

## EVANGELISM ON ARAB SOIL

*BY JACOB DU PLOOY*

### **1 Introduction**

I have been working in the Middle East for over ten years now (1996–2009) and I can truly say that if evangelism was were not part of my ministry, I would have packed my bags and left for my home country a long time ago. In this article I would like to mention a few things about evangelism from my experience, which might help others to put things in the right perspective.

Firstly, when talking about evangelism there are so many aspects on which one can focus, such as the content of our message, contextualization issues, etc. However, I remember a quote from George Housney on this topic: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” We can easily get caught up in all kinds of strategies and discussions and, by doing so, might lose the main focus of our ministry, i.e. actually going out there and reaching the Arab Muslims with the message of Jesus.

### **2 Evangelism as worship**

My motive for evangelism is worship. Some people get great inspiration when they worship the Lord with music and songs. I have never experienced it when I am in a worship service but, during and after an evangelistic conversation, I get this awesome feeling of closeness to God. I go away with a feeling of *yes*, I have experienced God. In general the goal of worship is to experience God and that is exactly what happens with me during evangelism. Evangelism is seldom a burden for me or something extra I need to do in the Christian life. It is as normal as the blood in our veins.

This is a call to make us rethink the priority of evangelism in our lives as Christians and missionaries. Instead of putting evangelism at the bottom of the list of Christian things we should do, I want to suggest that evangelism be viewed as something that will bring us into a closer walk with the Lord and experience His presence in the midst of evangelism.

### **3 Evangelism in a foreign language**

When a person first arrives in a foreign country, the main obstacle is usually the language barrier. Most people spend their first two years learning the language, and only after acquiring some level of proficiency can they attempt to bring the gospel to this particular language group. My experience has been different. After arriving in the Middle East I was overwhelmed with the responsibility of bringing the gospel to the Arabs. But what should I do if don't have the language? Wait for two years?

So I decided to write the gospel message as I understand it, in English. Then I sat down with an Arab Christian who translated my gospel presentation in Arabic. I was not able to write Arabic at that time so I just used the Latin alphabet to transcribe the Arabic so that I knew how to pronounce the words correctly in Arabic.

Then I took that piece of paper and I went back to my flat and I memorized the whole thing even though I did not understand most of the Arabic words myself. It took me a week and my flat mates thought that I was crazy as I walked up and down in the room reciting the Arabic on my paper.

Armed with this I went to a social gathering place where men would meet for coffee and tea. As soon as somebody asked me if I was a Muslim I would respond by saying: *Let me tell you this story*, and then I would give my gospel interpretation in Arabic. Of course the objections came but I learned the phrase: "Wait a minute, you will understand later." This worked brilliantly and I proclaimed the gospel to numerous people before I had a grasp on the

Arabic grammar. Looking back ten years I kind of envy the time I was not able to understand their objections. I just gave the gospel message as it is.

God can use us even if our language has not yet reached fluency, and yes, God can use our broken Arabic. Search for creative ways by which you can proclaim the gospel. From day one when you arrive in the field, focus on religious vocabulary that will help you bring over the message.

#### **4 Evangelism and methods**

There are often debates about questions like *How should we do evangelism?* I remembered a lecture from John Gilchrist in which he said: “Street evangelism, Bible, Jesus film and literature distribution, friendship evangelism, one-on-one evangelism, door-to-door evangelism, I don’t care how you do it, BUT DO IT!” God in His infinite wisdom can use all kinds of methods to bring somebody to Christ.

Decide on a method which suites you the best and start doing it. My suggestion is to try all methods and put them into practice. Make it an adventure by trying a different method each month.

#### **5 Evangelism requires boldness**

One day I was on a train in a Middle Eastern country. In front of me was an Islamist with a long beard busy reciting the Qur’an which was in his hands. I immediately took out of my pocket the gospel of John. I asked him, “Excuse me sir, would you mind reading out of this book from this passage?” It was John 3 on the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus. He put away the Quran in his pocket and started to read the gospel of John. I was then able to share my testimony with the man.

Some missionaries would have thought of a thousand reasons not to have done something like that. During my time in the Middle East I have found two kinds of missionaries. The first are those who rarely share the gospel, rarely give out Bibles or other literature. Many of these kinds of missionaries maintain such a high level security and are so protective about the platforms they use to get into the country, that in the end it does nothing but cripple their witness.

The second kind of missionary are those who dare to be bold and take some risks. Admittedly these missionaries often get kicked out after, say, five years. But in those five years they were bold witnesses for the Lord; they shared the message often and gave out Bibles on a regular basis. They are fearless about evangelism because they know that this is the reason the Lord called them to that country.

When evangelism is the focus for a missionary, the culture shock that one goes through is also minimized. Many times people start to internalize their problems during culture shock and they completely forget why they are in that particular foreign country in the first place.

Let us look for opportunities to share the gospel at all times. This is also a call to put aside our fears of witnessing (for which ever reason) and focus on the task the Lord has given us. We are messengers of love, which drives away all fear. Is this message not more important than our lives and our safety? Jesus calls his followers to lay down their lives and be ready to die. In evangelism, are we ready to lay down our lives, our safety, and our platforms for Jesus?

## **6 Evangelism leads to stories of changed lives.**

Because of evangelism I have many stories to tell, but I would like to tell one particular story of Abraham. One night I decided to go and evangelize. That specific evening I was not in the mood to go

out but I went anyway. (It makes me think of a sermon I listened to by Greg Boyd. In the sermon he said that sometimes you are not in the mood to read the bible but then you just do it because you know it is the right thing to do. If you are going to wait until you feel in the mood to do evangelism you are most properly not going to get there. *Just do it.*)

Abraham and his friend Jamal spent the evening at a place where young Arab men liked to sit and drink tea. I asked them if I could join them and they had no problem. We had a very good religious discussion for four hours after which Abraham asked me if I had a Bible for him. I immediately said yes and we took a taxi to our house where I handed a Bible to him and his friend.

I said good-bye to him and his friend and did not take any contact details. The next morning I had to go to the post office to pay a bill. There in the middle of the street I bumped into Abraham. Immediately he took out of his pocket the Bible and showed me that he had read half of the gospel of Matthew already. He told me, "There is only one problem, I read and read but nowhere do they explain how you become a Christian". I made an appointment to meet him that evening. When we met he had a lot of questions about Christianity. At one point in the conversation he told me that he and his friend had some severe stomach problems for the past two years (a common ailment in this part of the world). I offered to pray for healing. They agreed and then I prayed for them. We said bye to each other and they asked me to have lunch with them the next day. When I met them the following day both of them were healed from their stomach problems. We met again that evening and he told me that that he must return to Mecca the next day where he was employed. I realized that I had not told him how to become a follower of Jesus yet. When I told him what to pray he looked at me with an amazed look on his face and he said, "I have prayed that prayer already! Last night!"

So he departed for Mecca. One month after our meeting I got a phone call from him. He told me: "It is Abraham here from Mecca. I just want to tell you that I am still happy and there are six other people who are happy with me." I was overjoyed when I hung up the phone.

## **7 Evangelism and the Holy Spirit**

One day I took a taxi to my house. Some days I have very good gospel conversations with taxi drivers. However, this day there was only silence in the taxi. When we stopped at our house I was prompted by the Holy Spirit to give this man a Bible. I was a bit hesitant because I made a rule for myself to never give a bible to someone unless I had a spiritual conversation with him. But this time I was sure that the Holy Spirit was telling me to do it. So I overcame my fear and told him to wait a minute. I gave him the Bible and told him this is a gift from me without telling him what the book was. Ten minutes later I heard a knock on our door. I must confess I was afraid that maybe the secret police had come. I opened the door and there was the taxi driver. He thanked me for the Bible and told me that he had been listening to the Christian radio for six years, and was praying for a Bible during that whole time.

We should always be sensitive to the voice of the Lord. Be open that the Lord might ask you to share his message in new or different ways.

## **8 Evangelism and prayer**

This is a fact of life we can't get past: evangelism without prayer is useless. This year (2009) there was one guy I had been meeting with for about three months, once a week. Let's call him Mohammed. I shared all that I was able to share about the gospel. I felt

that our conversations were beginning to reach an end. Then I decided not to meet him for two weeks and just to pray. My wife and I then prayed daily for his conversion. After the two weeks I met up with him again. The moment I saw him I noticed something different about him. There was this joy all over his face. He told me then he became a Christian that week.

If your evangelism seems to not be going anywhere, try to focus on praying for the people that you work and talk with. If you have the opportunity to join a 24/7 prayer watch, go for it - it is ideal for the message we want to proclaim.

## **9 Evangelism and our responsibility**

Many missionaries in the Middle East say that they don't have the gift of evangelism. Yes, it is true that some have that gift of evangelism, but that does not justify the rest of us in the field doing nothing about it. While some ministers of the church have a special gift for evangelism, *every* disciple of Christ has the responsibility to actively share the gospel with those around him. By active evangelism I mean using words to proclaim the gospel. Some people try to get away with saying, "I proclaim the gospel with my life and the way I live." While it is true that our daily life should reflect the message of Jesus, the fact remains that many atheists, Buddhists or social activists can compete with us by the good lives they live. Certainly our lives as believers in Jesus are not perfect, and we do make mistakes and say things that we should not have said or done. It is at this point that we can proclaim the message, "Jesus has died for a sinner like me, I am a broken vessel in God's service." We only live by the grace of God; let us proclaim this with our mouths.

Romans 10:14 is quite relevant in the context of evangelism: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not

*heard?* And how can they hear without someone *preaching* to them?"

Humble servant of Christ  
Jakob Du Plooy, October 2009.