

# BAPTISM AND THE MUSLIM CONVERT TO CHRISTIANITY

*By Azar Ajaj<sup>1</sup>*

Nader is called to pastor a small evangelical church which also has a school in a place under the Shari'a<sup>2</sup> (as in the West Bank). A Muslim man, Ali, comes seeking baptism. After a few conversations Nader is confident that Ali understands Christian faith and morals and is ready for baptism. Nader is also aware that if he baptizes this man and it becomes known then it is very probable that it would cause serious problems for the man, the church, Ali and the wider Christian community. How should Pastor Nader balance his responsibilities as a pastor to the man seeking baptism with the safety of the small, local Christian community?

## **1 Introduction**

To deal with this case I believe first of all one has to have a real understanding of the possible consequences of his decision. Although evangelism or baptizing people from a Muslim back ground is not strictly speaking illegal, and thus we are not discussing here the issue of submission to the authority, that does not prevent people motivated by Islamic beliefs to take the law to their hands. In doing that, I would see that the effect is on three levels:

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<sup>2</sup> That is, the Islamic legal system.

First, regarding the pastor himself. He might be attacked physically and even be killed.<sup>3</sup>

Second, regarding the pastor's family, his church and school and the wider Christian community. The church and the school will be shut down, and Christian families in your city, though they had nothing to do with this decision, might be persecuted and their homes and shops vandalized and perhaps burned down.<sup>4</sup>

Third, regarding the person who is asking to be baptized, he could be cut out from his family, or even his wife and children may leave him<sup>5</sup>. This would be the least that can happen to him, and of course being killed is something real that he has to take into consideration. As the Prophet said, 'Whosoever changes his religion, slay him.' (Abu-Daud n.d., *hudud*). Apostasy, *irtidad* in Arabic, which is understood as leaving Islam and following another religion, has been from early Islam a great offence, and the punishment of this offence is death (Griffel 2008). Not all Islamic countries will apply this penalty, but certainly such a person will face serious persecution from the government, society and his family.

To discuss this case I want to explore it from three different angles: Biblical, theological and practice.

## 2 The Bible is the guide

For the abovementioned reasons, and to keep good relation with the governments, traditional Churches in the Middle East<sup>6</sup> almost always refuse to baptize believers from a Muslim background; the challenge to do that or not, is left to the small evangelical churches, like Na-

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<sup>3</sup> Two years ago a Bible Society worker in Gaza was killed by Islamic radicals who suspected that he was sharing his Christian faith with Muslims.

<sup>4</sup> A Molotov bottle was thrown at a church in Nazareth because one of the elders gave to a Muslim a Christian book that compared Mohamed and Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Under the Islamic shari'a a man's wife is automatically divorced from him at the moment of his apostasy. Also, all his property is forfeited to the Islamic government.

<sup>6</sup> Orthodox, Malachite and Roman Catholics.

der's Church. In order to answer this question I believe we should try to find if the Bible gives us any answers, guidance or help for our case. And I want to propose three sections from the New Testament.

First, *the Great Commission* which we find in Matthew 28:18-20. Matthew is concluding his gospel with this commission, and this commission is based on the authority Jesus has received, 'God has given Jesus this comprehensive sovereignty over the whole of the created order.' (Hanger 1995, p. 886) Jesus mentioned His authority earlier in Matthew 9:6, so this is not the first time we find this theme. However, here he connects His authority and the mission of the disciples to go to all the nations with a new level of authority connected and verified by His resurrection. (Nollad 2005, p. 1264)<sup>7</sup> This authority becomes the basis of the disciples' mission to go to all the nations. 'The universal authority of Jesus is the basis of the universal mission of the church.' (Hanger 1995, p. 887)

'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing ... and teaching them.' With these words Jesus is sending not only the disciples that heard Him, but all those who will believe in their message. This mission is threefold: *first*, to make disciples from all the nations, not only from the Jewish people but also from the gentiles. Apparently it took the disciples some time to understand this, and the issue of the gentiles was not solved until the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. (Nollad 2005, p. 1266-1267) *Second*, to baptize. We do not find in this verse or in other places in Matthew an explanation about baptism and what it means; only later did the apostles explain its meaning. But as Hanger says, 'The practice of the early church suggests its historicity.' ( p. 887) This is what the apostles understood from Jesus' words, and this is what they did. Third is to teach. The only place we find the words 'teach' and 'disciple' together in Matthew is in the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-2).

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note the similarity between the words of this verse and the verses from Daniel 7:13-14. There we find one like the Son of Man, who was given the authority over all the nations (Hauerwas 2006, p. 248)

Whether Jesus was suggesting that this sermon should be the disciples' basis for teaching or not, by using the same words, we do not know. But his words in Matthew 5-7 are part of what He taught, and he entrusted the disciples to teach them. In this sermon Jesus taught about serving each other, forgiving and blessing each other (Hauerwas 2006, p. 249). Hardship is also mentioned: we as Christians are called to 'enter through the narrow gate'; followers of Christ will face difficulties, challenges and persecution while they are fulfilling their mission, but they ought to remember that they are not alone. Jesus who was given all authority in Heaven and Earth, is with them.

Second, *Our Response to opposition* - Obeying God more than men (Acts 5:29). How did the apostles and church leaders understand their duty in discipling, baptizing and teaching? What was their response, and the church response, to opposition and persecution? Was persecution a legitimate reason for them not to carry out their mission? While reading the first few chapters of the book of Acts, and without going into many details, we find the apostles obeying faithfully Jesus' commandment from Matthew 28:19-20.<sup>8</sup> The fruit of their ministry was great; a few thousand were baptized and joined the church, but opposition, especially from priests and Jewish leaders, was not long in coming. Peter and John were put in jail, and twice were asked later not to teach about Jesus (Acts 4:17-18; 5:28). The words the apostles answered with, 'we must obey God rather than men', represent in a sense not only their attitude, but also the attitude the men of God had through all history, especially during time of hostility – 'Moses before Pharaoh, Elijah before Ahab, Paul before Festus, Ambrose before Theodosius' (Pelikan 2005, p. 88).

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<sup>8</sup> At least to the Jews, it took the church some time to understand its mission to the gentiles too.

Furthermore, these words, ‘we must obey God rather than men’, were used by the church through history to declare that its loyalty to God comes before its loyalty to a worldly king, government or ruler. We find them in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed; they are found also in the Batak Confession, and in the Barrmen Declaration of German Evangelical Churches standing against the Nazis in 1934 (Pelikan 2005, p. 88-89). This was not a call from the church to stand against governments or authorities; on the contrary, God’s word tells us to submit to the rulers (Rom. 13) and to pray for them as they were appointed from God (1Tim. 3:1), in order to live a peaceful life. But when there is a conflict between the law of people and the word of God, between obeying our rulers or God, the latter should be obeyed (Calvain 1984, p. 214).

Third, *Estimate the cost*. Reading the Gospels, it looks as if Jesus tries to make it hard for those who want to follow Him. For example, in Matthew 10:22-33, Jesus is making it very clear that his followers will face persecution, even death. He is not hiding the real issues they might face. Thus he does not tell them not to follow Him, but rather to estimate the cost before following Him. In the light of knowing this they can make their decision (Luke 14:25-33). ‘It is all very well to want to be a disciple, but the demands identify the necessary resources, without which there could be no successful implementation of discipleship’ (Nolland 1993, p. 766). Those who wants to build a tower or go to war should estimate the cost ahead of time, otherwise they face not only embarrassment but other challenges too. ‘Lacking adequate commitment then one should not follow. Rather if one is to follow Jesus, then total commitment is expected, a commitment arising out of careful thought consideration.’ (Evans 2002, p. 229)

From one side, Jesus has laid down the possible cost the disciple might have to pay (this can be found in both passages, in Matthew 10 and Luke14), and has asked those who are willing to follow him to take this into consideration. But from the other side Jesus realized

that disciples, those who agreed to pay the cost, are human, weak and subject to fear, which will hinder them in carrying out their mission. I like the way France relates to the request of Jesus asking and encouraging His disciples not to fear in Matthew 10:26-27:

The fear very naturally engendered by the sort of conditions described in vv. 17-25 could put a stop to the disciples' mission. These verses therefore emphasize how essential, and indeed ultimately inescapable, is their duty to bear witness to what they have seen and heard, this duty must override their natural reluctance to incur men's hostility. (1985, p. 186)

In summary, Jesus is sending His disciples, and in the same way Christian leaders today too, to disciple, baptize and teach. Baptism is not a secondary issue for the followers of Christ or something we can ignore. Baptism is not an optional practice: it was and still is the fundamental sign of following Christ. Pastors are responsible to baptize those who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. Christian pastors and leaders in the early church and throughout history realized that there is a cost to following Jesus, especially for those who want to obey and serve Him. And when they were challenged by men not to carry out their mission, their position was, "we must obey God rather than men".

### **3 Baptism is the challenge**

Before I continue and apply the above biblical conclusion to the case we are looking at, and since the baptism is the issue for this pastor, I want to explore the meaning of baptism a little more. What does baptism mean to us as Christians? Does it mean the same for a believer coming from a Muslim background? Answering these questions might help us to understand the extent of our commitment to this person, and estimate the possible cost that we might have to pay. The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology defines baptism as following:

Baptism is a symbolic event representing the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In it the church confesses that the baptized person has died to sin and had received a new spiritual life by the grace of God. Through it believers of all races are welcomed into the one body of Christ. (Fape 2000, p. 397)

Being influenced by western ways of living, and thus placing more importance on the individual rather than the community, we tend to put more emphasis on the first part of the definition and ignore the last part. We sit with the person who is considering this next step, hear his testimony, and examine if he understands the meaning of baptism. But I believe we fail to examine our part of accepting him into our community, the body of Christ, the local church. This is the way they understood church life in Acts: ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship... All the believers were together and had everything in common.’ (Acts 2:42, 44) It is a picture of community, fellowship and relation. I’m bringing this point up here, since it is a crucial one that will determine the responsibility we should or should not carry towards this brother. I’ll get to this point soon.

I want to pause for a moment here, and try to explore the meaning of baptism for a person coming specifically from Islam. For many people in the west, Islam is seen only as a religion. But as a person who has lived among Muslims for more than forty years, I can say that Islam is much more than that; it is described as ‘the best nation’, or *khayra ummah* in Arabic (Quran 3:110). Muslims consider themselves as a nation, a family with similar traditions and points of view. *Ummah* is related to the word *umm* in Arabic, which simply means mother. For a person to leave Islam is to leave his ‘mother’, ‘family’, nation. Or maybe it is better to say (as they understand it) to betray them.

How is this related to our case? Well, Islam is a religion that emphasizes the practice of rituals; what is in your heart is not as

important as the way you express it. Leaving Islam<sup>9</sup> does not happen when a person accepts Christ in his heart; baptism is considered the turning point - backsliding *irrtidad*. Ray Register, a missionary who spent 30 years in Israel and Palestine working with Muslims, writes: 'Baptism is the decisive turning point for an inquirer or seeker to become identified as a Muslim background believer.' (Register 2009, p. 60) Marsh also makes a very similar statement which supports this, 'Baptism is generally regarded by Muslims as the decisive break with Islam because it constitutes an open profession of faith in Christ.' (p. 87) It is the time when he confesses his faith in Christ and announces his commitment to follow Him, obey His words, and to serve Him. It is the moment he joins the Body of Christ, the church (Ayub<sup>10</sup> 2009, p. 30). When a Muslim women shared about her journey from Islam to Christianity she wrote:

I knew that the significance of baptism is not lost on the Muslim world. A person can read the Bible without arousing too much hostility. But the sacrament of baptism is a different matter. To the Muslim this is the one unmistakable sign that a convert has renounced his Islamic faith to become a Christian. To the Muslim, baptism is apostasy (Sheikh and R. Schneider 1987, p. 61).

Understanding all that, I believe it makes it clear that baptizing a person from a muslim background becomes a bigger question when he understands what baptism is, and he is ready to take this step. Pastors and Christian leaders should be aware that their responsibilities now exceed the normal ones, such as teaching and preaching, and other basic pastoral duties. Here we have a special case, and a careful and delicate approach should be applied. Having said all this, what should this pastor do? Should he baptize or not?

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<sup>9</sup> I am not speaking here about the person who is accepting Christ, but his family and the wider community.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Ayub is a pastor from a Muslim background himself, which make his insights all the more important for us.



#### 4 Wisdom is the way ahead

Recalling all that I have said so far, from one side it is clear that the task of God's servants is to fulfil his commission and to go to the whole world to disciple all the nations, including Muslims. Baptism is part of this mission; it not optional. And from the other side, baptism for the Muslim believer is not a choice he can avoid, and Ali is doing the right thing by asking to be baptized. The question then is how to proceed with the baptism in a way that minimizes the danger, if that is possible at all. What is the role of the pastor and the local congregation in applying not only the physical dimension of baptism, but also the spiritual dimension, namely becoming his family.

*Wisdom of the Shrewd Manager:* God, in both Old<sup>11</sup> and New Testament, encourages his children to 'purchase wisdom'. This wisdom begins from knowing God, fearing Him and obeying His law, but it does not end there: it continues with our observation of life and nature. Learning from these observations leads to a life of righteousness and effective obedience to God. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, asks His disciples to 'be as shrewd as snakes ...' (Matt. 10:16), and in a very strange parable He gives compliments to an unfaithful steward (Luke 16:1-12). Why is Jesus praising this man's wisdom?

The parable of the shrewd manager has always been puzzling, confusing and challenging for Christians. After a shallow look to this parable we might understand that Jesus is commending the shrewd manager for his indecent and sneaky way of dealing with his master's money. Indeed some did get this meaning from this parable, 'In the fourth century, Julian the apostate used this parable as a primary text claiming that the parable taught Jesus' followers to be liars and thieves, and that noble Romans should reject all such corrupting influences.' (Bailey 2008, p. 333)

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<sup>11</sup> Mainly in the wisdom literature: the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job.

This is not the issue at all in this parable, and it is clear that Jesus is not speaking about one of His disciples; he is calling the manager ‘the son of the world/age’. Jesus is making it clear that this steward is unjust and shrewd, but still there is something to learn from him, not from his corrupt and unclean way of dealing with money, but to learn from his wisdom in thinking about the future, especially when he knew that he might face serious problems in the near future. Evans argued that the discount that was offered by the steward to those who owe money to his master was from the profit he would make in a normal situation. In this case he was losing (investing) in the present in order to secure the future (p. 239). And Jesus is commending his wisdom and his way of thinking not only about the present, but also about the future.

Baptizing a Muslim in the given place and circumstances is a challenge and a threat for the future of Christians, their churches and leaders, in the mentioned country. For this reason wisdom should be applied and used. We should think about the future of the church and its message. We might lose or suffer in the present, but this might be our investment for the church witness in the future. Before I suggest what this pastor should do, I want to have a quick look at some people from the Bible and see how they used their wisdom in such times with similar challenges, and how it would be possible to learn from them as we approach this complex situation.

*Wisdom practiced in the Bible:* Peter in his first letter writes to the scattered Jews in the world calling them “aliens and strangers” (1 Pet 2:11). As Christians we are living in ‘exile’ in a world that hostile and strange to us and to our faith, beliefs and practices.

Daniel and his three friends lived literally in the exile, in a pagan country that had no sympathy to the faith of Israel. They were asked a few times to practice things which dishonored their faith and their God. Their reactions were remarkable; in the first incident where they were asked to eat non-kosher food (Chapter 1), they already had decided they were not going to defile themselves by doing that (v. 8).

Then they argued their case logically with the chief official and were able to convince him. But later on, when every citizen had to bow down to the golden image made by King Nebuchadnezzar when they heard the sound of the horn, flute, etc (chapter 3), or when King Darius issued his decree preventing anyone from praying to man or god for the next thirty days (Chapter 6), in both cases Daniel and his friends, refused to disobey God. They did not go around boasting, or making a big issue about their stance, but when they were challenged in relation to their faith, they were determined to 'obey God rather than men', willing to bear the consequences.

The book of Acts provides us also with several examples from the time of hostility against the church and its leaders. Stephen's story in chapters 7 and 8, followed later by the death of James (12), are examples of the courage of early believers in fulfilling their mission and obeying God. But when we continue reading Acts we can say that this was not always the pattern for facing persecution. Take the example of Paul. Although it is clear that he was ready to die for his faith and for the sake of the Gospel, nevertheless we find him sometimes escaping from people and running away from persecution (see 14:6, 17:14, 18:20). At his trial in front of Festus and Agrippa (chapter 25-26), he did not stand there passive and silent; rather he took an active role in defending himself; he also used his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar. In Damascus he was lowered in a basket from a window to escape from the king (2 Cor 11:32-33). Even Jesus, with all of his teaching about facing suffering, does not encourage His disciples to run after it, rather to run away from it. 'When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another.' (Mathew 10:23)

Looking at these stories from Old and New Testament, we can learn that we should neither pursue persecution nor avoid it by compromising our faith and dishonoring God. The church in the first few centuries had a similar attitude: 'The law of martyrdom alike forbids us voluntarily to go to meet it (in consideration for the persecutors,

and for the weak) or to shrink from it if it comes upon us.’ (Gregory of Nazianzus n.d., paragraph 6). There is no problem, or I should better say it is wise to avoid persecution and suffering, but when this becomes our main goal then very soon we will be ‘obeying men rather than God’. Our motive should simply be to glorify God and be faithful to Him whether in the time of persecution and suffering or in the time of ease. Pastors and Christians should seek God’s will and act wisely. It is true that we are living in times when suffering and persecution are seen by some Christians as a lack of faith, especially by those who are lifting up the flag of the ‘Prosperity Gospel’. I actually wonder if these people have any words to say to the early church concerning this matter. And I wonder if it were not for the faith of those who endured suffering that we could stand where we are now.

Having said all this let me come back to our case and answer the question whether Pastor Nader should baptize Ali or not. According to what I have discussed so far I would say the pastor has an ethical obligation and spiritual responsibility to do so, and my answer would be defiantly ‘yes’. But, as a pastor, he also has a responsibility towards his church members and their families (not to mention the wider Christian community), to protect them by trying to minimize the threat as much as possible. There might be no right path; nevertheless I believe that it can be done, first by wisely performing the act of baptism, and second, by wisely preparing the church to be a home for this brother. Wisdom is needed so much.

### **5 How should we do the Baptism? And who should do it?**

One option is to ask a foreign pastor who might be visiting the country to baptize Ali, without the pastor or the church taking any part. Of course, this should be done outside the church building. Since the baptism itself, and not the faith in the heart, is what is viewed as the turning point by the Islamic community, the pastor and

the church in this case are “innocents”. They cannot be accused by Muslims of proselytizing.

Although having the baptism done by a foreigner might prevent trouble, it has some negative points. *First*, if Ali’s baptism becomes known, he probably has to face the persecution alone, especially if the church prefers not to be seen as being involved. If they are questioned about his attendance at church, the answer would be that the church doors are open for everyone who wishes to come in. *Second*, the church will be seen by the wider Muslim community as a foreign institution, controlled by western people who have a political and religious agenda to fight Islam. This does not add much honor and respect to the local church, and removes it from its local roots.

The other option would be that Pastor Nader and a few elected people from the church perform the baptism. Baptism can take place in the church, but if possible it is better to have it somewhere else. It might appear secretive, which I do not think is a shame in the given situation. The negative side would be if the issue becomes known to the family, then all who were involved will bear the consequences. The important issue in this is the picture of one body, together facing the good things and the bad also.

As I already mentioned when I discussed the meaning of baptism, it includes not only the immersion part, but also grafting the baptized person into the Body of Christ. So, as much as the pastor should deal sensitively with the first part, he should prepare his church and share with the members, in general, about their responsibility toward people from all backgrounds and religions. The issue of estimating the cost does not fall only on the pastor, the Muslim convert and the leaders of the church but, rather, every member should be aware of the cost and should make a decision if he wants to continue membership in a church that believes in such a mission. The church should realize her role and responsibility toward Muslim converts, and Gairdner puts that in challenging words:

If any church desires to be a spiritual home for those who come to Christ from Islam, a brotherhood, a spiritual garden, then it must have a very definite and well thought-out plan for teaching and training them in the Christian faith; and it must also, having determined its responsibility with regard to their human needs, be ready to shoulder the same. (p. 241)

It is true that some Christians, and also some Muslims converts, believe that it is better if their relatives do not know that they have become Christians. They will not attend church services or any church activities; in fact they do not seek any relationship with Christians. Ayub argues that the main thing motivating these people is avoiding persecution:

To avoid persecution and fear of oppression, they continue to go to the mosque, and participate in the prayers, maybe they can say other words, and they continue to be members of the mosque community. (p. 28)

Holding such a view would solve the entire problem. In this case, neither do we have a challenge to baptize him, since he is not going to announce his faith, nor have him in the church because he is not going to come.

But this is not what I'm arguing for; I believe that Ali should be part of the church, and a member in the church family. The church should do her best to make that happen. 'It is especially important that converts from Islam, cut off as they probably will be from their families and their Islamic community, be received as beloved members of a Christian church.' (Miller 1976, p. 141) It does not mean that we do not need to have a special way of teaching, supporting and bringing Ali to maturity. On one hand it is true that he has become a member like the rest, but on the other, even in our families we treat each one according to his situation and abilities. This is a great challenge for the pastor and the church, and I dare to say that this is a greater challenge than persecution. I find the following words very true:

Whatever we may think of the Mohammedan religion, it has markedly stood for a Brotherhood, a universal brotherhood, of a sort. It may be that many of the manifestations of this brotherhood are imperfect, unspiritual, and injurious to those without. But from the point of view of those within, it does stand for something, for much; with some, for everything. If this is so, it is obvious that unless we can show them a brotherhood that is higher, better, more spiritual, warmer, tenderer - in one word, truer - they will marvel how we have the face to preach to them at all. Until we have a church in which converts can be at home we work almost in vain. (Gairdner 1924, p. 237)

## **6 Conclusion**

It is clear that the church is responsible for carrying the Great Commission that Jesus entrusted to her. Through its pastors and leaders it should go to 'all the nations', including the Muslim world, sharing with them the Good News of salvation and bringing them to God's new society - the church - where they can find love, support and growth. In certain situations, persecution might come, but persecution should not stop them from fulfilling God's call. If pastors and Christians fail to stand firm for God and avoiding persecution becomes their main motivation, if the church, as leaders and members, fails to become a home and shelter for its members, then I believe it has lost its ground to share the good news. Nevertheless, acting with care and deliberation, seeking a wise and balanced path, Pastor Nader can fulfill his responsibility as a minister to Ali, while also taking steps to safeguard the integrity of the small Christian community in his city. It is important to teach the church about her responsibility to carry the message to everyone including their Muslims neighbours. I believe having done these things, pastor Nader should Baptize Ali.

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