

Sacrament and Mission Go Together Like Bread and Wine

Part I: Baptism, Discipleship, and the Apostles' Creed

by Abu Daoud

1 SACRAMENT AND MISSION TO MUSLIMS

Sometimes I get the feeling that we missionaries to Muslims are reinventing the wheel. Every few years a new book comes out that presents a curriculum, or set of topics or Bible passages that Christians must use to correctly disciple/evangelize the Muslim seeker or *Muslim Background Believer* (MBB). There is a great deal of danger in this. As Andrew Walls points out in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, missionaries have always brought their religious luggage along with the Gospel. Often, that luggage is simply not interesting or important to the people we are trying to evangelize. On the other hand they often have questions we have not thought about. Walls gives a great example where Saint Augustine of Canterbury, a missionary bishop, is writing to the bishop of Rome asking him whether two brothers can marry two sisters! This reminds me also of missionaries who talk to Orthodox Christians who seem to have no problem whatsoever—to the chagrin of Western evangelicals—in believing that, of course we are saved by faith, and of course we should have good works, and doesn't every Christian know that?

This danger becomes quite real when we get down to the basic content and flow of discipleship and evangelism. What exactly are the topics we must teach our Muslim friends? When should they be introduced to a local MBC (Muslim-background congregation—remember that word)? When should they be baptized? How do we make sure that doesn't come too early or too late?

My overall thesis is that we should rely on the sacraments to shape our mission and ministry. However, as soon as someone says sacrament, someone else says, but I'm not Catholic. It needs to be pointed out, before we tackle the main topic, that sacramentality is not exclusive to the Catholic and Orthodox churches. Lutherans, Anglicans, Reformed, Methodists, and Presbyterians, among others, can all draw on this rich resource that is part of

their heritage. Moreover, holding to a sacramental point of view need not contradict the tenets of evangelical Christianity. So here, when I speak of sacraments, I am referring primarily to baptism and the Eucharist, while there are other rites (like ordination) that are sacramental in nature, but not generally called sacraments within the Protestant tradition.

There is a flow to the sacramental life. Baptism is the spiritual rebirth and reception of the Holy Spirit: it is an outward sign and symbol of an inward, spiritual reality. Baptism is an act of initiation and induction into a body, the church. Once one has been grafted into the body of Christ—and only then—he may partake of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is, in its essence, a meal: something that gives sustenance so we can go and work. That work is the mission of the church. Just as there are rituals in life for most important beginnings and endings, this is the act that signifies rebirth and incorporation into the body of Christ. This is why the New Testament uses such dramatic language about baptism. It is sometimes lost on us: ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’ (Gal 3:27); ‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?’ (Rom 6:3). Likewise, it is no coincidence that the famous passage, ‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all,’ comes directly after Paul’s command for unity, ‘maintain unity of the Spirit’ (Eph 4). For it is by baptism, which is the sign and seal and our sacramental confession of faith, that we are incorporated in the body of Christ.

John Calvin puts it like this: ‘Baptism serves as our confession before men, inasmuch as it is a mark by which we openly declare that we wish to be ranked among the people of God, by which we testify that we concur with all Christians in the worship of one God, and in one religion; by which, in short, we publicly assert our faith, so that not only do our hearts breathe, but our tongues also, and all the members of our body, in every way they can, proclaim the praise of God’ (Institutes IV xv 13). Calvin makes it clear that the significance of baptism is not that it is some magical act, but that it is a kind of confession. It is one thing to say to a friend in the privacy of his home or anonymously through a website, that you believe in Jesus as Savior and Son of God, but it is a wholly different kind of confession to be baptized and confess with the complete body one’s allegiance to Jesus and his people.

2 CONFESSION OF FAITH IN BAPTISM AS THE INITIAL GOAL OF DISCIPLESHIP

An apt comparison is marriage. While two people may truly love each other before marriage, their standing in their community fundamentally changes when they are married. This is a similar kind of confession that is, generally, both public and ritual. In fact, ritual is and always has been a key element of human identity; this is why MBB's often flounder and feel lost if the old rituals of the mosque and holy days are not replaced with the new rituals ordained by Christ and his church. Nowhere does the Bible condemn ritual in itself; it is only when ritual is disconnected from interior renewal—both communal and personal—that we find harsh words.

Practically speaking then, baptism—which is a very specific way of confessing faith in Christ—must be a major goal of our missionary activity. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' If we accept that converts will be adults, at least in the context of the Apostles as in the Muslim world today, we see a progression in method: discipleship leads to baptism, then after baptism one is further instructed in the teachings of Christ and obedience. In fact, discipleship becomes the means of evangelism.

A disciple 'is basically the pupil of a teacher. [...] in the rabbinical writings the talmid is a familiar figure as the pupil of a rabbi from whom he learned traditional lore. In the Gk. world philosophers were likewise surrounded by their pupils.' When Jesus called his disciples they probably knew very little about him, and he taught them not only by his didactic teaching but also by his miracles, way of living and treating others. If we understand this, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus' intention is for us to evangelize by making disciples, as he did. For us today, this means that discipleship not only happens after commitment to Christ and baptism, but beforehand as well, taking a person forward to a point of being able and desirous to make the confession of faith that baptism is.

Here we arrive at a very key question in terms of missionary method, and I am going to appeal to the sacramental tradition to provide us with a wise

path. The key question is this: what is to be the content of our teaching to our disciples? Should we go for the Roman Road? And then what? Should we pick up the latest fad from the West, like the *Prayer of Jabez* or the latest Rob Bell videos? Or should we judiciously exegete entire books of the NT? For how long does this go on? What are we trying to accomplish?

I suggest two things: The goal of our discipleship is baptism: this comes quite clearly from Matthew 28 once we understand that there is an important sequence in the Great Commission. Second, as our goal is profession of faith in Christ in baptism, at least initially, the content of our teaching should be the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.
He descended into hell.
The third day He arose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

For the vast majority of Christians throughout history and the world, this is the confession used at baptism, the faith that must be confessed for one to be baptized. This is true today in all the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but also for Anglicans, Reformed, Lutherans, Methodists and Presbyterians. I wish to point out what this looks like in practice, and why it is better than the current system, which is basically that each missionary does as he likes.

3 BENEFITS OF USING THE APOSTLES' CREED AS A TEMPLATE FOR INITIAL DISCIPLESHIP

The Apostles' Creed is not too broad: it contains a number of elements that will be challenging to Muslims, especially the language of sonship and the crucifixion. It should not be seen as shooting too low or as a way of avoiding the hard work of intelligent, responsible Christian witness. Look at what it avoids: questions about baptism in the Holy Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, infant v adult baptism, the rapture, assurance of salvation, the tribulation, and so on. . Using the Apostles' Creed, which has stood the test of time and has been used in every continent for centuries, helps us to avoid importing our concerns and squabbles into the mission field

The Apostles' Creed is not too narrow: it was probably formed to counter the Gnostic heresies, which is why it has a very narrative and, like Islam, historical quality to it. It is concerned largely with affirming certain events in history, and unlike the later Nicene Creed, is not as concerned with dogmatic specificity. Some have commented that it does not clearly enunciate the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. Here one could reiterate that it is not appropriate to bring in what was basically a family affair of the European church in the 16th century, one that had little effect on Eastern Christianity. But if one feels that this is unconscionable, the statement about 'forgiveness of sins' gives us the perfect occasion to address the topic that mercy, like grace, is unmerited. Mercy and grace cannot be earned but are gifts of God in their whole, and are made available to us through the crucifixion and resurrection which have already been studied.

Some object that there is nothing about the Bible in the Apostles' Creed. Here I would make three points. First, this is probably because the pre-Christian and Christian texts that make up what we call 'the Bible' had not been collected together into one book when the Creed was composed. Dating the Creed is difficult but it is very early. Not until after 325 AD at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea do we have a clear enunciation of which writings are inspired and which are not. Secondly, the whole process of discipleship and the teaching of the contents of the Creed have presumably been based on biblical studies from Genesis (God the Creator) to Revelation (Return of Christ). It is likely, then, that a disciple has learned how to read, study and listen to the Bible by observing you (remember that disciples learn

by watching, not just by listening). Finally, in the Muslim context at least, the disciple knows well what the Bible is - the revelations sent down by God to his prophets. Through study she has learned that they are not corrupted (muharraf).

The use of the Creed is also strategic and beneficial because it provides continuity. 'Creeds help us by reminding us of what the convictions of the historic church reaching back to the apostles have always been. [...] They are expressions of the rule of faith, the *regula fidei*. The rule of faith was considered by the church up through the Reformation as the content of the profession of faith for every candidate for baptism.' If you go back far enough, almost every Arab Muslim, had some kind of Christian ancestry, even if that was a slave woman (the taking of women slaves from Christian and Jewish groups has been a common feature of Islamic imperialism throughout the ages). You can tell Muslim or Muslima that this is the same confession that was used when their ancestors were baptized. Thus, instead of the disciple seeing himself breaking off from his family and violating their tradition, there can be a restoration of at least a small sense of contiguity with his ancestors. For some disciples this will not be an important factor, but for some it may be essential. This, I propose, is the same sort of approach we find in Hebrews, where the author explains that Jesus is indeed a priest, but in an older order, not that of Aaron but that of Melchizedek. Historical reconfiguration of this kind can be quite important and fruitful if done well.

On a similar note, you can explain that the Creed is used by indigenous Christians like the Copts, Syriac, and Chaldeans. Evangelicalism is correctly seen as a very Western form of the Christian faith. Using a confession that has always been used in the disciple's homeland can be comforting and reassuring. Finally, it is fair to compare it to the Shahaada. Both are related to conversion, both are short, and both are universally used.

In conclusion, I have argued that the work of discipleship is in fact a sort of evangelism. Initially, its aim is to bring a person to a point where he is ready to confess his faith in Jesus Christ in the words of the Apostles' Creed, in the context of the sacrament of baptism. The Creed is appropriate because, while brief, it is complete; it is not too narrow or too broad, and it establishes a helpful connection to the past and to any indigenous Christian churches in the area.. It guards the missionary against too readily importing his theological and ecclesiastical biases.

The Apostles' Creed has been in use for most of the life of the church. It is the common heritage of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism. It is common to the East and the West and has been used and is being used today on every continent of the world. Mission to Muslims is hard enough as it is: we do well to draw on the resource and rely on the wisdom of generations past, rather than to reinvent the wheel every few years.

May I mention here that once a person is baptized, and only then, may he partake in Communion? But that's a different topic.