

The “Clash of Civilizations” and a Cache of Connotations

by Michael Alfred Kilgore

25 years after the paradigm emerged, what have we learned about making Jesus disciples among Muslims in the midst of a world aligned according to civilizations?

Twenty-five years ago, the eminent Harvard political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, proposed a new paradigm to help us understand how people all over the world identify themselves and then behave en masse.¹ His paradigm immediately caused a huge stir in the secular press and journals, drawing sharp critiques from international affairs experts all over the world. In 1996 Huntington wrote a book answering his critics² and followed up with more articles and interviews.

His idea has profound implications for believers who desire to clearly communicate the gospel across cultures. From my vantage point in SouthEast Asia, I believe his concept of world alignment according to civilizations has tremendous bearing on how we make Jesus disciples among Muslims. Remarkably, most missiologists have ignored Huntington’s paradigm of the 21st century world. If Huntington’s perceptions are at all accurate about how billions of people today construct their identity, very few have thought about the implications for intercultural communicators of the gospel.

In this article, I will take a fresh look at Huntington’s paradigm and the debates swirling around it. I also want to consider some of the similarities between the first century New Testament world and our 21st century world, and then identify some of the contemporary implications for clear gospel communication across civilizational lines.

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Huntington’s Key Concepts

In 1993, the Soviet Union had recently collapsed, the Cold War had been largely won, and the world had rearranged itself, making obsolete the terms “Free World,” “Communist World,” and “Third World.” Huntington sought a new paradigm to help us see how people now self-identified and related to one another. He asked the question: “What is the best simple map of the post-Cold War world?” He then developed a general paradigm for viewing and making sense of our current world.³

For the two centuries spanning the French Revolution and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world had largely been divided by ideologies. Huntington proposed that in the 1990s we began returning to an older paradigm where people no longer identified as much with ideology as with kinship groups, not merely with their narrowly defined ethnic groups or local kingdoms, but rather with their mega-kinship groups, their civilizations. To define what he meant, Huntington observed that although there are huge variations within civilizations,

Arabs, Chinese and Westerners... are not part of any broader cultural entity. They constitute civilizations. A civilization is thus the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.⁴

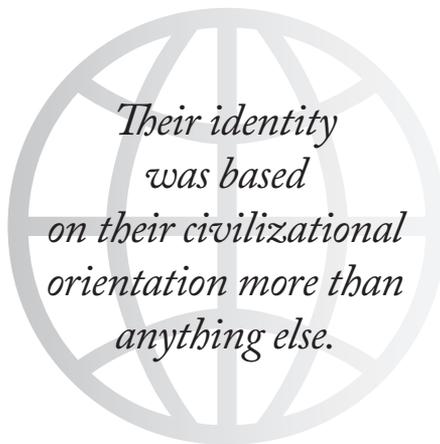
Huntington saw the world divided up into nine major civilizations (listed in alphabetical order): African, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Japanese, Latin, Orthodox (Russian-led), Sinic (Chinese-led), and Western.⁵

He suggested that where ancient civilizations meet there are fault lines along which we can expect tension. He convincingly demonstrated this in Belarus where he showed that voting patterns after the fall of the Soviet Union differed predictably across ancient civilizational lines.⁶ This was because people now formed their identity based on their civilizational orientation more than anything else. He pointed to civilizational herding, whereby people live by a double moral standard, demonstrating a knee-jerk reaction to support the actions of those from their own civilization and to condemn similar actions by outsiders.

I discovered Huntington's book late, in September 2000, when two events occurred. The first happened at Atambua, along Indonesia's border with the newly independent East Timor. Three

UN workers (a Hispanic-American, an Ethiopian and a Croat, from at least three separate civilizations, none of them Muslim) were brutally hacked to death by machete-wielding Indonesian nationalist Muslims. The second event happened in the same week. After a long time of relative peace, the Israeli military and Palestinians began clashing with deadly results mostly on the Palestinian side. Soon the *al-Aqsa Intifada* was in full swing.

The Indonesian street showed no concern at all for those brutally murdered in their own back yard, but even when the Palestinian death toll had not yet surpassed that of the UN workers, Indonesian Muslims were incensed about the violence against their *ummah*



brothers. By contrast, Africans, Latins, Orthodox people and Westerners were extremely exercised about the murder of UN workers, while brushing off news of Palestinians' suffering with sentiments akin to, "Oh, there they are going at it again!"

Huntington stressed how civilizations compete and clash with one another. His 1993 article infuriated diplomatic sensibilities with his remark that "Islam has bloody borders."⁷ Across the Muslim world, newspapers carried headlines angrily heralding that what Huntington said about Islam was not true, without, of course, giving any hint about what he had said. He later provided statistical evidence

that Muslims in the late 20th century were twice as prone to conflict as most other civilizations, and reasserted that "Islam's borders are bloody, and so are its innards."⁸

Huntington argued strongly that the West has been in decline since peaking in influence somewhere between 1914 and 1924. Many Westerners dismissed him as too pessimistic. He responded by citing demographic statistics and a wealth of data regarding the West's declining percentages of worldwide factory output, declining control of territory, and declining percentage of global military forces.⁹

But one of his observations should really worry missiologists. He sensed that non-Christians perceive "Christianity" to be closely tied to Christendom or Western Civilization, with missionaries being "the most successful protagonists of Western culture."¹⁰ To the degree that this is true, we should not be too surprised that many outside the West view missionaries as socio-political instruments of Western governments, who seek to make non-Westerners defect via proselytization across civilizational fault lines.

Similarly, Charles R. Taber's research on early Western missionaries reveals how this connotation was created as field workers over-identified themselves with their home culture's values and geo-political agendas.¹¹

Opposing Voices

Francis Fukuyama became Huntington's nemesis arguing that

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.¹²

His view has had difficulty explaining Sept. 11, 2001, the failed Arab Spring,

Russia's revived nationalism and China's burgeoning influence on other continents.

Benjamin Barber considered Huntington a pessimist, believing that the West losing manufacturing sectors does not matter in an information age where "McWorld" overwhelms Jihad (code for all traditional cultures) through its grip on media. He forecast McWorld gradually overwhelming Jihad into submission by creating a mono-cultural megalith.¹³ But Barber over-estimated the impact of surface McWorld cultural forms on non-Westerners. An Arab youth may indeed wear Nikes and Levis and spend many hours imbibing YouTube, but it would be naïve to then deduce that he or she has thereby internalized Western values to melt into a global unified culture.¹⁴

Barber did not address the bulging demographics of Islam over against the stagnant population growth rates of Westerners. Demographics says that sooner or later something's "gotta give"—and in some way it will have to be the West. Westerners would like to believe that their civilization can never seriously decline. So did the Romans as well as the Byzantine Christians. They could not imagine how "the faith" could survive, much less thrive, post-Rome or post-Constantinople.

Muslim commentators, of course, were quick to reject Huntington's larger paradigm and many Western experts heartily supported them in rejecting it. Yet, many Muslims seem to have embraced it as undeniable. In 2002 Mohammad Khatami, the president of Iran, arguably one of the most influential people in the Muslim world, adopted a "policy to curb America's threats to Iran—a partnership with other powers" which he entitled "the dialogue of civilizations."¹⁵ This led to the Dialogue of Civilizations (DOC) Research Institute which recently celebrated its fifteenth anniversary.¹⁶ Khatami portrayed himself as one stressing constructive dialogue—rather

Whether it's a clash, a dialogue, or a mere alignment, the civilizations paradigm keeps coming up in journals and popular media.

than a clash—between civilizations, but even in so doing, he was embracing the basic paradigm that *in today's world, the lines are drawn around civilizations.*

Experts disagree about whether Huntington meant to prescribe (or merely to describe) a clash between civilizations. However, whether it is termed a clash, or a mere alignment, or even a dialogue of civilizations, the civilizations paradigm keeps coming up in journals and popular media. This general framework for seeing how the inhabitants of our planet function is simply not going away.

For instance, outspoken former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahatir Mohamad demonstrated the tension that some Muslim leaders feel over Huntington's paradigm. In a 2014 blog entitled "Stop Postulating A Clash of Civilizations," Mahatir nevertheless exclaimed:

It is not the religion of Islam that led the Muslims to commit heinous acts. It is simply anger, hate and rage over not being able to do anything to stop the Europeans or West from oppressing people who profess the same religion as themselves. And Europeans, most of whom are not practicing Christians, react in the same way when Christians are faced with any threat.

Look at the record of the Europeans, especially after they created Israel. Now, although they will not admit it, they are carrying out a crusade against Islam and the Muslims. Call it a war on terror or the clash of civilizations. But factually it is still a continuation of the crusade of the past centuries.¹⁷

Much more recently, both a Muslim and a Hindu commentator embraced the clash of civilizations paradigm to explain UN inaction on the Rohingya genocide crisis.¹⁸ In a seeming contradiction, multiple major US newspapers have repeatedly rejected the paradigm

in reference to the West and Islam while at the same time referencing it in connection with China and the West.

Many who outrightly reject the civilizations paradigm seem to do so because they don't want to endorse any civilizational clash, whether it be the attacks of 9/11, or Western government responses. But the paradigm itself never necessarily endorsed a clash; it merely described what we were seeing. Admitting this, as disturbing as it is, will do well to move us past denying certain present realities and prepare our minds for the challenges before us.

A Biblical Perspective

The most interesting aspect about the world that we now see ourselves in is its similarity with the biblical world of the first century.¹⁹ In one important way this puts us at an advantage. It becomes easier to understand the New Testament and to see how the Apostolic model applies in our situation.

The world of Jesus and the Apostles was also facing a clash of civilizations. Many Jews were displaying a high nationalistic fever. Greek civilization and then Roman civilization had come steam-rolling in like juggernauts, subjugating the Jewish way of life. Emotions ran high as teams of zealot guerillas operated in the Judean countryside. Prejudices were so high that Judean Jews found it hard to get along with the culturally-polluted Hellenistic Jews, causing dangerous tensions even among the Messiah's early followers.

Yet God, the grand Maestro of civilizations and history saw to it that this clash did not hem in the spread of his gospel. Again and again, the gospel spread to the edges of one civilizational grouping, with the Apostles seemingly

self-satisfied that it had gone as far as they could imagine it going, only to then leap over remarkable social barriers to penetrate into yet the next group. Thus it left from the Jews to the Samaritans, to an Ethiopian semi-proselyte, to a Roman “proselyte at the gate,” and finally, at Antioch, to raw Gentiles with no revealed understanding about the one true God.

Due to the clash of civilizations occurring at that time—with its resultant negative experiences between people from across the fault lines—it was inconceivable to Jewish believers that any Gentile could become a serious follower of their Messiah without first converting to Judaism. Both Jews and Romans viewed Greeks as embracing remarkably slack sexual practices.²⁰ The Jews viewed Romans as being hopelessly brutal. To be either a Greek or a Roman carried seemingly inherent connections to blatant idolatry.

When referring to the age in which Paul lived, Turkish author Fatih Cimok sounds like he is actually describing modern Muslim societies. He states that,

This was a period when politics, social and economic life, fortune and the future of people were all integrated into religion.²¹

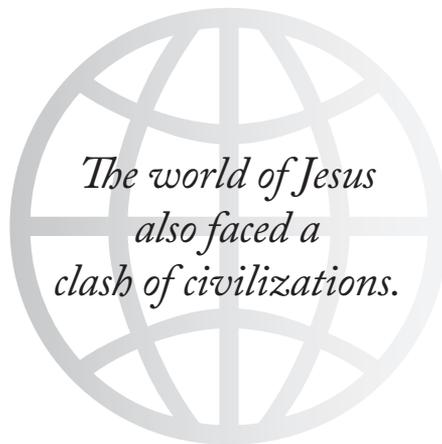
How could anyone seriously suggest that these people might really follow the Jewish Messiah while remaining in these inherently idolatrous civilizations?

It is no wonder that Paul got into so much trouble with the Jerusalem church. He could have chosen an approach that would have made his relations with Jerusalem better. He could have told audiences in Asia Minor, Macedonia & Achaia,

Trust in Jesus the Jewish Messiah, his death in your place, and his resurrection, to give you forgiveness of all your sins, to reconcile you to God and to give you citizenship in his eternal kingdom. You will be saved and will receive the Holy Spirit empowering

you to do all that Jesus taught. *Then just line up over here where we have a team of medical specialists ready to perform a minor surgical procedure on your sex organ, and we will get you started on being full fledged devotees of this Jewish Messiah.*

Paul did *not* communicate that message, because he knew that if anyone tied circumcision to the gospel, it would so muddy the waters of Gentile understanding that they’d never keep circumcision—for them a sign of civilizational defection—distinct from understanding salvation by grace through faith alone. He would not be communicating a clear gospel. Thankfully, Paul obsessed over communicating a clear gospel.



Paul became the intercultural communicator par excellence when *he placed the burden squarely upon himself to bridge the civilizational gap* and to make the gospel clear within an unevangelized civilization. He told Greeks to “stay as you were when God called you” (1 Cor. 7), and then disciplined his Pharisee background conscience to move outside his own comfort zones so that he could “become as a Greek . . . to become as one not under the law . . . to become all things to all men.” His conscience achieved this by intentionally abiding under the law of Christ. He aimed to generate a movement of Greeks who would become disciples of Jesus as Greeks, of Romans becoming disciples of Jesus as Romans, of

barbarians becoming disciples of Jesus as barbarians! He scandalized most of the Jerusalem believers,²² but he pulled it off. Within a generation, the number of Gentile background believers even outstripped the number of Jewish background believers.

Paul succeeded in his God-ordained role by facilitating movements to Christ inside Greek and Roman and even “barbarian” civilizations. When Jerusalem fell in 70 AD, the movement was not threatened precisely because the faith of the gospel had become a powerful influence beyond Jewish civilization.

Three hundred and seventy years later, as Augustine lay on his deathbed, he could hear the Vandals storming the gates of Carthage. One would not be surprised if he prayed for God to intervene and destroy their “civilization.” God had a better idea. At the extreme edge of European barbarian culture, God was nurturing a new community of believers who were passionate about his Word. From the most unlikely place imaginable, God used Irish “barbarians” to spread the Word as far as Russia and Italy,²³ establishing education and culture as they went. These Irish inadvertently laid the foundation for a new civilization, one that would be unusually influenced by basic biblical truths. Rather than obliterate barbarian culture, God had intended to penetrate it and use it as his vehicle to create something measurably better than Augustine’s Roman civilization.

God displayed his sovereign ability to orchestrate the expansion of his kingdom even as the world’s current greatest kingdom was collapsing. He thus demonstrated that he is the grand Maestro in the midst of any contest of civilizations.

Implications in the Current Contest of Civilizations

Despite wishful, optimistic commentaries, world events often provide evidence that we are facing some sort of a contest of civilizations, centered around

the global tensions between China and the West and between Islam and the West. In this situation, nothing is easier than to write off the opponents of our own respective civilizations as hopeless cases, fodder for hell fire, not worth real effort to save. Yet, if we take the incarnation, the Apostolic pattern and post-biblical history seriously at all, presenting every person complete in Christ must be our goal.²⁴

In light of the Muslim perception of Christianity, which is indistinguishable to most of the world from Western Civilization, we must be very careful about what we call people to embrace. Our messaging often connotes to them, “Believe in Christ, plus do this work, defect across civilizational fault lines, and then God will accept you and so might we.” Whenever we give such an impression, whether deliberately or inadvertently, the message they perceive from us is a works gospel—a false gospel.

Consequently, many Muslim background believers have paid a horribly high price. Sometimes they paid it not necessarily for following the gospel but for following “Western Christianity,” the only way forward that we offered them once they expressed interest in Jesus. We must consistently engage deeply with our hearers to discern how our message is coming across and to eliminate these tragic miscommunications.

The only alternative to calling Muslims to move into “Christianity” (often connoting in their minds—“the West”) is, like Paul, to call them to Christ-centered movements that somehow penetrate their society and transform it from within. Even William Carey, referring to their *civilizational* orientation, recognized the need to produce “Hindu Christians,”²⁵ at a time when British churchmen would typically respond, “How in the world would that be possible?”²⁶

Donald K. Smith, one of the best intercultural communications experts

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in ministry today, started his legendary career in South Africa. The philosophy of intercultural communications that he hammered out in Sub-Saharan Africa has rightfully found a wide reception. In his classic book *Make Haste Slowly*, he masterfully elucidates why lasting change must come from within the culture:

The most far-reaching change, and the least disturbing, comes when change begins within the group, even though stimulated by outsiders. The group itself, not individuals pulled out of the group, is the place for change to occur.... The strength of the group supports change; the group is made stronger and at the same time more open to considering other changes.²⁷

The key is to create Third Culture settings that do not destroy a person’s participation in his home culture. He must have the opportunity to be involved in new patterns and solutions that he can carry inside his own group.... These bi-cultural people are very often the most effective change agents.²⁸

Smith cautions against counting on marginals—people who have moved to the periphery of their own culture—to introduce change.

As progressive as such a person appears to the outsider, he cannot be a satisfactory sponsor. He is a bridge that is broken at one end.²⁹

He summarizes our choice with striking clarity,

Two different approaches are possible when seeking to introduce change in society: 1) “Attack” the society, virtually forcing it to leave its traditions and social structures so it can become “modernized” and “christian” [sic]; 2) Learn how the society is structured, how it operates to make its own decisions and then penetrate the society and bring change from within....³⁰

But he admits that we find the better choice harder to swallow,

Even the occasional missionary has admitted, “We can never win these people until their culture is broken.” Traditional culture patterns have been seen as obstacles that must be flattened before desired change can be brought about.³¹

This same sentiment was expressed at a global conference on ministry to Muslims in 2017, when a plenary speaker quoted a prayer from a conference a century ago calling on God to “Destroy this world of Islam!” The prayer seemed to be not merely reported, but quoted approvingly.

Admittedly when we come to Islam, we face special challenges. One often hears, “Islam is a religion that includes a whole life system and is incompatible with the gospel.” Undoubtedly, there’s some significant truth in that statement that would require a book to address. But Islam is also a *mega-oikos*, the *Dar al-Islam* or household of Islam, or, in Huntington’s words, a civilization—one of those

highest cultural grouping[s] of people and the broadest level[s] of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.³²

If someone suggested that a Chinese could not follow the Lord without first becoming culturally Korean, or that Uruguayans could not possibly mature in Christ unless they first became culturally Brazilian, we would all be appalled, even though these jolts would constitute cultural changes within the same Sinic or Latin civilizations. However, many Muslims perceive us to be asking them to turn, not just from one understanding of God to another, while remaining within their civilization, but from their very civilizational orientation

to an alien one before we will accept them as serious followers of Christ.³³

When did the Apostle Paul ever insist that anyone *defect from their civilization* (e.g., Graeco-Roman to Jewish) before God or Paul would accept them?

It is fascinating that the New Testament uses the Greek noun *proselutos* or "convert" (Matt. 23:15, Acts 2:10, 6:5, 13:43) to describe Gentiles who became Jews, but never to describe a Gentile who came to faith in Christ. Even more fascinating is the matter of the noun and verb forms of "convert" in our English Bibles. Our less-than-literal English translations often render *aparche* with the noun "convert" (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15), but any literal translation would be "first fruit." Similarly, translations may render the Greek *epistrepho* as the English "to convert/a convert" (Acts 15:3), whereas it simply means "to turn." Matthew and Luke only use the Greek words for "converts" or "to convert" when describing someone entering Judaism, which *was indeed* a civilizational change, but *not* to describe someone coming to the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ.³⁴ How significant do you sense that this distinction may be?

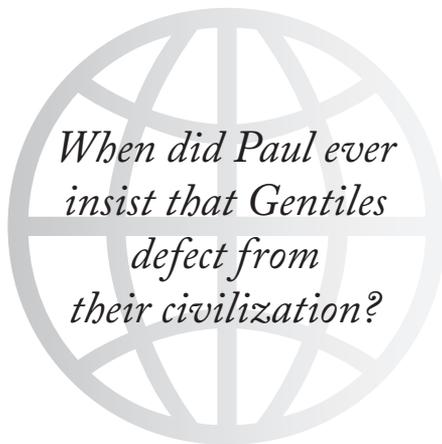
Luke's mentor Paul persuaded Gentiles to be transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit through the guidance of God's Word and to begin influencing their civilizations, to be sure. But when did he ever insist that they defect from their civilization? Did he not call them to something even much more difficult, something demanding miraculous power, when he challenged people to find their ultimate identity in Christ while remaining as lights in the situation they were in when God called them?

Yet we hear of Christians celebrating when a devout Muslim girl takes off her head covering and starts wearing a "proper" low-cut blouse and mini-skirt. What are we communicating to the Muslim community? And do we really care whether we communicate clearly?

Certain non-Arab local Muslim cultures are so immersed into Arabic-flavored Islamic civilization that it's difficult to discern local cultural patterns that may have existed since before Islam came to their region. Here, trying to adapt to the local culture while avoiding anything perceived as Islamic becomes a hopeless endeavor.

I once heard a field worker, who had grown up in such a context, but mixing mainly in local, westernized church communities, exclaim, "I'm not wanting to ask them to leave their culture, just Islam." I asked her,

What if your request comes across sounding like someone saying, "I'm not asking you to get out of Seoul; you just have to get out of Asia!"?



In that particular context, most people saw their culture as a small subset of Islamic culture, and they were not usually thinking about theology. Getting out of "Islam" would to them mean moving a whole world away from all the culture they had ever known.

In such cases we do not merely extract change agents out of their local culture. We move them out of their entire civilization. Small wonder that it took so long before we started seeing movements among them.

Admittedly, we must not go too far, as if to naively picture a rigid dichotomy between Islam as a religion and Islam as a civilization. At the same time, we

need discernment to recognize that this civilization comprising 1.5 billion people is a seriously multi-faceted entity. There are Muslim communists, Muslim pig farmers, Muslim gay rights activists, Muslim agnostics, and even Muslim atheists, along with a dizzying variety of folk Muslims. Indeed, a gifted evangelist friend of mine met a man who said, "I'm a Muslim, but I hate religion." Huntington once indicated that regarding Islam and the West, the greater conflict was not between religions but between civilizations.³⁵ What can these statements mean unless people are actually distinguishing between religion and larger civilizational identification?

Mainstream "orthodox" Muslim leaders certainly despise fellow Muslims who display these innovative variations. But in the first century, Paul never let mockery from polytheistic Greeks dissuade him from mentoring new monotheistic Greek disciples of Jesus Christ. Rather than brushing off cultural variations as useless, spurious oddities, Paul appreciated and captured opportunities by stepping into this cultural "wobble room" to create new movements of Jesus disciples.

I have lived among Muslims for over twenty-five years. Those who confidently state that it is impossible for a committed believer to continue as a member in any Muslim community are claiming a virtual omniscience of all specific Muslim communities that I hope I would never dare claim.

An incident in my city illustrates the point. A Muslim background believer (MBB) who had been raised in a fanatic family heard about a home Bible study that was about to discontinue meeting due to pressure from Muslim neighbors. Every time they met singing praise songs to guitar music, rowdy neighbors would throw stones and bricks at the roof, terrorizing the believers inside. This MBB encouraged them to meet at least once more before giving up, and to let him lead the

study. He told them to refrain from bringing guitars and to sit on the floor rather than on chairs.

Before the Bible study started, neighbors saw a motorcycle pull up with two men dressed in the manner of Muslim *ulamas*.³⁶ The MBB stepped down from the cycle in a dignified manner carrying a holy book wrapped in beautiful cloth. After entering the house and having the attendees sit on the floor he told them, “We’re going to have a Bible study tonight, but different than what you’re used to.” He unwrapped his Arabic Bible, placed it on a *rabal* (Holy Book X-stand), and then taught the attendees to chant a New Testament passage in Arabic (which most of them did not at first understand at all). He led them in chanting the verse loudly in Arabic. Afterwards he translated the passage into their language and expounded its meaning and life application. They prayed together with palms raised to heaven before breaking up for the evening.

That night not a single stone struck the house. After the MBB left, once-antagonistic neighbors rushed over to the homeowners exclaiming,

Wow, we didn’t know you had anything like that! That sounded great! Why haven’t you ever done that before? Why didn’t you ever tell us you were into that?!

Nothing done in that gathering violated Scripture, unless you actually contend that the Arabic language is inherently evil. Our MBB friend merely distinguished the gospel from Western expressions, communicating truth in a way that made sense inside that civilizational context. As a result, one group of Muslim neighbors for the first time felt drawn to what they heard.

This does not deny that there are serious theological differences between the faith of the gospel and today’s mainstream expressions of Islam. If a Wahhabi-educated *ulama* had lived next door, he likely would have rallied

Our MBB friend distinguished the gospel from Western expressions in a way that made sense in that civilizational context.

neighbors to mistreat the believers again. But the lesson is that many, many Muslims are demonstrably open to the gospel when it is presented as a message for people in the *Dar al-Islam*. What’s our excuse for not serving them?

Jesus Followers within Islamic Civilization?

This discussion often raises the question of whether we propose that Muslims coming to Christ not be called “Christians.”

The interesting thing about this is that if 21st century evangelicals were transported back to the 40s AD, it is doubtful whether they’d have a clue as to how to find fellowship. If they sought “Christians,” few believers then would know whom they were talking about. New Testament writers used the label “Christian” only three times, and two of those usages are by hostile outsiders who disparaged the movement. Only as late as the early 60s AD/CE did Peter embrace the term in 1 Peter 4:16.

By contrast, New Testament believers used a rich vocabulary to self-identify: disciples, believers, saints, followers of the Way (this last one being particularly relevant to Muslims who pray many times a day beseeching Allah to show them the straight path).

In light of the heinous moral and political connotations attached to the word “Christian” in many Muslim lands, would it not boost our communications impact if we rediscovered the predominant New Testament vocabulary and dared to overturn the proverbial apple cart by using it with the same frequency that they did, and use the label “Christian” with the same infrequency that they did?³⁷ I believe that this will also greatly help

us communicate more clearly with unbelievers in the West, too. To many in North America and Europe, the term “Christian” now carries with it a political affiliation. What do we want to come to people’s minds when we tell them who we are? Socio-politics, or the awesome person and work of Jesus Christ?

Several different stripes of movements to Christ have emerged within Islamic societies. I have personally seen a few advocates who in my opinion went too far and compromised central biblical truth, leading me to withdraw from working with them. For instance, any teaching (by professing believers) that denies Jesus is “our God and Savior” (Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1)³⁸ may play well in the halls of mainstream Islamic theology, but is no longer faithful to biblical teaching.

I have also seen beautiful expressions being lived out by very sincere followers of Isa Al Masih who are courageous enough to challenge mainline Islamic worldview from within the society while worshipping Isa Al Masih³⁹ as *Theos*. They do not merely take the risk of hit-and-run foray witness into Muslim communities. Instead, they speak boldly for Jesus and the gospel while their hearers know exactly where they live.

Summary

We have reviewed the Huntington paradigm of a world demarcated along civilizational lines and seen that, while many understandably object to calling it a “clash,” the basic civilizational alignment paradigm is not going away, even among leading Muslim thinkers. We’ve highlighted the similarities between the 21st century and the first century in being similarly aligned. We’ve seen how Jewish believers, from

a civilization that had long benefited from God’s revelation, were surrounded and pressured by civilizations they viewed as inherently idolatrous. Furthermore, we’ve spotlighted how the Apostles communicated in such a world, not demanding civilizational defection, but rather encouraging people to become change agents from within.

A deeper understanding of ancient civilizations can help us put things in perspective. Specifically, it forces us to question whether embracing *civilizationally-Islamic followers of Jesus* today is really more problematic than accepting *first-century Greek or Roman* (or *fifth-century Irish*) believers was back then.

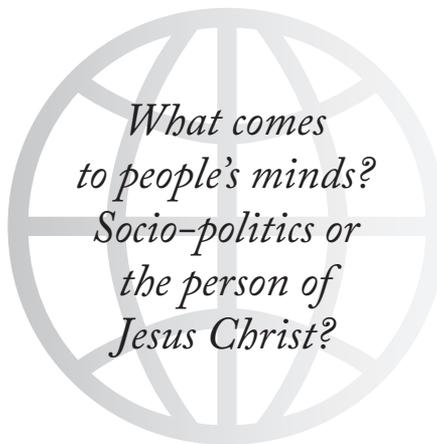
We all struggle to find the best way to be fully faithful to Jesus in the place in the world where God has sovereignly planted us. Certainly the dilemma experienced in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where mature believers ended up voting in opposite ways, should lead at least my American readers to be empathetic to people who were raised within unreached civilizations and are now wrestling with how to live faithfully for Jesus Christ *there*. Specifically, what criteria are we using when we deny these Jesus followers the same creative opportunity that we assume in our callings to engage our own civilizations with the gospel?

Jesus has warned us to exercise caution. The person who judges will be judged by the same standard by which they themselves judged others. This being true, some believers appear to be in danger of losing property and position in the kingdom to others whom some of us never dreamed could ever even appear there

through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Did he not adequately warn us ahead of time, some of the “first” shall be last, and the “last” first?

The encouraging news in all of this is that the 21st century resembles the first century much more than our own fathers’ times. If we recognize it, this provides us with a great missiological advantage. We can emulate the Apostles. Rather than coming to promote our own socio-political and civilizational loyalties, we can choose to stretch ourselves to become clear communicators who correctly teach the word of truth.

Rather than contributing to humanity’s clash of civilizations, we have an exciting opportunity to communicate



a clear gospel—the same uncluttered gospel that in the hands of the Apostles turned the world upside down and conveyed the glory of Jesus Christ across intimidating fault lines right into the aorta of the world’s civilizations.

In this new millenium who will that be? **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, “A Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, First Touchstone Editon (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

³ Samuel P. Huntington, ed., *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (New York: Foreign Affairs, 1996), 57.

⁴ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate*, 2–3.

⁵ Huntington, “A Clash of Civilizations?” (1993): 3; *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997), 26–27.

⁶ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (1996), 7–9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997), 258.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81–91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ Charles R. Taber. *The World is Too Much With Us: “Culture” in Modern Protestant Missions* (Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 2000).

¹² Fukuyama, Francis, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, vol. 16 (1989): 3–18.

¹³ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: Terrorism’s Challenge to Democracy* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1995).

¹⁴ A millennial reviewer responded saying, “These two sentences are so interesting. I feel that even though I agree . . . about civilizations, the sentiment that there is this one world culture is very strong, especially in my generation. I think that the temptation is to believe that really everyone is moving towards a liberal, progressive worldview, and that the world is divided by lines of ideology still, and the main ideologies are progressive and regressive. I see some truth to this view, but I think it’s way too

Key Reflection Questions

1. In precisely which ways is the civilization of Islam today more inherently objectionable to biblical truth than were Greek or Roman civilizations?
2. How often do you hear the words “convert” (whether n. or v.) and “conversion” in modern Christians’ stories about people coming to faith in Jesus? How likely or unlikely is it that this extrabiblical use of terminology betrays a clouding of the gospel by those who desire to communicate it?
3. What do you hear when you ask unbelieving friends, “According to what you’ve heard from Christians, what is the gospel that Jesus Christ taught?”

ethnocentric for progressives to believe that their worldview is the future or 'right' one . . . They are just colonizing with ideas. It doesn't always work (Arab spring) but it is a powerful feeling at least in my generation. Young bucks coming out to the field aren't going to feel the difference of civilizations as deeply as they might feel this oneness with all of the world."

¹⁵ "Special Report: Where is Iran Headed?" Stratfor.com Worldview, July 18, 2002, 8, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/special-report-where-iran-headed> (accessed October 11, 2017).

¹⁶ "About Us, History," Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://doc-research.org/en/about-us/history/>.

¹⁷ Mahatir Mohamad, "Stop Postulating the Clash of Civilizations," *Counterpunch* (blog), September 17, 2014, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2014/09/17/stop-postulating-the-clash-of-civilizations/>.

¹⁸ Naila Farooq, "Rohingya Genocide and Clash of Civilizations," *South Asia Journal*, September 11, 2017, <http://southasiajournal.net/rohingya-genocide-and-clash-of-civilizations/>; and Ananth Krishna, "Buddhism Versus Islam: Clash Of Civilisations In South And South-East Asia?" *Swarajya Magazine*, June 1, 2017, <https://swarajyamag.com/world/buddhism-versus-islam-clash-of-civilisations-in-south-and-south-east-asia>.

¹⁹ I'm concerned that some people very dear to me may wonder if I am using the wrong "starting point" by surveying our world's current situation, and only then moving to a biblical perspective. I assure you that I firmly advocate making my theological and philosophical starting point be the Scriptures. Yet, in accordance with the biblically-recorded Apostolic model, our communications starting-point should often be the space where our audience perceives themselves to be. Thus, here I first survey recent history, and then bring your attention to how the Scriptures instruct us for times such as ours.

²⁰ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor Books by Doubleday, 1995), 43–44.

²¹ Fatih Chimok, *Journeys of Paul: from Tarsus 'To the Ends of the Earth'* (Istanbul: A Turizm Yayinlari Ltd Sti), Second Printing, 2007), 97–98.

²² This may be one reason that when he was jailed and facing death threats from unbelieving Jews, there is no record of the Jerusalem believers lifting a finger to aid him.

This, in spite of the fact that we have James' word that there were many thousands of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 21:20), and the city may have only maintained a population of about 25,000–30,000 if Joachim Jeremias is correct in his estimates, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, trans. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1969), 66. They must have had significant influence, yet there's no evidence that they exercised it to save Paul. Paul had to look to his biological family to look out for him.

²³ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization* (New York: Anchor, 2010), Kindle edition, location 2152.

²⁴ Col. 1:28–29.

²⁵ Michelle A. Vu, "Is it Possible to be a Hindu Follower of Christ?" *The Christian Post*, October 6, 2007, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/is-it-possible-to-be-a-hindu-follower-of-christ-29601/>.

²⁶ "Hindu" and "Hinduism" can mean many things. Indeed in recent times cultural commentators have stated that the term "Hinduism" is about as specific in its meaning as "Europeanism."

²⁷ Donald K. Smith, *Make Haste Slowly: Developing Effective Cross-Cultural Communciation*, 9th Printing (Portland, Oregon: Institute for International Christian Communication, 2005), 90–91.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120–121.

³² Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (1996), 3.

³³ Whiteman shows us how we deeply deprive ourselves when we do this. Darrell L. Whiteman, "Contextualization: The Theory, The Gap, The Challenge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 21, Issue 1 (January 1997): 2–7.

³⁴ I believe I first discovered this distinction via a presentation by Mr. Shannon Bachelor.

³⁵ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997), 213.

³⁶ Islamic Holy Book scholars.

³⁷ Many wonder what in the world we would call our faith if not "Christianity"? "The faith of the gospel" as used in this article is biblical. Paul never felt the need to coin the term "Christianity." Rather, he referred to our belief system as "the faith of the gospel" (Phil 1:27) or merely, "the faith." Currently, this label would be harder to misinterpret. Yet, in the past two decades only once have I ever noticed any Western clergyman employing this biblical name for our faith.

³⁸ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Granville Sharp's Canon and Its Kin: Semantics and Significance*, ed., D. A. Carson, Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 14, (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), or an earlier, briefer presentation at <http://bit.ly/WallaceOnGSharp>. Paul and Peter, committed life-long monotheists, nevertheless gained the confidence late in their lives, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to directly refer to Jesus Christ as *Theos* (God). Wallace amasses overwhelming evidence that these two passages cannot be read as affirming anything else. I advocate making many stretching adaptations in order to clearly communicate across civilizations, but we must never become false teachers. We must never deny that Jesus Christ is *Theos*.

³⁹ Arabic for Jesus the Messiah.

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