SECURITY AND SAFETY ISSUES IN MISSION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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1 Introduction

In a recent seminary convocation, the ministerial students were challenged to live dangerously and to be dangerous people for the sake of the Gospel. The challenge to future pastors, and missionaries was to step outside of one's zone of comfort and safety, and to count the cost of discipleship in following Christ even if that led us to dangerous places and situations. For disciplers of believers with a Muslim background (BMBs) this is not a theoretical issue, but one that involves many facets, affecting both discipler and discipled.

2 Definition of terms

In order to more precisely examine the issues involved perhaps a definition of terms is in order.

Safety: Refers to freedom and/or protection from physical, social, emotional and psychological harm. This is in contrast to the more specific terms of "safe people" and "safe places" which primarily refer to people or environments that provide emotional safety or comfort. In the context of reaching Muslims, "safe places" may refer to events and settings that Muslims would willingly attend, with low cultural barriers to their attendance, where they could come into contact with the gospel and followers of Christ. For a Muslim, going to a desert cookout with non-Muslims would be a "safe place", but generally a Western-style church service or Bible Study would not be a "safe place."

Security: Generally refers to a hidden true identity that is kept secret, and which offers safety and protection for the individual. When this true identity has been revealed, the physical presence (that is, their visa) and personal safety of the missional worker or BMB is put at risk. For the intentional missional worker in a restricted-access nation, this would generally involve a breach in which a hidden agency/organizational identity was revealed. Likewise, for a BMB, a breach would be one who has openly been identified as a Christ-follower either intentionally or unintentionally, that places the BMB in danger. In both cases, there is an assumption that secrecy of identity provides a certain level of security from those who may not be sympathetic to the Gospel. By using the term "security" we are not referring to theological issues relating to perseverance of the saints.

Risk: Refers to actions taken that have probability of leading to beneficial or adverse outcomes. In this definition, although we do not further define assessment and management of risk, based on probability of outcomes one can determine that some actions are worth engaging in risk, whereas others are not. Bad examples of risk often are based on faulty ministry models, and lack of cross-cultural understanding, and may include:

- Saying culturally crass and insensitive things
- Soap-box open air evangelism in closed countries, and/or public distribution of proselytizing materials without prior relational presence and follow-up intentions
- Openly and publicly attacking the Quran, the Prophet, or the local rulers or culture
- Simply acting rudely and disrespectfully of local customs

Whether one has goals and outcomes that are focused on making disciples or planting churches, there is a real difference between taking calculated risks versus being careless in our approach and methods.

3 Cultural Factors in addressing Security and Risk

Potentially, cultural and regional differences in how we understand safety, security, and risk may complicate our analysis of specific situations in BMB discipleship. Some of these differences reflect our socioeconomic understanding and expectations of what is a minimal level of physical and emotional need for us to function. For example, missional workers from different countries may have varying expectations of what basic minimal living standards are, such as children's educational options and issues revolving around families (such as separation from spouse, caring for parents, and balancing grandparents' expectations). In some cultures, insurance coverage and retirement funds are an expected part of managing risk and preparing for the future; other cultures do not place as high a value on future planning but tend to live more in the present.

Some are more risk averse than others, and these may not always be culture specific, but reflect individuals' tolerance for risk. In some emerging mission movements, martyrdom is seen as an oft used strategy by God to advance His work, and their workers have an expectation that a high percentage of them may face this. Although not necessarily packing their earthly goods in coffins as did workers of an older generation, workers from these emerging movements may still go to the field with "one-way" tickets—there is no alternate "Plan B." In contrast, other agencies may have detailed policies on evacuation of workers and/or specialized training in handling hostage situations to prepare them for worst case scenarios. There probably is a spectrum of attitudes in regards to risk taking; on one end those who do not shy away from but perhaps even actively seek danger, and on the other end those for whom danger is acceptable as a potential natural consequence of being faithful and obedient to the Name of Jesus Christ. Workers from certain countries may have a larger capacity to tolerate lack of comfort and security, and this can be instructive to other believers where there is a higher expected baseline level of entitlement to

certain comforts in life. As many of the issues and values that relate to risk assessment are not universal, biblical Christians can have differing expectations, and therefore different conclusions on benefit to risk ratio and what one readily gives up in following Christ and carrying one's cross. Maturity and grace are needed, and legalism and judgmental attitudes need to be avoided in multicultural and multinational teams, churches and organizations; individual conscience needs to be the guide where there may be variance in understanding and application of biblical principles, differing assumptions and values in accepting and embracing of risks, and diverging strategies and approaches in dealing with specific scenarios and situations.

4 Biblical precedents and Safety Issues

In addition to pragmatic reasons based on insider movements and strategies of contextualized Church planting, one could interpret and apply certain passages of Scripture to encourage or at least permit followers of Jesus to temporarily hide their true identity. Some examples:

- Nicodemus coming secretly at night to meet with Jesus in the Gospel of John (chapter 3)
- Esther who was told by her cousin Mordecai to keep her Jewish identity secret until an appropriate God-ordained time (Esther 4)
- Naaman in 2 Kings 5 who asked to be forgiven in advance by the prophet for continuing to go to the pagan temple with his king Ben-Hadad. Naaman is further cited as a positive example of genuine faith by Jesus in Luke 4.

Based on these examples, can we draw the conclusion that BMBs can hide their identity as secret believers, taking this as a providential way in which God sometimes chooses to protect one of His own?

Many disciplers of BMBs would accept secrecy as a transitional phase or "season" in the BMB's journey. Rarely would one affirm that this is a normative or acceptable end state in BMB discipleship. Missional workers themselves sometimes have to deal with the issue of dual identity (one public, one secret) when mission agency affiliation or the true purpose of their presence cannot be openly discussed or revealed.

4.1 Counting the cost

Most BMBs realize the cost of open identification as a follower of Jesus Christ. The loss of community, job and livelihood, family or possibility of marriage is real. The prospect of being without a replacement community of faith to join can also make it unlikely that the new openly-identified BMB is able to be part of an Insider Movement. There is a difference between BMBs who chooses to remain secretive about their identity out of fear, and those who do so in hopes of reaching others like themselves.

4.2 Strategic reasons for hiding one's identity.

In addition to the above example of secret believers, there are other passages in Scripture that seem to indicate there are times to be bold, and other times to be quiet. The Apostle Paul's bold and itinerant activity among the Greeks, many of whom were ready soil, was different from God's instruction to Israelites exiled in Babylon where they were instructed to settle down (although not with hidden identity), seek the welfare of their pagan captors and peace of their city. Apparently seeking safety, Paul left Damascus in a basket let down over the city wall; however, he immediately set forth to Jerusalem, not exactly a safe haven for the Apostle. Jesus often gave indirect answers when the religious leaders sought to trap him with their questions, because His time to suffer had not come.

5 Biblical teaching that suffering for Christ is normative

Several texts in the New Testament clearly instruct Christians to expect suffering as a result of their faith. The following passage in Hebrews 10 talks about how Christians in the early Church endured suffering and loss, but stood firm and persevered to the end in faith.

> But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. (Heb 10:32-39, ESV)

In Mark 8:38, after Peter's confession of Christ, Jesus states:

> Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

From these verses, it is abundantly clear that secrecy for fear of suffering and shame of being associated with Christ is not consistent with saving genuine faith. In the discipleship of BMBs this cost is high and the probability of suffering is real when their identities are revealed. Disciplers of BMBs must also remember that there is always a disproportionate level of suffering versus risk, usually with the most severe consequences suffered by the BMB and other nationals, rather than the expatriate worker/discipler.

6 Secrecy and approaches to discipleship

Some suggested strategies in BMB discipleship in light of security and safety issues include:

- Teach all of Scripture, including clear teaching on the need to be open about one's identity. It is worthy to suffer for the sake of God and His Kingdom. Eternal Life is worth the potential cost, and one should "not just fear the one who can destroy the body". (Matt 10:28).
- The discipler must also model willingness to suffer for following Jesus Christ. Even though the consequences may not be as severe for a foreign worker compared to a BMB, the example set in the discipler's life is important as these truths cannot only be taught as propositional truths.
- Clearly teach biblical wisdom that encompasses all of Scripture including wisdom from Proverbs on relating to others; and biblical commands regarding godliness, fruit of the Spirit, loving one's enemies, standards for husbands, wives, parents, children, employers, employees etc, so that BMBs are encouraged to live winsome and quiet lives, and that any suffering is for the sake of righteousness and the Gospel, and not for bad behavior (1 Peter 2).
- Allow the Holy Spirit to convict BMBs of the timing of when to reveal their identity as followers of Jesus, and assure them that He will give them the appropriate words in the face of trial. Many BMBs in the course of discipleship, become personally convinced and convicted by their study of Scripture to make public their faith and allegiance. Often this is a journey, and there may be years between when BMBs decide to follow Jesus and when they are able to make it unequivocally clear to their families and the larger community. The BMB has to come to this decision under his/her own free will, as forcing this issue can lead to feelings of manipulation. This is especially true when the discipler of the BMB is an expat from a Christian

background. In most settings where there is a breach of security, the degree of suffering for the expat Christian and the local BMB is apt to be disproportionate; the expat Christian often loses the residency visa, but the local BMB would face loss of job, family, and/or life, or perhaps must be extracted.

7 Conclusion

We have sought to look at issues surrounding safety and security that are common in missionary work in an Islamic context. We believe that Scripture on the whole teaches that mature discipleship requires counting the cost and taking up the cross to follow Jesus, regardless of consequences. Suffering is normative and an expected part of being a disciple of Christ. In addressing whether there are times a new believer should remain secret and silent about his/her identity, motivation is a key issue. Some questions in closing that may be useful in assessing specific situations include

- Is the person motivated by "strategic silence" vs. fear?
- Is the BMB tempted or put in a position where he or she is asked to deny Christ?
- Is the fear of physical threat (pain, plundering, death) the result of lack of faith and trust in God's promises and His ability to deliver?
- Are we encouraging the development of faith that may begin the size of a mustard seed, but grows to provide the basis of victory over fear?

Each BMB's situation will likely be unique and one needs to approach these situations with much prayer and wisdom, and seek counsel among the community of believers and workers where possible. Finally, in light of a potentially diverse spectrum of views and scriptural contexts, there will be the need to extend grace to one another (workers and believers), while encouraging one another to live by faith and obedience to God's word.