

CHAPTER THREE

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL TO MUSLIMS

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR MUSLIM EVANGELISM

1. Our Attitude and the Spirit of our Approach to Muslims.

Before exploring the actual subject of witnessing to Muslims and the most effective methods of communicating the Gospel to them, it is my intention to say a few things about our whole attitude and approach, in other words, the *spirit* in which we must conduct our witness. In any field of evangelism our manner of approach is very important, but especially in the field of Muslim evangelism. The impact of our message will soon be tempered if we do not present it in a tactful and charitable way.

Let me begin by saying that the fundamental principle to be observed, and the one that is the foundation of all the points I will raise in this section, is that we are dealing with people and not with robots, objects or insensitive creatures. Our witness must at all times have a thoroughly personal flavor with a keen sensitivity towards the needs, fears, attitudes and, at times, prejudices of those we intend to evangelize. Our objective must not be to score points or to win arguments but to win Muslim people to God's Anointed Savior, Jesus Christ.

The first thing we need is a right approach. We must see our witness in a person-to-person context and endeavor to establish a relaxed atmosphere of conversation and dialogue. A spirit of mutual intercommunication is vital if we are to effectively convey the Gospel to Muslims. We need to be open to discussion and allow the Muslim complete freedom to join in so that he can state his needs, fears, beliefs and misgivings as well. Above all he must feel completely free to express himself and not feel threatened in any way. If we show Muslims that we care for them as people and that our witness is intended purely to benefit them and that it comes without obligation or strings attached, we are far more likely to win their confidence and gain willing ears.

Later on in this chapter I will show why it is therefore essential that we study Islam and know the beliefs of the Muslims so that we can engage in profitable dialogue, but let me say here that it is at least essential that we be willing to listen as well as talk. When Muslims find that they are free to express their own feelings and beliefs, and when they realize that the Christian is not just interested in seeing them baptized at the first opportunity, they become more willing themselves to hear what the Christian has to say.

Take every opportunity of being friendly with Muslim neighbors, shopkeepers and others. Show them that you love them in practical ways. Do not try to preach at them. Be a good listener. This is where we are failing today in every land. We must listen to the other man sympathetically and patiently. Then we shall understand his point of view, his difficulties, and where he has misunderstood Christianity. (Marsh, *Share Your Faith with a Muslim*, p. 61).

Some years ago I saw a cartoon which showed a typical householder opening the door to a stranger who was obviously representing some religious cult or sect. "I have come to convert you", he said to the bemused and somewhat affronted owner of the house. While we may immediately disown such brashness, there are many more subtle ways in which I believe Christians are falling into this very trap, where the expression of Christian witness takes the form of a monologue with the only object being the earliest possible persuasion of the hearer to become a Christian.

It is for this reason that I am very wary of certain modern methods of evangelism. One takes the form of an impersonal approach where the Christian sets out, step-by-step, a presentation of the Gospel according to a

prescribed formula he has learned from someone else. These package presentations probably do make witnessing easy for those who distrust their ability to present the Gospel effectively in their own words, but they are so stereotyped and formal that they inhibit intercommunication and a genuine person-to-person approach and take the form of a pure monologue instead. Worse still, they invariably encourage the Christian to attempt to get the hearer to pray a prescribed prayer at the end of the one-two-three, step-by-step presentation, to receive Christ as Savior. The object of the exercise is obvious: obtain a formal commitment before the end of your first and only appointment with the object of your witness.

The Muslim must feel free to introduce subjects he wishes to discuss and will soon feel threatened if he senses that the Christian motive is to get a conversion commitment at the first possible opportunity. We need to be extremely patient with Muslims and it is only rarely that Muslims come to Jesus Christ without much time, heart-searching, learning and reflection first taking place.

This leads to the second thing we need and that is a keen sensitivity towards Muslims. It is a very subtle form of pride that makes Christians want to chalk up as many converts as they can in the shortest possible time. The same malady accounts for the spirit of triumphalism we see in so many of our churches today. Shortcut methods to elicit an early response or force a formal decision can do untold injury and harm to Muslims. Just as an untimely birth will damage or destroy a child, so a premature commitment will injure a Muslim and many have, in fact, turned against the Gospel permanently as the result of such hasty, insensitive approaches.

I believe that booklets and other prescribed presentations of the Gospel (e.g. Evangelism Explosion and The Path of the Prophets) are beneficial in many situations when a Muslim desires to jump from one topic to the next without first finishing the discussion on a previous topic. A prepared presentation can help to keep the conversation on track. They can also be useful to make evangelizing an easy process for those learning to share their faith for the first time. However, as with all methods, we need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading during the conversation just as John Gilchrist wrote above.

The Apostle Paul taught that, on the Day when our works will finally be tested by God's refining fire, the wood, hay and stubble will be consumed and only the gold, silver and precious stones will remain (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). We must seek to work as closely as possible with the Holy Spirit and ensure that the outward effects of our ministries correspond to the real inward work the Holy Spirit is doing. No Muslim should be pressed into a premature commitment. Let the Spirit of God give the growth while we plant and water and only when the Muslim himself shows a genuine desire to become a true Christian should he be persuaded to do so. Too often today Christians appear to be interested only in boasting about the numbers of converts they are seeing, as though head-counting is a proof of the Holy Spirit's work and presence. Such Christians often fall very quickly into a temptation that we should all avoid: the making of converts through "easy believism". Jesus cautioned again and again against such an approach, with warnings such as this one:

"Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven". *Matthew 7:21*

When a scribe made a formal commitment, saying “I will follow you wherever you go” (Matthew 8:19), Jesus replied:

“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head”. *Matthew 8:20*

He called on the man to count the cost of conversion before he made such declarations and we must do likewise. The cost of discipleship is great for all men, but especially for Muslims who will invariably suffer much persecution and rejection for their faith. The temptation today is to obtain formal commitments at minimum cost. This may give the appearance of power, progress and the work of the Holy Spirit, but it is both illusory and insensitive. How many Christians today would not have joyfully counted that scribe among the followers of Jesus upon such a declaration without further reflection? On more than one occasion Jesus was surrounded by people who appeared to be only too willing to believe in him. On one of these we read that “as he spoke thus, many believed in him” (John 8:30). We would probably have enrolled them in our churches immediately, but Jesus tested the sincerity of their faith and thoroughly examined their motives until, finally, they accused him of being possessed of a demon (John 8:48) and sought to stone him (John 8:59). After he had fed five thousand men besides women and children with bread, they flocked after him but, by the time he had finished with them, not even his regular disciples were keen to continue with him (John 6:66). A fine summary of the whole problem and Jesus’ acute awareness of it is found in these words:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man. *John 2:23-25*.

We too need to be sensitive, not only towards Muslims as people with needs and misgivings, but also towards the Spirit of God who alone can convert people, who “blows where he wills” (John 8:3), and who is not impatient. We must be discerning, as Jesus was, and discover patiently those with whom the Holy Spirit is really working and not seek to prematurely reap the fruit before it is fully ripe or, worse still, mistake leaves for fruit by enticing Muslims to make commitments who are nowhere near genuine conversion. Even before the wood is thrown into the fire, five ounces of gold are of greater value than five hundred pounds of wood.

The third thing we need to be is charitable in our witness, to speak graciously and courteously, and to be truly Christian in all our ways when discussing with Muslims. One of the things about the Scriptures that always appeals to me is the sense of balance that is so often advocated insofar as our attitudes and manners are concerned. It is always tempting to go to extremes, but the Bible constantly calls on us to be balanced in our approach. A good example of this is found in the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Christians of Colossae. He begins by saying:

Pray for us also, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison, that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak. *Colossians 4:3-4*.

In his letter to the Ephesians he shows that his desire to make the Gospel “clear” means a willingness to speak with authority and he thus requests prayer that “utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:19-20). Twice in that passage he speaks of the need to boldly declare the mystery of the Gospel, yet in the very next breath in his letter to the Colossians he says:

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt so that you may know how you ought to answer every one. *Colossians 4:6*

Note, therefore, the beautiful balance he maintains in his exhortation: be *bold*, but at the same time be *gracious*.

On the one hand he cautions against a spirit of timidity and appeasement (so also 2 Timothy 1:7), but on the other, he likewise warns against a spirit of arrogance and offensiveness. How well this applies to Muslim evangelism. A so-called “loving” approach that makes no allowance for argument, challenge, apologetic or debate, is no more tolerable or spiritual than a triumphalist approach that is purely confrontational, dogmatic and overbearing.

It is important to note here that the salvation of the Muslim is more important than anything else in our discussion. It can be common for political discussions to become the focus of your witness. It is important to remember what is the main reason for the conversation, namely to glorify Christ, not to win political arguments. Muslims can become very offended and often times shut down to our witness if we discuss American and European foreign policy, Iran’s nuclear weapons, or Israel. Furthermore, even if we won them over to our political view, they would still be lost without a savior. Let’s use our time wisely and proclaim the Gospel.

The Muslim has a keen perceptive mind and quickly detects any attempt to mask the truth or to compromise. Dr. Zwemer once said that you can say anything to a Muslim provided you say it in love and with a smile. They respect the man who, alone in the midst of a crowd of Muslim opponents, has the courage of his convictions and does not hesitate to speak the whole truth. (Marsh, *Share Your Faith with a Muslim*, p. 11).

We need to develop a spirit of gentle aggressiveness, to “show perfect courtesy toward all men” (Titus 3:2), and yet to speak with such boldness and confidence that those who dispute with us will not be able to, as the Jews were with Stephen who “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke” (Acts 6:10). Stephen had the right approach - he was “full of grace *and* power” (Acts 6:8). We need to be likewise in our approach to Muslims.

Lastly let me say we need to maintain at all times a spirit of fairness. Christians, in imitation of Jesus Christ, must be thoroughly sincere, always composed, trusting quietly and patiently in the truth and in their own integrity.

It is impossible to pay too much attention to fairness and courtesy in your arguments. If you are polite and kind in your words and manner, your opponent will generally, even against his will, be forced to observe the rules of courtesy. Regard him as a brother for whom Christ died, and to whom you are sent with the message of reconciliation. You can generally repress any rudeness on his part, without offending him, by showing courtesy to him and making it clear, by your manner, that you expect the same conduct from him. Never let an argument degenerate into a quarrel. (Tisdall, *Muhammadan Objections to Christianity*, p. 14).

Christians must endeavor at all times to be gracious in their conversations with Muslims. Never become flustered or lose your temper; you are seeking to win Muslims to Christ, not an argument for Christianity. Muslims are people for whom Christ died, not opponents to be silenced and downgraded by all means. Never become angry when Muslims debate relentlessly with you. Argue on behalf of the truth by all means, but do it charitably and tactfully and, above all, avoid sheer confrontation and quarreling.

Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. *1 Peter 3:15-16*.

When the occasion arises where you are obliged to expose some of the weaknesses of Islam, never be directly critical or judgmental but speak sensitively and purposefully.

We do not mean you should consider all Muslims as opponents! But no doubt some will oppose your witness and show their misunderstanding of the Gospel. Then you have to correct them, but *with patience and gentleness*. (*Christian Witness Among Muslims*, p. 23).

A Christian who can “keep his head when all around are losing theirs” will give a salutary witness to the quietness of his confidence in Christ as well as the fact that love for all men is the real motive behind his message. A Christian writer wisely counsels that a sense of humor and patience are prime virtues for you to acquire in dialogue with a Muslim” (Register, *Dialogue and Interfaith Witness with Muslims*, p. 17). Remember at all times that you are dealing with people and that genuine love is the only proper motive in evangelism.

There is a story that the sun and the wind were one day having an argument. “You have no power”, said the wind, “you are just stuck up there in the sky, bound by the forces of gravity, impotent and immobile”. Just then a man with a coat walked past. The sun said to the wind, “If you are so strong and mobile, see if you can blow the coat off the man’s back”. The wind blew furiously, but the man just pulled the coat all the more tightly around himself. “Stand back”, said the sun, “and let me see what I can do”. The sun poured out its warm rays upon the man who soon became uncomfortable and duly removed his coat.

If we desire to see Muslims remove their opposition to the Gospel and shed their beliefs for the faith of Christ, we too will only succeed when they feel the warm rays of Christian love and compassion rather than the cold winds of arrogance and point-seeking confrontation.

2. The Christian’s Attitude to Muhammad and Islam.

Just as Christians will want to speak of Jesus to Muslims, so Muslims will soon seek to introduce Muhammad into the conversation. Very often the Christian will be faced with a simple question, “What do you think of Muhammad?” On many occasions, where relationships are amicable, this question will be purely one of inquiry. The Muslim is just interested to know what the Christian’s assessment of Muhammad really is. On other occasions, in the company of Muslims who are heated and provocative, the question will come like bait attached to a hook. The Muslim, looking for a good reason to vilify the Christian, will seize on anything that sounds like disrespect for his prophet to give him a solid mouthful. Christians must be sensitive to Muslims, irrespective of the atmosphere, and handle the question as fairly and as objectively as they can. Those who seek favor with Muslims by lavishing praise on Muhammad will only discredit their own witness, while those who are immediately forcefully critical of him are likely to alienate their hearers and injure their feelings. Once again there is a deep need for a sense of balance in our attitudes and perhaps the best approach is neither to praise nor to bury him.

If Islam is criticized by the Christian, unnecessary opposition may be aroused. If Islam is commended, the impression will be made that the Christian is really a Muslim at heart. The Christian teacher or preacher must know what the Muslim believes, and must try to state the full Christian message in the way least offensive to him. (Miller, *A Christian's Response to Islam*, p. 149).

THE BIBLICAL APPROACH TO MUSLIMS

1. Islam's Rejection of the Christian Gospel.

An eager young Christian, full of joy and the Spirit of God, sets out to make his first contact with a Muslim. He knocks at the door of a Muslim home and when the owner opens the door and enquires about the purpose of his visit, the young man replies: "I have come to tell you the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified for you and died for your sins. Now if you will repent and accept him as your Lord and Savior, you will be saved and go to heaven". What does the eager young evangelist expect? That the Muslim will immediately respond, "This is the most wonderful thing I have ever heard in my life. Where can I be baptized?" If he does, he is in for a surprise.

The Muslim will probably say to him, "How can you ask us to believe that God let his Son die on a cross? If you have a son and see someone trying to kill him, will you stand by idly and let it happen?" When the young man feels obliged to concede that he would, of course, step in to save his son, the Muslim replies: "Then you must not ask us to believe that God just stood aloof watching his Son die. We Muslims believe Jesus was only a prophet, albeit a very great one, and because God loved his prophet so much he raised him to heaven and saved him from crucifixion. But you want us to believe he was even closer to God, that he was the Son of God, and yet God did nothing to save him? Sorry, I think you should go and talk to someone else". The young man leaves the home deflated somewhat stunned, and very much perplexed. Where did the young man go wrong?

His error was to use a direct line of approach that might work with some people but one that can only fail with Muslims. The Qur'an distances itself from Christianity by denying two things about Jesus Christ. Firstly, it denies that he is the Son of God in emphatic language:

The Jews call 'Uzair a son of God, and the Christians call Christ the Son of God. That is a saying from their mouth; (In this) they but imitate what the Unbelievers of old used to say. God's curse be on them: how they are deluded away from the Truth! *Surah 9:30*

They say, "God hath begotten a son!" - Glory be to Him! He is self-sufficient! His are all things in the heaven and on earth! No warrant have ye for this! *Surah 10:68*

In Muhammad's time the Arabs worshipped idols and these were often female deities whom the Arabs considered to be intercessors with Allah (three are mentioned by name in Surah 53:19-20, namely Al-Lat, Al-Uzza, and Manat). When Muhammad denounced the polytheism of his countrymen and called on them to believe in Allah alone, they responded that they did indeed consider Allah to be the Supreme Being, but that these deities were the "daughters of Allah" whose intercession with Allah was to be invoked. Muhammad rightly rejected this as idolatry and from the start called on his people to worship Allah alone. His message, as recorded in his exhortation to his nephew Ali at the time he was contemplating converting to Muhammad's cause, was simply:

"Bear witness that there is no god but Allah alone without associate, and disavow al-Lat and al-Uzza, and renounce rivals". (Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasulallah*, p. 115).

This became the theme of his whole mission (though it is recorded that he at one time made a concession to the pagan Arabs and honored their deities - see pp. 117-129 in the companion volume to this book), and it is summed up in one of the most well-known Surahs of the Qur'an:

Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, the Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten and there is none like unto Him. *Surah 112:1-4*.

When Muhammad met Christians who claimed that they, too, believed in God as the Supreme Being but that they believed that Jesus was the Son of God and that he was the "one mediator between God and men" (1 Timothy 2:5), Muhammad was unable to distinguish between their beliefs and those of the pagan Arabs and concluded that Christian belief in Jesus as the Son of God was as much *shirk* ("associating" partners with God) as the Arab belief that Al-Lat and others were daughters of God. To this day, this misunderstanding causes Muslims to vehemently reject belief in Jesus as the Son of God.

The other great truth that the Qur'an denies about Jesus is his crucifixion. It is equally emphatically rejected, through in only one verse in the whole book which reads:

That they said (in boast), "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah"; - but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them . . . for a surety they killed him not:- *Surah 4:157*

There is no hint at any point in the Qur'an that Muhammad ever knew that the crucifixion of Jesus was relative to Christian beliefs and it is denied simply as an unfounded calumny of the Jews. Certainly there is nothing to suggest that he had any knowledge of the whole atoning purpose of the event. Nevertheless, for reasons best known to Muhammad, he denied the crucifixion as a fact of history.

As a result of these two denials, Islam and Christianity are, in a sense, as far from one another as the east is from the west. Muhammad denied the two pillars on which the whole of Christianity is founded - the deity and crucifixion of Jesus. The New Testament well defines him as "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 2:20), and although Muhammad spoke highly of Jesus in other ways, his attitude at this point was quite dogmatic - *neither Lord nor Savior*.

It is probably for this reason more than any other that Muslims are the hardest people on earth to reach with the Gospel. Islam is the only religion which, by definition in its own Scriptures, denies the deity and crucifixion of Jesus. This explains why the young man, who approached the first Muslim he met with a typically traditional evangelical approach, was so thoroughly rebuffed.

Ever since mission work among Muslims began in earnest in the last century Christian missionaries have sought effective methods of evangelizing Muslims. All over the world Muslims are deliberately programmed against the fundamental doctrines of Christianity and no direct method of evangelism is ever likely to prove successful among them. A number of alternative methods have been suggested, many of which seem to create more problems than they purport to solve. Our attitude is that the Bible, being God's complete and final code of conduct for life and authority for all things secular and religious, must assuredly set out a methodology for reaching people in a cross-cultural and, especially as here, a cross-religious context. We will be on safe ground, surely, if we can find such a model in the Scriptures and be careful to apply the Biblical method of evangelizing people from another religious background. I have no doubt that the Bible does indeed set forth clearly the method we should use and will therefore proceed to analyze what the *Biblical* approach to Muslims should be. We shall turn to the Book of Acts and the very beginning of Christian mission in the world to see how the Gospel was first preached in alien environments.

2. Paul's Approach to the Jews at Thessalonica.

The Apostle Paul was the early church's great missionary to the world and he came into contact with men of many nations and different cultural and religious backgrounds. I believe we can learn much from the following passage which briefly describes the method of approach he used among the Jews of Thessalonica:

And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ". Acts 17:2-3.

There are three points that are mentioned in this passage that are of considerable relevance to our subject and we shall examine them briefly in order. Firstly, we read that for three weeks *he argued with them*. He entered freely into debate and discussion with them on the whole subject of his message, being quite willing to put its veracity to the test of scrutiny and critical analysis. This was nothing exceptional, in fact it was the rule in his contacts with the Jews, and there is clear evidence that he took the initiative in creating debate and dialogue with them. At Ephesus he entered the synagogue "and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8) and, when the Jews opposed him, he went to the Gentiles and "argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9).

There is, therefore, obviously nothing wrong with argument and debate and, in fact, we have a clear Biblical sanction for it. Unfortunately there are many today who are strongly against any form of argument in the preaching of the Gospel. We are constantly being told that the spirit of debate and argument among Muslims belonged to the "confrontation-method" of men like Pfander and St. Clair-Tisdall of a past generation and that we need, in this age, a "constructive" and a more "loving" approach. A good example of this attitude is to be found in the following exhortation to missionaries among Muslims:

Avoid argument with individual professed fanatics. Little if any good is accomplished by meeting them. Seldom answer or discuss questions that are asked while preaching. . . . I know a missionary, who in some respects is a very able man. His favorite method of preaching the Gospel to Moslems is by controversial argument. When one of his meetings was finished, the Moslems went away very angry, and one of them was heard to say, "That man has the religion of a beast". I have never heard of that missionary as being the

instrument of leading one Moslem to Christ. (Esselstyn, "What to Preach to Moslems" *The Muslim World*, Vol. 12, p. 67).

It has become fashionable to label any form of argument with Muslims as uncharitable and to suggest that a genuinely Christlike approach must disdain debate on theological matters. No allowance is made for a form of argument that can be highly spiritual and profitable.

Is it a new, a modern idea forsooth that missionaries must go in the spirit of love to win the Moslems? God forbid. It is as old as the first missionary, and the spirit of love will ever be the only spirit in which any lasting work will be done for the Master. (Logan, "Our Approach to Moslems" *The Muslim World*, Vol. 13, p. 390).

A healthy argument to establish the validity of the Gospel message has sound Biblical authority and it is my personal experience that many Muslims will consider the message of the Gospel more seriously when they hear a sound argument to vindicate the foundation on which it is laid. In fact, when Christians deliberately avoid any discussion on the credibility of their message and on the justification they might have for their convictions, Muslims invariably conclude that they cannot vindicate their faith. The message is gently disregarded as the product of Christian fervor and emotion. "The weak and flabby attitude towards Islam taken up by some today in the name of Christian love and sympathy can only breed contempt from the Moslem's standpoint" (Logan, "Our Approach to Moslems", *The Muslim World*, Vol. 13, p. 391). Christians must not only know *what* they believe, they must also be able to explain *why* they believe it.

Arguments that become quarrels and wrangles are obviously to be avoided, but so much can be gained for the glory of God by a Christian who can patiently, charitably and steadfastly give a thorough justification for the message he proclaims. The following passage states this whole principle very finely:

Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. *1 Peter 3:15-16*.

The Apostle Paul likewise declared that no man should be admitted as an elder unless he could not only "give instruction in sound doctrine" *but also* be able "to confute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). God is glorified when Christian men effectively defend the truth of the Gospel, unbelieving Muslims are often persuaded by such proofs (viz. the well-known Maulana Imad-ud-Din who became a Christian after hearing Pfander's messages), and Muslim converts yearn for such proofs and are greatly strengthened in the faith when they are supplied.

The second thing we learn from Paul's approach to the Jews at Thessalonica is that he argued with them *from the Scriptures*. He did not rely on smooth talk, empty clichés, theological dogmas, doctrinal assertions or sparkling new methods. He reasoned at all times from the Word of God and it is my own experience that a defense of the Gospel is never more powerfully based than when it is founded on the Scriptures. Muslims may not accept the Bible as the Word of God but that is no reason to avoid using it in preference for rational doctrinal arguments calculated to persuade his intellect. The Bible *is* the Word of God, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12), and when a Christian, who is well-read in it, can use it with confidence and conviction, Muslims will always be brought face-to-face with its truths. The well-known Christian scholar of Islam, Dr. Kraemer, once declared that "especially in the world of Islam to present Christianity as a set of doctrines is the most awkward way conceivable . . . Islam itself is creedal and doctrinal to the core. To present Christianity as a set of doctrines is to arouse the militantly intellectualist spirit of Islam"

(Addison, *The Christian Approach to the Moslem*, p. 294). Christians must endeavor to be *Biblical* in their witness rather than doctrinal or rational in their approach.

The third thing we learn from the passage under consideration is that Paul argued from the Scriptures, *explaining and proving* that Jesus was the Christ. We are once again back at the question of debate and discussion. Paul was so sure of his message that he had more than sufficient courage to put it to the acid test of critical analysis. Indeed, as we have seen, he keenly entered into debate with the Jews, persuaded that his message would have far more impact if he could ground it firmly on sound evidences. Not only, therefore, should we not avoid debate and controversy, but in the spirit of 1 Peter 3:15-16 should willingly engage in it. As one Christian with experience among Muslims has put it, “Too many people jump to the conclusion that controversy in every sense is harmful” (Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Muslims*, p. 39). He goes on to say:

But you may be sure of one thing; if you open your mouth in an effort to get your message across, you are implicitly engaging in controversy. When dealing with Muslims you are up against an either-or; either contra-version, or you keep quiet. The reason for this is obvious. He already has a “version” which is contrary to the “version” you want him to accept. It is puerile to say, “Don’t indulge in controversy but try to win men to Christ”. He already has a ‘version’ of Christ; your version is contrary to his, and he has a perfect right to want to argue about it (Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Muslims*, p. 40).

The writer concludes by saying that from Christ’s own “method of approach you can see that controversy is unavoidable if you want to get your message across” (op. cit., p. 42). Both Jesus and Paul regularly engaged in debate, proving the truth of their message and reproving those who opposed it. I doubt whether the one was crucified and the other beheaded for “lovingly” abstaining from all forms of controversy with their opponents - and there cannot be two finer examples for correct methods of evangelical witness than Jesus and Paul.

In the Synoptical Gospels Jesus is repeatedly seen in controversy with Pharisees and Sadducees alike, and at the bar of the high priest the supreme controversy as to His divine sonship is pressed to the point of death. In St. John’s Gospel, still more, He is engaged in longdrawn controversy with “the Jews”. St. Paul at Athens “reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and in the market-place every day with them that met with him”. (Weitbrecht Stanton, “Christ and Controversy”, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 12, p. 116).

The writer adds that “he will be a unique missionary to Moslems in the twentieth century who can escape discussion with them on the doctrines and practices which they have inherited from the Jew” (op. cit., p. 116). Continuing his study he comes to a very different conclusion from that of Essetstyn quoted earlier, and speaking of Pfander’s classical work *Mizan ul Haqq: The Balance of Truth*, he says:

I can remember no conversion of a thoughtful Moslem in which this book has not played some part. Recently, we hear, it is being eagerly read in Palestine. As a matter of experience, no less than of reason, controversy of the right kind has had, and is likely to retain, an essential place in missionary work among Moslems, as among other religions also. (Weitbrecht Stanton, “Christ and Controversy”, *The Muslim World*, Vol. 12, p. 118).

I have never ceased to be somewhat amazed and bemused at the suggestion that Christians should never indulge in argument with Muslims, for the Muslims themselves love argument and many of them are only too willing to enter into a charitable and friendly debate on the whole foundations of Christianity and Islam. The Christian who shirks the challenge not only misses a golden opportunity to give a thorough vindication of his beliefs but is also likely to appear to the Muslims to be evading the issues, an impression that can only have severe implications for the ultimate effect of his witness among them.

3. Paul's Preaching at Athens and Corinth.

We have analyzed the first basic principle of Biblical witness to Muslims, namely a willingness to make a good defense to those who, let it be said, rightly call us to account for the hope that is in us. As we follow Paul from Thessalonica to Athens and Corinth we shall discover the second great principle of witnessing across cultural and religious barriers and it is here, I believe, that we will find the one great method that Paul adopted in these circumstances and that applies so appropriately to Muslim evangelism. When Paul came to Athens he was met by a number of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who brought him to the Areopagus and called on him to declare his message. Paul began:

“Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god’. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”. *Acts 17:22-23*.

After speaking briefly of God's universal rule over all the earth and his desire that all men should seek after him with all their hearts, Paul added:

“Yet he is not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we, live and move and have our being’; as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring’. Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man”. *Acts 17:27-29*.

This brief record of Paul's address gives vital clues as to how to properly approach people from another background. Paul was speaking to Gentiles, in particular to Greeks who, on the one hand, worshipped a host of deities and, on the other, were nonetheless highly philosophical about life. Two things, I believe, should particularly be noted. Firstly, Paul found *common ground* with his hearers. He sought a point of contact through which he could communicate his message and found it in the inscription “to an unknown God”. He did not hesitate to relate his message directly to this inscription. “What you worship as unknown”, said Paul, “this I declare to you”. In so doing he very effectively set his Gospel against the background of their beliefs. Paul was not seeking to call the Athenians to a “foreign divinity” as they supposed (Acts 17:8), but rather to come to the full knowledge of the one true God who, by their own admission, was unknown to them. As Kenneth Cragg has put it (in his paper at the North American Conference referred to earlier in this book):

St. Paul brings to the people of the altar in Athens the news of the God of the gospel. But he says he is the God they “ignorantly worship”. He does not ask them to deny the intention of their worship but to find it informed into the truth of God in Christ. (McCurry, ed., *The Gospel and Islam*, p. 198).

Secondly, Paul did not disdain to quote their own poets to validate his message. The quotations in Acts 17:28 are both from Greek sources. The first (“In him we live and move and have our being”) comes from a poem attributed to Epimenides the Cretan, and the second (“For we are indeed his offspring”) is part of the fifth line of the *Phainomena* of Aratus the Cilician. It is very significant that the only texts quoted by Paul to establish his message come, not from the Old Testament, but from the writings of Greek poets, and we shall have more to say about this shortly. At this point however, it is important to note the principle that the Gospel can be vindicated from non-Biblical sources.

When Paul came down to Corinth after his sojourn at Athens, he was “occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:5). He was now among his own people, fellow Jews, and we mark a very obvious difference in his theme, though not in his approach. Once again he finds *common ground*, though this time it is in the hope of the Israelites in the coming Messiah. On this occasion any documentary evidence to attest his message would almost certainly have come from the Old Testament predictions of the coming Messiah.

My point will best be made if I look at Paul’s approach from the opposite angle. Let us imagine that, as he stood on the Areopagus, he began “Men of Greece and Athens, I am a Hebrew, born of Hebrews; with respect to the hope of Israel, in the coming Messiah of our people, I stand before you this day. The Messiah of Israel is Jesus of Nazareth and I can prove it by quoting from the writings of the Jewish prophets of old”. The Athenians would have been justified in being perplexed and bemused and saying to one another, “He is indeed a preacher of foreign divinities”. Disappointed at the lack of relevance in his message, let us imagine him in the synagogue of Corinth, determined to relate his preaching more effectively to the Gentile environment of Greece and Europe. He begins: “O Jews of Corinth, as I passed by and observed the objects of worship in your city, I found an inscription, ‘to an unknown God’. What you inhabitants of Corinth worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. You know, even Greek poets have said some things that I can use to prove my point”. I need hardly comment further! Once again he would have been dismissed. The reply would have been: “Our God is the God of Israel, he is anything but unknown to us. And as for Greek poets, who needs their wisdom when we have the Word of God himself in the writings of our prophets”?

Paul adapted his message to the environment he found himself in and always sought to set it against the background of the beliefs and convictions of the people he was addressing, even to the point of quoting their own records and proverbs in support of his proclamation. I believe we have here the Biblical model and method of reaching people of a different culture or religion with the Gospel. Notice how impressively Paul related his Gospel to both Jews and Greeks. At Thessalonica, while he was arguing in the local synagogue, he declared to the Jews present there:

“This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ”. *Acts 17:3*.

And at Athens, when he was among the Greek philosophers and free thinkers, he declared:

“What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you”. *Acts 17:23*.

On both occasions Paul used the words “this I proclaim to you”. To the Jews *this* Jesus was proclaimed as their long-awaited Messiah. To the Greeks *this God*, who raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 17:31), was proclaimed as the one whom they worshipped as unknown, of whom even some of their poets had spoken in their writings.

If this is, therefore, the Biblical method of approaching men of other creeds and cultures with the Gospel, how does it work in practice in Muslim evangelism? I believe the whole foundation of our approach must be to find *common ground* with Muslims, which is easy enough, because so much of the religious history of the Qur'an synchronises with Biblical history. In my view the very best ways of doing this are by relating the Gospel to the prophetic history preceding Jesus Christ and to the Qur'an's own teaching about Jesus. I will give detailed examples of how this can be done in practice in the coming chapters, but let me here establish the principle. Other Christian writers with experience among Muslims have also advocated this form of approach. One says:

In summary, it can be said that the common ground of the Quran and Old Testament in regard to the prophets should be thoroughly explored. This may well eventuate in the Muslim's giving serious consideration to the message that leads on from prophecy to prophetic fulfillment. (Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*, p. 136).

Another who makes the same point is G. M. Grant in his book *Religions of the World in Relation to Christianity*. An annotated bibliography of sources dealing with the Jesus of Islam sums up Grant's method, saying:

The author goes on to suggest that by following the lines of least resistance - common doctrines on the New Testament, Old Testament, and Jesus, for example - the Christian will cause the Muslim to feel a compelling attraction toward Christianity. (Wisner, *The Islamic Jesus*, p. 103).

When Christians take a traditional evangelical line of approach, simply setting Jesus forth as the Lord and Savior of all men, Muslims find security in dismissing the message as simply an exposition of Christian doctrine and belief, and they comfort themselves by resting in the doctrines and tenets of Islam instead. We need to penetrate, we need to challenge the Muslims where they are and stimulate a process of reflection by presenting the Gospel *against their own background*, against the Muslims' own views of Jesus and the prophetic history leading up to him.

Not only so but, as we have seen in the example of Paul, we have a clear Biblical sanction for quoting *their own scriptures* to make our message relevant. Paul did this with telling effect in Athens by quoting Greek poets and it is quite amazing to behold how, by quoting passages from the Qur'an as well as the Bible, a Christian can make the Gospel message thoroughly relevant to a Muslim. I intend to give numerous practical examples later in this book, but let it suffice for the moment to say that we have, here, a clear Biblical authority for this method.

We need to meet the Muslim where he is and make our message relevant to his own background and beliefs. By so doing Muslims will be obliged to examine more seriously the claims of the Gospel upon their souls and lives. I am reminded at this point of an incident in Jesus' own ministry which also establishes this point very emphatically. As he sat beside the well at Sychar in Samaria on his way to Galilee, a Samaritan woman came to draw water (John 4:7). No doubt she came every day from the city to draw water this, the only well in the region, and one of great sanctity in the eyes of the Samaritans because of its association with Jacob and his twelve sons (John 4:12). The journey was a significant reminder, day after day, of the need of water to sustain life on earth and the well itself became a symbol of life in a barren environment. Jesus related his message of life and hope directly to the well when he said to the woman:

"Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life". *John 4:13-14*.

How effectively he related the Gospel to the woman's own environment! His message was not a dry theological or doctrinal treatise, it was a living proclamation of the hope of eternal life. What better way to present it than by comparing it with the well that claimed the woman's attention every day, especially as the very need of a daily journey to the well testified to its limited usefulness.

If we are ever to make a real impact on the Muslims we must discover how to relate the message and claims of the Gospel to the beliefs of the Muslims themselves. The Apostle Paul himself shows, in one of his letters, that his method was not an incidental one but one which he had carefully defined in his mind and deliberately applied. Let us proceed to examine just how he described his approach to people from backgrounds different to his own.

4. Becoming a Muslim to the Muslims.

The Apostle Paul allows us insight into his mind, insofar as his approach to people of another cultural or religious background is concerned, in the ninth chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. He writes:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law - though not being myself under the law - that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law - not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ - that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

In these words we find the whole basis of his approach to the Greeks at Athens and the Jews at Corinth and Thessalonica. He would briefly examine his situation, assess the beliefs, heritage and background of his hearers, and connect the Gospel to these features. The Greeks worshipped an "unknown God" - he immediately related his gospel to this worship, even quoting from their own works where he found their teachings relevant to his message. Among Jews, however, he became as one of them, boldly proclaiming that Israel's long-awaited Messiah was Jesus of Nazareth. "To the Jews I became as a Jew" means, simply, that whenever he was among Jews he became like them, setting the whole of his Gospel against the background of the prophetic and ecclesiastical history of Israel, just as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews so effectively does throughout his exposition of the Gospel.

St. Paul feels himself compelled to make himself familiar with the conditions of others in the "natural order" so as rightly to be able to touch them with the Evangel. Instead of trying to change the natural order, he submits himself to their circumstances to give them the Evangel just where they are. (Christensen, *The Practical Approach to Muslims*, p. 187).

In the same way, as soon as he was among Gentiles, he presented Christ, not as the Messiah of the Jews, but as the fulfilment of all the philosophical strivings of the Greeks and as the revelation of a deity who appeared to be inevitably elusive and unknowable.

What difference did this make to the way he sought to communicate the Gospel? It meant that he was willing to rethink his message and present it in ways which Gentiles would understand. (Chapman, *You Go and Do the Same*, p. 51).

What, then, is the Biblical approach to Muslims in the light of this method into which the great apostle allows us to enter? It is simply this: in the same way that he became as a Jew to the Jews, so each of us must become as *a Muslim to the Muslims*. We must discover the beliefs of the Muslims, their view of prophetic history, their assessment of Jesus Christ, and their overall religious perception of life, *and present the Gospel against that background*. Samuel Zwemer, one of the most famous missionaries to Muslims, sums this up perfectly in saying:

We must become Moslems to the Moslem if we would gain them for Christ. We must do this in the Pauline sense, without compromise, but with self-sacrificing sympathy and unselfish love. The Christian missionary should first of all thoroughly know the religion of the people among whom he labours; ignorance of the Koran, the traditions, the life of Mohammed, the Moslem conception of Christ, social beliefs and prejudices of Mohammedans, which are the result of their religion, - ignorance of these is the chief difficulty in work for Moslems. (Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, p. 183).

We should follow Paul's fundamental method of achieving this goal; that is we should seek common ground with Muslims by establishing points of doctrine or belief which we hold in common with them, and then press on to show how the Gospel relates to them. Alternatively, as I intend to show in many practical ways shortly in this book, we must show that such common beliefs lead, of necessity and by implication, to the Gospel of God as it is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Zwemer goes on to emphasize this deep need of beginning with common ground by saying of each Christian who seeks to witness to a Muslim, "He should cultivate sympathy to the highest degree and an appreciation of all the great fundamental truths which we hold in common with Moslems" (Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, p. 183). This makes it so essential to know how Muslims think, what they believe, and to become fully acquainted with their attitudes, convictions and religious perceptions. Another Christian writer gives a similar overview of the proper Christian approach to Muslims in the light of Paul's varying approach to the Jews and Gentiles he met:

The apostle was, at such a time, patiently and sympathetically, to lead them to a fuller conception of the truth. To the Jew he became as a Jew, to the Greek, he became as a Greek. Had Mohammedans existed, to them, he would have become as a Mohammedan. The missionary to Moslems will therefore do well to ask himself this question, "Have I become as a Mohammedan to lead these Mohammedans to Christ? Have I absorbed their ideas? Have I acquainted myself with their way of thinking? And, looking at things from their point of view, can I make the truth acceptable to them?" (Purdon, "Our Angle of Approach" *The Muslim World*, Vol. 14, p. 140).

The same writer also does not fail to observe that the foundation on which this whole form of evangelism is based is the establishment of common ground. He says of Paul:

He preached to them Jesus and the resurrection, but when they "encountered" him, he immediately seized upon a common ground from which to lead them to a higher platform of truth. (Purdon, "Our Angle of Approach", *The Muslim World* Vol. 14, p. 141).

In my view, as stated already, there are two great themes in the Qur'an, where Christians can find common ground with Muslims which should be extensively explored in our witness. The first is in the prophetic histories of the Qur'an and the Bible insofar as these coincide, and the second is in the Qur'an's teaching about our Lord Jesus Christ to the extent that the Qur'an agrees with the Bible. The coming chapters, on Abraham in

the Qur'an and the Bible and the uniqueness of Jesus in both books, to some extent cover these two themes respectively. The chapter following these two goes on to give even further examples.

When I first read through the Qur'an I was struck by the two great denials the book contains about Jesus Christ, namely his deity and his crucifixion. I have already pointed out that in these denials the whole foundation of Christianity is summarily disregarded, and I was soon led to conclude that the Qur'an stood as an antithesis and stumbling block to the Gospel. In later years, however, I set out to examine and compare more carefully those teachings in the Bible about Jesus Christ with which the Qur'an agrees and, to my great delight, I realized that, even though the religion of Islam itself is hardly a stepping stone to Christianity, the Qur'an's positive teaching about Jesus Christ most certainly is. There are numerous places in the book where the Qur'an acknowledges Biblical truths about Jesus Christ and, by analyzing these in conversation with Muslims, a Christian well instructed in both the Qur'an and the Bible can show very comprehensively that Jesus Christ was far more than just a prophet. In my chapter on the uniqueness of Jesus I trust I will leave no stone unturned in showing just how extensive the evidences are for this approach.

This is what it means "to become as a Muslim to the Muslims". By examining the Qur'an's teaching about Jesus, to the extent that it agrees with the Bible and provides common ground between us, a Christian can show quite convincingly that Jesus was far more than a prophet and he can use this as a platform from which to lead to the fullness of the Gospel as the only possible explanation for the unique features of his life and the mission he came to accomplish.

To become then "as a Mohammedan" means - to know and utilize divine truth in the Islamic faith, and from these seek to lead the devotees of Mohammed to seize the only truth that can really satisfy their soul. (Purdon, "Our Angle of Approach", *The Muslim World*, Vol. 14, p. 141).

Before launching into a study of practical examples, however, I believe there are still a few things that need to be said about the whole subject of witnessing to Muslims as well as our handling of Muslim converts and we shall proceed to examine these in the meantime.