

Preaching the Gospel among Muslims

By Vivienne Stacey

Introduction

In seeking to preach the Gospel among Muslims we could pay more attention to:

1. Christ's methods of communicating with the Jews and
2. His methods of training his disciples who in turn communicated with the Jews.

In some ways the situation in Palestine in Christ's day was not so different from that in many parts of the Muslim world today. The Jewish objections to Jesus as God Incarnate, their hatred of idolatry and their desire for an earthly kingdom are paralleled in Islam at the present time. Or instead of thinking of the Jewish and Muslim communities we can take the example of an individual Jew like Peter before Christ changed him and made him Cephas – a rock (John 1:35-42). Peter was rather like my Muslim neighbor in:

1. his reaction to the suffering of the Messiah and particularly in his reaction to the way of the cross. (Matthew 16: 21-23). To Peter as to many Muslims it seemed a disgrace, failure and dishonor that Isa, Ibne-e-Mariam Al Masih, should suffer and die. Surely God would not allow his prophet, his servant, his Messiah to die in such defeat and weakness. At this point Peter was unable to see that the Messiah's suffering would be vindicated by God's raising him from death and the grave. The very suffering and death was part of His [????] crown of glory and honour (Hebrews 2:9). Eventually Peter understood and preached the resurrection of the Messiah. Peter was rather like a Muslim also in
2. his reliance on the use of force and worldly power (John 18:10-11).
3. his overestimate of his own powers based presumably on a faulty view of the nature of man (Matthew 36:33).
4. his inadequate conception of his sin which was related to his lack of understanding of the holiness of God (Luke 5:1-11). He came to realize his own sinfulness. If Peter who had these Muslim ideas could be changed then surely some of our Muslim friends can also be changed by the power of God.
- 5.

The task of the early Church in Jerusalem was not more formidable than that which faces small groups of Christians in many Muslim areas at this present moment. Twentieth century Christians may draw wisdom and comfort from the Hebrews and the Bellensits [??] who faced up to their differences and divisions (Acts 6:1). We may still expect the Holy Spirit to give to some like Ananias visions so that they may be willing to accept converts as brothers. To other Christians the Holy Spirit can give the gift of encouragement as he did to Barnabus. By such ministries a fearful church may overcome its suspicion of new converts even if a Saul of Tarsus comes to them (Acts 9:10-31).

Let us now look at Christ's methods. Surely we must submit and train others to submit to Christ's training (Ephesians 4:20), recognizing that the Holy Spirit continues to teach us all (John 14:26). In a technological age when man can so easily allow the computer to dominate him and when the importance of the successful method tends to obscure the importance of people we must emphasize that there is no one infallible method for communicating and training. Christ used many methods for communicating, teaching and training. Perhaps we should sue some of this methods more today in our evangelism among Muslims. Let us examine them:

1. Questioning and answering (Luke 2:46-47)

Christ sat among the teachers, listened to them and asked them questions. The teachers were amazed at his understanding and answers. We often neglect this informal way of learning and teaching. Sometimes we are afraid of being asked questions to which we do not know the answers. Informal exchange is often

a most effective way of sharing our faith and learning more about the Muslim's way of thinking. Christ often used this method in personal conversations, for example, with the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4. It is no disgrace not to know all the answers. It is in personal exchanges of this sort when we have disclosed our own vulnerability that we can often give our own testimony to what Christ has done in our personal lives.

2. Using symbolic actions

When Christ put a child in the midst of a group of adults and proceeded to explain that one could enter the kingdom of heaven only if one had a childlike faith He was using a symbolic action. (Matthew 18:5). He was demonstrating an answer to the disciples' question as to who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. What Christ did in putting the child in the midst provoked curiosity and interest and was something that all participants were likely to remember.

How many of us use symbolic actions today? Once an evangelist told me how he used to take visual aids carefully wrapped up and strapped on the back of his motor bicycle. He would then drink tea in a local teashop near where he intended to preach the gospel. Before long a few Muslim villagers came along and asked what he had on the back of his motor bicycle. He told them that it was part of the equipment for explaining a very important message. Then they requested him to tell them the message. He said it would not really interest them and that it was about Isa Ibne-Mariam the Messiah and that anyway he was just going off to tell the message in a neighboring area. The men pressed him to come to their village and tell the message to them and their friends. He said he could not possibly do this as some of the villagers might be disrespectful and not listen properly to the message. In the end the men guaranteed the behavior and attention of the whole village and the evangelist took his motor cycle and went with them to preach. Instead of responding eagerly to a little interest he had deepened the interest by his approach. Instead of giving the message immediately he had underlined its importance by the conditions that he expected for its hearing. In a sense he had acted symbolically.

3. Interpreting religious festivals

Christ took well-known Jewish religious festivals and reinterpreted them. He used festivals as channels of communication, e.g. John 7:2, 37-39 the feast of Tabernacles and Matthew 26:26-29 the Passover. He also showed how he fulfilled these festivals. Today there is a fruitful area for communication of the gospel in taking festivals, sharing in them and in discussing their meanings. We can involve some of our Muslim friends in our celebrations of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost in a way that is mutually acceptable and that deepens their understanding of the events commemorated.

In Pakistan Muslim ladies sometimes gather in the home of one of them to read the Qur'an through together, sitting on cushions on the floor with the Qur'ans raised on stands in front of them. One Easter a Christian doctor in the province of Sind invited twenty-five of her former patients to a recitation of parts of the Holy Gospel. Twenty-four women came in their best clothes to this celebration. Muslim and Christians sat on cushions on the floor, the Holy Bibles were set on stands in front of the women and passages about the death and resurrection of Jesus were solemnly read aloud from the Holy Bible. Afterwards tea and refreshments were served. The twenty-fifth lady arrived later with great apologies that she could not come before. She besought the doctor to have another such occasion to which she and her friends could come. The doctor arranged a similar recitation a couple of days later and invited forty ladies, all of whom came.

Besides using Christian festivals as channels of communication one can use the occasion of Muslim festivals as a way of sharing good news. Dr. Dudley Woodberry has written on how one can discuss Id al-adha (Id ul-kabir, the feast of sacrifice) with one's Muslim friends drawing parallels with the Passover, the Last Supper and the communion service. The feast is prescribed in the Qur'an – Surah 22:34-37. The willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son is commemorated with an emphasis on thanksgiving – Surah 37:101-109. Dr. Woodberry suggests discussing the following questions as appropriate. In each feast

- 1) What is commemorated?
- 2) What is the significance of each sacrifice?

- 3) How is the sacrifice prepared and made?
- 4) What is sacrificed?
- 5) Who is saved?
- 6) Who provided the sacrifice?
- 7) How do we commemorate in each case?

Christians living in Muslim lands could also initiate new festivals making them culturally relevant –the dedication of a new home or building, the celebration of a child’s birthday, a thanksgiving for deliverance from severe illness. In all such occasions Muslim neighbours understanding of the truth about Jesus.

4. Taking Events as Teaching Points

When the disciples were quarrelling about who was to be regarded as the greatest among them Jesus took up the matter and gave teaching on humility and service. Current issues can be fruitful opportunities for spiritual teaching. A Christian couple I know in Cairo who are very friendly with a nearby Muslim family were able to have useful talks on the sanctity and meaning of life when these Muslim neighbours came to discuss the question of the wife having an abortion as a way of limiting the size of the family. Jesus took current issues like disablement (John 9) and bereavement (John 11) and used them as teaching points besides showing his glory through the actual miracles.

5. Deepening the meaning of religious terms

One example is the term “the Son of Man” (Matthew 9:6, 12:40). Jesus took an Old Testament term and applied it to himself. By his use of the term he both concealed and revealed truth about himself. In religious conversations with Muslims we are constantly using the same words but meanings of these words are different for the Muslim and the Christian. Often neither the Muslim nor the Christian realizes this and they think they have communicated with one another. It is vital therefore that we try and deepen the Muslim’s understanding of concepts like God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness. Let us take, for example, the term and concept of sin. Helping Muslims to see their sinful state and need is a very difficult matter. I am convinced that in our presentation of the gospel not enough teaching has been given on:

1) Sin and the Nature of God

According to Surah 59:23 God is holy (al quiddus). Only he is so described in the Qur’an. Holy in this context means other. God is completely different from and other than man – he is quiddus (holy). Sin is not sin because it is an offence against God’s holiness but because it is against his pronouncement. Only those acts are sins which Allah decrees should be so regarded. So if Allah decrees that his prophet (Mohammad) should marry his adopted son’s wife then such an act is not sin. (Surah 33:37). Sin does not affect God. He has no abhorrence of evil. Sin is the breaking of God’s laws harming and hurting only the law-breaker himself (Surah 17:13-15).

2) Sin and the Nature of Man

Muslims have a high view of man as the representative of God on earth. The Qur’an teaches that if man receives and follows the right teaching and rules he can overcome his weaknesses. He is created weak (Surah 3:28) prone to sin but not sinful, liable to make mistakes but not deliberately disobedient. There is no moral fall – a lost paradise but not estrangement from a holy God (Surah 2:31-39; 7:22-23). Almost immediately God accepted man’s repentance (Surah 2:37), no atonement was needed. Each soul is responsible for his own actions and no soul can bear the burden of another (Surah 6:165). It is extremely difficult, therefore, for a Muslim to accept that Adam’s sin should affect anyone else. In addition to this the teaching that Adam was both a prophet (nabi) and an apostle (rasul) minimizes his sin in their eyes. A straightforward Biblical explanation of original sin is not likely to have much of a hearing or due consideration. In communicating with Muslims we may have to find other ways to communicate the seriousness of sin. We could possibly help a Muslim to see his sinful state if we explored more with him concepts like jihad (holy war), shirk (associating with God a partner or partners) and nijah (intention).

a) *Jihad*

The “jihad” means to strive hard. It involves striving hard in the way of Allah with one’s physical strength, knowledge, wealth and life. “Jihad” has several meanings – it can be used for religious war against an actual enemy, for struggle against the devil and for striving to purify the soul. Sufis (mystics) particularly stress the struggle against one’s carnal nature. Surely a consideration of “jihad” might lead us on to a discussion and study of Romans chapter 7.

b) *Shirk*

The word “shirk” means “association” and is used of that greatest of all sins in Islam – associating with God a partner or partners. Pious Muslims have extended its meaning to include any association which does not give God first place in one’s life. To love money more than God, to think about success more than God is also “shirk”. So “shirk” is not only that which is applied to worshippers of more than one God, to idolaters and sometimes to Christians but it has been spiritualized to include anything which denies God his rightful place in one’s life. Instead of the long and often fruitless discussions as to whether Christians are guilty of “Shirk” we might have a more fruitful interchange if we could debate the more spiritualized meaning with our Muslim friends.

c) *Niyah*

The Muslim often declares his intention before doing something. Niyah is an indispensable condition for the validity of prayer or any other ritual act. “I intend to offer with a sincere heart, this morning and with my face towards Mecca two ‘rak’at...” the Muslim declares or vows. Niyah may be regarded as part of the ritual and it does not have to have any subjective meaning – it is a vow. However, for some it has a subjective meaning and the attitude of the heart is important. Surely in this there is some bridge from external ritual to internal attitude and condition. Even with regard to the Biblical account of the death of Christ Muslim would generally agree that it was the Jews’ intention that he should die and that he himself was willing to die.

3) **Words used for sin in the Bible and the Qur’an**

If we are to go thoroughly into the concept and meaning of sin we must pay more attention to the words used for sin in the original languages of the Bible and the Qur’an. In the Qur’an “khati’ah” is used 5 times and comes nearest to the Biblical idea of missing the mark or standard set by God. “Ithm” is used 29 times and “dhanb” 38 times in reference mainly to ceremonial offences. The use and frequency of these Qur’anic words for sin underline for us the necessity for our seeking for further ways to deepen the understanding of sin for the Muslim.

6. **Demonstrating the fulfillment of prophecy**

Jesus often explained how he fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. On the road to Emaus after his resurrection he explained recent events in Jerusalem to two of his disciples. “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27) Surah 19 verse 10 states that Jesus called himself Abdullah, the servant or slave of Allah. Certainly the four servant songs of the prophet Isaiah are rich in prophecy of his ministry as the suffering servant of God whom God so wonderfully vindicated by raising him from the dead. See especially Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Other prophecies speak of his rule Genesis 49:10. In Isaiah 9:6,7 we read: “...the government will be upon his shoulder and his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God... Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore.” In several Muslim countries today there are concerted efforts to establish nizam-E-Mustafa, the organization of society modeled on Muhammad’s Arabia. Pakistan under President Ziaul Haq is pressing on with Islamization with this in view. The question of nizam-e-Mustafa raises the question of other nizam – other ways in which national life can be organized under divine sanctions. Nizam-e-Musa, Moses’ design for

God's people or nizam-e-Masih, Christ's rule and organization for God's kingdom become relevant issues for some. What was Moses' system and what was Christ's? Isaiah prophesied of Christ's system and rule and of a state that would last forever. There is much here for the Muslim and Christian to discuss together.

7. Teaching through parables and stories.

By his use of parables and stories Christ taught spiritual truths which could be accepted by those who had ears to hear and rejected by others without loss of face. (Luke 15). Martin Goldsmith out of his own experiences among Muslims in Indonesia and southern Thailand has written helpfully on the subject in an article entitled "Parabolic Preaching in the Context of Islam" published in October 1980 in the *Evangelical Review of Theology*.

8. Quoting proverbs to bring home spiritual truths.

Jesus was probably quoting a local proverb in Matthew 11:17. We could make far more use of proverbs both from the Bible and from the local cultural situation and language in our communication of the gospel. One example from Egypt is the Arabic proverb: "He left off sinning, but never asked forgiveness".

9. Engaging in direct confrontation.

Matthew 22:41-46 provides an example of Jesus engaging in a direct approach as to who he is. It is significant that he asks the questions: "What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?" towards the end of his ministry after there had been many opportunities to listen to his teaching, to see his perfect life and to reflect on the significance of parables and stories, symbolic acts etc. The mood in our time is away from such directness but we are called to be bold and challenging. That we may not be accepted is not proof that we used the wrong method.

10. Employing common key words.

Jesus often used common words like "water" in John 4:1-42 and "houses" in John 14:1-7. Like him we should be very familiar with the basic interests of those with whom we see to share the gospel.

11. Preaching sermons.

Jesus sometimes preached a sermon or series of sermons. The Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7 was probably a series of talks or sermons about the ideal community, how to join it and its requirements. In communicating the gospel there is a very definite place for preaching whether it be directly to a group of interested Muslims or to a group of Christians with a number of Muslim bystanders. In one village in Pakistan I used to preach in Punjabi to a group of about thirty Christians sitting in the courtyard of a small village mud house. Outside the wall over two hundred Muslims would gather to listen in the darkness. In my preparation I remembered this large unseen congregation. One passage I often use as the basis for such a sermon in Numbers 21:4-9. It is the account of the sin of the children of Israel and the brazen serpent in the wilderness. The passage is found in the Taurah or Law or Pentateuch which the Muslim accepts more easily than the Gospel or Injil. It speaks of the prophet Moses whom they highly esteem. The passage clearly shows sin as rebellion against God and as a lack of being thankful (murmuring). Such sin affected relationships with God as well as with man. The sin corrupted the heart, mind, will and body and was beyond human remedy. God in his greatness and mercy provided a particular remedy – a turning in faith towards the brazen serpent Moses put on the pole. This remedy, effective for one people at one time, was a "sign" of that greater provision for all races and all times which God in his mercy provided through permitting the crucifying of Jesus on a cross. God in his greatness vindicated this remedy for human sin by raising Jesus from the grave on the third day. Jesus himself had prophesied about his death and resurrection:

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life".

12. Performing miracles and signs.

Jesus performed many signs and wonders. Through these he manifested his glory and some believed. (John 2:11, and 20:31-32). At the end of the gospel of Mark we read that “these signs shall accompany those who believe” (Mark 16:17). The evidence for this does not only come from this passage. In another lecture I propose to deal in detail with this subject and its importance in communicating the gospel to Muslims.

13. Keeping silent deliberately.

In John 19:9 we read how Pilate asked Jesus where he was from. Jesus gave him no answer. He kept silent deliberately. His silence spoke more eloquently than anything he might have said. It also added significance to his subsequent answers to subsequent questions. As Christian communicators most of us have not explored and reflected upon the value of deliberate silence in communication.

14. Dramatizing

When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet he was enacting the concept of humility. His actions ensured that his words would not be forgotten. In the Middle Ages “miracle plays” were often used to teach illiterate people Biblical history and truth. Many Eastern people have a greater love and talent for drama than we sometimes realize. Play, stories and poems are still the most popular literary forms in many parts of Africa and Asia. Even in countries where there are many restrictions on the communication of ideas drama can often be freely and effectively used. Last Christmas a Christmas pageant in a Muslim land dominated by communism drew over a thousand Muslim spectators over a period of three evenings. The wise men literally came riding on camels, the lighting and stage management was of high standard in this open air performance which did not fail to make clear the meaning of the incarnation. In Tunisia a local believer is experimenting with Easter dramas produced in homes to which others are invited. The message of the death and resurrection is put in a setting which is relevant to present day city life in one of Tunisia’s main cities.

15. Instituting sacraments

While we cannot imitate Jesus in instituting sacraments we can so obey him in celebrating them that they become a way of communicating the good news to those who as yet have not fully understood it. Baptism demands a separate treatment as it is such a large and controversial matter but let us think about the Lord’s Supper. Outsiders are bound at some stage to enquire as to its meaning if we regularly celebrate it. Curiosity can lead to enquiry and to explanation. Some observers of the early Church concluded that the believers belonged to a secret society or that they were cannibals or that they were atheists for no god was visible. Surely today the celebration of this sacrament could raise questions which could be for the convincing or at least informing of sensible observers. We are to proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (1Corinthians 11:26). The church proclaims not only through the spoken word but also through the sacraments.

16. Sharing in social events

Jesus’ first miracle took place at a wedding in Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-11). He certainly communicated through his presence quite apart from the miracle. Some Christians regard many social occasions as a waste of time. However, it might be at a tennis club or a ladies gathering that seeking Muslims have their only contact with Christians whom they later seek out. Bilquis Sheikh first met the woman to whom she went for information about John the Baptist at a garden party. Not only is it a matter of presence only but at such functions there are often excellent opportunities to exchange ideas. At family weddings the extended family and friends get together. The celebrations generally last a couple of days during which time the different age and interest groups get together and these can be natural channels for exchange of information, views and experiences.

Such was the variety of Jesus Christ’s methods for communicating and teaching. Now let us consider whom Jesus selected to teach and to train. It is clear from the New Testament that he trained teams to

reach and teach others. Most of his training for leadership, ministry and witness was training of groups or teams. These groups and teams can be listed as follows:

- 1) The specially selected group e.g. the twelve disciples (Mark 3:14-15),
- 2) The group of two or three who received intensive training e.g. Peter, James and John. A group within a group (Matthew 17:1 and Luke 8:51).
- 3) The house group e.g. the home in Bethany of Lazarus, Mary and Martha (John 12:12)
- 4) The larger group e.g. of seventy (Luke 19:1)
- 5) Couples – teams of two each. Luke 10:1 refers to the seventy being divided into thirty-five teams. They were also a group within a group.
- 6) The trainer and the trainee together form a team so that in a sense training individuals was also team work e.g. the Samaritan woman in John 4.

No one moves forward in discipleship if he ceases to share what he is learning. It is clear from the gospel records that Jesus always mixed theory with practice. It might be even more correct to say that he mixed practice with theory. Out of the doing came the principles.

As he taught his followers were involved in practicing or acting upon what they were learning. The success of the seventy called for further training, (Luke 10:17-20), as did the disciples' failure to cast out an evil spirit (Mark 9:28-29). Alan Norrish writing on leadership training declares about Christ: "The Master Trainer of men taught them on the job – coaching was his method... So the streets, bazaars, field, Temple, homes, the well, became his classroom. In the boat, out in the storm, on the job he was coaching his men. The Master Trainer taught by demonstrating his own way of serving, winning and transforming people, and by coaching and transforming disciples."

One might ask what curricula Jesus had for those whom he trained. He must have had some basic teaching to communicate. Perhaps it can be summarized as "the good news about the Kingdom of God" (Mark 1:15 and Acts 1:1-3). We cannot recreate the situations in which he taught but we can be practical in working out modules comprised of practice and teaching for use with all types of groups who are trying to reach Muslims. A planned curriculum is needed as a guide for each group. Here is a list of some different types of groups:

1. A Muslim awareness seminar for a local church. What is the curriculum for this and how can such a seminar be followed up until witness to Muslims becomes a feature of the local church's life, and until a group of Muslims believe and become worshipping disciples of Christ in that church?
2. A group of South Koreans who are going to Saudi Arabia as construction workers. Saudi Arabia is not the place in which to learn the first lessons on how to reach out to Muslims. Or is it? Ideally any believer going to such a country should have had some experience in a freer situation beforehand. How can such a group be prepared beforehand and how can it continue in ministry and study?
3. A group of missionaries seeking to plant a church in a predominantly Muslim community. They have the advantage of theory and practice in a natural situation. What initial and advance courses would be necessary?
4. Missionary candidates and "tentmakers" planning to spend the next thirty years in the Muslim world.
5. A month's course for a group of Asian workers at an Asian Missionary Training Institute. What is needed for this course and for the practical involvement? Should it be followed up by a more advanced course the following year or is the best follow-up for staff to visit the students back in their spheres of witness and ministry?

6. Groups of expatriate and national Christians in Muslim lands dominated by Communism.
7. Christians who belong to a church which is very different culturally from the majority Muslim community among whom it lives e.g. Pakistan and Bangladesh.
8. A group of unskilled, illiterate workers in the Gulf States. Too little has been done for this type of group. We so often think of educated and literate and neglect the great potential in a group like this.

After adding to the above list we need to ask:

1. Where are the trainers?
2. How mobile are the trainers?
3. What material do the trainers have for training?
4. What materials do the trainees have for using with Muslims?
5. How can we be sure that all our training and being trained to communicate the gospel to Muslims comes out of our worship, prayer, devotion and love? (Matthew 28:17 and Acts 13:2)