

Reaching Islam Today: Doing It Paul's Way

Christianity and Islam are two faiths that, at one level, have some things in common. They are both monotheistic, believing in only one eternal, omniscient, omnipotent God who is creator of all. Both adhere to a special revelation claim whereby God has communicated authoritatively; each faith reveres a particular person whom God has chosen to reveal truth. However, there are significant differences that, when looked at on a grassroots level, place the two faiths worlds apart. The nature and character of God and his revelation to the world, the nature of humankind and the means of salvation are, on a closer inspection, completely at odds between these religions. Only the naïve, or intellectuals who are so reductionistic that truth itself is sacrificed, could hold Christianity and Islam as being compatible at the fundamental level.

Paul's approach to non-Christian religions is best illustrated in Acts 17:16-34. He was the evangelist-apologist exemplar. He did not view apologetics simply as intellectual warfare, but spiritual warfare (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Paul's experience in Athens illustrates how contextualizing the gospel so as not to compromise its fundamental truths while, at the same time, demonstrating its relevance to all people everywhere is the most effective way of reaching other world religions. Even though Paul was dealing with the intellectual-religious climate of First-century Greece, there are important apologetic and evangelistic principles that can be applied when speaking to adherents of Islam.

Essentially, Paul acknowledged points of similarities and renounced those things that were contrary to the gospel. In speaking to the Athenians, Paul did not come out and declare "the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God," though he believed this full well (1 Cor. 10:20). Paul knew the gospel was "foolishness to the Gentiles," he also had a passion to proclaim the truth to every person that some might be saved (1 Cor. 1:23; 9:22).

Paul was not impressed with the culture of Athens; he was irritated by the idolatry. But this is the very charge the Muslim would level against the Christian. The doctrine of God in Muslim thought is so opposed to any ideas of plurality or complexity. The slightest hint of Allah expressing himself in human form is unthinkable. Nevertheless, Paul proclaimed the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus in the marketplace (17:17-18).

Since these would be some of the major issues to contend with in confronting a Muslim (Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection) it would be important to begin by establishing some common ground between the two faiths. Common ground is important because it shows a genuinely humble effort to discover truth. Christianity may indeed contain all religions truth, but it does not follow that other religions possess none. Common ground also affirms our respect for the opponent despite any difference. This is precisely what the Apostle Paul did with his pagan Greek audience (17:18ff).

It is significant that Paul did not continue proclaiming Jesus and the resurrection at this point. This would have been to invoke argument rather than dialogue. Instead, Paul took the opportunity to get their attention by first showing that he knew of and respected their culture (17:22-23). Rather than flattering his audience, Paul was simply engaging their attention by commending them for being religious.

Common points of reference with the Muslim might include: (1) affirming the truth of only one eternal God; (2) his absolute sovereignty and supremacy; (3) difficulties in the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility; (4) creation by God ex nihilo. This last point of reference is precisely what Paul used in proclaiming the existence of the one true God.

But Paul recognized that it wasn't enough to know God as Sovereign Creator; one must understand that God is transcendent. Not only is it impossible to contain God (17:24), he is entirely self-sufficient and in need of nothing from his creation (v. 25a). Rather than we supplying his needs, he supplies all our needs. God, being the source of all life, has the authority to determine the geographic boundaries and times within which everyone exists (v. 26). All of this is important in establishing the proper distance between Creator and creature. Both Paul and Mohammed would agree that blurring the lines between Creator and creature is the beginning and end of all idolatry.

At this point, it is possible to use these principles from Paul in affirming a degree of similarity between Islam and Christianity. Neither faith, up to this point, would be compromised in their general beliefs regarding God and his creation. Yet this knowledge alone is insufficient for having a personal and redeeming relationship with God as Paul goes on to say.

It is at this juncture in Paul's Athenian encounter that dialogue between the Muslim and the Christian would take a turn. Even though God is transcendent and wholly other than his creation, he is also immanent—not simply in a spatial or temporal way but in a deeply personal way (v. 27). For he desires that all "would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (17:27).

While Islamic theology asserts that Allah is "the Compassionate, the Merciful" (Qur'an 1:2), the individual Muslim knows God only from a distance and only in relation to the Islamic community. Paul proclaims that God is "not far from each one of us." The Muslim knows hardly of a personal God who is "near to all who call on him" (Ps. 145:18; cf., also, Deut. 4:7; Ps. 119:151; Lam. 3:57; Acts 23:11; Phil. 4:5; Heb. 7:19; Jm. 4:8).

It is especially important to note that Islam denies several tenets of Christianity and in doing so places itself worlds apart from it. First, the Qur'an expressly renounces the triune nature of God (Surah, 4:171; 5:76-79). Second, the Qur'an denies the deity of Christ (Surah 4:169; 5:115-118). Third, it denies the sonship of Christ (Surah 112:1-4). Finally, it denies Jesus' death by crucifixion (Surah 4:155-159).

While all Christians may, and certainly should, respect the Muslim for holding these opposing views, it is intellectual suicide to regard them as equally valid assertions of religious truth. Truth transcends geographic, national, cultural, and chronological boundaries. To allow the Muslim and the Christian his/her claim to the truth in these matters is laudable. This is the quintessence of religious freedom. But it is an unwarranted epistemological leap to allow that both actually contain the truth on these matters.

For example, it is absurd to maintain that there is no contradiction between the statements "Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh" and "Jesus Christ is not God manifest in the flesh." Paul would never accommodate such homogenous thinking, viz., that world religions merely complement rather than contradict one another. Truth does not come in degrees. There are no gradations of truth. A proposition, when made about a state of affairs corresponding to reality, is either true or it is not. There is no alternative position.

Aside from distorted and heretical teachings Mohammed may have been denouncing (cf. Harold Netland's *Dissonant Voices*, pp. 76, 92), Paul would have but one strategy in confronting Islam. It was the "good news about Jesus and the resurrection" including the demand to repent of sinful ignorance in worshipping false gods in light of the impending judgment OT come (17:18, 30-31). Paul was consistent wherever he went. He was not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16) as his passion and doctrine were always one and the same: "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Whether in Athens or Mecca, Paul would have challenged the Muslim with the central tenets of the gospel. It is here that Islam and Christianity go beyond incompatibility; they are contradictory!

While the Qur'an affirms the humanity of Jesus, it denies his deity. Paul explicitly affirms both his humanity and deity (Phil. 2:6-7). The Lord Jesus is essentially and morally identical with God the Father. Moreover, Jesus is numerically identical with the Godhead, which is a "tri-plex" unity consisting of one divine essence with three eternal distinctions (not divisions), namely, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Paul makes it clear that the purpose for Christ's coming was to assume our guilt (1 Cor. 5:7; 2 Cor. 5:21). Jesus' death is closely tied to the idea of deliverance from sin's power and reign (Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13). According to Netland (*Dissonant*, p. 89, fn. 37), Islam views sin as weakness rather than rebellion. But, it is God's holiness that is offended by sin, not his authority or sovereignty.

Another dimension of the cross of Christ is one of substitution. Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3). Jesus offered his life in exchange for our new life. Jesus was made to be sin (2 Cor. 5:14, 21) and became cursed for others (Gal. 3:13).

Jesus' death is also the propitiation of God's anger toward sin (Rom. 3:25). The idea is the removal of God's anger. Propitiation is tied to our sins, which provoke the wrath of God (Col. 3:5-6; 1 Thess. 2:16). Redemption is the benefit that results from the cross. Believers are freed from the guilt of sin, the penalty of sin, and the power of sin (Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). Christ's death redeems believers from a "guilty" verdict and pronounces them "just" (viz., in good moral standing before God, cf., Rom. 3:24). In addition, forgiveness is a result of the believer's redemption where the offense of sin is pardoned and all obstacles in having a relationship with God are removed.

Another result of the cross is reconciliation between God and the individual. There exists, prior to faith in Jesus, an colossal hostility toward God (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21). Paul states that God loves the sinner in spite of his/her enmity toward him (Rom. 5:8). However, it is the grace of God that takes the initiative in the reconciliation process (see esp. Eph. 2:4-5). Contrary to Islamic thought, humanity is incapable of responding to or even recognizing God's grace. In other words, God reconciles the world of repentant sinners to himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Col. 1:22).

The cross of the Lord Jesus demonstrates God's love for all, justice to all, example to all, and victory over evil once and for all. A holy and righteous God must act against sin. If he were not to act against sin, he would cease to be worthy of worship. Salvation from sin is impossible unless the price of sin is paid in full, meeting the demands of God's justice. Out of love, God accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection what we could never accomplish for ourselves. Jesus paid the penalty that we ourselves incurred, taking the consequence for our sin upon himself, thus becoming for us a once-for-all representative, substitutionary sacrifice offered to God. Because of the cross the effects of redemption will be enjoyed by all who, through faith, enter into an eternal relationship with God that is filled with peace and purpose.

Nowhere is the distance between Islam and Christianity so great than among the means of salvation. Salvation by submission rather than by God's grace through faith is the overriding difference. Conversion for Islam is assent (sincere as it may be) to the Five Pillars. More than just religious duty, radical submission to the Five Pillars of Islam is obligatory for everyone who would hope to enjoy a relationship with Allah.

Paul proclaims the exact opposite. The means of salvation is exclusively by God's grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Whether it be the Mosaic economy or the Qur'an, no system of human effort is sufficient to establish a relationship with the Creator. For Judaism, the Law assumed an existing relationship between the believer and God. It was never intended to establish a relationship. Rather, it was more for the maintenance of a relationship that already existed. The function of the Law is to protect, preserve, and progress the relationship between the believer and God. However, the basis of the relationship with God is solely upon the magnificent grace of God that shines in both the old and new covenants.

Christ came so that men and women might not be under any legalistic system. No one can hope, by conformity OT any laws or creeds, to be found acceptable to God (Gal. 2:16; 3:10-11; 5:1). Islam is a system of bondage, compelling all to become slaves to a god who is a master over them. Obedience and submission for Christianity is an expression of a loving relationship with God and what he has done on behalf of the believer. Moreover, the Christian can be assured of their standing before God. For Islam obedience and submission is the way of salvation and there is no assurance, since all is dependent upon the Muslim's conformance/compliance. Both systems are diametrically opposed to the other.

In conclusion, it has been shown that Paul's message was the same everywhere he went in the First Century world. While recognizing common ground in other religions, he never stopped short of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. Paul had a passion for the lost that would not die. So long as he was able, he never ceased telling others about Jesus.

Knowledge of common ground between Islam and Christianity is essential for effective communication of the gospel. But it should never be viewed as an end in itself. To do so is to fall short of proclaiming the good news. Similarities between the faiths must always be scrutinized in light of the differences. Yet an intense concern for those who reject the tenets of the gospel message and an awareness of their fate should consume us at every moment. This was Paul's passion and it must be ours also as we proclaim the heart and mind of God in the power of the Spirit to the unbelieving world.