used may be different. On one visit to the local *imambara* (e.g., a congregation hall used by Shi'a Muslims for the annual festival commemorating the martyrdom of Hussain, son of Ali and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad) the cleric who gave me a tour showed me all of the objects that are used there as *vasilas* in seeking blessing. These particular objects are defined by the Shi'a belief that Muhammad's physical descendants (through Hussain) are his only true successors as leaders of the Muslim community, so the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hussain (son of Ali) is an important occasion for obtaining blessing through symbolic objects. For example, there is a model of the tomb of Imam Hussain.

Not everyone, he told me, can visit the tomb of Imam Hussain in person, so pious Shi'as are allowed to construct a model of the tomb. Visiting the model of the tomb of Hussain generates just as much blessing as making a pilgrimage to the actual tomb. The power for this source of blessing for Shi'as is that Muhammad's true succession, the lineage of Ali and Hussain, provides the valid conduit of blessing.

Another example involves the scene of Hussain's martyrdom, that place where he was carried into battle on a white horse named Zuljanah, whose likeness is venerated in picture form in the *imambara*. Around the corner from the *imambara* is a courtyard containing



a live horse whose color is pure white. The horse, which was donated by a Hindu devotee of the *dargah* in whose courtyard the horse is kept, is venerated in memory of Zuljanah. According to the caretaker, the horse does no work. Each day the horse is given a bath and takes a two-hour walk around the city. It has its own private barn, which will soon be outfitted with an air conditioner for the summer months. When the Shi'a folk Muslims of the locality show respect for this horse, they show respect to the real Zuljanah, and by extension to the person Hussain who rode Zuljanah, and by extension to the Prophet Muhammad. In this way, by venerating and respecting a horse that resembles Zuljanah, blessing is obtained.

Anything that has some physical or spiritual connection to Muhammad may be used as a means for obtaining blessing, because all blessing is believed to come through Muhammad. In the South Asian folk Muslim's concept of *vasila*, blessing and prophethood are never separated as they are in orthodox Islam. In orthodox Islam, blessing comes directly from God, and prophethood is an institution for the guidance of humankind. But in South Asian folk Islam, humankind is cut off from God and his blessing. Blessing is available only through the appointed *vasila*, which is Muhammad, the ultimate prophet of Islam. Therefore blessing and prophethood are closely intertwined in the worldview of South Asian folk Muslims. Each of them represents a deep need as well as a core spiritual and theological doctrine.

Salvation

What these phenomena suggest is that for South Asian folk Muslims blessing (including the blessing of salvation) is primarily a *prophetological concept*. By "prophetological concept" I mean that the logic of salvation has everything to do with one's relation to the Prophet Muhammad. Orthodox Islam, relying heavily on the Qur'an, places adherence to the prophethood of Muhammad at the very center of the faith of Islam. Entrance to the faith is through the pronouncement of a creed stating the exclusive deity of one God and the prophethood of Muhammad. The Qur'an states in 7:158 and 4:69 that Muslims must believe that Muhammad is God's messenger. Eternal salvation depends on it.

For South Asian folk Muslims, the doctrine of eternal salvation is of secondary importance compared with concerns related to this present world. While I will make clear below that eternal salvation remains a persistent concern of these folk Muslims, their understanding of salvation is less focused on orthodox practices and doctrines and more concerned with forming a connection to

the Muslim community, a connection which is defined by its allegiance to the Prophet Muhammad.

Muslims generally cherish and respect all the prophets, among whom Muhammad is preeminent, especially because his prophetic authority continues into the present. In the Islamic understanding of prophethood the period of a prophet's authority extends only until the coming of the next prophet. The period of the prophethood of Jesus, for example, lasted only until the coming of Muhammad, but the prophetic authority of Muhammad will never end, since he is the final prophet. For South Asian folk Muslims, then, what is important to the obtaining of the blessing of salvation is allegiance to the final prophet, Muhammad.

Blessing of all kinds, including eternal salvation, is understood to follow from a connection with the prophet. In order to demonstrate that connection, traditional Muslims use certain identity markers such as a beard, traditional Muslim clothing, circumcision, and dietary restrictions. These identity markers have more than cultural significance. For South Asian folk Muslims, these markers are an attempt to manifest their allegiance to the worldwide Muslim community and to the Prophet Muhammad. The use of traditional identity markers connects Muslim families to the greater Muslim community, even at the expense of advancement in the world at large.¹⁴ A connection to the Muslim community, expressed through traditional Muslim identity markers, is important because receiving salvation on the last day is associated with belonging to the community of the Prophet. Inclusion in the community of Islam is determined strictly according to adherence to the prophethood of Muhammad, so salvation for South Asian folk Muslims is primarily a prophetological concern.

A Pattern in Judaism

A helpful comparison for this South Asian folk Islam's view of salvation

Their hope (not assurance) of salvation is not based on individual holiness or merit but on belonging to the "right" community.

might be the view of salvation in Second Temple Judaism. In his book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, E. P. Sanders is at pains to demonstrate that Judaism was not a religion of works-based salvation as was previously understood in biblical scholarship.¹⁵ Sanders argues that Jewish people expected salvation not because they had earned it, but because they *belonged* to the Jewish people. The Jewish people had a covenantal relationship with God, so to be Jewish was to be saved.

Dunn's modification of this theory added to this basic premise the idea that the Jewish people proved or validated their inclusion in the covenant people by using certain identity markers such as dietary restrictions, Sabbath observance, and circumcision.¹⁶ The purpose of these identity markers, or "works of the Law," was not to earn salvation, but rather to demonstrate membership in the Jewish people. As shown above, South Asian Muslims make use of similar identity markers (circumcision, diet, clothing) by publicly showing their allegiance to and membership in the worldwide Muslim community.

Whether or not one accepts Sanders' interpretation of the pattern of religion in Second Temple Judaism, his work has recommended a reorientation of our conventional understanding of Second Temple Jewish soteriology. I'm suggesting that our conventional evangelical perspective on Islamic soteriology needs a similar reorientation. Evangelicals have sometimes assumed that Muslims seek salvation through a legalistic observance of the *sharia*, or Islamic law. We need to recognize, however, that Muslims hold a more nuanced view of sin and salvation. Most do not see themselves either as completely sinless or as dangerously sinful. Rather, because they *belong* to

the community of the final Prophet, they hope that a merciful God will show mercy to them on the last day. A Muslim friend explained to me that if a human parent forgives the sins and mistakes of his children, why should not God, who is so superior to humans, do the same on the last day?

Despite their expectation of forgiveness and salvation at the last day, Muslims of all kinds consider it highly presumptuous to claim eternal security. Instead of relying on their personal holiness and claiming the "assurance of salvation" (to use the evangelical Christian phrase), Muslims will assume the triumph of the faith of the Muslim community. Their hope (not assurance) of salvation is not based on individual holiness or merit but on belonging to the "right" community. The Muslim community is the one possessing the final revelation and following the final prophet. Therefore, salvation for a South Asian folk Muslim is based on belonging to the Muslim community, and this belonging is defined by one's allegiance to the final prophet. The blessing of salvation, therefore, is a prophetological concept for South Asian folk Muslims.

Social Status

One of the most sought after blessings in South Asian folk Islam is social status. All South Asian societies are hierarchical, and the structure of South Asian Muslim society is no exception. A person's position in the social hierarchy is determined primarily by ancestry, kinship, and occupation. Again, just as with other kinds of blessing sought by these folk Muslims, one's social status is determined prophetologically, as I will explain below.

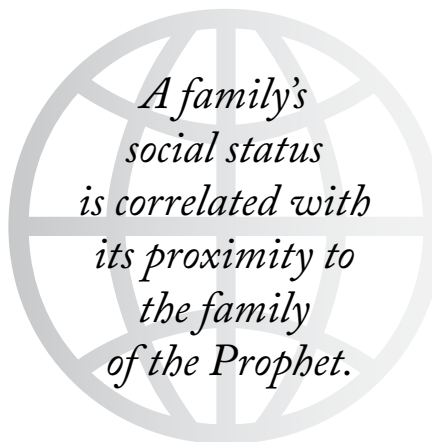
Many South Asian Muslims flatly deny the existence of a clearly defined

social hierarchy in South Asian Islam, and would simply state “all Muslims are equal.” The Qur’an in Sura 49:13 describes humankind as one family, and it is sometimes cited as evidence that Islam views all people as equal. In South Asian Islam, however, a social hierarchy exists that is based on ethnicity and kinship. Ethnic groups which are most closely related to the family of the Prophet Muhammad have the greatest amount of social status, while those at the bottom of the social hierarchy belong to ethnic groups having no relation to the Prophet Muhammad.

What’s most important regarding this hierarchy in South Asian Islam is that a family’s social status is directly correlated with its proximity to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. The top position in the social hierarchy belongs to the Sayyids, who claim to be direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Their ancestors came to South Asia as Sufi masters, traders, or invaders, and their family connection to the Prophet Muhammad is the defining mark of their community identity. The Sheikhs hold the second tier on the social hierarchy, claiming to be descendants of Arabs (but not direct descendants of Muhammad). They take the companions of the Prophet Muhammad or the prestigious tribes of Arabia for their ancestors, as reflected in their clan names (e.g., Qureshi, Abbasi, Siddiqui, etc.). The third level is made up of several non-Arab ethnic groups who came to settle in South Asia, including the Mughals, Turks, and Pathans. However, as foreign-origin Muslims they are still considered higher on the social hierarchy than are Muslims of indigenous origin. There are many different groups of indigenous-origin Muslims in South Asia who are descendants of the indigenous Indian communities who converted to Islam after the arrival of Muslim traders, preachers, and conquerors on the subcontinent. Their hierarchical social ranking is based in large part on their traditional

place in the Hindu caste system. In some cases, they have retained their traditional caste names, occupations, and kinship patterns. *Rajputs* (descendants of rulers and warriors) have a higher status than artisan castes such as *Nais* (barbers) and *Jats* (cultivators), for example. The *Mussalis* (sweeper) and *Chamars* (leatherworkers) occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder of South Asian Islam.

In this social situation, improving one’s social standing can only be accomplished by drawing closer to the bloodline of the Prophet Muhammad. This is nearly impossible due to the preference among South Asian Muslims for contracting marriage alliances within their own ethnic group, with



first-cousin marriages being the ideal. To improve their social status, some indigenous-origin South Asian Muslim families have invented an Arab lineage and origin story for their clan that connects the clan back to companions or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Alison Shaw documents this phenomenon by describing the ways in which lower-status South Asian Muslims try to assume the social role and status of “upper caste” Muslims.¹⁷ Muslim missiologists bemoan the hierarchical status quo of South Asian Muslim society, noting that it is one of the biggest obstacles to the expansion of Islam in South Asia.¹⁸ Nevertheless, most South Asian Muslims perceive a direct correlation between social

status and proximity to bloodline of the Prophet Muhammad. This social system once again confirms the thesis that for South Asian folk Muslims blessing, in this case the much sought-after blessing of social status, is always a prophetological concept.

For South Asian folk Muslims, the search for blessing is a central concern of daily life and a primary spiritual goal. Blessings such as general well being, salvation, and social status are sought through a variety of religious, spiritual, and “magical” means, each of which depends on the Prophet Muhammad for effectiveness. Because South Asian folk Muslims have a prophetological view of blessing, they are strongly inclined to seek out sources of prophetological information or inspiration in order that it might result in some type of blessing. In their worldview all the important parts of life converge upon the key concepts of prophethood and blessing.

The Biblical Themes of Blessing and Prophethood

Because South Asian folk Muslims seek out prophetological information wherever they can, a gospel presentation should give them something prophetological to think about. This kind of contextualized gospel can speak to and challenge the worldview of South Asian folk Islam. This worldview of folk Islam assumes that all of humankind, except for the prophets and saints, are separated from God by an impassable gulf. Blessing is available only through a system of mediation, and that mediation ultimately depends on the Prophet Muhammad. In contrast, the Christian gospel declares that God desires direct interaction and relationship with all of humankind. He wants to provide blessing in the form of peace, joy, hope, and love. He has overcome that impassable gulf through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who restores those who believe in him to a state of blessedness.

According to the New Testament, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the people of God have direct access to God's favor and blessing. In the same way that Muslims understand their prophets, the New Testament understands the followers of Jesus: they speak God's word, enjoy God's favor, and experience God's presence in a special way. So, in the context of South Asian folk Islam, aspects of prophethood reflect what is meant by salvation and blessedness in the Bible. As will be shown below, from the perspective of South Asian folk Islam, in the New Testament Jesus transforms his followers into what the prophets are by granting them the Holy Spirit.

While prophethood and blessing are excellent concepts for facilitating conversations with folk Muslims, are they theologically sufficient for presenting the gospel? Can they explain the gospel effectively? In the following paragraphs I want to quickly introduce how the New Testament authors wove prophethood and blessing into their explanation of the gospel.

In the first chapters of Acts, we see Peter proclaiming the gospel at Pentecost with a striking message that included themes of prophethood, blessing, and the Holy Spirit. In Peter's sermon in Acts 2, he notes that after Jesus died and was resurrected, he was exalted to the right hand of God, received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and has poured out what you now see and hear (Acts 2:33). The behavior that Peter was defending ("what you now see and hear") was the disciples' speaking in tongues and declaring the wonders of God (v. 4, 11). Peter attributes this behavior to the Holy Spirit's presence and makes a direct connection between receiving the Spirit and prophecy. This connection is important, because later Peter closely connects salvation with receiving the Spirit, so that the prophetic and salvation are fused in any reception of the Spirit.¹⁹ Quoting the prophet Joel, Peter states that,

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your

Our presentation of the gospel will require that we recognize the "prophetological" perspective so prevalent among folk Muslims.

sons and daughters will prophesy... Even on my servants both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

The act of receiving the Spirit, which Peter has closely associated with prophesying, is then used to explain or describe salvation in Acts 2:38, where Peter says to the crowd:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

To the ears of the audience in Jerusalem, the call to repentance and salvation in Peter's sermon was also an invitation to participate in the gift of the Spirit, which had previously been the exclusive experience of the prophets of God. When the sermon is taken as a whole, it is clear that Peter is promising the audience that through faith in Jesus the audience would receive reconciliation with God and with it transformation into something like what the Old Testament prophets were.

As implied in Peter's sermon, prophethood was considered normative in the New Testament churches. The New Testament authors assumed that all believers were anointed with the Holy Spirit and had the potential to be prophets.²⁰ For those living in the period of Second Temple Judaism, any reference to receiving the Spirit could only be interpreted as receiving prophethood.²¹ Because the Spirit was shared by all in the church community, it followed that all were imbued with prophethood.²² Prophethood remained an important theological concept for the church until the church lost its distinctly Jewish character.²³ It remains a valid and important theological theme in the Bible that can provide a theological foundation for the church among Muslim-background believers.

The theme of blessing is also used by the biblical authors to describe salvation. Today, because of the widespread preaching of a "health and wealth" gospel, some may hesitate to use the language of blessing in relation to salvation. One might be reticent to imply that salvation results in material blessing or to minimize the importance of spiritual renewal and reconciliation with God in salvation, regardless of material blessing. Nevertheless, salvation is described in the language of blessing in Scripture.

In Galatians, Paul interpreted the death of Jesus with the language of blessing and cursing. First, Paul equates the gospel with the promise of blessing when he says that God had "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham" when he said: "All nations will be blessed through you." (Gal. 3:8). Paul made it clear that the good news of the gospel, that promise of blessing made to Abraham, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and that it is both a blessing of reconciliation with God and the gift of the Spirit that accompanies it (Gal. 3:13-14). Paul assumes that people are not naturally within the sphere of God's blessing, but that, on the contrary, all people are cursed because they do not follow the Law (Gal. 3:10-12). In his death, Jesus became a curse in order to redeem the church from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13). In Galatians 3:14 Paul states that the result of redemption in Christ is that those who believe may be blessed and receive the Spirit. As I tried to show above, during the period of Second Temple Judaism (and also from the perspective of folk Islam) receiving the Spirit was functionally synonymous with becoming a prophet. Like Peter, Paul relies heavily on the language of blessing and cursing in order to explain the necessity and result of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Clearly, blessing and prophethood were central to the New Testament authors' explanation of the gospel.²⁴ And while these themes deeply resonate with South Asian folk Muslims, Western evangelicals usually fail to appreciate their significance. Indeed, our very different cultural and religious traditions have caused us to emphasize other biblical themes that relate to our general well-being, salvation and social status. Yet, even for Westerners, the study of prophethood and blessing in Scripture can be rewarding both spiritually and missiologically. Gazing into the world of Sufi Muslims in South Asia can help us grasp the missiological priority of harnessing these rather unfamiliar themes of blessing and prophethood in order to feature them more prominently in our presentation of the gospel. However, to do this will require that we evangelicals not only become more deeply immersed in the doctrine and fellowship of the Holy Spirit, but that we recognize—and respond to—the “prophetological” perspective so prevalent among South Asian folk Muslims. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ I first encountered the term “prophetological” in Oscar Cullmann’s *The Christology of the New Testament* (p. 42). In my paper I use this term in a general way, not in a selective sense. Prophetology is simply that section of theology that deals with the phenomenon and doctrine of prophethood. Below I have included a sample of published writing in which the term is used by scholars to refer to the study of the doctrine of prophecy in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and the Baha’i faith. Outside of academic work no one seems to use the term at all, and to practicing mission personnel the term “prophetology” might be practically unknown. However, there is discussion among missionaries about the concept of prophethood with relation to Muslim evangelism. It is seen as an area of common ground between Christians and Muslims, who both view Jesus as a prophet. That common ground can be used to build trust and relationships with Muslims. My paper attempts to show why and how it works theologically and missiologically to explain the gospel in terms of prophethood (and blessing) and to orient ourselves to a “prophetological” manner of thought.

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² “Folk Islam” is a variety of Islam that combines orthodox Islamic practices with animism. Dudley Woodberry writes “Many missionaries arrived in Pakistan ill-equipped

to deal with issues of power such as the demonic—a major concern of local people. I, in addition, arriving with a Ph.D. in Islam as taught, found that I did not understand Islam as lived.” J. Dudley Woodberry, “Power and Blessing: Keys for Relevance to a Religion as Lived,” in *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power*, eds. Charles E. Van Engen, Darrell Whiteman, and J. Dudley Woodberry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 98. It is estimated that folk Muslims comprise 70–85% of the worldwide Muslim population. Richard D. Love, “Church Planting Among Folk Muslims,” *IJFM*, 11:2 (April 1994), 87.

³ Both Islam and Christianity teach the oneness of God, the creation, the day of judgment, heaven and hell, the virgin birth of Jesus, and the prophethood of Jesus. It should be noted that these “shared” beliefs are overlapping but not identical. Distinct differences exist between Islamic and Christian doctrines, even when a basic belief (such as monotheism) is shared.

⁴ Biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

⁵ Douglas A. Hall, Judy Hall, and Steve Daman, *The Cat and the Toaster: Living System Ministry in a Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 250–260.

⁶ Rajindar Sachar, *Social, Economic and Educational Status of the Muslim Community in India: A Report* (New Delhi: Cabinet Secretariat, 2006), 237.

⁷ For an evangelical perspective on folk Islam, see Bill Musk, *The Unseen Face of Islam: Sharing the Gospel with Ordinary Muslims at Street Level* (Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch, 2003), Rick Love, *Muslims, Magic and the Kingdom of God: Church Planting among Folk Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), and Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

⁸ Rick Brown, “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers. Part I: God and Mankind,” *IJFM* 23:1 (Spring 2006), 6–7. Rick Brown, “Muslim Worldviews and the Bible: Bridges and Barriers. Part II: Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Age to Come,” *IJFM* 23:2 (Summer 2006), 51, 52, 54.

⁹ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, CD-ROM ed., s.v. “Baraka.”

¹⁰ For a detailed and insightful study on Sufism, see J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

¹¹ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (New Delhi: Shambhala, 1997), 121.

¹² Imam Imaduddin Abul-Fida Ismail Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets*, trans. Rafiq Abdur Rehman (Karachi: Darul Ishaat, 2004), 34.

¹³ Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 190.

¹⁴ Muslims in India, for example, are at a greater risk of discrimination and even harassment in public life due to the use of Muslim identity markers (Sachar, 12). A similar situation exists for immigrant Muslim populations in the West. David Masci, *An Uncertain Road: Muslims and the Future of Europe* (Washington D.C.: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2005), 6.

¹⁵ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 54.

¹⁶ James G. D. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1990), 192.

¹⁷ Alison Shaw, *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁸ Masood Alam Falahi, *Hindustan Mein Zaat-Paat Aur Musalman [Casteism and the Muslim in India]* (Delhi: Al-Qazi, 2007).

¹⁹ The important exegetical work linking blessing, prophethood, and the gospel can only be summarized here due to the constraints of space. I provide a much more detailed explanation in the second chapter of my thesis (Pennington, 2014).

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, Rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 33–34, 167–69, 347–59. See also Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke's Charismatic Theology*, (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010), 65.

²¹ David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1983), 103–05; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 82.

²² Aune, 191–93.

²³ Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1963), 42.

²⁴ For more on this topic, see Perry Pennington “Prophethood and Blessing: A Biblical Theology of the Gospel for Folk Muslims” (diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2014).

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