

“A. S. Ibrahim is a gift to the body of Christ and a writing machine! This book, *Reaching Your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel*, so well combines his comprehensive understanding of the Islamic faith with his pastoral heart for reaching Muslims with the life-changing gospel message. I highly recommend this work.”

Adam W. Greenway, President, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I want you to join the work of God among Muslims today—we are his workers.’ With that invitation, A. S. Ibrahim brings the Christian world a book that will equip us to do just that: become a part of sharing the hope of the gospel with Muslims. Even if you are not preparing for missions work overseas, *Reaching Your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel* is far more relevant than most of us realize, as the Muslim population continues to grow not only worldwide but also in the United States. To this reality, Ibrahim grants insights and practical advice that will spur optimism for anyone desiring to share Christ with those who remain captive to the false religion of Islam. More importantly, time with this book will make you a better disciple maker.”

Paul Chitwood, President, International Mission Board

“If you struggle to share Christ with your Muslim coworker or neighbor, you need this book from A. S. Ibrahim. Divided into two parts, it offers valuable insights into understanding Islam and Muslims while providing a practical toolbox for witnessing. Ibrahim says we should make it our ‘practice to open the Bible with Muslims,’ and that’s what he does in this excellent book. Recognizing that there is no one-size-fits-all method to reaching Muslims, *Reaching Your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel* points to the authority of Scripture as its foundation. From the role of prayer before, during, and after evangelism to asking questions as Jesus did, Ibrahim constantly turns us to the Bible as our guide to being effective witnesses and loving examples to Muslims around us. A recommended read for all who seek to be salt and light to the nations.”

Carol B. Ghattas, author and speaker, with over thirty years in cross-cultural ministry among Muslims

“As I have taught evangelism in colleges and seminaries for the past thirty-five years, I have fielded many questions about witnessing to Muslims. I am grateful for this helpful new resource from my friend and colleague A. S. Ibrahim. Ibrahim knows Islam. He is rightly viewed as one of the leading scholars on Islam in our day. But he also understands the gospel and has a passion for Muslims to hear this salvific message. I wish this book had been available to me years ago. I am glad it is available today. It is an incredibly helpful resource!”

Timothy K. Beougher, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism and Church Growth, Associate Dean, Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“With almost two billion Muslims in the world, it is essential that Christians today not only understand Islam but are able to clearly communicate the message of the gospel with those who follow Islam. In this book, A. S. Ibrahim has provided an invaluable guide that will help Christians share the good news of Jesus Christ with Muslims all around the world. Lord willing, this book will serve the global church by giving Christians the tools and the confidence to faithfully share the gospel of Jesus Christ with Muslim family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.”

Paul M. Akin, Provost, Senior Vice President for Academic Administration, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Ibrahim encourages us to ‘be prepared, preach the word, and reach the world,’ and this incredibly helpful book gives very practical tools and training to help us proclaim Christ clearly to our Muslim friends. This is a much-needed resource both for Christians heading to serve overseas and for those who desire to share Christ with their neighbors down the street.”

Cyndi Logsdon, Director of Church Groups, McLean Bible Church; former missionary to central Asia

Reaching Your Muslim Neighbor with the Gospel

A. S. Ibrahim

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To Pastor Menes Abdul Noor (1929–2015), who taught me evangelism not only by his profound words and creative insights but also by his Christlike example and genuine love for Muslims.

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Introduction

AS A CHRISTIAN GROWING UP IN EGYPT, I was regularly surrounded by Muslims. My neighbors, friends, and classmates were Muslims. It was natural to be exposed to Islamic claims and Muslim practices. There Islam is the religion of the state and of the majority. From an early age, I learned how Muslims prayed, what they thought about Christianity and Christians, and how they cherished their prophet, their Quran, and their religion. As Christians in a Muslim-majority country, I and my church family always wanted to evangelize Muslims, but that was risky for at least two reasons: Christians are forbidden to preach about Christ outside the church building, and Muslims are under tremendous pressure because abandoning Islam could lead to death. But even with these significant hurdles, Muslims were coming to Christ, being baptized and discipled, and witnessing to their relatives.

In those days, Christians in Egypt were on fire for Christ. Although the doors were not wide open for evangelism in the 1980s and 1990s, many Christians were operating within a different paradigm. There was a growing awakening to the power of prayer. We knew that it was necessary to speak with God about Muslims before speaking with Muslims about God. We were passionate

about Jesus's words "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). My church in Cairo held weekly prayer meetings on a weekday evening, after people finished work or school. Sometimes we had to schedule them early in the morning before everyone went to work. Most church members attended these gatherings. We called them intercessory prayer meetings, and they attuned us to God's heart for Muslims. We knew we were partners with God in proclaiming the gospel. One particular prayer so captivated me that I clearly remember it today: "Lord, grant us to win many souls to you." This prayer aligned our hearts with the Holy Spirit. We believed the gospel to be true and convincing, and we knew it must be preached.

This was true not only in Egypt. I saw Muslims come to Christ in Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. I attended intercessory prayer meetings in each of these places. Christians were not silent about the gospel, and God was clearly at work among Muslims. While this was indeed the case in the 1980s and 1990s, it is even more expansive and glorious now. I know former Muslims in these places, and their numbers are growing. In the internet age, Muslims have more resources for investigating the claims of Islam, and Christians are ready to answer. A so-called Muslim-blocked country—as a term—was understandable in past generations, but it is unfathomable in our days. Christian missionaries are active, and many Muslims are asking critical questions about the religion into which they were born. Multitudes are openly abandoning Islam. The gospel of Christ is penetrating places that have been known for centuries as strongholds of Islam: Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia; Sanaa and Aden in Yemen; Tehran, Mashhad, and Isfahan in Iran. Even the Uighur Muslims in China have gospel proclaimers in their midst. We also hear of the tremendous work

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of the gospel in the largest populous Muslim country, Indonesia. This is a great day for Muslim evangelism.

I write this book with Christian readers in mind. I write for those who have a passion for Christ but who may know nothing about Islam and perhaps know no Muslims at all. It is important to change these two matters: you must learn about Islam, and you must befriend Muslims. I write for a frustrated Christian who does not know how to start a conversation with a Muslim. I want you to join the work of God among Muslims today—we are his workers (1 Cor. 3:9). My hope is to exhort you to partner with the multitudes of Christ proclaimers worldwide. Whether locally or globally, Muslims are our neighbors. I encourage you not only to accept the Muslims around you but also to be filled with God's compassion for them. I pray that you will see Muslims as Jesus sees them. They are not projects or targets of strategies but people loved and sought by the wonderful heart of God.

Writing a book on evangelism to Muslims is not a glamorous endeavor. I approach the topic with a deep sense of humility since the matter of saving souls is sacred. It involves people loved by God and their eternal destinies—"Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). At the outset, I concede that I do not know everything about Muslims or Islam. While I have indeed studied Islam, interacted with numerous Muslims, and proclaimed Jesus to them, I am still learning and growing. I saturate my writing in prayer because I believe we all need to grow in our love for Muslims and in our proclamation of the gospel to non-Christians. I am convinced that Jesus is the only way to heaven. We need proclaimers who still speak of God's holiness, the eternal punishment for sin, and salvation through Christ. In writing this book, I want to serve as an encourager to you, as a fellow believer to all those who seek to share his good news with Muslims.

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In the following chapters, I aim to help you understand the Muslim mindset, so that you can relate to Muslims more effectively. Why do they say this or do that? What do they think about Christianity, Christians, the Bible, Jesus, or even the West? If you don't understand their paradigm, your words will hardly resonate with them. If they do not fathom the concept of sin, and you keep using the word, not only will you be wasting time and effort, but they might be eager to end the conversation or change the topic. We want our gospel conversations with Muslims to gain fruits—eternal ones.

I also aim to exhort you to evangelize Muslims with *confidence* and *boldness*. These are two important words, and we need them greatly as we reflect the image of Christ to Muslims—in ways they can comprehend. Most Westerners are too intimidated to talk about Islam, let alone to begin proclaiming the gospel to a Muslim neighbor. I want you to be confident that there are compelling answers to Islamic charges against Christianity. I want you to master these answers. In this book, we discuss important questions: Can God be triune? Can God have a Son? Can God be incarnate? Can we trust the Bible, or is it corrupted? While these are important questions in Christian-Muslim conversations, rest assured that they have convincing and reasonable responses. Once you learn these answers, you will develop confidence and boldness in sharing your faith lovingly. An essential part of your evangelism is to be “prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

To achieve the aims of this book, I have divided it into two major sections. In the first part, I introduce you to a Christian understanding of the many strands of Islam and the diversity of

Muslims. I help you distinguish Islam from Muslims, thinking critically about the former and growing in love for the latter. I also bring you closer to the overarching Islamic worldview and the Muslim mindset. This understanding is significant because it assists you in navigating conversations with Muslims. Finally, I discuss several Muslim misconceptions about Christianity and Christians and provide you with tools to refute them in order to prepare the way for gospel proclamation.

In the second part, I offer practical ways for you not only to connect with Muslims but also to communicate the gospel *clearly* and *effectively* to them. I encourage you to speak naturally about religious matters, thus overcoming a common tendency—particularly in Western circles—to avoid such topics. Relying on biblical passages, I introduce new approaches to evangelism and motivate you to ask Muslims good questions and answer them as a bridge to the gospel. I share many true stories of real encounters with Muslims (I have changed all names to protect privacy), as I explain how to engage in conversation and what to expect when things do not seem to progress. I also caution you to avoid pitfalls and mistakes in your gospel proclamations.

This book aims to help you begin experiencing the joy of proclaiming Christ's gospel intentionally and passionately among your Muslim neighbors. In it I do not seek merely to add information to your prior knowledge. While it provides you with crucial ideas and important methods for understanding Muslims, I seek mainly to inspire you to evangelize Muslims today. Our generation should again cherish the word *evangelism*—not only as a word but as a lifestyle. We are in an extraordinary time of harvest among Muslims. Muslims are coming to Jesus as never before. You—in your city and where you currently live—are a part of God's marvelous

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work. Read this book prayerfully. Absorb and practice the things you learn in the following pages—not only on your own but also with your church family. As you go, preach the word. Cover all in prayer, and join the multitude of Christians who intercede daily, “Lord, grant us to win many souls to you.”

PART 1

UNDERSTANDING
MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

Islam or Islams?

Why It Matters

IF YOU ARE IN THE WEST and chose to pick up this book on evangelism to Muslims, it is likely that you have heard two common claims: (1) Muslims are among the most challenging people groups to evangelize, and (2) Islam is the fastest-growing religion on earth. I contest these two inaccurate claims in this chapter and the next, respectively. Here I share four short stories from my interactions with Muslims. The ultimate point of these stories is twofold: in your evangelism, it is best to distinguish Muslims from Islam and also to think of various Islams instead of one monolithic religion. This understanding will help you greatly as you proclaim Christ.

Different Muslims, Different Islams

A few years ago, I heard of a Muslim cleric who had recently moved from the Arab world to my city in the United States. He was assigned to be the imam (leader, teacher) of the local mosque. Thrilled

by his arrival, I contacted the mosque and invited the imam to meet for coffee. He was thrilled, also, to learn that I was originally from Egypt. When we met, we joyfully exchanged Arabic-style greetings with different dialects and big laughs.

Our conversation began as I asked him about his hometown and how he ended up moving to the States. After the first few sentences, it became obvious that he thought I was Muslim. Many Muslims believe an Egyptian must be a Muslim since they do not realize that, based on unofficial records, Christians account for at least fifteen to twenty million of the ninety-five-million total population. At the first opportunity, I conveyed to him cordially that I was born into a Coptic Christian family and had never been a Muslim. This information changed the tone of the conversation. He said that of course he was aware of the Christian population in Egypt, but he immediately attempted to dissuade me from Christianity by citing how erroneous many Christian beliefs are. He claimed it was a waste that a man like me would follow such idolatry and infidelity. He was keen to speak about the implausibility of three gods or of God having a son. As I listened with a smile, he warned me that the destiny of a polytheist like me is hellfire. While I did not plan for a religious debate, it appeared that I was invited to one.

My goal for this meeting was simply to get to know him and begin a friendship, but his devotion to his Islamic beliefs steered our friendship in a unique direction. The more I attempted to reduce the intensity of his preaching, the more he felt the duty to convert me to Islam, insisting that he feared for my eternal destiny. This was an experience with an imam who recently immigrated from the Arab world to the United States. He represents a specific kind of Islam, so to speak.

But there is another imam whom I have known in the same city, and my experience with him has been quite different. This imam was born and raised in the United States. His family immigrated from Asia before he was born. I have visited his mosque many times and have had many conversations with him about Islam and Christianity. He believes that all Christians and Muslims will be admitted to paradise, as long as they do good works as prescribed in both their scriptures. He also believes that Islam as a religion is nothing more than being kind to people. When I've asked him about a specific set of doctrinal issues explicit to Islam, he has dismissed the whole concept of particularities, saying that all religions aim at making us live together in peace and that Islam is no different. For him, the militant group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has nothing to do with Islam because they twist the religion of peace to fulfill their agenda—all their deeds were condemned by the Quran and Muhammad's teaching. When I've asked him why I should convert to Islam if Christians will be admitted to paradise anyway, he has not given a compelling answer but has said that I should choose the new, higher, and better faith. In all our conversations, this imam has never mentioned the Bible being corrupt. He has never accused Christians of polytheism, nor has he stressed the implausibility of the Christian faith, although he clearly rejects the deity of Christ. Thus, for this imam, Islam is a wonderful fit in a pluralistic Western society, and it must be presented in such a way.

The difference between these two imams is vast. One possible reason for such a difference is their different places of origin. A Middle Eastern imam reads Arabic Islamic sources and views the exclusivity of Islam as a distinctive aspect of the religion, while an American imam strives to make Islam appealing in today's multireligious context. Thus, it seems that we are dealing

with two Islams instead of one. Both Muslims are likely well versed in Islamic doctrines, but they differ in their emphasis and articulation of Islam. This understanding will help you in your interactions with Muslims. I want to share two more stories to illustrate this point.

On a trip I took to Thailand with some American students, we entered a mosque. Our desire was to hear what the Muslims in that mosque believed about Islam. Three exceptionally hospitable Thai men met us once we entered; one of them was the imam. Although their mother tongue was Thai, they spoke to us in good English. In establishing their Islamic identity, they emphatically greeted us in broken Arabic: *As-salamu alaykum* (Islamic greeting meaning “Peace be upon you”).

As we sat down to talk, the conversation began with general inquiries about Islamic beliefs and practices. Then a student asked the imam about his views concerning the verses in the Quran that command Muslims to fight Christians and Jews. The imam responded that the Quran included nothing of that sort. The student showed him the verse (Q 9:29), at which time the imam seemed puzzled. It was not that he had never seen it but that he never had to deal with its meaning. Out of respect, the student did not want to push the conversation to investigate the matter further.

When the imam heard I was a native Arabic speaker, he was in awe. He said that he had been trying to learn the language of the Quran for eight years and that he traveled to Saudi Arabia for education but had not learned much. To him, Arabic was the language of heaven—the most beautiful language, since it is the language of the Quran, although he struggled to read or understand it. He was thrilled to practice his Arabic with me, and the conversation developed.

I asked him what he thought of Allah's ninety-nine attributes or names. As a point of reference, we should say that Allah in Islam is known through ninety-nine adjectives or names that reflect his divine characteristics and deeds. The imam said he had a list of these attributes. His list provided the Arabic attributes with English translations, and he told us that he often used them in his meditation, although he did not know why there were only ninety-nine instead of one hundred. I introduced one possible reason: the list lacked a name for "the loving one." He was perplexed and examined the list repeatedly in an attempt to find a term for "the loving." His attempt was in vain, but then he said, "Allah is merciful and compassionate," to which I responded, "Indeed, it is listed that way, but there is no term for *al-muhibb* (the loving one)." Then I pointed him to one of the other ninety-nine names of Allah: *al-daar*, which literally means "the harmful one." I asked the imam what he thought of that name. He said he had never heard of it in this way, and he insisted that Allah could not be harmful. He again examined his list of English translations, at which time I pointed out that the adjective was translated as "the distresser." I also mentioned that some Muslims today argue that this and many other attributes should be removed from the list because they do not present a commendable and respected picture of Allah. He was speechless.

This conversation indicates that many who claim to be Muslim—even those who are somewhat educated in Islam—know very little about the religion. They practice what they are told in local mosques. The conversation also highlights that many non-Arab Muslims—by far the majority of Muslims—view the Arabic-speaking world as the heartland of Islam, where Islamic education is valued and trusted. Indeed, Arabic Muslim institutions are

considered the religious elite for many Muslims. In a sense, most Muslims believe that Saudi Arabia is the “heart” of Islam since it has the two most holy cities—Mecca and Medina, where Muhammad lived—while Egypt is its “mind,” since it is home to the highly respected intellectual center of Azhar University, the most prestigious Sunni school. Although non-Arab Muslims constitute more than 80 percent of all Muslims, Arab Muslims still control the knowledge in Islam, especially since the most trusted primary sources of Islam are in Arabic.

The conversation further demonstrates that outside the Arab world, many Muslims live and practice a version of Islam that fits their own culture, and they sometimes don't even know the essential basics about the faith. The Islam you encounter in Thailand is somewhat comparable to what you may find in other parts of Asia, but it is distinct in many ways from the Islam you may encounter in the Arab world, the heartland of Islam. Our final story shall clarify this point. It is about a Muslim woman I met in Egypt.

My first vivid encounter with a Muslim—note that I did not say with Islam—was when I was about five. I remember it as if it occurred yesterday. My parents sent me to a nearby public kindergarten in our district in Cairo. They chose a public school because they were unable to afford a private one. This school was also within walking distance from home, which was convenient. Egypt's public schools generally accept Muslims and Christians together in the same classrooms, although some schools accept only Muslims. There are also a few Christian schools—usually Catholic—that are often expensive and, by law, must accept the admission of both Muslims and Christians.

I was thrilled about the new school, especially since my parents bought me a new uniform and a new colorful bag. On my

third day at school, my mother prepared my favorite mortadella sandwich. This was an incentive to encourage me to go to school because I loved this cooked, cured pork meat. At school recess that day, I sat next to my new teacher. She was wearing a head-covering hijab, which meant nothing to me at that young age since most women I saw in the street wore them. As I grew older, I learned that her hijab—according to the culture and the religious context in Egypt—distinguished her as Muslim. I sat next to her and eagerly grabbed my sandwich from my new bag.

She looked at me with a smile and asked, “What are you eating?”

I said, “Mom made me my favorite sandwich, mortadella.”

To my shock, her face completely changed as she shouted, “You filthy Christian, how dare you eat pork next to me?” She snatched the sandwich from my hand, threw it in the trash can, and yelled, “Go away! I never want to see you near me again.”

As a boy, nothing of this drama made sense to me, and I was terrified. When I told my parents about the incident, they immediately transferred me to a Christian private school. Although this meant a tighter budget for our family, they thought the new school would provide a better environment for me. This encounter is still vivid in my mind after four decades because it affected my life experience significantly. Although I soon realized that not all Muslims behave in this way, the encounter provided me a window into what some Muslims, particularly in Egypt, feel about Christians and Christianity. In later chapters, I refer to other encounters I had with Muslims in Egypt, as I share with you how I grew to love Muslims despite negative experiences in my early years.

These four true stories highlight important matters about Islam and Muslims, especially as we consider how to intentionally proclaim the gospel among the followers of that faith. Not all Muslims

are the same. Islam is not monolithic. It is not practiced or interpreted identically around the world. Many in the West fear Muslims because they represent the unknown. Here lies an important point: we should always distinguish Islam from Muslims. While we can critically evaluate Islam and even disapprove of certain elements and doctrines, we should always love and cherish Muslims as created in God's own image. We should view Muslims as bearers of God's image, not as Islam's possessions. While they are influenced by Islam, they are loved and sought by the almighty God. If we confuse Islam with Muslims, our dislike or disapproval of Islam—or any of its doctrines—may pollute our view of Muslims. We should approach Muslims with love and compassion, as Jesus does—not with the naive, sympathetic kind of love that is suitable only for TV shows and to serve media purposes but with the love that comes only from the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts as we imitate Christ.

Three Kinds of Muslims

Finally, I must make an important concluding point. Many in the West tend to think of Muslims as militant and extremist. This is incorrect. In light of the four previous stories, I encourage you to think of a spectrum of Muslims and consider three categories among them: nominal or cultural, devout or practicing, and extreme or radical. These three categories are mainly to help you, but we should note that sometimes the boundaries between the categories are not obvious or distinct. In my life, I have met each of these kinds of Muslims, and the gospel of Christ was clearly presented to all of them. This is encouraging and should stir your heart as you study ways to proclaim Jesus to all. A brief description of each should suffice.

Nominal Muslims are by far the vast majority among the followers of Islam. They are “Muslim” because they accept what their parents believed. Most of them know almost nothing about Islam or its tenets. For nominal Muslims, Islam is indeed unique as a religion, but they are generally not so adamant about that fact. Some of them question this claim of uniqueness, and many are closet atheists or seekers of other religions. For them, Islam is more of a cultural identity or nationalistic movement. Some identify this category of Muslims as adherents of folk Islam, which is the version of Islam that is practiced by more than two-thirds of Muslims worldwide. With these Muslims, evangelism would not usually follow a textual examination of holy books or an argumentative presentation of the truth claims of each faith because these Muslims are immediately willing to admit that they are not experts on Islam. Evangelism among nominal Muslims usually revolves around emphasizing God’s supernatural power and the heartfelt needs of humans. I always love to share with them the biblical stories of the miracles of Jesus, especially his authority over nature and his power to raise the dead. We will examine this theme later.

As for devout or religious Muslims, they resemble the Muslim imam who moved from the Middle East to the States or my kindergarten teacher. They are fewer in number than the first group. Many of them are from the Arab world or have been educated in it. They are familiar with major Islamic doctrines, have strong religious convictions, and seek to follow Islam’s actual tenets. They are not, however, necessarily radical in their implementation of the religious texts. While they are enthusiastic about their faith, they do not seek to harm others. The majority in this category tend to be conservative in their views of Islam, but some religious Muslims can be surprisingly progressive in their thinking. Mostly found in

the West, these progressives want to both follow Islam and present it as a good fit in today's pluralistic world. We hear of Muslims who insist that they are true followers of Islam, yet they advocate for human rights, women's rights, and same-sex marriage—all in opposition to traditional Muslim texts and interpretations. While some conservative Muslims may argue that these progressives are not Muslim at all, the progressives claim otherwise. If you want to evangelize Muslims, you must understand this diversity among them. The kind of Muslim you meet determines the bridges and methods you will navigate in your gospel conversations.

Radical Muslims do exist, and we should not deny it, but we should also highlight that they are—by all fair estimations—the tiniest minority among Muslims. Still, they are loud in their presence because they are not only literalistic in applying Islam but also aggressive in implementing and interpreting the Quran and Muhammad's teaching. Our generation became aware of radical Muslim interpretations with the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS, among other groups. They support all their radical deeds with sacred Islamic texts that are cherished by all Muslims. How can a Muslim reject a Quranic statement or one of Muhammad's reports? This is one way the militant Muslims appeal to the masses. Nonetheless, we should be thankful for the many creative and progressive arguments by self-identified Muslims who aim to dilute the severity of traditional and extremist Muslim claims.

In this chapter, I encourage you in your evangelism to distinguish Muslims from Islam and to understand that Muslims are not all the same. Think of various Islams instead of one rigid religion. It is crucial that you know which kind of Muslim you are encountering in order to properly engage that individual with the gospel. You might think that nominal Muslims are the only ones who come

to Christ, but this is far from correct. Both religious and extremist Muslims come to Christ as well. They are not impossible to evangelize. Today, there are remarkable works of God occurring among all kinds of Muslims. We hear of former Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Egypt. There are ample testimonies about God's astounding work in the hearts of Muslims from all these categories, which you will read in the following pages. The number of *former* Muslims is growing as never before. Muslims are abandoning Islam in droves.

But one may wonder, Don't we hear that Islam is the fastest-growing religion on earth? Aren't we told that Islam is going to surpass Christianity soon? We will discuss these false claims next, but remember Paul's words: "A wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries" (1 Cor. 16:9).

Is Islam Really the Fastest-Growing Religion in the World?

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HEARD that Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the world. This claim is driven by Pew Research Center data, but it can be misleading. We usually hear it in the context of statistics projecting that by 2050, based on *current* information, the number of Muslims will be nearly equal to the number of Christians around the world. To some, this claim implies that Islam, as a belief system, attracts multitudes every year and that the number of its adherents is growing. When Christians hear such analysis, they tend to feel discouraged because they assume the claim is unquestionably true and reflects the only existing reality—especially when we compare that data with statistics of nominal Christians abandoning their faith. Some may think that Islam is on the rise, while Christianity is declining—that Islam is persuasive and convincing, while Christianity is not. But these statistics are not caused by people converting to Islam.

The growing number of Muslims is mainly due to higher birth rates in Muslim families. Consider that a Muslim man can marry

up to four women, which often leads to more children. Consider also that in many Muslim circles, women are not allowed to work outside their homes, which usually results in more children than the average non-Muslim family. Some Muslims openly admit that Islamic society oppresses women, to the extent of viewing them as mainly childbearers. Many traditional Muslims view having many children as a sign of devotion to Muhammad—by expanding Muhammad’s *umma* (community). Furthermore, the death punishment for apostasy from Islam discourages many from abandoning the religion. Some “apostates,” to avoid being murdered, may resort to remaining “Muslim,” although in reality they are not.

Understanding Statistics and Headlines

When Christians hear that Islam is the fastest-growing religion, they must put this into perspective since the growing number of Muslims does not necessarily reflect Islam’s persuasiveness. For instance, this statistic does not include the Muslims who abandon Islam—not only for Christianity but also for atheism. In recent years, ample studies have revealed waves of apostasy among Muslims. In the United States, according to analysis of a 2017 Pew Research Center study, the number of converts to Islam is similar to those who abandon it. The net gain is almost zero. Researchers observe that almost a quarter of adult Muslims who were raised in the States no longer identify as Muslims.¹ I do not share this statistic to boast or gloat but to question the initial claim that Islam is the fastest-growing religion.

Consider Iran’s Muslims: In September 2020, findings from an academic study of Iran’s secular shift appeared in *The Conversation*.

1 Besheer Mohamed and Elizabeth Podrebarac Sciuipac, “The Share of Americans Who Leave Islam Is Offset by Those Who Become Muslim,” *Pew Research Center*, January 26, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/>.

Droves of Iranians are abandoning Islam. While Iran's official census claims that 99.5 percent of the population is Muslim, the survey found that only 40 percent of Iranians identified as Muslim.² If true, this suggests that Iran is no longer a Muslim-majority country. What about Muslims worldwide? In September 2019, an article in *The Telegraph Online* titled "Why Are Young Muslims Leaving Islam?" highlighted new generations of educated Muslims—not only in the United States but in many parts of the world—who dare to ask hard questions about Islam's basics and foundations. The article points to waves of young Muslims abandoning Islam in crises of unbelief, and it emphasizes this as a phenomenon not only in Western liberal societies but in solid conservative Islamic countries, including Sudan, Iran, and Pakistan.³ Note that anti-apostasy laws are strongly enforced in these countries. Does this reflect a persuasive religion? It appears that these Muslims readily abandon Islam even though they could face Islamic capital punishment for apostasy.

In the same vein, what about Muslims in the Arab world? On June 24, 2019, the British news outlet *The Guardian* reported on a study conducted by a Princeton University–based research group. The study detailed how Arab Muslims are abandoning religion. This is in the heartland of Islam. In comparing people who identified as "nonreligious" between roughly 2014 and 2019, the number rose from 11 percent to 18 percent.⁴ During this period, the Arab

2 Pooyan Tamimi Arab and Ammar Maleki, "Iran's Secular Shift: New Survey Reveals Huge Changes in Religious Beliefs," *The Conversation*, September 10, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/>.

3 Hasan Suroor, "Why Are Young Muslims Leaving Islam?," *The Telegraph Online*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/>.

4 Kate Hodal, "Arab World Turns Its Back on Religion—and Its Ire on the US," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/>.

world witnessed the Arab Spring and the rise of the radical Islamist group ISIS. One may think that a 7 percent increase—in abandoning Islam or religiosity in general—within five years is not a major indicator, but this would be incorrect. This shift is happening in the Arab world, the stronghold of Islam, where its sacred texts are taught and its history is cherished. Furthermore, these numbers reflect only the Muslims who were willing to speak openly about being nonreligious—a notably risky action in Muslim-majority lands. The numbers could very well be greater.

Similarly, an article in *The New Republic* from April 2015 focused on Muslims abandoning Islam in the Arab world. This piece reported hundreds and thousands—depending on the country—of ex-Muslims who are openly identifying as atheists. These people were willing to leave an online trace about their decisions.⁵ This secular data should be contrasted with the reported claim that Islam is the fastest-growing religion on earth.

How should Christians respond to these statistics? We should come in humility to Christ and pray fervently for him to use us as his laborers among Muslims, locally and globally. We should be active in evangelism as a lifestyle. All the information above should bring us to a place of interceding for Muslims to see Jesus's light, as we realize that now is a great time for serious gospel proclamation among them. While some of us are called to go to the ends of the earth, which includes Muslim countries, others already have many Muslim neighbors in their backyard. Either way, Christians should be encouraged by the work of the Holy Spirit among Muslims today. While the abovementioned statistics—which primarily appear in secular outlets—describe Muslims abandoning Islam

5 Ahmed Benchemsi, "Invisible Atheists: The Spread of Disbelief in the Arab World," *The New Republic*, April 23, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/>.

in general terms, which can be to atheism or secularism, we have ample reports from Christian workers evangelizing among Muslims. Throughout this book, I will share examples of God's marvelous work among Muslims to encourage you—in your place and on this very day—to partner with the many workers who are bringing the gospel of hope to Muslims.

Saudi Arabia and Christianity

Here is one example of God's work: consider conversion to Christ among Saudis. As I was writing this chapter, I spoke with gospel proclaimers about their work on the Arabian Peninsula. A Western reader may imagine that Saudis are the most difficult to convert to Christ, but this is far from true. Saudis are questioning Islam as never before. A growing number of them access evangelistic websites, speak with Christians, and come to Christ. It is common among Saudis to use a virtual private network (VPN) to ensure that sensitive information is transmitted securely. This allows them some freedom since they are bypassing government interference. Granted, the number of secret Saudi Christians is difficult to determine. One missionary among Saudis estimates the number of secret converts to be in the hundreds and secret seekers in the thousands. A Saudi convert to Christ who currently serves in Mecca says that his major obstacle is not the police but his family, who are willing to report him to authorities. He conveys that persecution among Saudi converts is usually from one's own family, not the government.

Moreover, gospel reports from Saudi Arabia highlight the marvelous work of God using Asian workers in particular. They are in Saudi Arabia for jobs and usually have less financial means, but their gospel work is astonishing. Missionaries usually work bivocationally

to secure a compelling platform; however, this also affects how much time they are able to spend in ministry. Because of their jobs, sometimes missionaries cannot accommodate the ample requests from Saudi seekers to talk about Christ. This situation echoes Jesus's words about the need for laborers because the harvest is plentiful.

The most compelling part about the gospel's work in the Saudi community is how God is using Saudi converts themselves. Saudis often travel to particular countries in Europe. In many cases, they meet Christians, hear the gospel, and then take it back to Saudi Arabia. A similar pattern occurs among Saudis who come to North America as international students. In 2011, about thirty to forty thousand Saudi students came to study in the States. Many of them were exposed to the gospel and returned to their homes with new hearts. Again, remember: there are Muslims right in your backyard. In 2012, the number of Saudi students in the States increased to 110,000, according to some estimates. What a marvelous opportunity for American Christians. These Saudis receive scholarships from the Saudi king to study in the States—the king pays for Saudis to come, which, in essence, supports Christian mission work among Muslims.

One Saudi convert in the States conveyed to me that in the past five years through his ministry alone, about fifty Saudi students accepted Christ, and five families returned to Saudi Arabia to proclaim his name. The gospel penetrates the household of Islam. Islam is not growing through conversion. Furthermore, these stories of Saudis coming to Christ are not the exception. Over the past two decades, God's work among Egyptian Muslims has been astounding. A major evangelical church in Cairo estimates an average of one million former Muslims in Egypt since the year 2000. In our day, it is not uncommon to see veiled women attending church

services in Cairo. These are Muslim seekers of Christ who are willing to be persecuted. They are *openly* coming to churches to hear about Christ. Some are sick, and they come to the place—as they believe—where Jesus lives because they believe that Jesus is the healer. If waves of Muslims are abandoning Islam in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, then there is a crisis in Islam, for these two countries are considered the heart and mind of Islam, respectively. If this is happening in the Arab world, the heartland of Islam, it should be obvious that Islam is struggling to attract converts.

Muslims Abandoning Islam

But why are Muslims abandoning Islam? In particular, why has the number of apostates grown over the past three decades? There are at least two major factors.

First, access to information has increased as never before. Muslims are now able to question Islam, Muhammad, and the Quran. This was not the case in past generations. Satellite TV and the internet are game changers in providing access to information that was previously blocked. Satellite TV broadcasts evangelistic material, and the internet grants access to anonymous chat rooms. In the past, Muslims relied mainly on the mosque's imam, and many never dared to question the traditional Islamic claims. Today, anyone can ask anything, and nothing is off limits. For the past three decades, I have witnessed the tremendous work of God among Muslims in Morocco, Algeria, and Sudan, in addition to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This is the result of a hunger among Muslims to learn about Christ because of the rapid flow of information. In the 1980s, Muslims in the Arab world had to sit next to the radio at midnight to listen to one evangelistic channel calling them to Christ, but now there are hundreds of satellite channels and thousands of

web pages proclaiming the gospel to Muslims. Muslims can access these outlets with anonymity, which offers them protection. They enter chat rooms, download the Bible, and watch videos targeting Islam's truth claims.

Many Muslims are now ready to admit that Islam is a man-made religion. In our day, we see bold online hashtags, such as #AwesomeWithoutAllah, #ExMuslim, #FreeFromHijab, #Apostate, and others. We hear of organizations like Ex-Muslims of North America (EXMNA), which is a nonprofit activist group exposing Islamic teachings and encouraging Muslims to abandon Islam. The light of Christ keeps bursting into the darkness of false worship.

Second, in the past two decades, the world witnessed the rising influence of militant radical Islamic groups. We saw al-Qaeda's attacks on US soil and the atrocities of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, Boko Haram in Nigeria, al-Shabab in Somalia, and others. Especially in the case of ISIS, it coincided with growing unrest in Arab countries, in what has been called the Arab Spring. This was also a time when the use of social media grew rapidly. Muslims were met with the horrific actions of militant Islamist groups. Many Muslims were faced with a crisis because these militant groups claimed to apply and follow the true Islam. Was this Islam? Were these actions prescribed by Allah? These became tough questions for many Muslims, especially with the hunger for peace in their hearts. While many Muslims denied any association of these deeds with Islam, the radical groups openly justified their actions using verses from the Quran and statements attributed to Muhammad and his faithful companions. This link led Muslims to question the basics of Islam because these deeds were carried out under its banner.

The timing was also crucial. The Arab Spring collapsed the quietism and status quo among Muslims in lands where Islam had been

strongly rooted. The rise of social media use came in handy because Muslims could ask daring questions and criticize the sacred—a very new development in acquiring knowledge about Islam. Muslims swam against the current of traditionalism and began to question the sacred untouchables: Muhammad and the Quran. Was Muhammad really the best example of humankind? Bypassing their mosque's imam, Muslims read Muhammad's biography on their own. Some were shocked to read for the first time about some of his questionable deeds. They compared his deeds with the actions executed by militant Muslim groups, and the result was alarming. Muslims realized that Muhammad's biography contained unpleasant and shameful acts and that his sayings promoted unsavory ideas. How could this be a true prophet? The sacred halo that protected Muhammad for centuries was vanishing. The same could be said about the Quran: Was it really divine? Was it the only preserved scripture, as Muslims had claimed for centuries? Today, Muslims can find these answers for themselves, and Christian workers have outlets to inform Muslims who lived in the dark for centuries.

This is a remarkable time for evangelism among Muslims. The harvest is plentiful. Muslims are questioning Islam as never before and are coming to Christ in droves. While conversion is a complex and sometimes long process, it happens in astonishing ways. Now is the best time for you to talk with Muslims about Christ. As you go, proclaim the gospel of hope. The word *hope* is crucial and necessary in our conversations with Muslims. Be ready to partner with the many Christians involved in this work. Let us follow the Holy Spirit's guidance in reaching Muslims for Christ. Initiate conversations and friendships today.

While you will learn evangelistic tools in this book, my hope in this chapter is to encourage you about God's current work among

Muslims. I want Christians to understand things in perspective: converts to Islam are not growing in number, and claims about the proliferation of Islam can be misleading. As you read this book, I hope you maintain a prayerful heart, asking God to stir your compassion for Muslims and move you toward a lifestyle of evangelism among Muslims. Let's pray that in our generation, through the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, a significant change occurs in the statistic about the "fastest-growing" religion.

A Christ-Centered Approach to Islam and Muslims

THIS CHAPTER AIMS TO HELP YOU develop a biblical approach to Islam and Muslims. This will help you connect well with Muslims as you proclaim the good news to them.

Theology and Evangelism

Before I discuss with you my Christ-centered approach, I must emphasize that effective evangelism requires sound theology. Your theology drives your missiology. Your understanding of God shapes your evangelism. Of course, you do not need a degree in theology to witness to others about the Lord Jesus. We know that a Samaritan woman spoke to her people about Jesus by proclaiming that he told her everything she had done in her life (John 4). But this was not a presentation of the gospel as identified in the New Testament. And her words did not save the people—Jesus did when they believed in him. As disciples of Jesus, we should seek to preach the gospel properly and entirely and to preserve its authenticity. Indeed,

preserving the gospel message was always very important to the apostles of Jesus Christ; they endeavored to protect the message from false teachers who would distort it (2 Pet. 2:1–3). Sharing the gospel of Jesus, then, requires a biblical understanding of the basics about God and the world. This is called theology.

A sound theology always begins with this question: “What does the Scripture say?” (Rom. 4:3). This shapes our evangelism since theology responds *biblically* to crucial questions related to engaging Muslims with the gospel, such as these: What does it mean that Muslims are created in the image of God? What is the gospel for Muslims? Is it in any way different from *the* gospel, which is proclaimed to everyone else? How can a Muslim be saved? Is Jesus the only Savior to Muslims? Can Islam lead to eternal life? What is Islam? Who was Muhammad? Is the Quran divinely revealed in any way? Can the Quran lead to the saving grace of God?

While these may seem to be basic questions, they are highly consequential in gospel proclamation. They can also result in more complex questions: Can Christians assign Muhammad any prophetic role or honorary status, so that they can connect better and more easily with Muslims? Can a Muslim accept Christ yet continue to live socially and religiously as a Muslim? Can a Muslim accept Christ but continue to use the Quran as a scripture, that is, as a guide to obtain truth about God? These are crucial questions. At first glance, you may say, “No Christian would even consider these questions because their answers are clearly no,” but you would be mistaken. Some self-identified evangelicals, especially in the West, argue for these unbiblical positions in an attempt to design creative ways to win Muslims to Christ. Giving a positive answer to these questions leads to confused converts. Some of them may continue to cherish the Quran as scripture and Muhammad as a prophet, at

least to some extent. Theology does matter. The adoption of a loose theological stance may result in unbiblical arguments, including honoring Muhammad as a prophet or encouraging Muslims to convert to Christ while retaining their former theological convictions and religious traditions. Syncretistic practices and conflating beliefs always begin with a theological flaw.

Consider this example. For most of the centuries of Christian-Muslim history, Christian theologians have argued that Muhammad was either a false prophet or simply not a prophet and that the Quran is not divinely inspired. We currently hear, however, of new claims voiced by some Christians. In the past decade, several self-identified evangelicals, in attempts to be relevant in conversations with Muslims, have been willing to assign Muhammad a prophetic role of some sort. They find no issue with allowing believers from a Muslim background to continue reciting the Quran, for some unidentified benefit. These teachers believe converts can continue to go to the mosque and recite Islamic creeds—and even continue to call themselves Muslims—if they follow Jesus in their hearts. These questionable claims have come to be known as insider movements.

But theology has a great deal to say regarding these important matters. If we begin to evaluate these claims and methods by asking, “What does the Scripture say?” rather than by considering what would please the hearer, the answer is clear: Muhammad is not a true prophet, and the Quran cannot be inspired (e.g., 1 John 4:1–3). It is no wonder that Christian thinkers throughout history refused to assign Muhammad honor, even if that meant persecution under the most ruthless caliphs. Nor were they ready to view the Quran as a divinely inspired text. We must be careful theologically to “guard the deposit entrusted” to us (1 Tim. 6:20), by not mixing, compromising, or distorting the gospel with any false teachings,

methods, or practices—even if they might lead to initial fruits of conversion. This is a great lesson for today’s disciples to learn from church history. As a Middle Eastern Christian, I notice many new Western trends in evangelism that ignore the wise words of Elijah: “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). This is why sound theology is indispensable for proper evangelism. What we believe, as presented in Scripture, shapes our whole Christian life as witnesses for Jesus (Acts 1:8).

Now the question remains: How should a Christian view Islam and Muslims?

A Christ-Centered Approach

There are various approaches to viewing Islam. Two of them appear as opposite extremes. The first is used by some Christians who aim to attack Islam at all costs by revealing its weaknesses and flaws. The aim of this approach is to lead Muslims to realize Islam’s deception and abandon their false religion. Former Muslims often adopt this tactic because they want to steer people away from Islam after realizing its erroneous claims firsthand. While this approach succeeds in many circles, especially with Muslims in the Arab world, who are fond of confrontations and debates, I do not view it as considerably helpful, particularly in Western circles, where logical arguments usually trump polemical attitudes.

In practical terms, this approach usually reflects anger and often uses sarcasm. The truth is, Islamic traditions and sacred texts contain ample questionable areas. Nonetheless, I do not encourage adopting this approach. In my conversations with Muslims, my goal is to focus on Christ, to magnify Christ, and to reflect his image—not to destroy Islam. In evangelism, there is an appropriate

time for exposing Islam's falsehood, but attacking Islam is not your best way forward. I have seen many Muslims quit Islam and not choose Jesus. This is why attacking Islam cannot be your goal. In evangelism, I focus on Jesus and let Muslims criticize their own religion as I ask them leading questions (more on this later). So the approach of attacking Islam and its truth claims—though used successfully by some—is not what I recommend.

The second extreme approach to Islam usually appears in secular academic circles and media outlets. Islam here is viewed in a simplistic and idealistic way. This approach is evident in claims that Islam and Christianity—and any other religion, for that matter—are basically the same. It also appears in slogans: Islam ultimately teaches the same thing as all other religions, and no religious particularities are significant. It appears in generalizations: Islam is all about peace, Muhammad was a feminist, and jihad refers to self-control. These statements are at best naive and at worst inaccurate. They shrink Islam to a religion of peace, tolerance, and harmony, not because of any specific religious texts but because that is what today's rhetoric and public discourse require. In some ways, this approach views and elevates Islam as a better alternative to the "hostile" biblical Christianity that opposes relativism, liberalism, and religious inclusivism.

The only acceptable portrayal or discussion of "Islam" in this view is one that does not involve any hint of the Islamic texts that promote violence against non-Muslims. Any critic of Islam is faced with accusations of bigotry and prejudice. Associating Islam with ISIS or Boko Haram is discouraged since these terrorist groups—according to this approach—have "nothing" to do with Islam. In this idealistic approach, Islam receives a halo; it is off limits from any critical assessment. Of course, some scholars still evaluate Islam

and its claims critically, but they do so with an understanding of what this risky business entails. The reasons for the adoption of this approach vary, but it grew rapidly after September 11, 2001, as a reaction to the severe criticism Islam received when many identified the religion as the driving force behind the terrorist attacks. This idealistic approach, however, does not persuade intelligent thinkers, nor is it acceptable to devoted Muslims themselves. For them, Islam is distinct, unique, and unmatched.

Just as I reject the attacking, aggressive approach to Islam, I do not accept the simplistic, culturally adapted one. Not only is it dishonest and inaccurate in its representation of Islam's distinctiveness, it is also neither plausible nor faithful to the Islamic texts. If these two approaches are unsatisfactory, there must be a better way forward for Christians. And that is to view Islam through the eyes of the Bible and to see Muslims in light of the cross of Jesus. This is the core of a Christ-centered approach to Islam and Muslims, in which we evaluate Islam's claims through the infallible biblical text and love Muslims as people sought by God. This Christ-centered approach always begins with "What does the Scripture say?" Whether one is considering an Islamic claim or an evangelistic method, this approach starts with a biblical assessment because Christians must think biblically about evangelism.

The approach is also Christ-centered in its scope. It is intentional about evangelism. It is proactive and passionate about gospel proclamation. It elevates the supremacy of Christ and does not shy away from the truth claims of biblical Christianity. In engaging Muslims, this approach is centered on Christ's teaching, character, and deeds. Even when evaluating Muhammad's deeds or Islam's teaching, this approach seeks to emphasize Christ and his unmatched character. In conversations with Muslims, this approach leads Christians to

seek every opportunity to highlight “all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). The approach offers answers to Islamic charges against Christianity, and it exhorts Christians to always be prepared to defend the faith and provide a reason for the hope we have in Christ “with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15). This drives a love for Muslims that can only come from the heart of God and the fruit of the Spirit. Christians who use this approach are not only passionate about winning Muslims to Christ; they are also patient, hopeful, meek, humble, joyous, and respectful in sharing the good news.

The Christ-centered approach propels Christians to glorify Jesus in every encounter they have with Muslims—even through a single statement. While all Bible-believing Christians—owing to regeneration and new life in Christ—may think or sense that this approach is a natural result of following Jesus, we cannot take this for granted. We are all growing in knowing and proclaiming Christ. At times, our encounters with Muslims demonstrate weak areas in our attitudes where we still need to change. Loving Muslims—or any non-Christian, for that matter—is not always easy. Test your heart’s attitude when you meet a Muslim. Sometimes Christians feel confusion and suspicion toward Muslims, at other times, anger and even hatred. Your best way forward is to pray and seek God’s face as you pursue sincere friendships with Muslims. The Holy Spirit’s work is your only hope for a changed attitude. The Spirit can take us from merely accepting Muslims to loving them generously and seeing them in light of the cross.

Consider the following story. On a missions trip to a Muslim-populated area in New York, I had about twelve of my students with me. All of them wanted to engage Muslims with the good news of Christ, and they successfully did. Many Muslims wanted to continue

the conversation, so we connected them with local believers. David,¹ one of my students on this trip, was a US veteran. He was very enthusiastic about sharing the gospel with Muslims. When the trip was almost over, I sat with him, and we reflected on the trip—but then our conversation took a deep and unexpected turn. The day was September 11, and David began telling me his true feelings—not his thoughts—about Muslims. Though he knew that Jesus called him to proclaim the good news, he openly admitted that he was angry. He said he was not sure he loved Muslims enough since he was suspicious of their motives. David asked, “If they harmed my beloved country in a terrorist attack once, why would they not do it again?” David’s words were authentic. He loved Christ, but his uncertainties and fears about Islam and Muslims were real. The matter was personal to David since he cared deeply about his country. David did not need my advice or preaching at that moment; he needed Jesus’s power. Like David, all Christians need the power of God to work in our hearts to help us love Muslims as he loves them.

After the trip, I had to think about David’s honest words. I appreciated his sincerity. It was not surprising to me that, despite his feelings, he still shared the gospel with many Muslims. Who could imagine he did not love them? The truth is, I could. I was like David, at least for part of my life. I was angry, confused, and suspicious of Muslims, but God worked in my life and changed my attitude. God is not yet finished with his work in my life—he is still shaping my heart to love Muslims more and more. I now adopt a Christ-centered approach to Muslims and Islam, but I will tell you how I grew to pray for them, love them, and reach out to them with the gospel of Jesus, which I hope will encourage you.

1 In all stories, names have been changed to protect privacy.

Developing a Christlike Love for Your Muslim Neighbor

IN THIS CHAPTER, I want to share briefly about how my views changed toward Muslims and how I continue to grow in my love for them. Being raised in a Muslim-majority country, I did not always love Muslims. I encountered a unique kind of Islam that always left me feeling pressured and discriminated against. While some Muslims were kind, others harassed me and my sisters, and those negative examples were loud and influential in forming my impressions and feelings. Most likely, my distaste for Islam distanced me from Muslims. I needed to experience God's strong, nurturing compassion in my heart to change my attitude toward Muslims. I needed the light of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. I can testify that God changes hearts and minds. He transforms us when we submit to his changing power. Make no mistake: even today, I struggle and feel anger toward some Muslims—especially when I see them commit atrocities under the banner of Islam. Loving my Muslim neighbors as

Jesus commands can be tough. It requires constant intercession and continuous humility as we reflect the image of Christ to our neighbors. I hope that my journey can help you—if you struggle to love Muslims—to see that you are not an exception. I pray that the Holy Spirit uses my story to stir your heart to unrelentingly pursue the heart of God as you seek to reach Muslims with the good news.

How Life Shaped My Posture toward Muslims

As a young boy growing up in Egypt, I remember hearing of a famous convert to Islam. It was October 2, 1980, and many Egyptians were preparing to stay up late to watch a professional boxing match between Larry Holmes and Muhammad Ali. Most Egyptians were familiar with American TV shows and celebrities. This contest was also a heavyweight championship fight, and many wanted to get a glimpse of the famed Las Vegas. Some news outlets reported that more than a billion viewers were expected worldwide. I remember vividly that many Christians around me were cheering for Holmes. When I asked why, they whispered to me, “Muhammad Ali abandoned Jesus and converted to Islam.” Indeed, Ali was born in a Christian family and converted to Islam in the 1960s. These Christians *whispered* to me because “conversion” to or from Islam was not a topic to be discussed openly.

At that time, radical Islamist groups were on the rise in Egypt, driven by Wahhabi Saudi Islam. Christians could discuss these matters only behind closed doors because they feared government retaliation or Muslim harassment. Rumors of Christians tortured in prisons led many to believe that the government had spies everywhere to harass and arrest Christians if they talked negatively about Islam. I was not yet seven years old, but this was an important moment for me. It introduced me to what Middle Eastern Christians,

particularly Copts, felt about Islam and Muslims: fear, anger, and a strong sense of injustice against Christians. This, coupled with the story I shared earlier about my kindergarten teacher, did not result in positive feelings in me—especially since I was not yet a born-again believer in Christ. A few months later, another moment powerfully shaped my understanding of Christian attitudes toward Islam and Muslims.

In June 1981, Coptic Christians were unsettled and anxious because of the growing influence of radical Islamist groups. At that time, Egypt's president, Anwar el-Sadat, had seemingly welcomed the involvement of these unfriendly groups—such as the Muslim Brotherhood—in Egypt's public life. This was in contrast to his predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who suppressed their power and influence. Out of the Muslim Brotherhood, many other jihadist groups emerged. It was a tremulous time for Egypt's Christians, especially those in the remote areas of southern Egypt, where police presence was sparser than in the capital. Reports of persecution against Christians grew—this included the burning of Christian houses, fields, and businesses.

One particular day, the matter worsened significantly in Cairo, where things had seemingly been under control. On June 17, 1981, a group of Muslims in a working-class district, al-Zawiya al-Hamra, accused a Christian of attempting to build a church in the neighborhood without permission. At that time (actually until recently), Christians were not allowed to do any maintenance in church buildings without official permission from the government. If they wanted to build a church, they needed to seek permission from the president himself. The accusation against the Christian layman led to the massacre of more than seventy Christians, including women and children. In the absence of police, horrible chaos

erupted. Businesses owned by Christians were looted, especially jewelers' shops. Pharmacies owned by Christians were marked with derogatory words, and Muslims shouting *Allahu Akbar!* (Allah is greater!) set them ablaze. Muslim shop owners put signs up in hopes of protecting their stores: "We are Muslims, monotheists, and believe there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is his apostle." The act of declaring their adherence to Islam protected their shops—and positioned Christian homes and shops as open targets. The Coptic priest of the Orthodox Church in the district was dragged out of his home by a Muslim mob. They held knives to his neck and asked him to declare the Muslim profession of faith. They demanded that he accept Islam or die. When he refused to convert, they beheaded him. The police did not intervene for hours, until many Christians were massacred. All the victims were Copts.

I heard this news from my parents, who were talking in whispers to some of our relatives. I gathered that Muslims did not love us and that we could do nothing about it. Although we lived ten miles away from the center of the massacre, we were concerned for my father's carpentry shop since the attacks might possibly spread. Christians felt betrayed and helpless since President Sadat did not respond in a supportive way. He diluted the severity of the incident and allowed the official Muslim Brotherhood newspaper to accuse Christians of *initiating* the attack. Sadat, in an attempt to oppose far-left ideologies, allowed the rise of radical Muslim groups. Christians became the prey. The tension grew between Sadat and the leader of the Copts, Pope Shenouda III, since Christians increasingly felt that they were treated unjustly. In September 1981, President Sadat rescinded the presidential decree recognizing Shenouda as the Coptic pope, which infuriated the Christians. The pope was forced into exile. He left the cathedral in Cairo to stay in

a remote monastery. A month later, President Sadat was assassinated by a radical Islamic group. Despite his support of their rising power, they declared him an infidel for cutting a peace treaty with Israel. Muslim jihadists justified his assassination. It was telling that many Copts openly claimed that the assassination was a divine response to the injustice they had been experiencing.

Egypt's Christians in those days grew weary of Islam and Muslims, and they probably feared or hated both. That was the formative context in which I grew up. These were my initial encounters with Islam and Muslims. Behind closed doors, Christians voiced fear and frustration regarding the dominance of the oppressive Islamic culture. Many sought to immigrate to the West or to other places perceived as Christian nations. Although I was not yet nine at the time, my mother would tell me stories about Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, when there was very little discrimination against Christians and when Muslims and Christians—and even some Jews—lived side by side without enmity or persecution. She said Muslim women rarely wore the Islamic hijab, and Muslim men used to eat pork publicly and go to bars. Egyptians—Muslims and Christians alike—used to go together to the beach in the summer. This changed in the 1970s and 1980s, when the extremist version of Islam (Wahhabism) was exported to Egypt from Saudi Arabia, and Egypt's radical Muslim preachers were supported by oil money from the Arabian Peninsula.

In that context and with stories like these, how could Christians care for—let alone evangelize—a person they feared or hated? How can you love someone you identify as your enemy? We cannot do it by our own power; it must be through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. God changed my heart toward Muslims. He stirred me to grow in loving them through four major factors: my

conversion to Christ, friendships with Muslims, a superb pastor who became my mentor, and an eye-opening realization.

How God Changed My Heart toward Muslims

First, I encountered God in a unique way during the summer of 1983. He transformed my life. I was almost ten when I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior and began to follow him. Daily reading and memorization of the Bible changed me, as well as regular attendance at services in the local Coptic evangelical church. I attended church before that, but I reached a turning point when I committed my life to Jesus. Although I was young, my zeal for Christ was evident as I eagerly told Christians and Muslims (mostly in my school) what I learned about God.

Before I was fourteen, I began reading Christian tracts refuting Muslim charges against Christianity. One of them was attributed to the Coptic Pope Shenouda and was distributed secretly by Christians. I learned from it and practiced sharing it with others in an attempt to help fellow Christians defend the faith. The tract was very informative. It gave me the boldness to tell Muslims about Christ and ask questions about their faith. At the same time, I began reading history books. I took a giant step forward when I learned about early Christian encounters with Islam. Coptic Christians had been interacting with Islam for centuries, and they wrote a great deal about these encounters. I began to focus on Egypt's church fathers and examples of their bold defense of their faith against Muslim accusations. These books were in the church bookstore, but few of my peers were interested in reading them. I saw them as a treasure. I wrote down the claims and the creative ways early Christians articulated complex Christian doctrines—the Trinity, the incarnation, and others. Slowly but steadily, I learned

evangelism and apologetics. Reading stories of Egyptian Christians and their open acceptance of martyrdom instead of abandoning Christ propelled me to choose a life of professing my faith to both cultural Christians and Muslims around me. In interacting with Muslims more and more, I grew in loving them as our conversations multiplied in number and in depth.

When God converts us, he transforms us. Instead of avoiding and disliking Muslims, I became eager to connect with them to tell them about Christ. This fervor did not eliminate all my fears, but I knew that Christ loved Muslims and wanted them to come to his salvation. Thus, the first factor in changing my attitude toward Muslims was my conversion to Christ, my immersion in his word, and my diligence in studying the work of God in his church throughout history.

Second, in my junior high and high school years, I developed many good friendships with Muslims. This also changed my attitude toward Muslims. I realized that they are not all the same. I shared good laughs, happy memories, and delicious meals with them. I visited their homes, and they visited mine. Some of them became very close friends; they were like my brothers and sisters. I loved them dearly, and I was no longer afraid of them. It is significant that in the midst of the cloudy and chaotic Christian-Muslim environment in Egypt, I had normal friendships with kind and thoughtful Muslims. Granted, I still encountered unkind and unthoughtful Muslims, but the picture was now balanced by positive experiences. Indeed, one way to grow in your love for Muslims is to begin sincere friendships with them. I encourage you to seek out Muslims friends today.

Loving Muslims became normal and natural through everything we shared together. In fact, because of my deep friendships, I was

able to ask my Muslim friends hard questions about Islam—questions I learned in my apologetic readings. Some of my friends were open to conversing, while others were angry, but we always shared religious stories. In every story, I did my best to magnify and exalt Jesus. It was not always easy, but I was growing to love Muslims and to understand their worldviews and doctrines.

Still, almost all my Muslim friends wanted me to convert to Islam. This is a reality: Christianity and Islam are missionary faiths. As you seek to convert Muslims to Christ, you should know that they want you to accept Islam. Here lies an opportunity: you do not need to be concerned about initiating religious conversations with Muslims; if you do not begin one, trust me, they will.

Third, in my university years, God sent a remarkable mentor into my life: Pastor Menes Abdul Noor (1929–2015). He was the pastor of Kasr el-Dobara Evangelical Church in Cairo, the largest evangelical church in the Middle East, with over seven thousand members. He was active in ministry in the 1980s and 1990s. When Christians were concerned for their lives, he was a fearless proclaimer of the gospel of Christ and was known all over the Arab world as an evangelist among Muslims. Almost everything I knew about Islam and Muslims came from what this pastor taught, either by his words or in his writings. Of course, he was wise in his preaching because he knew the restrictions in Egypt. Nonetheless, he was always open to telling Muslims about Christ. During one of his trips outside Egypt, I spent seven days learning from him about Islam, Muslims, and God's work among them. In those days, we were just seeing the beginnings of revival in winning Muslims to Christ. Years before the internet, Pastor Menes (as we called him) began preaching the gospel on a radio program, broadcast from outside Egypt with Trans World Radio. He recorded evangelistic programs, including

the reading of complete passages from the Gospels. Muslims used to listen to the program and send him letters with questions that he would answer. He was a pioneer in presenting sophisticated Christian doctrines in simple language for laypeople, particularly with Arab Muslims in mind. Pastor Menes taught me by example how to love Muslims and to seek their salvation.

He once told me about a terrifying event in his life. In 2000, he was sitting in his office preparing for his Sunday service. A Muslim man with a gun in each hand rushed in and pointed them at the pastor's head. Thinking it was his last day on earth, Pastor Menes prayed, then smiled at the man. "Please sit down," he told him. The man sat. Still with a genuine smile and showing no fear, the pastor asked, "What can I do for you?" In response, the Muslim man said, "Tell me stories about Christ." Pastor Menes told several stories of the miracles of Jesus. The man listened for some time, then left the office, promising to come again the following day. Indeed, he did—but this time without guns. Pastor Menes met with this man many times and told him openly about Jesus. Five months later, the Muslim man came to Christ. Pastor Menes mentored many Christians to preach the gospel to Muslims. He was convinced that nothing should scare Christians. During that chaotic time in Egypt with the rise of political and radical Islam, Pastor Menes was not afraid, even of the extremist Muslims. He always relied on the Bible to give him courage, and he believed that Christians should not be intimidated by Muslims because ultimately our lives are in the Lord's hands.

Having a mentor like Pastor Menes encouraged me to see all Muslims—even those who are not easily lovable because of their extremism—as people loved and sought by Jesus. He believed that radical Muslims can come to Christ once Satan's veil is removed

from their eyes. He taught me that Satan is real, that hellfire is real, and that once we begin proclaiming the good news, we have three enemies fighting us: the world, the flesh, and the devil. He exhorted me to ask Muslims good questions and tell them meaningful stories about Jesus from the Bible. All tools and methods of evangelism that I later used and developed were initially taught to me by this mentor. Without a doubt, I was blessed to have such a mentor in my life, but I believe that we are all surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. If you come across a mentor like this pastor, I encourage you to sit and learn how devotion to Christ and gospel proclamation are lived and practiced.

Fourth, in my university years, I learned a remarkable lesson about Muslims. It propelled me to grow in my understanding and love for them. The lesson was simple: Islam is not monolithic, and Muslims are not all the same. I explained this reality briefly in chapter 1. Here I want to share how this realization changed my attitude toward Muslims. I want to help you see how the Islam in the West differs from the Islam in other parts of the world.

No one should expect every Muslim to practice Islam in the same way. If I assumed that all Muslims worldwide are—in their application of Islam and their treatment of Christians—similar to those Muslims I encountered in my early years in Egypt, the outlook would be bleak. The truth is that Egypt's Muslims are remarkably unique in their devotion to and application of Islam. I cannot use the Egyptian example of Islam to stereotype Muslims worldwide. In many parts of the world, people practice a milder form of Islam and are mostly cultural Muslims. God used my travels to open my eyes and help me understand that the experience I had with Islam in Egypt was distinct. This is good news for a Western reader. The Islam that you encounter in North America is likely different from

the one you read about in some of my stories. This difference is not about doctrines or beliefs but about application and intensity. Some examples should help.

I traveled to preach in Lebanon in 1999. Lebanon is in the Middle East and is part of the Arab world, but it is unique in that it has a significant number of Catholic and Orthodox Christians. This was one of my earliest trips outside Egypt; thus my understanding of Islam and Muslims was colored by my Egyptian context. In a sense, I thought that Islam and Muslims were the same everywhere. To my surprise, I discovered that the nature of Islam and the type of Muslims I encountered in Lebanon were different from those of my own country. After preaching at a Baptist church in a village near Beirut, the church youth took me for an evening walk on the coastal Corniche promenade of the Mediterranean Sea. When we sat on the sand, one of them began playing his guitar and singing Christian hymns. Everyone in the group began worshiping and singing loudly, except me. I looked around, expecting the police to arrest us. In my experience, Christians could not sing or preach outside a church building. My mind was stuck in my Egypt paradigm, while my body was in Lebanon. Both countries had Islam, but they practiced it differently. I discovered that Christians in Lebanon could sing, preach, and even—to a large extent—evangelize Muslims openly. The Lebanese context—especially with the existence of several Christian denominations and various Muslim sects—constitutes a unique Islam, with different dynamics and application.

Upon my return to Egypt, I reflected on my experience in Lebanon and marveled at the unique Lebanese form of Islam. But I also realized that Egypt's Islam is not always of the aggressive kind that I experienced growing up. The Lebanese context, which I loved,

was most likely similar to that of Egypt before the forceful Wahhabi version of the 1970s. This was an eye-opening realization for me. I learned that I would encounter different kinds of Muslims all the time and that I should never allow my negative experience with some to color the rest. While God is the only one who can work in our hearts, this realization encouraged me to love Muslims in their diversity. I began to understand that I had a message for all kinds of Muslims, whether cultural, nominal, religious, or even radical. It is the message of Jesus's love and redemption for all. We are all sinners, and our need is the same: the Savior. Christians will grow in their love for others when they recognize that we all have the same sin.

It would be wrong to love Muslims *only* if they are kind to us. We are not better or more superior than our Savior: "A disciple is not above his teacher" (Matt. 10:24). No matter what kind of Muslims you encounter, the gospel is the same. Can there be any more aggressive Muslims than those I encountered in my early years in Egypt? Of course yes. Should this prevent us from seeking to proclaim Jesus to them? Of course no. A few months after my trip to Lebanon, I traveled to preach in a country in North Africa. To my shock, I encountered a version of Islam that was more aggressive than the one I experienced in my homeland. I had a conversation with a muscular Muslim man. When he discovered I was Christian, he threatened to kill me. He believed Christians should not be allowed into his country because they were polytheists. According to his words, he sought to apply Allah's laws by his own hands. Although I was scared initially, I managed to speak with him several times over three consecutive days. I asked him questions about Muhammad and the Quran (I share some such questions in chap. 9) and presented to him the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. He did not accept Christ, but he did not kill me either.

Finally, we should be ready to lovingly share the hope we have in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). Developing love for Muslims requires growth through the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the source of our compassion (2 Cor. 1:3–4). Our compassion for Muslims, with our desire that they be saved, must be directly connected to our love for God, with our passion for the fame of Jesus and his glory. We share the gospel because we love God.

I can testify that my views of Muslims have changed significantly over the years. The Lord used these four major factors to shape my experience with Muslims and to help me grow in loving them. He can do the same for you, and even more. Our conversion to Christ and a steady prayer life can change our attitudes, allowing God to shape our views of Muslims to match his. Befriending Muslims, listening to them, and sharing life with them can help us see them as people loved by God. It nurtures our hearts to love them more and transforms our negative thoughts about them. Initiate conversations with Muslims. As you see the diversity in thought and practice among them, you will begin forming more and more relationships. Not all, to be sure, will be the same, nor will all of them lead to conversion—but there will be precious kingdom moments. Remember, a Muslim is created by God but separated from him. Furthermore, we can learn a great deal from the ministry and writings of experienced evangelists. Mentors, especially in evangelism, are a blessing from God. We all need to grow in learning. If you find a good mentor, do not waste the chance to learn as much as you can.

As a reader in the West, your experience with Islam will most likely differ significantly from mine. The Islam you encounter in the West is, for the most part, distinct from the one you would encounter in Muslim-majority countries. Let us all pray that God

stirs our hearts to love Muslims, and let us move from a mere acceptance to a Christ-centered compassion for them and passion for their salvation.

To further understand Muslims and Islam, we should discuss the distinctiveness of the Muslim paradigm, which some call a worldview or mindset. I explain this in the next chapter.

Understanding the Muslim Paradigm

Mindset or Worldview?

HAVE YOU EVER ASKED any of the following questions: Why do some Muslims become furious and act violently when Muhammad is depicted in satirical cartoons (unlike Christians, for instance, reacting to anti-Jesus Hollywood movies)? Why do many Arabic Muslim countries hate anything Jewish or related to the Jews? Why is it a big deal for many Muslims, in Western countries, to purchase church buildings and turn them into mosques or Islamic centers? The answer to these—and many other related—questions lies in one concept: the Islamic worldview. While Islam is a religious belief system, it also represents a cultural identity and a nationalistic character. One can encounter the cultural and nationalistic aspects of Islam in various ways through interactions with Muslims. This is explained by the term *worldview*.

An Islamic Worldview and a Muslim Mindset

A worldview is an overarching view that explains life and reality in general terms. An Islamic worldview, therefore, is a set of religious claims that clarify distinct Islamic understandings and convictions about crucial matters for the adherents of the faith. It is a comprehensive doctrinal and philosophical view that explains the seen and the unseen spheres in the world, highlighting the most basic Islamic claims and beliefs about the universe. The term *worldview* is related to another term: *mindset*. In relation to Islam and Muslims, I prefer using the phrases *an Islamic worldview* and *a Muslim mindset*. The reason is that Muslims differ in their understanding and interpretation of Islam; thus, theoretically, we can speak of numerous mindsets, yet at the same time we can still outline an overarching Islamic worldview. This does not aim at stereotyping Muslims or essentializing Islam. Rather, it highlights how the distinct Islamic presuppositions and assumptions—derived from sacred Islamic texts—form the beliefs and shape the practices of Islam’s followers.

Through my travels to different Muslim countries and my conversations with many Muslims and non-Muslims, it has become evident that a generally uniform Islamic paradigm prevails among Muslims despite their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity. This is called the Islamic worldview. It is interesting that Muslims in Saudi Arabia and West Africa have much in common with those in Indonesia and China, although there are still crucial differences. The discussion of a worldview will not exhaustively explain everything about an individual believer—arguably no two Muslims view or understand the reality of life identically. Rather, through this discussion, we recognize an overarching paradigm and

framework—within which many individual mindsets operate—and make sense of the way Islam shapes the contexts and concerns of its adherents. As we can talk about an Islamic worldview, we can also speak of a Christian worldview. But the Christian worldview and the Islamic worldview are different because they stem from a distinct set of religious prescriptions and accounts that answer questions about God and man differently.

While a detailed explanation of an Islamic worldview would require a book of its own, here I share with you seven elements of this worldview. The goal is to help you better understand the paradigm within which many Muslims operate. If you understand the Islamic worldview better, you can share the gospel of Jesus Christ with Muslims more properly and effectively.

Elements of an Islamic Worldview

First, Islam is submission. The Arabic term *islam* means surrender and submission. A *muslim* is, literally, a person who submits. In identifying themselves, Muslims proudly declare that they submit to Allah and Muhammad. Submitting to Muhammad is an essential part of Islam. Muslims long to follow his sayings and conduct. During his lifetime, many accepted *islam* as an act of submission to Muhammad, the victorious leader, rather than converting to a persuasive religious belief system. They accepted “submission” to avoid slaughter. The Islamic worldview exhorts Muslims to live in total submission to prescribed statements in the Quran and Muhammad’s sayings (*hadith*). Since these are usually difficult to access or comprehend among the masses, the educated clerics are the arbiters of religious prescriptions for Muslims.

Submission is crucial enough that it is distinguished from belief. A person can declare submission without a genuine belief in the

heart. A mere recitation of the profession of faith—“There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger”—declares submission and constitutes conversion to Islam, even if there is no sincere faith in the heart. In the West, many media outlets erroneously claim that *islam* is a term meaning peace. In evangelism, you will likely discover that Islam is a gigantic stronghold and an intense bondage, under which many are crushed. Through a works-based system and the threat of abandonment, many Muslims live in fear and total surrender.

Second, Islam is a religion and a state. In Islam, there is no separation between religion and state. The vast majority of Muslims view Islam as both worship and leadership. Muhammad was a prophet and a statesman. He brought a religious message and achieved political hegemony. This is why Muslims do not separate the two spheres. For Muslims, Islam encompasses all domains of life. The state and the religious institutions are intertwined. Thus, in some Muslim countries, the religious institutions are run by the government, and the state authority and religious authority are controlled by the same person. In those places, Islam serves as a religious belief system and a citizenship.

This is why some wrongly assume that if a man is Iranian, Saudi, or Egyptian, he must be Muslim. Owing to this worldview, many Muslims erroneously assume that the West is Christian; an American—say, a Hollywood actress—must be Christian. The Islamic worldview shapes the Muslim mindset. Many Muslims yearn, without realizing what it entails, to live in countries where Islam is applied literally, believing that Islam is the best governing system. They accuse the “Christian” West of immorality, claiming that Christianity is too lax—particularly with respect to worldly and lustful matters—in comparison to the more devoted and pious

inclinations of Muslims. Christians need to understand this aspect of the Islamic worldview and begin by refuting misconceptions about Christianity and the West (I discuss this matter in the next chapter).

Third, Muslims are one *umma*. The Arabic word *umma* is of great importance to Muslims. It is a unique Islamic term, denoting a unified and united community. This is Islamic nationalism, as if Islam replaces the nationality of an individual. Muslims view themselves as one unmatched community. This *umma* is a key concept in the Quran and is political in its core, although it touches social and cultural aspects of Muslim life. The logic is that Muslims are united—they are one *umma*. A Muslim in Dearborn, Michigan, and another in a jungle in central Asia may proudly declare that they are part of Muhammad's *umma*. This creates what is in their minds an unrivaled connection between Muslims from different ethnicities, languages, and cultures. For Muslims, this *umma* represents the best of mankind, as gleaned from the Quran 3:110. In their thinking, it surpasses any other community and is usually contrasted with other religious groups.

Some Muslims point to the fractured Christian denominations and assert the exceptional status of the unified Muslim *umma*—not realizing that Islam, too, has many sects. Indeed, Christianity does reflect some unity and solidarity that surpasses culture and ethnic lines, but unlike Islam, it is usually confined to doctrinal and pragmatic matters. Muslims celebrate that the *umma* represents solidarity and unity in all aspects of life.

The concept of one *umma*—at least theoretically—indicates equality between all Muslims; this is hardly evident, however, in social spheres. While Muslims proudly claim that they believe in the equality of all Muslims, this is merely a theoretical assertion. In many Islamic societies, especially in the Arab world, various social and economic

classes exist. The way the upper classes treat and view the lower classes is less utopic and idealistic than some claim.

Nonetheless, this Islamic worldview is important for Christians to understand because it explains why Muslims do not value individualism. Since they view themselves as an *umma*, Muslims often operate within a community. Sometimes Muslims desire to convert to Christ, but the question of how friends, neighbors, and relatives will react to their conversion complicates the matter. Unlike in the West, most Muslim societies operate in a collective group manner, where family members have a significant say in an individual's life. We should note here that even Christians who live in Muslim-majority countries—such as in the Arab world—tend to operate within similar patterns; they, like their Muslim counterparts, do not function individually. In a sense, the experience of these Christians differs from those of Western Christians in their encounters with Islam.

Fourth, Islam's hegemony should be sought by all Muslims. Whether cultural or religious, Muslims tend to pine for Islam's superiority as reflected in the "golden days" of Islam. Those were the days of Muhammad and his faithful companions, when—according to Muslim-trusted sources—Muhammad raided the Arabs and became the sole leader in Arabia and when his followers expanded the *umma* after his death. Thus, this aspect of the Islamic worldview is linked with that of the united *umma*.

As we think of an Islamic worldview, we should consider it as a colored painting instead of as discrete, unconnected parts. Each aspect of the worldview is woven into another. The understanding of Islam's unmatched *umma*, then, weaves into the yearning to see Islam's rule and hegemony achieved over every other faith and belief. Many Muslims in our day dream of waging jihad against the

West, conquering it and establishing Allah's laws. This is one way of following the "sacred" Muslim history and the example of early Muslims. It explains why, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, some Arab Muslims were filmed celebrating the horrific incident. These Muslims showed solidarity with the attackers and celebrated what they viewed as Islam's victory. Of course, not all Muslims followed the same action, but the yearning for Islam's superiority explains why some acted in such a way.

Further, Muslims are generally loyal and committed to their own families and also to their *umma* and faith. The notion of Islam's hegemony also explains why the act of dishonoring family in particular or Islam in general is considered the most severe tragedy in a Muslim's life. The logic is that if Islam must be superior, how can someone bring it down by committing shameful deeds, such as converting to another religion? And if Muslims are one *umma*, then one's family will receive shame if a Muslim abandons the faith. After all, shame within a family unit will cause hurt in the extended *umma* family. In this worldview, shame is often felt and described in loaded terms: it is a dreadful hurt, dishonoring embarrassment, and defaming grief. Its effects stigmatize the whole family. A family's communal reputation is crucial, and a "shameful" act can penetrate the family throughout future generations. No Muslim wants to marry into a shameful family, such as a family with a member who abandoned Islam. One always wants to be described as a member of a "reputable" and "honorable" family.

This paradigm differs from the individualistic reality in Western societies. Understanding this aspect of the Islamic worldview may help Christians see why a Muslim father would decide to kill his own daughter if she brought shame to the family by marrying a Christian. It also explains why a Muslim family might disavow their

own son when he converts to Christianity. The same worldview drives an older woman to wear a head covering, even if she is not religiously convinced that she should wear a hijab. Indeed, these examples emphasize the factor of shame in Muslim cultures. But I should warn the reader: many tend to think that Islamic societies operate primarily within an honor-shame paradigm, while their Western counterparts view life through a guilt-righteousness lens. This is relatively simplistic and somewhat inaccurate. While indeed the honor-shame paradigm often explains a plethora of matters in Islamic cultures, especially in the Arab world, one can trace the same paradigm in Western societies, albeit to a lesser extent, given the individualistic nature of these societies. Overall, it is helpful for Christians to understand the communal aspect in Muslims' lives, their solidarity with other Muslims within Muhammad's *umma*, and their yearning for Islam's superiority.

Fifth, Islam's path is jihad. The term *jihad* is unique to Islam and is used repeatedly in the Quran. The term means making effort and striving diligently for something. In Islam, one should strive (think of "applying jihad") for piety, for pleasing Allah, for elevating and expanding Muhammad's *umma*, and so forth. The term is thus exclusively related to a distinct Islamic understanding of life. For the earliest Muslim generations, the term itself served as their greatest motivation to march in conquests to expand the Islamic state. The Quran and many sayings attributed to Muhammad were employed by the caliphs to exhort Muslims to strive in jihad for Allah's cause by marching in battles to spread Islam to non-Muslim lands.

Today, every Muslim cherishes the term. Of course, it refers not only to waging war against non-Muslims but also to striving to please Allah in every possible way. Nonetheless, the overarching

application of the term throughout Islamic history has tended to emphasize the militant use of the term. A translation of the famous Arabic slogan of the Muslim Brotherhood group reads, "Allah is our goal. The Prophet Muhammad is our example. The Quran is our constitution. Jihad is our path. Dying for Allah's cause is our greatest hope." One can see how jihad plays a central part in such a worldview.

While not every Muslim mindset encourages jihad against non-Muslim infidels, one cannot deny the importance of the concept in justifying actions or claims advanced by Muslims. For many Muslims, Islam's hegemony and Muhammad's *umma* require every Muslim to live according to the Quranic jihad. It is the path through which Islam will become superior. Many Muslims today lament the fact that Islam is not superior and that Muslim countries are not as great as Western ones. These Muslims say that the reason for the failure of Muslim governments is that they forsake their jihad. It is not uncommon for Muslim clerics, in their Friday sermon in the mosque, to exhort Muslims to wage jihad to free Palestine and to conquer the Christian West. As Christians, we used to hear this call through the loudspeakers of the many mosques in our neighborhood in Cairo. Still, we need to balance the picture: many progressive Muslims, especially in the West, define jihad as a self-piety striving, not a militant endeavor. Again, an overarching Islamic worldview includes numerous Muslim mindsets.

Sixth, Islam's deity is an absolute unitary who has no partners. In Islam, the belief in the oneness of Allah is known as *tawhid*. The term reflects the most important, distinctive conviction in Islam. If Muslims are unified in one *umma*, they celebrate this *umma* as the community of *tawhid*, which qualifies them as a group in consensus around the absolute oneness of Allah. The belief in

absolute monotheism is also a matter of strong Islamic pride. The logic is this: we are the only religion that believes in one—and only one—god.

This claim is strengthened by the false charges in sacred Muslim texts that Jews and Christians have deviated from the right path by associating partners with the deity and assigning to him sons. Christians need to understand this aspect of the Islamic worldview when they begin gospel conversations with Muslims. The vast majority of Muslims, whether cultural or religious, believe that Christians are “associaters,” worshipers of three gods—a capital sin in the Islamic worldview. For Muslims, Allah’s oneness is contrasted with the evil, erroneous beliefs of other religions. Christians need to properly comprehend this aspect of the Islamic worldview in order to refute misconceptions in conversations with Muslims (as I explain in chap. 6).

This issue also indicates how important it is to define what we mean by certain vital words when we talk with Muslims. Think about the words God and Jesus. We may be speaking of “God,” and we may even use the same term as they do in English, but it is crucial that we define what we mean by the word. The Muslim understanding of the deity deviates significantly from the biblical understanding. Both Christians and Muslims see the deity as merciful and compassionate, but nowhere in Islam is the deity personal in his approach to and relationship with humankind. This idea can appear offensive to devout Muslims, who cherish the transcendence of the deity. This is one reason why Muslims can hardly fathom the notion of a god taking initiative to save sinners. For Muslims, Allah is far out of the reach of humans. This is an encouraging opportunity: Muslims are usually astonished—in a positive way—when Christians emphasize the biblical teaching of

a God who loves unconditionally and seeks personal relationship even with sinners. Similarly, we may be discussing “Jesus,” but the Islamic view of Jesus is starkly different from the Bible’s view. Thus, in evangelism, you must understand the Muslim view of the deity and always contrast it with the biblical one (I explain this idea more in later chapters).

Seventh, Muslims’ salvation is uncertain. In Islam, terms such as *justification* and *eternal assurance of salvation* are completely foreign. The very concept of salvation, if discussed in Islamic theology, refers to one’s rescue from error or deception. Muslims do not have any sense of eternal security. They believe that the best reward in the afterlife is paradise, but this “paradise” differs from “heaven” in the biblical understanding. Islamic paradise is more like the garden of Eden, where a man—not a woman—will find trees, rivers, food, drinks, marriage, flawless women, and more. This makes one wonder if there is a paradise for women and what allows one to be admitted.

The Islamic worldview heavily emphasizes good works as a means for eternal reward. Muslims, however, may hypothetically do every good deed in their lives and still not reach paradise; this is because there is no guarantee, since Allah knows best. In some Western circles, Muslims needed to converse with Christians, who speak often of salvation, and these Muslims developed the notion that salvation in Islam is synonymous with Allah’s forgiveness and thus requires both belief and deeds (Q 2:82; 5:9; 8:29; 35:7; 42:26). But these verses speak of forgiveness, not salvation. Moreover, nothing in Islam describes how to atone for one’s sins. In fact, Muslims do not believe in original sin. They say they have nothing to do with Adam’s sin. Because there is no original sin, according to Muslims, there is no need for a savior, redeemer, or atonement.

Muslims believe they are born pure. If one converts to Islam, one enters this pure status but then begins transgressing henceforward. To receive the best reward in the afterlife, Muslims must believe in Allah and keep doing good deeds—even though no assurance is granted. In a sense, most Muslims tend to think that humans can be sinless if they try hard and follow all the religious commands. This is one reason for the abundance of religious rulings followed by Muslims, including very precise ones, such as the notion that the reward of one ritual prayer in the mosque equals twenty-seven prayers at home. Here is a helpful example to consider further in illuminating the Islamic worldview: comparing Islam and Christianity in their views of prayer. Islamic prayer is a repeated ritual, not a communion with a divine Father.

In the same vein, it is interesting to note that Allah does not grieve human sins, nor does he initiate a solution for the sinful status of humans. This worldview is in clear contrast to the biblical one, where the sinful man attracts the divine compassion of the Most High. The best thing Allah does in response to human sin is to send prophets who model good works and encourage people to believe in the oneness of the deity. This may explain why it is difficult for Muslims to comprehend how God initiates the entire plan of salvation, by giving himself to die for sinful humans. In the end, salvation and redemption in biblical Christianity are initiated by God. Unlike Allah, God's greatness is demonstrated and amplified in his personal relationship with humankind, not in distancing and isolating himself from them. The biblical God knows your name and cares about your salvation—a total contrast with the Islamic worldview of Allah.

In sum, these seven aspects provide a sample of important features of an overarching Islamic worldview. When you talk with

Muslims, you should be a Christlike messenger who seeks to bridge barriers. There are major barriers, given the complexities of communicating your message across two different worldviews. When you understand the Islamic worldview, this should help you understand the various mindsets of those who operate within it. The hope is that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, you can communicate the gospel to Muslims properly, clearly, and effectively.

Since we have discussed the various features of the Islamic worldview, it is important, in turn, to study some misconceptions Muslims have about Christianity and Christians. In the following chapter, we examine these misconceptions and refute them.

Basic Muslim Misconceptions about Christians and Christianity

Clearing the Air

MOST OF THE MUSLIMS YOU ENCOUNTER will likely be of the nominal and cultural kind. They will be some of the most generous, kind, thoughtful, and hospitable people you will ever meet. Their knowledge of Islam will be minimal and centered on generalized claims and broad slogans with no sophistication. Many of them will be willing to hear about Jesus and the gospel. At first, they might show reluctance, most likely because they are not well rooted in their own faith; however, initiating a sincere conversation about religion with a Muslim is not considered odd, as might be the case in the West more generally. Religion is a significant part of a Muslim's daily life. If, when meeting a Muslim, you do not begin a conversation about faith, the Muslim often will. Still, these nominal Muslims most likely hold specific beliefs about Christians

and Christianity, some of which are completely distorted. They do not acquire these views by reading Christian books or talking with believers but instead by hearing sermons at the mosque and having conversations with other Muslims. These views probably include misconceptions about Christianity and its adherents.

Although I focus in this chapter on major theological misconceptions Muslims may have about Christianity, I first want to draw your attention to a few cultural and social misconceptions that Muslims sometimes adopt—especially if they have never encountered believing Christians. Refuting and responding to these misconceptions will help clear the air for your gospel conversations.

Social and Cultural Misconceptions

Because Muslims generally do not separate religion and state, they tend to view the West as Christian. This is problematic and creates baggage that hinders gospel conversations. Some Muslims believe that Hollywood reflects the Christian lifestyle. They presuppose that such loose and lax lifestyles are the result of Christian beliefs. They assume that Christians approve of sexual immorality and do not care when, where, or with whom one has sex. These Muslims deduce that American actresses and characters on television shows—who wear crosses on their exposed bodies and live with their boyfriends—represent Christianity. Evangelists must be aware that Hollywood influences many Muslims' views about Christians in the West. Muslims assume that Christianity allows the portrayed behaviors because the West is supposedly Christian. This erroneous presupposition sometimes serves as a claim for the superiority of Islam as more virtuous than Christianity.

Thus, I encourage Christians to emphatically and openly communicate that this lifestyle is not biblical or supported by believ-

ing Christians. Particularly, in conversations between female evangelists and Muslim women, the Christian needs to mention that the Bible is clear about chastity (this word rings well with Muslims) and godliness and that Christ never commanded the lifestyle represented by the American entertainment industry. A male Christian should strongly emphasize that his lifestyle mirrors that of Christ, who called us to godliness and to flee from sin and immoral sexual desires (1 Cor. 6:18; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; 2 Pet. 1:3). Show your Muslim friends these verses and read them aloud.

Similarly, some Muslims view any Western military attack on Arab countries—think of the Iraq War as an example—as a Christian war against Islam. Of course, considering these views, Muslims tend to ignore their own history. They do not consider the Islamic conquests of the Christian Byzantine lands (seventh to ninth centuries) to be invasions or military incursions, but instead, they call them religiously motivated campaigns to proclaim Islam. Nonetheless, I encourage evangelists to simply affirm that the West is not Christ, that Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6), and that his twelve disciples never carried out military campaigns to promote his message.

It is important, at this point, to bring your discussion to the Bible and demonstrate how Jesus rebuked one of his disciples when he wanted to apply the sword (Matt. 26:52). The implied contrast here is between the message of Jesus and the actions and statements of the early Muslim commanders. You must explain Jesus as the “Prince of Peace” and show how he alone can reconcile us to the Father and bring peace to our hearts (John 14:27). We should inspect faiths first and foremost by their founders, the teachings they offered, and the examples they presented, rather

than by followers of these faiths and their misdeeds. Overall, do not get tangled up in political discussions. If you find yourself in such a discussion, listen carefully and show sincere care for the Muslim friend and his or her views—but quickly direct the conversation to Jesus, his words, and his actions. Affirm that, in Jesus, we are called to be peacemakers, not war initiators (Matt. 5:9; Rom. 12:18; 14:19).

Some Muslim misconceptions are theological. They appear repeatedly in gospel conversations and often present significant barriers in evangelism. In particular, there are two major theological misconceptions: (1) the belief that Christians worship three gods and (2) the assumption that the Bible is corrupt, falsified, and altered. Each of these also involves subsequent misconceptions. Thus, it is important for Christians to be aware of these problems and address them in a Christlike manner when talking with Muslims. In the following two sections, we study these misconceptions and respond to them.

Theological Misconception 1: Christians Worship Three Gods

Evangelists do not need to assume that every Muslim believes the erroneous claim that Christians worship three gods. It is, however, a widespread misconception among Muslims owing to centuries of Islamic traditions—preached often in mosques—that accuse Christians of worshipping three gods. The misconception relates directly to the erroneous Quranic presentation of the Trinity. The Quran states that Christians believe Mary was God’s consort and that she conceived Jesus as their son (Q 4:171; 5:72–75, 116–17). Thus, the Quranic Trinity is the Father, Mary, and Jesus. Any Christian would agree with Muslims that this Quranic Trinity is blasphemous. Jesus is not the physical offspring of the Father. In

fact, the Quran allows the possibility that Allah could have a son (Q 43:81) but denies that this son was Jesus.¹

Sometimes once a Christian unequivocally denies this erroneous Quranic Trinity (Father, Mary, and Jesus), the matter is settled. If this is the case, it is prudent to move on—there is no need to explain the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in its fullness yet. If your Muslim friend is satisfied with your answer and accepts that Christians do not worship three gods, then move on to reading the Bible together or talking about Jesus’s miracles and teachings. It is not that you want to avoid discussing the Trinity but rather that you want to gain ground in presenting Jesus and salvation before focusing on complex theological matters. You will present and discuss Trinitarian theology more completely once you have established a foundation.

At the same time, in some conversations with Muslims, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity may be an obstacle that must be removed before the conversation can continue. At this point, the evangelist will need to emphasize some basic facts. Here I encourage Christians to ask, “Would you like to see what the Bible actually says about the oneness of God?” If the Muslim agrees, the Christian may refer to two important passages, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New: Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and Mark 12:29.² These two passages explicitly state that God is one.

- 1 For a helpful discussion and survey of possible explanations of the Trinity, see Imad N. Shehadeh, *God with Us and without Us*, vol. 1, *Oneness in Trinity versus Absolute Oneness* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018). Shehadeh serves as president of Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary. His ministry in the Arab world, and in a Muslim context in particular, drives his explanation and articulation of the triune God to help Muslims grasp the biblical truth.
- 2 Of course, there are many more passages, including Deut. 4:35; 32:39; 1 Kings 8:60; 2 Kings 19:19; Ps. 86:10; Isa. 45:5–6; 46:9; Rom. 3:30; 1 Tim. 1:17; James 2:19.

The passage from Mark is spoken by the Lord Jesus himself. We can add Exodus 20:3: “You shall have no other gods before me.” It is important to affirm to the Muslim friend that the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, affirms that we worship and believe in one—and only one—God.

In many cases, Muslims are surprised to find this in the Bible since their presuppositions have been the opposite. At this point, the Muslim may be convinced and satisfied that Christians are not polytheists. This is often the case. Whether you should continue explaining the Trinity at this stage or wait until you establish some biblical foundations depends on how the Holy Spirit guides you. After all, we should remember that the Trinity as a doctrine is not a simple intellectual argument but God’s revelation of himself. We believed the Trinity through the Scriptures: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

When you do explain the Trinity to a Muslim, it is important to make some specific initial remarks. First, in early conversations, your aim is to clear the air and to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity does not violate the oneness of God. It is not necessary to present a detailed, comprehensive, and sophisticated explanation of the theology of the Trinity right away. Your goal is not to build a complex argument but rather to establish a clear understanding that Christians believe in one God and not three.

Second, you will need to examine your Muslim friend’s view of the Trinity because in some cases Muslims do not require much explanation and can simply take your word and move on to other matters. Ask your Muslim friend some leading questions: “What do you mean by Trinity?” “Who are the three gods of Christians?”

“Do you really think that Christians worship three deities?” These questions can help you discern where your Muslim friend stands so that you can speak according to his or her particular needs.

Third, always turn to the Bible and read it with the Muslim. In fact, it is better if you have the Muslim read the biblical passages aloud.

Fourth, do not try to oversimplify the Trinity. We need to realize and to affirm to Muslims that the Trinity is a revelation of God about himself. We receive it as he wants to convey it. God is marvelous, almighty, and too vast for any of us to contain, comprehend, or fathom completely. He reveals himself and the truth about his nature to us; we are unable to understand his revelations apart from his grace and help.

Fifth, let the Holy Spirit guide you in your conversation. Sometimes it is only necessary to explain one element; other times, you will dive deep and read many passages from the Bible. Nothing is better than seeking God in your heart while you explain his truths to a Muslim. One matter is certain: the Holy Spirit works in the hearts and minds of Muslims as you speak with them about the triune God and as you read the Bible with them. Many Muslims have come to Christ throughout history, and when doing so, they came to worship the triune God.

To explain the Trinity to a Muslim, I rely on the wealth of accounts by medieval Arabic-speaking Christians who articulated this important biblical doctrine to their Muslim interlocutors. I always begin by emphatically stating that Christians believe God is one being and that we do not believe in three gods or in three parts of a god. When I say that the belief in three gods is blasphemous and ridiculous, Muslims usually open up more for conversation. I turn to the Bible and tell my Muslim friend that from the Bible we know

that God is sovereign and eternal. He is beyond our limited minds and understanding. Here I pause to make sure Muslims are following the discussion and ask, “Do you agree with that?” Muslims often agree since these words resonate with them.

As you go on to explain the Trinity, the dialogue may take something like the following form:

EVANGELIST: Is not God a living God? Doesn't God speak and create?

MUSLIM: Yes, of course.

E: Thus, God has a Spirit and a Word: Is this correct? [Muslims read in the Quran that the deity has a spirit and a word, so this question should be familiar to their thinking.]

M: Yes.

E: Is God's Spirit eternal or created?

M: God is eternal; therefore, his Spirit is also eternal.

E: Is God's Word eternal or created?

M: Again, the same answer: God is eternal; therefore, his Word is eternal. His Spirit and his Word cannot be created. [Muslims read in the Quran that Jesus is the word of Allah and a word from Allah, Q 3:45.]

E: Was God at any point not living?

M: No, never.

E: Was he at any point deaf or wordless?

M: No, never.

E: So can we say that God, his Spirit, and his Word are eternal and not created?

M: Nothing about God can be created.

E: So when you worship God, do you worship him without his Spirit and Word?

M: No.

E: When you worship God, do you worship him with his Spirit and Word?

M: I never thought of this, but I think yes, indeed, I worship God, his Spirit, and his Word. [Christians should understand here that Muslims conceive of these realities in a very different way. We are mainly trying to help them get closer to realizing the plurality in the oneness of God.]

E: So do you believe in God, his Spirit, and his Word?

M: Yes, I do. [Again, we realize that Muslims do not believe in three distinct persons of the triune God, but we are using language familiar to them to help them understand that the Trinity does not equate to polytheism.]

E: But this would make God three gods, correct?

M: No. He is only one God. I worship only one God.

E: This is what Christians have been saying based on the Bible's teachings. We worship one God: the Father, who is God; the Son, who is his Word; and the Holy Spirit, who is his Spirit. We call this one God the triune God—one being in three equal and coeternal persons.

This dialogue is a sample of how an evangelist can explain the plurality in the oneness of God. Still, we need to affirm to our Muslim friends that we use limited language to explain divine, infinite matters. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and eternal—he is beyond our limited minds and understanding. Since God never changes, he has never been Spirit-less or Word-less. Since God is holy, his Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Since God is a living God, his Word is with him and inseparable from him, and his Spirit and Word are coeternal with him. If the Bible identifies God's Spirit

as the Holy Spirit, it also speaks of his Word as his Son. Here the Son is not physical offspring (more on this shortly). God reveals himself to us as one being existing in three persons—but the three persons are not three gods.

When the Trinity discussion with a Muslim goes deeper, we can explain matters further. God exists eternally as one God in three persons. He is one only as he is also eternally three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity means tri-unity. God is one in nature, which comprises all the essential attributes of God, and three in persons, as each is a distinct, personal expression of the one, eternal, undivided divine nature.³

One important point in this discussion is that when the Bible refers to God's Word as the "Son" of God, it does not mean a physical offspring. Many Muslims have been hindered by the Quranic concept of the Trinity (Father, Mary, and Jesus), and we must help them see that "Son" does not refer to physical reproduction in this situation. Sometimes you simply need to use a metaphor to help Muslims realize that not every "son" is a physical offspring. While the following metaphors do not align with proper theology regarding the "Son of God," they help Muslims overcome the misconception that the Son is a physical reproduction from the Father. When a man says, "I am the son of this land," he does not mean that he is the physical son from a marriage between the land and his mother. The term refers to belonging and connection. In fact, the Quran itself uses a metaphor to describe its heavenly source as

3 When explaining the Trinity using more nuanced theological language in later stages, Christians can benefit from Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 24 (2008; repr., Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016); Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020). For a short explanation of the Trinity, see the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, accessible at <https://bfm.sbc.net/>.

“the Mother of the Book” (Q 3:7; 13:39; 43:4)—does this mean the Quran was born from a mother? In most cases, these metaphors help Muslims realize that “Son” does not refer to physical offspring. We should be clear, however, that these metaphors do not describe the theological concept of the sonship of Jesus Christ to the Father—they simply help Muslims move beyond the erroneous Quranic conception of the Trinity. Theologically, the Son of the Father is unlike “the son of this land.” The Son of the Father literally is the Son of the Father: he is eternally begotten from the Father, and this is what constitutes the Father being Father and the Son being Son. The Father eternally begets a Son, and the Son is eternally begotten of the Father.

For some Muslims, the major barrier to accepting the doctrine of the Trinity is the Islamic concept of strict monotheism. This principle stands in the way of understanding that God can have any plurality in his oneness. When speaking with these Muslims, we must include God’s attributes in the discussion. God’s attributes cannot be understood apart from a plurality within the unity of God. Muslims believe that Allah, in his attributes, is knower and hearer. These attributes are meaningless when no other person exists. I ask Muslims whether God was loving before he created the world and everything in it, including humans. While the Quran does not explicitly portray the deity as loving, most Muslims accept this attribute as essential to the divine. They would answer that indeed he was because he never changes. Then I ask, “Before the world was created, to whom was he loving? Can God be loving to nothing and no one?” The Islamic doctrine of strict monotheism cannot answer this question.

On the other hand, the doctrine of the Trinity can help us understand that in the one holy being of God, there is a divine

relationship between the coeternal persons of the triune God. God has always been loving, even before he created the universe. God loves not because he can or wants to but because he is loving in his essence. Within the three persons of the Trinity, the attributes of God have been manifested since eternity past and will be throughout eternity future. A relationship requires a giver and a recipient. The doctrine of the Trinity solves this dilemma since the one living God exists in three coeternal persons, while the Islamic concept of strict monotheism does not allow any composite or complexity in the oneness of God, which does not explain how divine attributes never changed.

In the same vein, the Islamic concept of the strict oneness—with no plurality—of God has a major flaw: most Muslims believe that the Quran is eternal and uncreated. Sometimes I ask a Muslim, “Do you believe that the Quran is eternal and uncreated?” If the answer is affirmative, then I ask, “Does this mean there were two eternal beings?” The Muslim is often shocked to realize that Islam’s claim can lead to such a conclusion. The point of this question is to demonstrate to a Muslim that strict monotheism without plurality in God does not answer certain important questions, including Islamic claims. Overall, we must also affirm that the matters of God are not always simple and straightforward. How can we bring the whole ocean (the unlimited divine) into a small hole in the sand on the beach (a limited human mind)? What we understand about God’s nature and character comes from what he revealed about himself in the Bible. You can share these words of Jesus with your Muslim friend: “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man” (John 3:12–13). These verses convey how complex

the matters of God are. We need to accept what he reveals about himself and praise him in love and obedience.

Theological Misconception 2: The Bible Is Corrupt

In my high school years, I had a dear Muslim friend named Ali. We were close friends and never felt awkward when discussing religion. We loved each other, although we disagreed on many topics, including theological ones. Ali was a religious Muslim who wanted to win me to Islam. Every time he would hear a critique of Christian doctrines in the mosque, he shared it with me to convince me of our “errors.” Frankly, Ali helped me discover various Islamic perspectives on Christianity and helped me think critically about my faith. One of the first topics we discussed was the falsification of the Bible. Like many Muslims, Ali was convinced that the true Bible is lost and the one we have today is falsified, altered, or corrupted. He believed that Christians and Jews had diligently and intentionally manipulated the text. Whenever I brought the Bible and tried to read it with him, he would immediately dismiss me and claim that the text was distorted and unreliable. Alternatively, Ali insisted that the Quran was the only reliable and perfectly preserved scripture.

I was left frustrated many times because I did not know how to respond and was unable to use my Bible to convey any truths about my faith to Ali. I often asked him, “If God—as you claim—revealed the Torah, ‘Gospel,’ and the Quran, how can he be just and fair to preserve only the Quran from corruption?” He used to say that this selective preservation was the divine will to establish the Quran as the perfect, ultimate, and final revelation. He once came to me with a victory smile as he held two Arabic Bibles. They were two different Arabic translations (an older version from 1883 and a newer one

from 1983). Of course, the two translations included different word choices. For Ali, this demonstrated that the Bible was corrupt. Ali joyously declared, “You will never find a different Quran. The Quran is one unchanged text. It is perfect.” Ali’s assumptions and conclusions here were inaccurate about both the Bible and the Quran. He was confused about Bible translations and did not realize the textual history of the Quran or know about its competing variants.

My friend Ali is not an exception. In my conversations with Muslims in various countries, I cannot remember ever meeting a Muslim who did not accept the false assumption that the Bible is corrupt. This indicates the popularity of this misconception, although—ironically—it is not even supported by the Quran itself. Later Muslims, in clear contradiction to statements in the Quran, claimed that the Bible was false. Why did they establish such a claim? One reason is that the Quran mentions that the Bible prophesies the advent of Muhammad (Q 61:6). If you search the Bible from cover to cover, you will find no such prophecy—a fact that led later Muslims to claim that the true Bible had been lost and the current one had been corrupted. Thus, the question remains, How should an evangelist deal with a Muslim who claims the Bible is corrupt? Here I provide a few pointers.

This is the only time when I refer to the Quran to make a religious point or claim in my evangelistic conversations. In general, I focus on the Bible and the truth claims of Christianity as found in the inspired word of God. In this case, however, Muslims begin with false claims about the Bible, and there is no better way to address these than with the Quran, which they believe to be perfect. In a sense, we should simply show Muslims that their claim contradicts their own scripture. Here Christians must be wise: you are not using the Quran because you believe it to be truthful but

rather because Muslims do. Once you establish the authenticity of the Bible to a Muslim, it is unnecessary to dwell on the Quranic text. Use the Bible alone. But how can you use the Quran to prove that the Bible is not corrupted?

The Quran clearly states that Allah inspired the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, and the “Gospel” of Jesus (e.g., 4:163; 5:43–45; 17:55; 21:105; 57:27).⁴ In addition to these three books, the Quran refers to the Bible using a unique Arabic term, *dhikr*, which means “the Reminder” and refers to the divine message reminding people of the truth about the deity. So does the Quran say that the Torah, the Psalms, the “Gospel,” or the *dhikr* is corrupt? Not at all; it actually states the opposite. In one verse, Allah affirms, “We have, without doubt, sent down the Reminder [*dhikr*], and we assuredly preserve it” (Q 15:9). The use of “We” here is the royal “We,” which is used often in religious texts. This verse insists that Allah revealed the *dhikr* before the Quran and assuredly preserved it from corruption. This *dhikr* cannot be the Quran since the Quran was supposedly being revealed at the time of this verse. If the pre-Islamic revelation is corrupted, as some Muslims claim, then Allah lied.

Muslims may hastily claim that this *dhikr* is the Quran itself, at which time you should reference another Quranic verse: “For We have written in the Psalms, after the Reminder [*dhikr*], ‘The earth shall be the inheritance of My righteous servants’” (Q 21:105). It is clear, based on this verse, that the *dhikr* was revealed before the Psalms; thus, it cannot be the Quran. In fact, the Quran associates Moses with the *dhikr*: “We did give to Moses and Aaron the salvation and a radiance and a Reminder [*dhikr*] to those who fear” (Q 21:48).

⁴ The material in this section draws on the lengthier chapter on the topic in my book *A Concise Guide to the Quran: Answering Thirty Critical Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 101–7. Used by permission of Baker Academic.

The *dhikr* clearly refers to the Bible in another verse: “We did not send [any prophets] before you [oh Muhammad] except as men to whom We revealed—ask the People of the Reminder [*dhikr*] if you do not know” (Q 21:7). Here Allah presumably instructs Muhammad to ask the people who received the *dhikr* before him. Thus, the *dhikr* is not the Quran, and Muhammad is exhorted to consult Christians and Jews when he is unsure of the truth. Would Allah command Muhammad to ask people who follow a corrupt Bible? Moreover, Allah instructs Muhammad, “If you are in doubt about what We have sent down to you, ask those who read the Book before you” (Q 10:94). If Allah directs Muhammad to ask those who “read” the Scripture before him, then that Scripture must be perfectly preserved. In fact, the Quran states, “No man can change the words of Allah” (Q 6:34), so if—according to Muslims—the Torah, Psalms, and “Gospel” are all Allah’s words, how can anyone change them? Why would Allah allow anyone to twist his divine words?

Some verses assure the hearers of the Quran that the Bible in its totality is uncorrupted. In one verse, Allah instructs Muslims, “Dispute not with the People of the Book [Christians and Jews] except with what is best as an argument, except for those of them that do wrong; and say to them, ‘We believe in that which has been revealed to us [the Quran] and revealed to you [the Bible]’” (Q 29:46). This Quranic verse establishes that during Muhammad’s lifetime, Muslims were instructed by Allah to proclaim their belief in both the Quran and the Bible. Furthermore, the Quran asserts that the Torah in particular is perfectly preserved and that the Jews must follow it because it contains the true laws of God and his light and guidance: “And how should they [the Jews] make you [oh Muhammad] a judge, while with them is the Torah, in which is Allah’s judgment? Surely, We sent down the Torah containing

guidance and light” (Q 5:43–44). Here the Quran establishes the trustworthiness of the Torah. Similarly, the Quran affirms the book of the “Gospel,” states that Christians must follow it, and declares that it confirms the Torah and has true guidance: “We sent Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah before him and We gave to him the Gospel containing guidance and light” (Q 5:46). Thus, the Quran—presumably during Muhammad’s lifetime—affirms the Torah and the “Gospel,” and explicitly declares that they contain guidance and light. How, then, can they be corrupt? The Quran commands Christians to follow Jesus’s statements: “Let the People of the Gospel judge by that which Allah revealed therein. Those [among them] who do not judge in accordance with God’s revelations are the transgressors” (Q 5:47). There is no doubt that the Quran explicitly confirms the authenticity of the “Gospel.” If Muslims claim that the Bible is falsified, then they clearly violate their Quran.

Some Muslims might introduce two verses of the Quran that appear to falsify the Bible:

But the wrongdoers changed the saying with other than what they were told. (Q 2:59)

There is indeed a group of them who twist their tongues to mimic the Book, that you may suppose that it is from the Book, though it is not from the Book, and they say, “It is from Allah,” though it is not from Allah, and they attribute lies to Allah, and they know [it]. (Q 3:78)

These verses, however, do not present a case for the unreliability of the biblical text but instead reflect how some evildoers twist the

words of Scripture. The text is not corrupt, but its explanations and interpretations by evil people are twisted. Of course, evil people often spread incorrect claims—we can all agree on this—but the text itself remains trustworthy. Further, if these two verses indeed indicate that the text of the Bible has been corrupted, then the Quran contradicts itself if we consider the many verses we discussed earlier stating that the Bible has been preserved.

After you explain these matters to Muslims, some will concede that the Quran confirms that the Bible is trustworthy and authentic; they may argue, however, that it was corrupted after Muhammad's time and after these Quranic assertions. To these Muslims, I always ask, "So God was unable to keep preserving the Bible after Muhammad?" Additionally, it is important to note that the Bible was canonized, quoted, circulated, and taught in many lands and languages (Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and so forth) centuries before Muhammad. This is evident in the four great uncial codices—Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (fourth century) and Alexandrinus and Ephraemi (fifth century)—which agree with the full text we use today.

If the text was corrupted after Muhammad, then Muslims need to show us where this corruption occurred. One may wonder, did the corruption occur in every existing copy worldwide? Were the corrupters able to erase and distort second-century manuscripts of the New Testament? What about the Septuagint, the Greek translation that traces back to the third century BC? Did the corruption take place in agreement between Jews and Christians, who differed in their beliefs and assertions? If corruption occurred, which specific passages were corrupted? Today, dozens of passages in our Bible portray key Jewish and Christian figures unfavorably and reveal their sins—would not these passages be the ones to target? These rhetorical questions lead to only one plausible conclusion: contrary to

what many Muslims claim, the Bible is entirely trustworthy. Indeed, the Quran affirms its reliability, authenticity, and trustworthiness.

Once the evangelist establishes the truthfulness of the Bible, there is no need at all to remain in the Quran. Remember, we only used the Quran because it was trusted by the Muslim. Once we are able to prove that the Bible is the word of God, then we need to dwell in it. I always question the methods advanced by Christians who use the Quran to evangelize or to advance “facts” or “truths” about Christ and Christianity. In many cases, these methods abuse and misuse the Quran. For our purposes, all that is needed to evangelize is found in the Bible. Why would people consult a man-made book if they have the word of the living God? This brings me to two final and necessary comments.

First, when a Christian uses the Quran to convince a Muslim of the trustworthiness of the Bible, there is a possibility that the Muslim may ask, “Do you believe the Quran to be a revealed scripture?” Here the Christian must answer honestly and sincerely. The problem is that a negative answer—especially in the early stages of a friendship—may end the conversation since the Muslim may reject a Christian who does not believe that the Quran is revealed. I always answer with a smile: “Brother, if I believed the Quran, I would have been a Muslim by now. If you believed the Bible, you would be a Christian, wouldn’t you? I have reasons to believe the Bible; would you like me to show you why I love the Bible as God’s word?” They are usually agreeable and willing, at which point I turn to the person and character of Jesus as found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Second, when evangelists speak with Muslims about the Torah, the Psalms, and the “Gospel,” they need to understand that there is a huge gap between the Christian and Muslim understandings of these terms. These books—in the Muslim understanding—are not identical to

those that Christians and Jews use. Muslims believe that Allah brought down a book to Moses called the Torah, another one to David called the Psalms, and a third to Jesus called the “Gospel.” Allah similarly sent a book down to Muhammad called the Quran. All these books are divinely dictated, according to Muslims. So for Muslims, David did not sing the Psalms but instead received such a book from the heavenly deity, who later revealed another book called the “Gospel” to the prophet Jesus. In the Muslim understanding, these books all contain the same message concerning the oneness of the deity. This same message—Muslims claim—is now found in the Quran; thus, there is no need for any other scripture since other scriptures are, or may be, corrupt. The understanding of this significant difference should help Christians as they bring the gospel of Christ to Muslims.

In sum, evangelists must be totally assured of the authenticity of their Bible. It is no exaggeration to tell our Muslim friends that there is no verse in the Quran—not a single verse—that degrades or undermines the Christian Bible. If the Quran hints that some evildoers changed the interpretation of the revealed text, then this is the fault of those evildoers. The text is reliable and stands as a witness against their evildoing:

Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

“That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged.” (Rom. 3:4)

By refuting misconceptions and emphasizing truth claims of biblical Christianity, a Christian is now in a position to smoothly present the good news to Muslims. We explore this and related questions in the second part of this book.

PART 2

TOOLS FOR EVANGELIZING
MUSLIMS

How to Communicate the Gospel to Muslims

WHENEVER I MEET WITH A MUSLIM, I remember Paul's precious words: "We are ambassadors for Christ" (2 Cor. 5:20). As gospel bearers, we are his representatives, speaking on his behalf, and he is making his appeal through us as we proclaim, "Be reconciled to God." Pleading with Muslims, "Come back to God," is what an ambassador of Christ does. Most of Paul's life was spent in afflictions and chains, but he knew the glorious reality that he was an ambassador for the Most High God. What an honor! Paul calls himself "an ambassador in chains" who seeks "to proclaim the mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19–20). This is one reason why he is not ashamed of the gospel (2 Tim. 1:12). It is not that Paul is spectacularly brave or uniquely bold. Rather, he is "not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). Whenever we interact with Muslims, we must be consumed with the biblical truth that the gospel is God's power for salvation. In order for people to be reconciled with God, the gospel must be proclaimed. You are the proclaimer—Christ's ambassador.

Whenever you speak with a Muslim, it is important to remember that God, for centuries, has been saving multitudes of Islam's followers. Seize this precious opportunity to proclaim the message of eternal hope and divine reconciliation. Expect that God will do it again, through you, here and now. Indeed, here and now, Jesus is mighty to save. Here and now, God is able to change lives. Here and now, the gospel penetrates the darkness and reconciles people to God. The Holy Spirit is able to make hearts soft and receptive to the gospel. In encountering Muslims, we need to be filled with God's compassion to bring unbelievers into life. Why does God save Muslims or anyone else? Why does he accept fallen, hell-deserving, and depraved sinners? The answer is that God loves them (1 Tim. 1:15).

But what is the gospel? What should be proclaimed to Muslims for them to be saved in Christ? Should the gospel proclaimed to Muslims differ in any way from that proclaimed to non-Muslims? These are important and consequential questions. In the following pages, we discuss and answer them. But at the outset, we should affirm that the gospel is one. There is no special gospel for Muslims. The good news that we declare to Muslims is the same that we declare to everyone else: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This verse uniquely conveys the most important elements of our gospel proclamation. Since some Christians do not know how to present the gospel to non-Christians *precisely*, it is important that we highlight the essential elements of gospel presentation.

Elements of a Gospel Presentation

First, when presenting the gospel, we must emphasize how God loves sinners and initiates the process of salvation. In conversations with

Muslims, it is important for us to explain that, if left on our own, we would remain rebellious against God and never choose to seek him. We tend to run away from his presence, just as Adam did. We are sinful by nature. It is God who—in his grace and kindness—reaches out to reconcile us with himself because he knows how weak and helpless we are. If humans could initiate their own salvation, then it would be man-made, man-centered, and man-focused. Instead, salvation is a free gift from the loving God. When humans accept God's initiative, they are merely reacting to the work of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; Heb. 8:10).

Here it is important to ask Muslims a few leading and reflective questions, to help them respond with what they understand about God's love:

- Have you ever experienced God working either in your heart or in your surroundings?
- Have you ever sensed that God sent special people in your path or sent special hints or signals about himself?
- How does God bring your attention to his holy presence?
- Has anyone told you the most glorious news that Jesus loves you?

These questions aim to help the evangelist emphasize that God is working to bring us to himself, and one way is by sending people to proclaim the gospel to those around them. No gospel encounter with Muslims is random or by chance.

Second, in gospel presentation, we should highlight that we are sinful and separated from God, destined to eternal judgment by

a *pure* and *holy* God (the choice of these adjectives is intentional because they resonate with Muslims). We cannot save ourselves by trying to become better people. Our spiritual reality is that we are in a bottomless pit, and we need the Almighty to rescue us or we will remain spiritually dead. But when the Spirit of God works in us, we receive life instead of death and experience freedom from sin.

When we talk with a Muslim, it is necessary to emphasize this truth: humans are not essentially good, and we cannot incentivize God by trying to be better. Humans are spiritually dead because of their disobedience and sinful nature, not because of wrongful behavior or mischief. The problem is our sinful nature, not our mistakes (Eph. 2:1–5). We are sinful, and therefore we commit sins; we do not become sinful because we commit sins. This is an important point because Muslims do not believe in original sin. It must be explained patiently and repeatedly. We can ask a Muslim, “How can *unholy* and *unclean* sinful humans”—note the language of *unclean* used here since it resonates with Muslims’ understanding of transgressions—“approach the Most High?” No work of any kind, no matter how good or unmatched, can reconcile us to the Most Holy God.

To help a Muslim grasp the notion of lostness, we can ask why Muslims do not eat pork. The answer is usually because it is *haram* (unlawful). Whether it is a small piece of pork or a hint of its mixture with any other food, Muslims avoid it because it is *haram* and unclean. We can explain to the Muslim, then, that our hearts are unclean in the sight of the Most Holy God, no matter how we try to clean them by mixing good deeds with our bad. The truth is, nothing can clean our hearts except God. We are sinful, and we need God to rescue us from eternal judgment (the word *rescue* resonates with Muslims, so it is helpful to use it).

Third, at this point in our gospel presentation, we should bring the unmatched work of Jesus into the conversation. We must proclaim joyously and boldly to Muslims that the Bible clearly identifies Jesus Christ as the only way to heaven. He is the only provision for any human's sin. The good news is that Christ died in the place of sinners. At this stage, we need to bridge a possible barrier in their minds. They most likely perceive Jesus as merely a human and a good prophet. We should explain who Jesus *truly* is. Ask a Muslim, "Have you ever met the *true* Jesus Christ?" This is an essential step. Although most Muslims already love Jesus and believe in him as a prophet, sometimes at this stage they are willing to adjust their perceptions about Jesus. The evangelist should be ready to read important biblical texts that show Christ gloriously and marvelously, especially in ways that resonate with Muslims. Make it your practice to open the Bible with Muslims. Do not recite verses from memory—read them from the biblical text. Be intentional about showing utmost respect for the passages as you read them. This will resonate with Muslims because they respect any inspired and revealed word. Focus initially on passages that portray Jesus as powerful, majestic, and unmatched. Consider a few examples that I often use in my conversations with Muslims.

We can begin by asking the Muslim, "Would you like to hear a story told by Jesus?" Muslims often answer affirmatively. There are many options to reference in the Bible; however, the parable of the two debtors (Luke 7:36–50) or the parable of the (un)forgiving debtor (Matt. 18:21–35) can be very helpful. After reading the biblical passages clearly, slowly, and respectfully, we can ask Muslims, "What do you understand from this?" Once we hear their answer, we can reflect on it as we unpack the exceptional truth about God's forgiveness. Muslims have no similar stories in

the Quran. Muhammad did not forgive his enemies—he fought them. We can explain to a Muslim, “Think about your biggest debt or toughest problem, and multiply it by infinity—then imagine someone who loves you enough to come to you and say, ‘Do not worry, I took care of it.’” This is the Jesus we proclaim!

The biblical passages that detail Jesus’s miracles also resonate with Muslims. In particular, consider Jesus’s authority over nature. This resonates in a great way with the Muslim mindset, which is fascinated by metaphysical signs and wonders. An evangelist can share the biblical text describing the miracle of Jesus calming the storm (Matt. 8:23–27; Mark 4:35–41; Luke 8:22–25). This passage is unique in that it reflects Jesus’s authority over nature, which indicates his control over creation. This leads to the conclusion that only the Creator could speak to a furious storm and roaring sea, “Peace! Be still!” (Mark 4:39), to the extent that the disciples wondered, “Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?” (Luke 8:25). We can reflect on this miracle by asking the Muslim, “In your opinion, what is the significance of Jesus calming the storm?” Some Muslims may immediately yield to the understanding that Jesus is not a mere prophet among prophets. Others may be slower to reach this conclusion, perhaps claiming that Jesus was merely performing miracles—like any other prophet—by the authority of God. If this happens, I have several recommendations.

I always ask Muslims, “Can God give one of his uniquely divine attributes as the only Creator to a mere man?” In these passages and the like, Jesus is on the same level as God. He is equated with the Creator. This cannot be true of a mere prophet. We can link this principle to the biblical passage of Jesus forgiving and healing a paralyzed man (Luke 5:17–26) as we emphasize that forgiving sins

is possible only for God. Sometimes I lead the Muslim to another passage, in which Jesus heals a man born blind (John 9:1–12). Here we can emphasize how Jesus “spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man’s eyes with the mud” (John 9:6). This miracle shares similar features with God’s creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7. I explain to Muslims that Jesus was able to give sight to a man because Jesus is actually the Creator, not merely a performer of miracles.

In the same vein, I encourage evangelists to read and share the story of the creation as found in Genesis 1–3. This account is of utmost importance because it both resonates with Muslims and provides crucial links to the gospel message and to the person of Jesus. Through this story, we can convey God’s almighty power as the Creator. We can share about his presence, his Word, and his Spirit. The story also reflects God’s unique order of creation (the sun precedes the plants). It describes how sin entered our world and details the consequences of disobedience. The story marvelously explains the effects of sin, the divine promise of redemption in Christ, and how man is created in God’s image and likeness. In fact, by reading the story of the fall, we can reflect on the problem of judgment in hell and how Jesus is the only solution. Muslims are terrified of hell because of the Muslim traditions about the horrors of the afterlife. They fear eternal condemnation in hellfire, and they find no hope in the Quran or Muhammad’s teachings. We can comfort Muslims as we proclaim that Jesus solved this problem. Muslims generally believe that hell is real. Christians have something important to offer in this regard. Does this set your heart ablaze with Christ’s gospel?

Fourth, when evangelizing Muslims, after we speak of God’s love, the lostness of mankind, and the work of Jesus, we should

explain that repentance from sin and conversion of the heart are necessary. They are not merely actions done to receive God's favor. Rather, they are reactions to God's love and forgiveness. True conversion, we should explain to Muslims, is also a gift of our God. Repentance is not about us feeling awful, miserable, and hopeless. This is not repentance. Repentance is the change in direction of our hearts when we respond to God's love and accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

We should explain to Muslims what obedience and submission to the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ really means. Concerning Jesus's lordship, we must explain that he rules, guides, and masters one's whole life. He is the teacher, and we are the disciples. We will never graduate from Christ's school. Here we can also emphasize the importance of studying the Bible and meditating on it daily. In explaining what it means for Jesus to be our Savior, we can clarify that he saves us from God's eternal judgment and opens the gate for us to experience God's fatherly love.

It should be noted that most Muslims understand the word *conversion*, but they do not usually link it to a change of heart. For many Muslims, converting to Islam involves declaring a sentence without necessarily having true faith. This is a point of contrast that evangelists must recognize. Similarly, Muslims understand *repentance* but usually associate it with forsaking some errors and bad deeds—not with a real change in the direction and attitude of the heart.

These four elements are the essential components of our gospel presentation as found in Scripture (Acts 10:36–43; Rom. 1:16–17; 1 Cor. 1:17–18; 15:1–5). This is the message of God's good news to humans. A person must believe this message to be saved in Christ. While these elements mirror those present in any gospel

presentation to non-Christians, it is especially important to use specific words and pose questions that resonate with Muslims when evangelizing. This requires patience and practice and is one reason why I emphasized important words and concepts that resonate with Muslims in the preceding pages. As a principle, it is always helpful to ask Muslims what they are hearing and learning as you talk with them. Make it a habit: after you present a specific part of the gospel, ask what they understand from it. Furthermore, in the early stages of a gospel presentation, I avoid using sophisticated terms that are understood only by Christians—terms such as *justification* and *sanctification*. I can describe their meanings, but using them without explanation would not be helpful since the terms are totally foreign to the Muslim mindset. This brings me to two important observations concerning gospel presentation among Muslims.

Two Observations

First, I encourage evangelists to have gospel conversations with Muslims in the context of sharing a meal together. In chapter 11, I explain in more detail the crucial balance between “no time to waste” and “do not rush” in evangelism, but I must emphasize here that a growing friendship with a Muslim (the meal concept) is the best context for a sincere conversation about the gospel. While an evangelist can certainly present the gospel in its entirety early on in a meeting, sharing meals will open the door for further explaining the truth of the gospel. Comprehension of the gospel—and faithfully responding to it—usually takes time and is best done in the context of a growing friendship. As Christians, we should always remember that we are ambassadors of Christ and that our gospel proclamation is not merely a task on our to-do list. Our greatest proclamation is

living a life that reflects the image of Jesus to Muslims. We must remember that we are dealing with humans created in the image of God. Muslims are not objects or projects—and if we treat them as such, they will immediately sense the disingenuous attitude and assume we do not truly care about them as people. In this way, our witness will be ineffective. Sincere conversations in a steadily growing friendship naturally lead to the effective sharing of the good news. It is important to remember that God works in the hearts of unbelievers differently. Some Muslims accept Jesus immediately and spontaneously, while others pass through stages of questions and answers.

Second, when evangelizing Muslims, evangelists should anticipate various turns in the gospel presentation. This is evident in Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14–39. The sermon is short and concise, but Peter presents the gospel entirely, openly, and clearly. The sermon teaches us what to expect when proclaiming the gospel.

Peter uses both logical and scriptural apologetics. You will need these in conversations with Muslims. Peter refutes charges by asserting logical facts: “These people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day [i.e., 9 a.m.]” (Acts 2:15). Peter also relies on Scripture to make his case, declaring, “This is what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). We need to be prepared to use logical and scriptural apologetics in our evangelism to Muslims. For this reason, this book covers various points of Christian apologetics.

Moreover, Peter is laser focused on Christ as the center of everything. This is a significant point for us as Christ's ambassadors: do not be distracted. Peter proclaims the supremacy of Christ, his life, cross, resurrection, and ascension (Acts 2:22–33). This is the heart of our gospel proclamation.

The culmination of the sermon comes when Peter declares, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36). Although this is the peak of the sermon, Peter does not stop here. He is concerned with helping his listeners know what they should do next: “Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 2:38–39). This concluding step gives direction and provides explanation. The call to repentance should always conclude our gospel proclamation, accompanied by an explanation of what baptism means for a new believer. Finally, it is important to explain to those who believe in Christ that, upon accepting Christ, the power of God’s Spirit will begin transforming their lives.

Peter’s sermon serves as a broad model—not necessarily as a template to be replicated—that highlights important aspects of our gospel proclamation. These aspects are not to be missed, but Christians do not need to be preoccupied about applying all of them in each encounter with a Muslim. Every Muslim is different. God uses us all in different ways and changes people’s lives at different paces. Pray for God’s wisdom to guide you, and be flexible under the Spirit’s leadership.

Whether we present the gospel in one short sermon—like that of Peter—or over a longer process with a Muslim, it is necessary that we follow up with those who hear it. We should always ensure that they understand the message as we explain the important gospel components related to us as sinners and to Jesus as the focus of the gospel. We must be prepared to use apologetics and scriptural texts as we call Muslims to repent and believe in Christ.

The Role of Intercessory Prayer in Evangelism

BACK IN THE 1980S, after I submitted my life to the Lord Jesus Christ, I began reading the Bible as never before, which led me to being intentional about evangelism. I wanted nominal Christians and Muslims to hear about how God loved them and Jesus died for them. In Cairo, where I grew up, Christians are not supposed to preach to Muslims in the streets. This can be risky. But Christians did it. Our church dedicated a specific time each week for groups to go out and preach the gospel. The groups included young men and women, usually in high school or early college, full of passion for Christ and compassion for the people of Egypt to know God. We would gather in the church building, spend an hour in intercessory prayer seeking God's face and power for our evangelism, then spread out in the neighborhoods to tell people about Christ.

Intercessory prayer was a huge discovery for me as a young Christian. When we gathered at church before the outreach night, we prayed through Scripture, asked God to lead us to the right people in

the streets, and sought his mercy on the city. We knew that the success of our outreach was linked to our intercession. We took it seriously. Sometimes we spent hours in intercessory prayer and fasted for the whole day of outreach. We learned that intercessory prayer actually changes us before it prepares people to receive the gospel. It unites us with the heart of God and equips us to love people as he loves them. Intercessory prayer emboldens us to share the gospel in difficult places and gives us the unmatched power of the Holy Spirit. In our outreach, we saw people come to follow Christ as Lord and Savior. We told people Jesus was still alive and could change their lives. We prayed with sick people and told them about God's power to heal the sick as we read scriptures of Jesus's deeds. Through intercessory prayer, when we met non-Christians, our hearts viewed them as they truly were: people loved and sought by God. The success of the early outreaches led us to do more, aiming to reach cities beyond Cairo, particularly in remote places all over Egypt. Still, intercessory prayer was a crucial element in every evangelistic activity.

The Role of Intercessory Prayer

In today's world, intercessory prayer seems to have become a lost art, even among sincere Christians who truly want to proclaim Christ. We are often occupied with new methods and possessed with creative strategies (which, in themselves, are not necessarily unhelpful or irrelevant). Yet intercessory prayer seems to have become a marginal matter in our evangelism. We do not realize that intercessory prayer is vital in Christian ministry, especially in fulfilling the Great Commission. It not only connects us with God but also demonstrates our total dependence on the Spirit.

It is no wonder that the church in the book of Acts took intercessory prayer seriously, even in the midst of severe persecution.

In Acts 4, when the authorities commanded Peter and John never again to preach of Jesus, the apostles did not yield or become afraid; they took the matter to the prayer room, the place where believers interceded and sought God's face. They prayed boldly and proclaimed Scripture from the Old Testament before calling on God: "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:29–30). What a marvelous prayer! God's answer to their prayer, we are told, was instantaneous: "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). Persecution did not stop the believers. They took the matter to God. They interceded, proclaimed Scripture, were filled with the Spirit, and continued their work with boldness. Indeed, intercessory prayer changes us inside and out.

Through evangelizing Muslims, I learned a lesson: no matter how smart, educated, and skillful Christians are in terms of theological argumentation and gospel proclamation, the only one who is able to persuade Muslims is the Holy Spirit. We can win every religious "debate" but win no soul at all for Christ. Many Muslims have come to Christ without arguments or debates. It is the Holy Spirit who touches and changes hearts. We must not be so preoccupied with creativity and intellectual argumentation that we forget the necessity of intercessory prayer in evangelism. Indeed, we need to learn about Islam and Muslims in order to understand their perspectives and explain the gospel effectively to them. We also need to be equipped with apologetic tools to answer

questions posed against Christianity. We must realize, however, that new strategies, creative tools, and stylish plans do not save people. Unless we recognize that God is the one who draws souls to him and saves them, our work is in vain.

Moreover, intercessory prayer is not merely a task we should complete before a church event or an outreach. It is a lifestyle. It should be an essential part of the daily prayer of every Christian, seeking God to use every chance to reflect the image of Christ to others: “Abba Father, I will meet many people today. Please help me realize how important it is for me to speak of Christ and his salvation. May your mighty power and guidance be with me today.” This lifestyle of intercessory prayer is evident in how some Christians intercede for non-Christians regularly for years without ceasing. Dedicate part of your prayer life to intercession for Muslims with whom you are in conversation. Ask God to reveal himself to them as you intentionally bring his message to your discussions. Intercessory prayer is the driving force behind a lifestyle of evangelism. Every tool and strategy should come only after total reliance on God’s power as evidenced in intercession.

In your intercessory prayers, you should be specific. Ask God about certain people (e.g., a neighbor, coworker, or family member), and pray for their precise needs. If you voice only general prayers, how will you know when God answers? Intercessory prayers are dear to God’s fatherly heart because they fulfill his instructions concerning lost people and the harvest (Matt. 9:35–38). In your intercession, seek God fervently for opportunities to proclaim the gospel, just as Paul asked the church in Ephesus to pray that words would be given to him in opening his mouth boldly “to proclaim the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19; cf. Col. 4:3). Some of these doors were challenging, and he had many

opponents, but all doors proved fruitful (1 Cor. 16:9). God will empower you with unique ideas, some of which will come to you on the spot. Perhaps you may meet a Muslim at a store and begin a conversation, and then God may place on your heart a terrific question: “Do you know the best road to heaven?” Questions of this sort can open great gospel conversations. God may surprise you with ideas such as these.

Dedicate time to intercede for boldness and protection against the evil forces that blind nonbelievers (Acts 4:29; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 6:10–20; Col. 4:3). We should always remember that “we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). Spend adequate time praying for specific persons with whom you are in an ongoing conversation. Ask the Lord to open their eyes, set them free from spiritual darkness, and give them the grace to respond positively to the gospel by “open[ing] their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45; see also Matt. 13:15; Acts 16:14; 2 Tim. 2:25–26). Do not underestimate the spiritual darkness over the minds of unbelievers. When you intercede for Muslims to come to Christ, you are calling on the mighty power of the sovereign God to stop Satan’s influence. Use scriptures in your intercessory prayers in order to pray according to God’s own will and in Jesus’s name (Matt. 7:11; John 14:13–14; 15:7; James 4:2–3; 1 John 5:14–15). The word of God is crucial in our intercessory prayer life because Scripture can direct us to pray in harmony with God’s desires. The Lord told the disciples, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). The more you intercede, the closer you will be to the Father’s heart and his desire to save those you meet (1 Cor. 3:9).

Ahmad's Story

A few years ago, I took a group of my students on a missions trip to a Muslim country. Evangelism was our goal. We aimed to walk around local markets, meet people, and tell them about Christ. We started every day with intercessory prayer. The entire team spent time talking with God about the local people of the city and asking him to open doors for the gospel. Our intercessory prayer time was transformative for many of us as we humbled ourselves and prayed for the local people. We also believed that the prayer time changed our street evangelism.

One day, after our morning intercession time, I went out with a few students, seeking opportunities to share about Christ. We saw a man who was about to open his shop. When I greeted him using his language, he smiled and offered to give me and my students a walking tour of his tiny town. Of course, we agreed. He introduced himself and told us his name was Ahmad. As we walked, the team prayed. I believe that God placed on my heart a unique question to ask Ahmad: “When did you become Muslim?”

Ahmad looked at me with a smile since he was surprised. Ahmad was born Muslim—which I already knew—and my question was to make a point. “I did not become Muslim,” he said.

I commented, “I see and understand, but this is different from my case.” I told him that I was born into a Christian family, but I was not a Christian until God opened my heart and I committed my life to follow him. I explained to him that I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and his marvelous work to save me and that I read the Bible daily as I prayed to follow and imitate Christ.

To my surprise, Ahmad said, “Tell me more.” As I explained more about the love of God and salvation in Christ, Ahmad said,

“I cannot believe I am hearing these words today—this is a miracle.” He believed that God sent us to him because two weeks earlier he had had a dream in which he entered a mosque and found it dark and void, then ran out. My students and I were surprised.

I asked Ahmad, “What does this dream mean to you?”

He said, “I do not want to be Muslim anymore. Can I pray to Jesus?”

I said, “Of course you can.”

He asked, “Can I just speak to Jesus in my prayer?” We all cheerfully agreed. He then prayed a simple prayer, and I helped him with some words. After the “Amen” at the end, Ahmad asked, “Am I now a brother to you all?” We shouted with joy and then had some tea with him as we talked about next steps as a Christian. We connected him with local believers and missionaries to begin his discipleship journey in Christ.

Principles of Intercessory Prayer

This marvelous encounter with Ahmad can help us learn four important lessons. First, evangelism is not separate from intercessory prayer. We should speak with God about people before we speak with people about God. In the Bible, God intends for intercessory prayer to play an important part in the evangelism cycle of interceding for the lost, proclaiming Christ, accepting the gospel, and glorifying God. Jesus promises, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (John 14:13). Gospel proclamation cannot be separated from intercession for the lost.

Second, intercessory prayer works to prepare both the receiver and us. When we prayed before evangelizing, God was working in our hearts as well as in Ahmad’s, preparing us to meet him and

preparing him to receive the message. If we want to live a lifestyle of evangelism, we must include intercessory prayer in our daily encounter with God. Pray and expect great things.

Third, Christians should not assume that Muslims will always resist the gospel. Sometimes no theological debate is needed, and no sophisticated argument is given. Some Muslims are ready to accept Jesus without questions or argumentation. This often occurs when we encounter nominal Muslims. They are not sophisticated believers, nor do they focus on particularities of faith. Most of the time, they are thrilled to encounter a God who loves unconditionally and saves eternally.

Fourth, sometimes God uses dreams to prepare Muslims to receive and accept the gospel. This matter requires some explanation. From the Bible, we know that God speaks in dreams and visions to guide and direct people (e.g., Matt. 2, which alone includes four dreams). This matter could fill up a book on its own, but two examples will suffice here.

In 2004, I met an Algerian Christian from a Muslim background. He came to Christ, along with many from his village, after Jesus appeared to all of them in a dream—all of them saw the same dream during the same week. There had been missionaries among them for years, but now the dreams motivated them to talk with the Christians who lived in their midst. Later, they formed a wonderful local church. They hosted Christians from various places because they were eager to learn and be discipled.

Similarly, a Moroccan believer from a Muslim background told me about his sister's conversion. She had a Christian coworker who gave her a Bible and talked with her about Christ several times. While she was not satisfied with Islam, she was reluctant to ask questions about Christianity. One night, while she was under

tremendous stress in life, especially with her manipulative family, Jesus appeared to her in a dream. She said that she knew him because of his clothes, his wounds, and his welcoming smile. She knew he was calling her to follow him. She began talking openly about faith with her Christian friend and started reading the Bible daily. She followed Christ and was later baptized.

Indeed, God is at work among Muslims, and in some cases, he works through dreams and visions. Dreams, however, do not save Muslims—the gospel of Christ does. For a person to be saved, according to the Bible, that individual must hear and accept the gospel and then clearly repent. This is God’s designed way for salvation. God intends for people to hear the gospel as found in the Bible from other people: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (Rom. 10:15; cf. Isa. 52:7). In each of the examples I mentioned earlier, the dream led a Muslim to seek a conversation with a Christian. Although God indeed speaks through dreams to guide some Muslims on the path of salvation, this cannot replace the need for a Christian who proclaims the gospel of salvation. The apostle Paul asks, “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Rom. 10:14). Thus, a dream may introduce Muslims to Christ or call them to follow him, but salvation is by hearing, accepting, and responding to the gospel. This is God’s design in the Bible, and it requires a Christian proclaimer. A dream cannot save a non-Christian.

One story in the Bible makes this clear. In Acts 10, Cornelius is a devout man who fears God but is not yet saved. He needs to hear and accept the gospel. The biblical narrative begins with God directing his angel to appear to Cornelius in a vision, in which the

angel instructs Cornelius to talk with the apostle Peter, who will preach to him a message by which he will be saved (Acts 11:14). The vision does not save Cornelius, but it leads him to speak with Peter. When Cornelius meets Peter, Cornelius and his family hear the gospel preached, the Holy Spirit falls on all of them, and they are later baptized (Acts 10:34–48). Therefore, we should thank God for dreams and visions and the ways he uses them to guide Muslims to himself; they should not be viewed, however, as replacing the need for gospel proclaimers.

The Role of Dreams and Visions

But why does God use dreams and visions with Muslims in particular? I believe there are at least two reasons. First, unlike many Westerners, Muslims highly regard dreams and consider them a unique and supernatural method of communication. In Islam, there is a science called “Interpreting Dreams.” In Islamic societies, a dream must have a meaning. Most Muslims are superstitious and believe that the spiritual realm affects one’s daily life. Muslims always ask questions about dreams and their interpretations. Sometimes major decisions—including marriage and selling properties—depend on dreams. This is a possible explanation as to why God uses dreams to lead Muslims to his path, especially when they are resistant—a dream will serve as a loudspeaker calling them to pay attention.

Second, God uses dreams with Muslims because, for generations, many Muslim countries have been hostile toward the gospel, and very few missionaries have been allowed to enter. Since there are so few Christians in these communities, God directs Muslims through dreams. Once, about two decades ago, I wanted to visit a Muslim-blocked country to preach in underground churches, but my visa was denied. When I asked the authorities why they denied

my visa, they said there was no reason for me to be there. When I asked to visit as a tourist, they stated that their country had no touristic places to visit. After a kind discussion, they admitted that they suspected I was a preacher and did not want such a visitor since there were no Christians in their country. In the end, I could not get a visa—but the Holy Spirit does not need a visa! He works in marvelous ways, one of which is speaking to Muslims through dreams and visions, guiding them to the followers of Christ around them. Thus, pray for God to use dreams and visions with Muslims, but also be prepared to share the gospel of Christ, by which they will be saved.

In this chapter, we explored the importance of intercessory prayer and the marvelous ways God uses it to change lives. Indeed, we need to think, prepare, and plan for missions and evangelistic encounters, but in many ways, we are occupied with strategies and methods that reflect our Western measures (program based, business oriented, efficiency driven, and so forth). These are valuable, but they should occupy their rightful place in our gospel-proclamation efforts (Matt. 23:23). We must seek balance, sensitivity, and breadth in our evangelism. Intercessory prayer connects us with God's fatherly heart. It provides us the means to rely fully on God's power—not on our intellect or wisdom—as we carry his gospel to Muslims. When God becomes the sole provider and giver of power in every aspect of evangelism, he is the only one who deserves the glory. When we intercede before preaching the gospel and then see Muslims saved, we realize that it was not about us: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).

Raising Questions and Answering Them

Using the Jesus Method

DURING JESUS'S EARTHLY MINISTRY, he asked brilliant questions. Whenever Jesus asks a question, he makes a point or moves the discussion to another level. Sometimes he uses questions to begin a conversation, connect more with his audience, or solve a dilemma. His inquiries always propel people to think about their lives, beliefs, or practices. This method of raising and answering questions is central to Jesus's teachings. I call it *the Jesus method*. It is an exceptionally helpful tool for evangelizing Muslims. When Muslims are asked a question, they do not feel threatened or attacked. Using questions will help them think critically about Islam's claims and open the door for you to make a point.

The Jesus Method

Think about these questions asked by Jesus:

- “And why are you anxious about clothing?” (Matt. 6:28).
- “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Matt. 7:3).
- “Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?” (Matt. 7:16).
- “What do you think?” (Matt. 18:12).
- “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4).
- “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).
- “For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark 8:37).
- “And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?” (Luke 12:25).
- “Why do you call me good?” (Luke 18:19).
- “Would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48).
- “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10).
- “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” (John 6:5).
- “Do you love me?” (John 21:16).

Each question has a point and clearly develops the conversation. By raising questions (and only *sometimes* answering them), Jesus is able to initiate a friendship, make a theological proclamation, or settle a debate.

Jesus also uses questions cleverly. He sometimes answers a question by posing another. The chief priests come to challenge Jesus and his teaching by asking, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” (Matt. 21:23). Jesus answers them with a question: “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” (Matt. 21:24–25). In this case, Jesus disperses a challenge by asking a question, which turns the tables. This method is helpful in evangelism, especially with kindly, gently, and calmly refuting Muslim misconceptions. When a Muslim tells you, “You Christians worship three gods,” you may simply respond, “What do you mean by that?” Instead of rejecting the accusation, you can use it to open a more thoughtful and gracious conversation that leads toward Jesus. When this same Muslim explains what these “three gods” are, you may ask, “Where did you find this information? How did you conclude this?” The goal of these questions is to direct the conversation to the Bible.¹ Again, the method of posing questions is very effective. When doing so, you do not come across as intimidating or attacking; rather, your calm spirit, driven by Christ’s love, propels you forward in Muslim evangelism.

Some Christians—naively, in my estimation—tend to come forcefully into their initial discussions with Muslims. They want to win.

1 For a helpful discussion on using questions in apologetics, see Gregory Koukl, *Tactics: A Game Plan for Discussing Your Christian Convictions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

Instead of asking questions, these Christians make huge statements about Islam and Muslims: “Muslims are lost sinners,” “Muslims cannot be accepted in heaven without Christ,” “Islam is a lie,” “Muhammad is a false prophet,” or “The Quran is a man-made book.” A variation of these statements can be even worse. While these statements are truthful from a Christian and biblical standpoint, they cannot encourage a fruitful conversation with Muslims. Assertions such as these—especially early in a discussion—may make Muslims feel attacked. They may also feel powerless because they may not know how to respond. In either case, Muslims will likely leave the discussion or simply listen with no desire to comprehend what you’re saying. Alternatively, if Christians begin with questions and lead Muslims to discover the truth behind these statements, the friendship can continue, allowing more time for gospel proclamation.

When you use questions in evangelism, one of the main goals is to bring the discussion to the matter of human lostness and the need for a Savior. This is an important step, and we should carefully choose our questions to lead the conversation toward the gospel. Reflecting on Jesus’s encounters in the Gospels, we can be prepared with a helpful list of questions to ask Muslims. Think about these:

- Why do Muslims wash their hands and feet before ritual prayers? Can water clean a heart? Do we need to wash our hands or our soul? Is one sin enough to send a person to hell?
- How can a Muslim obtain forgiveness of sin? How many good things must a Muslim do to receive redemption? Can Muslims be certain that Allah forgave them? Are your sins forgiven? Does Allah love sinners?

- Why do Muslims celebrate the Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice, commemorating Abraham’s attempt to sacrifice his son)? If this is considered the great feast, does sacrificing a lamb or cow make us pure and allow us admission into paradise? How did Allah actually redeem Abraham’s son in Islam? Does he help us in any way to be redeemed?
- Is paradise guaranteed if we work hard enough to please God? [Muslims do not usually think of heaven as a destiny. They tend to equate “paradise” for the most part with the garden of Eden, where trees and rivers exist and many marriages take place, especially for men.]
- Why does Allah have only ninety-nine names? What is your favorite name of Allah? What name do you wish was included in the list? [The list does not explicitly include “the loving one.”]
- Will paradise be crowded? Who will be allowed in, and what will they do there?
- What is the best way to reach paradise?
- Why would a holy and mighty God let *you* into paradise?
- Would you like to hear of my most favorite miracle? [That is, how God changed your heart—share your testimony.]
- Do you have an answer for why there is suffering in the world?
- Do you know what Jesus said about _____ [e.g., fasting, loving your enemy, forgiveness, healing the sick, demons]? Would you like to see what the Bible teaches about _____?

- You say you know and love Jesus, but have you heard about the *real* Lord Jesus? [The Quranic portrayal of Jesus differs significantly from the biblical one.]
- Have you ever seen Jesus in a dream? Have you ever prayed genuinely to know and meet God?

These questions are merely a sample. Their main goal is to open a conversation on matters of faith, particularly how humans are lost and need a Savior. Of course, these questions cannot be the first words in a conversation. They should be preceded by other general, introductory questions:

- Where are you from?
- Where is home for you?
- When did you or your family come to the United States?
- What do you do?
- How many siblings do you have?
- Have you ever had a Christian friend?

These questions open the door and encourage Muslims to talk about themselves—but they must eventually lead to deeper questions if the goal is evangelism. By now, you should be aware that Muslims do not usually avoid religious conversations. Even if, at times, they are reluctant to go in depth, they are usually keen to discuss religion and supernatural things. The best part about asking questions is that it creates a dialogue. When speaking with Muslims, allow them time to explain what they think and feel. Then you can ask the questions that

will direct the conversation to the gospel. Moreover, it is important that you—after explaining a specific Christian matter—ask Muslims to repeat what they understood. This way, you can ensure they have comprehended the information, or you can repeat something if they have misunderstood it.

Always ask the Holy Spirit to provide you the right question for the occasion. Do not ever waste an opportunity to speak with a Muslim you meet. Pray for opportunities. Seek and seize them. Female evangelists have a wonderful advantage since they can spot Muslim women relatively easily in public. Most Muslim women welcome a conversation with a Western woman who approaches them with kindness and a cheerful smile. A female evangelist may see a Muslim woman standing in line at a store. After the introductory greeting and questions, the evangelist can ask, “Would you allow me the blessing of praying for you tonight? What can I pray for you about?” These simple questions might open a conversation about a specific need for this woman, which might then provide the opportunity to introduce Jesus as sovereign, healer, almighty, Savior. These questions can open the door for more meetings with this woman, allowing time to read the Bible together: “Have you ever read the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman?” “Do you know of the Virgin Mary? Why was she so different from all other women on earth?” God can give female evangelists many other creative questions that are suitable for the occasion.

The same is true for male evangelists. When you go to the barber, ask God to open doors using good questions: “Have you heard of the Nazirite who had let the locks of hair on his head grow (Num. 6)?” “What jobs will there be in heaven?” “In your opinion, why was Jesus a carpenter?” Similarly, if you are helping a Muslim fill out government paperwork, you could ask, “Have

you heard of the names that cannot be erased from the book of life?” “How big will heaven be, to receive all the saved people?” These questions are merely a sampling to encourage Christians to raise questions and answer them. They serve as a bridge that can lead a Muslim to understand that humans are lost and need a Savior—a step forward in presenting the gospel.

A reminder here is in order: Muslims do not comprehend the concept of a sinful heart or believe in original sin. In chapters 5 and 7, we explained ways to overcome this barrier. Therefore, the questions you ask and the stories you tell should aim to help Muslims not only realize the lostness of humans but also discover the redeeming work of God to reconcile us to himself.

When you raise and answer questions, ask God to reflect the image of Christ in what you say. Ask God to make you more like Christ in your words, attitudes, and approaches. Sometimes all it takes to begin conversations with Muslims is a loving hug or a genuine question about their family. This can even bypass all awkward questions and introductions. Remember, Muslims are people with similar needs to our own. It is hard to resist true and authentic love, presented freely as a reflection of Christ. This is evident in a true story, with which I will close this chapter.

How Questions Changed Ismail’s Life

My American friend Brian called me one day and said that an Iraqi Muslim imam named Ismail just moved to our neighborhood and might need help at the grocery store. Since Arabic was both Ismail’s and my mother tongue, Brian thought it would be a good time for us to connect. I went to meet Ismail, and we immediately hugged and began speaking Arabic together. He introduced me to his wife and two children. Ismail was blind because of an accident when

he was a child; since he was an imam, however, he had memorized the entire Quran by heart.

I took him to the grocery store, and we began talking about his life in Iraq and his journey to the United States. He told me that he was a Sunni and used to live in a Shiite-majority city where many of his fellow Muslims persecuted him. The discussion went even deeper since he told me some personal stories about his family and their struggles in life. (Note that we had deeply personal conversations, although we spent less than two hours together. This reflects how genuine discussions and sincere questions can help you build friendships with Muslims smoothly and quickly.)

After I helped him buy groceries, I wanted to initiate a spiritual conversation, hoping it would lead to the gospel, at least when we next met. As I stood at the door to depart, I asked him, “Ismail, since you have memorized the Quran by heart, what do you think of the verse Q 9:29?” (Most Muslim commentators believe this verse commands Muslims to fight Jews and Christians until they concede and pay a special religious tax while humiliated.)

Ismail was surprised that I asked this question. He replied, “How do you know this verse?”

“I love studying religions, and this verse relates to Christians, so I am aware of it,” I answered. Ismail took time to think about his response, but I quickly told him, “Do not worry about it now, brother. We will talk about it later.” This is because I wanted to keep the discussion going and allow him time to think without causing any embarrassment. My goal was to build a friendship, not to win an argument. I did, however, achieve an important goal: we were now ready to talk about religion and the spiritual dimensions in our lives.

The following week, I went to check on Ismail and his family. I did not initiate any religious conversation because I wanted to

sense how Ismail felt about my earlier question. To my surprise, at some point, Ismail held my arm and said, “I have an answer for you about the verse you mentioned.”

“Oh, you still remember?” I replied with a big smile.

He said, “Of course, you are my friend, and I want to answer you.” In a confident voice, Ismail said, “This verse does not apply today. It is of the past and about the past.”

I was not surprised by this answer since I’d heard it from many other Muslims before. In reality, though, the vast majority of Muslim interpreters would elevate this verse to the highest degree of authority. To continue the discussion with Ismail, I asked, “Who decided that this verse is not to be enforced and applied anymore?”

He responded, “Trust me.”

“Yes, Ismail, I would love to trust you—but what about other Muslims who have never heard this opinion?” There was a short moment of silence. Since my goal was not to focus on the Quranic verse but instead to get to the gospel, I did not wait for long. I asked, “Do you know my real struggle with this verse, Ismail?”

He said, “What is it?”

His question triggered my best opportunity and propelled me to say, “In the gospel of Christ, I am commanded to love my enemy and pray for those who curse me—do you see the contrast?”

“Yes, I see it,” he whispered.

I sensed he was thinking about the contrast, so I continued, “May I read to you these commands from the gospel, Ismail?” He agreed.

Without hesitating, I turned to the Bible. I opened to the longer version of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7, not Luke 6) because I wanted to read as much as I could from the word of God. Since Ismail is blind and could not read it or follow along, I read slowly and carefully, allowing the words to sink in. Whenever Jesus

says, “You have heard that it was said. . . . But I say to you,” I read more slowly to emphasize Jesus as the ultimate authority. This was one of my most favorite times ever reading this passage. After finishing the three chapters, there was a moment of deep silence. I did not know what was happening in Ismail’s heart. Since I wanted to give him a chance to think and reflect on the words, I said that it was time for me to head home, and I promised to visit again the following week.

During that week, I prayed daily for Ismail. I interceded, asking God to work in his heart. When I next visited, he welcomed me with a smile at the door. To my surprise, he had a recorder in his hand. He seemed a bit serious, and I was not sure what was happening. Soon after I entered his home, he asked, “May I ask you a favor?”

“Of course, my friend,” I answered.

Holding the recorder in his hand, he said, “Please read again the same words you read last week. I want to record them because Jesus’s words penetrate my heart!” I was thrilled. Nothing compares to God’s word. Nothing is as effective as God’s word when used by the Spirit of God to change hearts and minds. He recorded my reading of the Sermon on the Mount, but we did not stop there.

Our friendship grew steadily, to the extent that one day I asked him, “Ismail, you keep believing Islam’s claims and following Muhammad’s teachings. Have you found peace, hope, and purpose? Do you believe you are truly reconciled with the holy God?” This was a deeper level of questions. Later, Ismail became good friends with many other Christians and heard the gospel clearly again. He committed his life to Christ. Although he faced tremendous challenges because his relatives considered him an apostate, he endured and persevered in following Christ.

In this chapter, we learned about the Jesus method—namely, raising questions and answering them in order to make a point. We studied its usefulness in helping Muslims see both the problems with Islam’s claims and the uniqueness of Christianity. When employing this method, you must use your questions to direct the conversation to the lostness of all humans and their need for a Savior. Speak of the marvelous character and teaching of Jesus. Be always ready to proclaim the gospel of Christ: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Pray for opportunities to speak with Muslims about Christ. God will open doors. When God sends opportunities, seize them. Do not waste an opportunity to speak about Christ with a Muslim. We concluded the chapter with the story of Ismail. While it shows the importance of asking leading and intriguing questions, the story also reflects other lessons, including the importance of reading the Bible with Muslims. That is the subject of the following chapter.

Proclaiming Christ

Specific Biblical Stories for Muslims

THE STORY OF ISMAIL, which we read in the previous chapter, offers more insights as we think about Muslim evangelism. At its core, we can see that sometimes all that is needed to break the ice with your Muslim neighbor is a genuine act of kindness, generosity, and hospitality. This sincere, loving act surpasses in its effect all awkward introductory questions. Of course, there is a warning here: Christians should have the right attitude. We are loving and hospitable to Muslims not only because they are loved by Jesus but also because we are called to love our neighbors. We are not *trying* or *pretending* to be kind and generous just to preach to them. Muslims are not projects, and kindness is not a task to fulfill. If Muslims reject Christ, followers of Christ should remain loving and kind to them. Christian kindness and hospitality are driven by God's love and the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). Christians must offer sincere and genuine kindness and love to others because we have already

experienced the favor, grace, and love of Christ. Still, Ismail's story encourages us to maintain a balance. Do not let your hospitality and kindness replace your "ambassador of Christ" role. If your only focus is kindness and hospitality, you might avoid the challenging but necessary conversations about God. We should love Muslims with Christ's love, and we cannot withhold from them the most important news in life—the good news of the gospel.

The Priority of Reading the Bible

Ismail's story also demonstrates the importance of reading the Bible with Muslims. Nothing can surpass the impact of reading God's word with a Muslim. While the word is indeed powerful and captivating on its own, there is an aspect about the Bible that connects on a deeper level with Muslims, especially with those from the Middle East and the Arab world: the culture of the text. The Bible—as God's inerrant word—is inspired, written, and staged in the Eastern world. It was proclaimed within the broader culture of the ancient Middle East. The Bible is painted with Eastern colors and filled with Eastern images. Many of its passages and parables are better understood through an Eastern lens. Jesus, in his earthly ministry, lived, walked, worked, and taught in what is today the Middle East. Arab Muslims in particular can relate to many of the Bible's parables and narratives because they reflect and describe a familiar or comparable cultural context. While the Bible can be foreign to Muslims *theologically*, it is undoubtedly familiar to them *culturally*.¹ Consider two New Testament passages that will clarify this point.

First, Jesus sits with a woman around noon at the well in Samaria (John 4). When his disciples return from looking for food,

1 For an excellent study on this topic, see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

the Bible states, “They marveled [or better, were shocked] that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you seek?’ or, ‘Why are you talking with her?’” (John 4:27). A Western reader may wonder, “What is their problem? They have no business asking these questions.” The questions pondered by the disciples, however, make perfect sense through a Middle Eastern lens: an unmarried man sitting with an unfamiliar woman is a questionable scene that would raise eyebrows. Moreover, the woman does not fetch water in the early hours of the day with the other women. She waits until noon—during the heat of the day—to go alone. She is trying to avoid people. This suggests that she is not accepted in society. Honorable and noble women do not behave in such a way. She is not one of them. The whole scene makes sense to a person from the Middle East. Of course, a Westerner can study the cultural background of the narrative to glean these details, but a Middle Easterner will comprehend the point of the story immediately.

Second, think about the story of a man who knocks at the door of his friend at midnight, asking, “Friend, lend me three loaves” (Luke 11:5). While we may assume that a few in the West might do the same, it would be an uncommon and unexpected action. Nonetheless, it is very normal in a Middle Eastern context. Also, note that the man is not asking for loaves for himself but for a friend who “has arrived on a journey,” and the man has “nothing to set before him” (Luke 11:6). In Middle Eastern culture, it is shameful not to receive friends, even if they show up unannounced. They would even offer the food already prepared for their own family. While similar situations can occur in the West, they are uncommon.

In Muslim evangelism, nothing can compare with reading the Bible slowly and carefully with Muslims. Specifically, some passages connect well with Muslim women. These include Jesus raising the

son of the widow from Nain (Luke 7:11–17), the sinful woman and her alabaster flask of ointment in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36–50), Jesus at the home of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42), and the parable of the persistent widow and the uncompassionate judge (Luke 18:1–8). These passages are all from one Gospel, and they often appeal to Muslim women because they include situations and concerns that are familiar to them. With these passages, a female evangelist can demonstrate to Muslim women the special way Jesus treats women and the value given to them in Scripture. During his earthly ministry, Jesus miraculously raises three persons from the dead—two of whom are raised for the benefit of their female relatives. With Muslim women, we can reflect that God listens to the prayers of women and men equally. When women are shamed in a hostile cultural context, Jesus honors and elevates them. These biblical passages contrast with the poor treatment Muslim women may encounter in some Islamic cultures or in Muslim homes, where they are not often treated well. These passages are more effective in changing hearts than any verse from the Quran or Muslim traditions. For the Bible is the living word of God, and the Holy Spirit works through the word.

Jesus's Parables

Read Jesus's parables with Muslims. Some of them appeal greatly to Muslim men or women specifically, while others connect with both equally. The Bible records dozens of metaphors and over thirty parables spoken by Jesus. This is a large number of images, symbols, and stories—but Jesus knew his context well. The same context largely shapes today's Muslim understanding of life. Jesus's preferred method two millennia ago is still useful today, especially as we proclaim his message to people from a similar cultural context.

Of course, many people did not understand Jesus's parables during his day; however, we can now share them with Muslims and explain their meanings. Jesus's parables will captivate a Muslim's attention while revealing theological truth.

Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). The contrast between the two men is striking. It easily catches the attention of listeners. The parable questions people who appear righteous and who believe that they do every good work—such as fasting twice a week and tithing—while looking down on others. This parallels devout Muslims who supposedly practice good works and fast twice a week. Do not only read the parable with Muslims, but always ask Muslims to comment on it, especially to reflect on what Jesus says about it: “I tell you, this man [i.e., the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other [i.e., the Pharisee]” (Luke 18:14).

Similarly, it is helpful to introduce the parable of the unforgiving, ungrateful servant (Matt. 18:21–35) and that of the two debtors (Luke 7:40–50). These stories drive home different points, but both demonstrate the astonishing level of God's forgiveness. An evangelist may ask a Muslim, “Have you heard of the barren fig tree?” This can lead to sharing Jesus's parable about a fig tree that does not produce fruit (Luke 13:6–9). It reflects the patience and grace of God and the way Jesus offers another chance for repentance, ultimately granting forgiveness of sin through his unmatched grace.

These parables are merely a sample, but the point is clear: Jesus's parables provide a useful foundation for discussing gospel matters with Muslims. Through Jesus's parables, the evangelist can explain grace, repentance, God's love (e.g., the three parables in Luke 15), and many other concepts. The parables reflect a culture very similar to that of many Muslims today and therefore resonate with them.

Jesus's Miracles

In addition to Jesus's parables, there is rich significance in Jesus's miracles. They captivate the hearts and minds of Muslims, especially because supernatural matters connect deeply with them. While religious Muslims may simply view Jesus's miracles as signs given to a prophet like all other prophets, nominal Muslims—who mainly practice Islam culturally—are often moved by Jesus's signs and wonders. To them, these miracles present exceptional power and unique might. Instead of seeking the blessing of holy shrines and sacred tombs, these cultural Muslims seek miracles from Jesus. I have met some nominal Muslims in North Africa who await Jesus's miraculous answers to their prayers while they fast during Ramadan. In particular, during the last ten days of the fast, they ask Jesus to solve problems, heal the sick, or resolve a curse. The miracles, they believe, are all done by “Jesus the Mighty.” Of course, these Muslims do not know the true record of Jesus's miracles—they only know of superstitious stories or variations from the distorted Islamic record for Jesus's miracles. This is why it is important for evangelists to read the Bible with Muslims. The significance of the biblical Christ is unmatched.

Through Jesus's miracles, we can explain the power and hope of the gospel. In the Bible, we see Jesus heal the sick, overcome evil spirits, resurrect the dead, and control nature with its raging. All these elements have great significance to Muslims, who seek Allah's favor without any assurance. When you share the gospel with them, you can always assure them that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). This is a marvelous verse. If Jesus is the same, then he does not change—he is God. As God, Jesus is powerful and able:

He changes times and seasons;
he removes kings and sets up kings;
he gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to those who have understanding.
(Dan. 2:21)

He is the Almighty who never changes but can change lives and circumstances. He did so in the past and can do the same today. If Jesus was able to control a raging sea in the past, we can trust him today to intervene in our afflictions when we pray to him. We can assure Muslims that the Jesus of the Bible is the same Jesus we seek today—everything that was written about him in the Christian Scriptures is still true. Consider this: as you talk about this wonderful verse, share details of current answers to your prayers. Muslims will be fascinated by them.

Muslims rush to Jesus the Almighty. Many Muslims attended our local church in Cairo. This was remarkably risky for them. Most of them did not hide but came openly. Many veiled women entered the church and sat in the front seats. They were easy to spot. They risked embarrassment and reproach from their relatives if they were discovered. Scenes such as these were not well received by other Muslims. They wondered why these Muslims were coming to church. The answer was simple: they wanted to see the Jesus who sets people free. They saw how Christians are different in the way they live. In our church, Jesus was proclaimed, and we sought him fervently, knowing that he answers our prayers. We also knew his love for Muslims and his desire for them to receive his salvation, so we openly preached salvation through the gospel and did not shy away from inviting Muslims. While receiving Muslims as visitors in our church did not sit well with many government officials in

Cairo, we always said that we could not close our doors; we took the posture of Peter and John in Acts 4:20, who said, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Read Jesus’s miracles with Muslims, aiming to reach the core of the gospel—salvation in Christ. Sometimes Muslims marvel at the fact that Jesus knows the future, reads the heart, and foresees the unseen (e.g., Matt. 9:4; 12:25; 22:18; 26:33–34; Mark 2:8; Luke 5:22; 6:8; 7:36–50; 11:17; John 2:25). As you read these passages, magnify Christ and explain the uniqueness of biblical Christianity: this almighty and exalted God is our personal God and Savior. This picture is unmatched in Islam. Emphasize the uniqueness of the Christian understanding of God. Christians can have a personal relationship with the Most High, as opposed to a Muslim understanding of a faraway deity. In the same vein, the salvation we receive in Christ cannot be lost. He promised, and he keeps his word: he saves and will not forsake his people. Explain to Muslims the assurance of salvation, as opposed to Islam’s uncertainty of the afterlife. Many Muslims are afraid of death and the afterlife because Islamic traditions describe a horrific punishment. This is understandable, but Christians have a steadfast hope in Christ. We do not fear death—we welcome it: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

Other Key Biblical Passages

There is much more in the Bible we can reflect on with Muslims. The narrative of Jesus’s birth astonishes Muslims because they see that God is at work in the universe and that everything submits to his divine plan. During the Muslim Eid al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice), it is always wonderful to read the Bible with Muslims

and make a comparison between the three sacrifices: the one made for Adam (Gen. 3:21), the one made by Abraham (Gen. 22), and the one made by Jesus (John 19). The passage in John 19 shows the suffering and affliction of Jesus and how he offered himself to be crucified. The significance of Jesus's sacrifice is that it was made once for all. We do not need a repeated sacrifice like the one made for Adam and the one made by Abraham (Heb. 10:1–18). Jesus is the true sacrifice of atonement, and through our faith in his blood, we receive the forgiveness of sin (Rom. 3:25). We can assure our Muslim friends that, in believing in Christ, God assures us, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb. 10:17).

As I mentioned in chapter 7, I also love to read Genesis 1–3 with Muslims, where the amazing work of the Creator is described. We can see God's wisdom in the sequence of the creation and his plan to save humans after the fall. I always read how God creates, and then I move to the New Testament to emphasize how Jesus creates too. Similarly, I show how Jesus creates sight for a man born blind (John 9; also for two blind men in Matt. 20:29–34 and for another in Mark 8:22–26). As a rule, whenever you read the Bible with Muslims, you should ensure two things: that you reflect the supremacy of Christ and the unmatched character of the Savior and that you always ask your Muslim friends to describe what they understood from the passage.

Muslims are no longer hidden in remote places in other countries. They are around us here and now. Many of them are seekers of the true God. They need simple people like you and me to speak with them about the hope of Christ. Many of them do not need debates or arguments but simply an encounter with Jesus. Many of them have questions that cannot be answered by Islam. Many of them have already abandoned Islam in their hearts and are waiting

for the true God to intervene in their lives. Stir our hearts, oh God, and make us true ambassadors for Christ.

In conclusion, I will tell you a true story: While I was writing this chapter, I had an encouraging phone conversation with Pastor Dawood (Arabic for David), who serves in an evangelical church in a Muslim-majority country. A Muslim woman in her thirties, Samia, contacted him and asked to meet with him because she was not satisfied with Islam and was considering Judaism and Christianity. What a bold assertion and surprising call! Of course, Dawood agreed to meet. When Samia began speaking with him, Dawood realized she was the daughter of a leader of an influential and powerful Islamic fundamentalist group. This was a huge surprise, but God is at work in the hearts and minds of many Muslims. Samia is an intellectual woman with several degrees. For over three hours, Dawood read the Bible with her and explained the gospel in detail, while she asked in-depth questions. At the end of the meeting, she did not accept Christ but promised Dawood to think more and get back to him. Later that week, Dawood spoke with an older woman from his church who knew Samia's family well and had been praying that they would come to Christ for over twenty years. The older woman was in tears when she heard how God was at work. She promised to continue interceding for Samia and her family.

There are many Samias around us, with varying levels of religious commitment. They are questioning Islam, since it does not satisfy the heart's need. They are seekers in an age of doubts, uncertainties, and confusion. Do not wait for them to reach out to you. Be prepared to preach the gospel. Seek opportunities and seize them. Intercede for those like Samia. As you proclaim the gospel, you should be aware of several pitfalls to avoid. We examine those in the next chapter.

Avoiding Pitfalls

HAMID IS A DEAR FRIEND. When I met him, he was a devout Muslim who preached Islam to Christians often. He loved doing *da'wa* (calling people to Islam)—especially with non-Muslims—and he exhorted his fellow Muslims to be devoted and committed followers of Islam. Since he lived in the West, he always compared what he saw as Islam's values to Western ideals and deemed Islam superior because he equated Western immoral lifestyles with Christianity.

When I first encountered Hamid, we both knew we were committed to our respective faiths. We did not waste time discussing the weather or football games. We moved directly to religious conversations. After a few minutes, we smiled because we realized that both of us were devoted believers and that each knew his faith and the other's fairly well. This began a sweet friendship that continues today. We take walks and talk often about Christ. Though Hamid has not accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, he says he no longer believes in Islam.

Walking with Hamid

In our first conversation, Hamid challenged me. Here is a summary of our dialogue:

HAMID: I will become a Christian today if you show me one verse in the Bible where Jesus says, “I am God; worship me.”

IBRAHIM: Great. If you want me to use the Bible, do you believe the Bible to be inspired?

H: No, it is corrupt. This is not the true Bible.

I: But you want me to use it to help you become a Christian?

H: No. I already know the answer. I want to prove to you that Jesus never said he was God but that you Christians made it up when you corrupted Christianity.

I: How do you know the answer? Did you read the Bible?

H: No, but we all know it is corrupt. We talk about this all the time in the mosque, and it is a proven fact. [While I could have continued the discussion to establish the authenticity of the Bible, I preferred to use the opportunity to help Hamid actually read the Bible.]

I: Okay, let's read the Bible.

I used the Arabic translation of the Bible so that Hamid could read in his own language. (Those who don't speak Arabic can access and use bilingual Arabic-English Bibles when reading with Arab Muslims.) When we opened a passage, I told Hamid to read it for us. I was determined to show Hamid three pieces of evidence about Jesus's deity from the Bible. First, I told Hamid that Jesus used the same term as the Most High God (“I AM”) about himself. When Jesus told the Jews that he had existed as “I am” even before their

father Abraham, they wanted to stone him as a blasphemer (John 8:58–59). I also pointed to another verse, where the Jews wanted to kill Jesus: “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). Second, I showed Hamid that only God can forgive sins, and Jesus forgave sins many times (Mark 2:5–7; Luke 5:22–25). Here Hamid was persuaded a bit but still doubted. Third, I showed Hamid how God uses titles such as “the first and the last” (Isa. 44:6) and “Lord of lords” (Deut. 10:17; 1 Tim. 6:13–15) about himself, and the same titles are used of Jesus (Rev. 1:17–18; 17:14; 19:16). Similarly, God is the only Creator who made all things, and we find that Jesus is also revealed as the Creator (Isa. 44:24; John 1:3, 10).

With these three pieces of evidence, Hamid was convinced but not yet moved. He seemed to be deeply troubled, as if he had just made a huge discovery that could shatter his world. He said that he had never heard anything like this and that he was grateful to have read the passages with me. I did not waste time, and I told Hamid about salvation in Christ. In this case, I thought it important that I explain the gospel to Hamid because I was unsure if the same opportunity would come again. After proclaiming the gospel, I asked him, “So, will you follow Christ?” He said he was not sure about many things and still believed the Bible to be corrupt. He said he would speak with his mosque’s imam about these matters.

A week later, Hamid and I went for a walk again, and he appeared to feel victorious. After he talked with his imam, Hamid felt prepared to refute my words. He said that the verses we read did not actually say anything about the deity. He added, “I am still

ready to be a Christian, only if you show me in the Bible that Jesus said, ‘I am God; worship me.’”

“But Jesus uses the exact same terms used by God to describe himself: forgiving, creating, everlasting, and others,” I responded.

“No. This is not the same,” Hamid answered. “I do not want to read the Bible anymore. I know all about it. I know the truth. You will not find any verse where Jesus explicitly says, ‘I am God; worship me.’”

Of course, given my many encounters with Muslim friends, I knew this line of argument. Muslims want to hear Christ use specific words in directly claiming to be God. This argument is common and advanced by many Muslim polemicists—like Ahmed Deedat and Zakir Naik—who use it repeatedly to try to embarrass Christians. I said to Hamid, “There are no ‘exact words’ of this sort, my friend; there are, however, many beliefs in both Islam and Christianity that do not rely on exact words.” I continued, “You will never find the term *tawhid* [strict monotheism] in the Quran. Does this mean you do not believe in *tawhid*?”

Hamid said, “Of course I believe Allah is one, but I never knew that the Quran did not include the word.”

I said, “No, it does not include the word *tawhid*; throughout the Quran, however, you find verses that establish the oneness of Allah—this is how Muslims articulate the *tawhid* doctrine.” This came as a shock to Hamid. Finally, I explained to him, “Even though Jesus did not say, ‘I am God; worship me,’ the deity of Christ is clear throughout the text.”

Five Pitfalls

My conversations with Hamid can help us as we think about evangelism. In particular, they prepare us to avoid some pitfalls in

dialogue. We need to be focused and avoid distractions. Our goal is to reflect and proclaim Christ, not to defeat competitors. Here I share five major pitfalls to avoid in conversations with Muslims.

First, stay away from competition. Do not argue to win. Adjust your heart's approach. Your compass should point to Christ. Your goal is not to make Christianity win over Islam but rather to proclaim Jesus to people he loves. Avoid being tangled up in wasteful debates without introducing the gospel. Always focus on the character, deeds, and teachings of Jesus. Let your Muslim friends see Christ in your dialogue. Let them sense how you care about them as people, how you respect them when they disagree with you, and how your conversations reflect the image of Christ. Some Muslims, like Hamid, are by nature argumentative and can lead you down the same path. Or you may be argumentative yourself. You should be solid in your belief in Christ, and you should never compromise; you do not, however, want to win debates and lose friendships. Competitive discussions usually lead nowhere. If you come across as argumentative, your Muslim friend may simply shut down and refuse to converse again about religious matters, especially if they are ill equipped to answer questions. Instead, you must love Muslims genuinely. Listen to them carefully, and always share about the uniqueness of Jesus, his character, and his teaching. When conversations get heated, remind your Muslim friends that you want them to see Christ and follow him, not to win or lose in dialogue. Ultimately, avoid burning bridges of communication, and strive to leave the door open for future conversations.

Second, do not be intimidated. This pitfall is common, especially with Western Christians who engage Arab Muslims in conversations. Perhaps Islam is intimidating because it is generally unknown or because these Christians are not solid in their understanding of

Christian beliefs. These evangelists often begin their conversations with uncertainty and hesitancy. This cannot be helpful. They may think, “I do not understand Islam. I do not know Arabic at all. This Muslim is probably more qualified than I am to discuss religions, and maybe I will be asked a difficult question about Christianity and embarrass myself.” This is never a good start. Remember you are not in a competition, and more importantly, your goal is to proclaim Christ’s good news, not to defeat Islam. You should not be intimidated. Even if you are asked a tough question, you can always request to discuss it later after you have pondered it further.

Moreover, intimidation and uncertainty do not reflect confidence, and your Muslim friend will sense this. You should realize that you are a bearer of the most important news. The gospel is powerful and needed by Muslims who seek hope, rescue, and forgiveness. You have a message without which Muslims cannot enter the kingdom of God. Do not be intimidated: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Of course, you must study about Islam and Muslims—perhaps by reading books like this one—but ensure that you never begin a conversation weakly or defensively. The Christian truth claims make perfect sense. Biblical Christianity has survived centuries of doctrinal attacks. Evangelists have a better way forward than Muslims do.

Furthermore, Muslims—especially Middle Easterners—value courage and confidence. They admire pride and assertiveness. They want to come across as strong and confident Muslims. Weakness, hesitancy, and intimidation do not sit well with them and will not encourage them to trust your words or to continue conversations. Muslims are apt to dismiss weak and unassertive people. Although you do not need to pretend to be confident, it is important to

present the image of Christ with joy, certainty, and courage. The best thing you can do is to know the Bible well and be prepared to speak about Christ.

Third, avoid chasing rabbits during gospel conversations. More than a pitfall, this is a roadblock in communication. For example, in most gospel conversations, perhaps as a defense mechanism, Muslims tend to interrupt the dialogue to switch topics. If this happens, you should respond kindly—but limit the discussion to one item, and schedule another meeting to discuss the rest. This is important because it happens often and usually leaves evangelists confused. I have found that chasing rabbits in dialogue is one way a Muslim tries to avoid confronting the reality exposed by the gospel. When you explain the need for salvation and forgiveness of sin, your Muslim friend may interrupt to accuse you of worshiping three gods. Do not dismiss this accusation, but with a smile and a sincere voice, ask to continue the discussion, promising to address the “three gods” matter at another time.

Fourth, never get angry when discussing faith matters. While this point relates to avoiding competitive argumentation, it is also distinct in some ways. Culturally speaking, if Muslims succeed in making you angry, this means in their minds that they proved Islam’s superiority over Christianity. Hegemony is a very important aspect in Muslim life and a major theme in Islamic tradition. The goal is always to prove that Islam is better, greater, and more successful than any other faith. In the Muslim mindset, if a Muslim man marries a woman who converted from Christianity to Islam, this is a win against Christianity and proves Islam’s hegemony. If Muslims purchase an old church building and turn it into a mosque, this is also a win for Islam. If a Christian—especially a leader or cleric—converts to Islam, it indicates, in Muslims’ estimation, the success

of Islam. Similarly, if Christians become angry about a theological point they are making in a conversation, Muslims often interpret this as a sign of defeat.

You should always remember that you reflect the image of Christ. Although you should be passionate about Christ and enthusiastic about the gospel, it is important to refrain from getting angry as you defend a point. When a Muslim accepts Christ, there is joy in heaven (Luke 15:7), but it does not mean that we—as ambassadors for Christ—won some competition. Christianity did not beat Islam, but rather the kingdom of God received a new believer. This is a testimony of the work of the Holy Spirit. Alternatively, if you preach the gospel to Muslims and they do not accept Christ, this does not mean you failed. Instead, it means that you fulfilled an essential part of the Great Commission and that the result is in God’s hand.

You should always be calm and clothed with Christ’s patience. Muslims indeed value strength, pride, and hegemony—but sincere humility and genuine meekness are attractive to anyone. Thus, Christians must avoid becoming angry at any point in Muslim evangelism. Remain focused on Christ, reflect the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23), and maintain a Christlike attitude in conversation (Matt. 20:25–28; John 13:14).

Fifth, Christians should avoid two extremes: delaying gospel proclamation and rushing Muslims for a conversion decision. It is important to maintain a crucial balance in evangelism. On the one hand, there is no time to waste, and we should proclaim the gospel as early as possible. On the other hand, we should never rush a gospel decision. Let us examine this balance.

There is a tendency among some Christians to wait for a long time before sharing the gospel with Muslims. These Christians think, “We should become friends first, eat together, learn about

each other, and then I will share the gospel.” In most cases, these Christians get tangled up in social measures and shallow conversations, and it becomes difficult to introduce the gospel. Make it a habit: from the very beginning of your friendship with a Muslim, be clear about your identity in Christ. Speak about Christ often. Bring a Bible verse or a miracle he performed into the conversation, even if briefly. This will establish your identity with these Muslims. They will know you as a Christian who loves to talk about Jesus. Culturally speaking, there is no problem at all with beginning a gospel conversation during your first encounter with a Muslim friend. Remember, Muslims by default do not avoid religious conversations. You can intentionally choose, each time you meet a Muslim, to plant a gospel seed. One huge advantage is that, if you begin a gospel conversation in the earliest encounter, you will be able to elaborate and explain more as the friendship grows. If you delay, you will likely find it harder to talk about the gospel and our need for a Savior as time goes by.

We do not, however, have to force our conversations with Muslims to follow a specific direction. Be courteous, kind, and sensitive to the context of the meeting. Muslims are people, and, as with anyone else, it is annoying and displeasing to feel forced into any kind of conversation. For example, do not force a conversation with a Muslim man while he is working in his shop and has customers. Still, you could smile, give him a genuine hug, and ask if he would like to meet later. This is why we need God’s guidance and leadership. Remember, God is in control, and he loves Muslims. He can provide a suitable opportunity for you to begin a gospel conversation without rushing or forcing it.

Moreover, we must be reasonable. There are vast differences between meeting a taxi driver whom we encounter only once

and talking with a neighbor whom we see often. In the former, Christians probably have one chance to share about Christ, so they may navigate the gospel conversation and plant a seed anyway. In the latter, they have many possible opportunities to speak with the neighbor and can even schedule a discussion about any topic, even gospel-related ones. Thus, you must train yourself to maintain a good balance in evangelism: there is no time to waste and you should share the gospel early on, but do not push Muslims into conversations or rush them into conversion decisions. We need to pray and seek the right timing to ask our Muslim friends whether they want to follow Jesus.

My friendship with Hamid continues today. We do not argue anymore, but sometimes I ask him about his response to Christ's love. While he claims not to be Muslim anymore, he has not yet taken a step to follow Christ. Hamid often voices his concerns about the great cost of following Jesus: "What will I tell my family? While I love Jesus, my family and I cannot endure the shame that would come on us if I came out as a Christian." I cannot make this decision for Hamid. I know that God is working in his heart, but he must reach the decision on his own. So I continue to pray for him regularly.

My conversations with Hamid reveal important areas in Muslim evangelism. Christians should avoid various pitfalls that often occur in gospel conversations, including an argumentative style, a lack of confidence resulting in the evangelist's intimidation, distracting topical shifts in discussions, a tendency toward anger if things don't go how one wants, delaying gospel proclamation, and pushing Muslims into conversations or conversion decisions. Christians must be calm, confident, cheerful, and Christlike as they avoid these common mistakes.

Still, the truth is that there are delicate matters we must discuss with Muslims if our goal is evangelism. In particular, how can we talk with them respectfully and effectively about Muhammad or the Quran? These topics are sensitive and serious. Whether you like it or not, these matters are often debated in gospel conversations, especially in developed friendships. I explain how to address these topics in the next chapter.

Treading Carefully

*Speaking about the Quran and
Muhammad with a Muslim*

WHEN I FIRST MOVED to the United States in 2007, I searched for a local church. I found one that was within walking distance, which was wonderful since I did not have a car. At the first Sunday service I attended, I enjoyed worshiping with American believers. The pastor was kind and engaging. The sermon was fine, but one phrase did not sit well with me. The pastor kept repeating, “Jesus is my buddy.” Every time he said this, I was bothered. Having just come from Egypt, I was unaccustomed to calling Jesus “my buddy.” Although the Bible calls us the beloved of God (1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13) and Jesus called the disciples his “friends” (John 15:15), I was unable to say, “Jesus is my buddy.” The pastor was trying to emphasize Jesus’s love and that we can trust him as we trust our close friends, which is true, but the phrase itself was too much for me. My culture—that of the Middle East—elevates the sacred,

sometimes to an extreme. Anything divine—God, prophets, saints, and holy books—is respected and revered. Consider the culture around Jesus during his earthly ministry. Most people approached sacred matters with fear and trembling. Of course, sometimes they were hypocrites, which led Jesus to condemn their actions, but the respect for the sacred still marked the culture. Although there are Middle Easterners who do not show veneration for religious or divine matters, this reverence is a common and important aspect of Eastern cultures. And this knowledge can help us understand how most Muslims approach religious matters, holy figures, and sacred traditions.

Consider this: unlike some Protestants, who go as far as to look down on Mary, Muslims cannot despise Mary or Jesus because they are highly revered. Most Muslims—because of their cultural stance and general respect for religious matters—cannot speak ill of any prophet or holy figure. In fact, I know many who, out of respect and admiration, call on Mary to help them in difficult circumstances because they view her as the best woman who ever lived (Q 3:42). Muslims reject Jesus’s crucifixion because of the Quran’s claims and because, in their estimation, it is a severe humiliation to die on a cross—a fate that is inappropriate for a revered figure.

Still, I do not think the American pastor was necessarily mistaken about this “buddy” phrase. I believe that everyone in the church understood what he meant. Perhaps no one besides me thought he was being disrespectful. In conversation with Muslims, however, an evangelist should not say, “Jesus, my buddy.” Muslims will not tolerate a revered prophet being labeled as a “buddy.” When I speak of Jesus to Muslims, I call him “my Lord and Savior, Jesus.” The logic is that Jesus is God, and I am his created human. He can eliminate barriers between him and me, but I cannot do the

same. Jesus allowed Peter and Paul to call him “friend,” but they insisted on describing themselves as his bondservants (Rom. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1). This discussion offers crucial background as we consider how to speak with Muslims about the Quran and Muhammad.

The Quran and Muhammad

Islam, as a belief system, stands on two foundations, the Quran and Muhammad—Allah’s word and Allah’s final prophet, according to Muslims.¹ For them, these two are holy, venerated, revered, and, more important, unquestionable and untouchable. They have sacred halos around them, established by centuries of circulated traditions. (Although these traditions are mostly forged and questionable from a scientific point of view, Muslims perceive them as truthful and authentic.) Consequently, in Muslim contexts, it is risky for anyone to question the Quran or Muhammad. Any hint of skepticism toward the Quran or word of criticism against Muhammad can lead to harsh consequences, in some places even to death. The risk is higher if you are not a Muslim. This aims to silence critics and objectors by creating fear—and this element of fear is evident in most Muslim countries, especially in the Arab world. One can talk about any topic critically, except the two foundations of Islam. Many Muslims and non-Muslims throughout history gave their lives for criticizing the Quran and voicing negative opinions about Muhammad’s character and deeds. These people swam against the current and dared to question the sacred. The case in the West is significantly different because critical thinking and criticizing the “sacred” have been essential parts of life. Here Islam, the Quran, and Muhammad have come under scrutiny, especially in recent generations.

1 For an in-depth discussion of the Quran and Muhammad, see Ayman S. Ibrahim, *A Concise Guide to the Quran: Answering Thirty Critical Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020); Ibrahim, *A Concise Guide to the Life of Muhammad: Answering Thirty Key Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

It might come as a surprise to many that the earliest encounters between Christians and Muslims were not of the sympathetic or syncretistic type, nor were they necessarily polemical. When Muslims claimed Christian lands in the early seventh century, Christian thinkers began to articulate their understanding of Islam and its main foundations, the Quran and Muhammad. These Christians were fearless and eloquent. Most of them viewed Islam as a man-made religion, the Quran as a regular book, and Muhammad as a false prophet. These Christians drew these conclusions based on the Bible, Muhammad's teachings, and the statements of the Quran. Some of these writers entertained diluted notions, including the belief that the Quran contains some truthful claims and that Muhammad was a charismatic preacher of monotheism. These arguments were marginal and dismissed by clear biblical testimonies. Christians wrote tracts and apologetic works to defend Christianity and address Islam and its foundations. Some of these Christians gave their lives because of their writings, while others wrote under pseudonyms to avoid persecution.

Thus, an evangelist may wonder, what should we tell Muslims about our views of the Quran and Muhammad? Are we supposed to tell them that we perceive Islam to be a man-made religion and Muhammad a false prophet? This is an important question. Before answering it, I examine briefly how Muslims view Allah's word and Allah's prophet. This helps us determine possible answers as we proclaim Christ to our Muslim friends.

To Muslims, the Quran is Allah's inerrant word. It surpasses and suppresses all precious, heavenly, divine revelations, including the Bible. They wash their hands before reading it, and they live under its metaphysical influence. They believe its pages and words have supernatural power—not the spirit of the words but the actual

book itself. This is why Muslims kiss the Quran and touch it to their foreheads. They never place it on the floor. Some Muslims write verses of the Quran on paper and place them in their water before drinking it—they think this can heal or strengthen them. The “received power” is what Muslims actually seek. This power is not about knowing the deity or understanding his ways; rather, it is more concerned with gaining benefits, evading harm, and ultimately reaching paradise. One of my Muslim classmates in Cairo slept with the Quran underneath his pillow to avoid nightmares. Many Muslims keep it in their cars to protect them from theft. Some place the Quran in the entrance of their shops at night to prevent a burglary.

Since in their minds the Quran has supernatural power, Muslims often recite it even if they do not understand it. They believe mere recitation is all that is necessary. Supposedly, reciting chapter 112 is worth the same blessing as reciting a third of the Quran. Reciting chapter 113 grants power and protection from the evil eyes and spirits. Ultimately, for Muslims, the Quran is Allah’s eternal speech; thus, the book itself is divine. Whether one reads the Quran to learn about Allah or to earn his favor or blessing, one is not trying to know him in any relational sense. He is far away and unapproachable. Muslims read the Quran in search of favors, not knowledge. In Cairo, after I returned to public school for high school, I encountered a situation with my Muslim teacher. He firmly told me that I could not touch the Quran since “none touch it except the purified” (Q 56:79). When I asked him to explain, he recited another verse: “Indeed, the polytheists are unclean, so let them not approach the Holy Mosque after this year” (Q 9:28). He believed Christians were polytheists. This demonstrates the reverence Muslims have for the Quran.

Compare this with Christianity. Unlike Muslims, Christians read the Bible to know God’s will, his works, and his character. For

Christians, the book we call the “Bible” is not the eternal incarnation of the divine—Jesus is. Christians view Jesus as the complete, ultimate, and definitive expression of God’s absolute truth. This is how Muslims view the Quran. To them, the Quran is the eternal word of Allah himself; it is the closest they will come to believing in incarnation. It is unsurprising that the strongest Muslim oath is “By the Quran, I say the truth.” It is imperative that evangelists understand the revered status of the Quran in the hearts of Muslims. Next, we examine their views on Muhammad.

Muslims regard Muhammad as the best proclaimer of Allah’s words. Just as the Quran is supernatural and powerful for Muslims, Muhammad is the most venerated and honorable man who ever lived. He brought the ultimate message to humankind. Out of reverence and veneration, Muslims always follow Muhammad’s name with the honorary phrase “Peace be upon him.” This phrase in Arabic, *Salla allahu alayhi wa sallam*, literally states, “May Allah send prayers and peace upon him.” The literal statement of the honorary phrase suggests that Allah prays over Muhammad. But if Allah prays, to whom does he pray, and who listens? While many non-Muslims view this phrase as blasphemous since it reflects the sin of associating partners with the deity (called *shirk* in Islam), it indicates the utmost veneration for Muhammad in the hearts of Muslims.

When conversing with Muslims, evangelists quickly notice that they seem to hear about various Muhammads. What Muslims believe about Muhammad does not necessarily stem from the Quran or even the traditions. They choose a Muhammad who resembles their mental picture and is a result of a collective memory portrayed by their mosque’s imam. Still, we can identify two main pictures, or Muhammads.² Most cultural Muslims believe in a legendary

2 Ibrahim, *Concise Guide to the Life of Muhammad*, 30–34.

Muhammad—one who does everything right based on their cultural stance. This Muhammad is not necessarily linked to any religious text or historical evidence. It is the Muhammad they cherish and in whom they believe. Religious Muslims, on the other hand, have access to—and high trust in—numerous traditions about Muhammad. In a sense, they believe in a traditional Muhammad, not a legendary one (although some superstitious elements can slip into their beliefs). Based on these traditions, religious Muslims learn of the beautiful traits of Muhammad, his unmatched deeds, his unique titles, and his superior qualities. None of these traditions come from eyewitnesses or contemporary companions but rather from Muslim authors who lived centuries after Muhammad.

These traditions, however, form a halo around Muhammad, making him untouchable. Whether you encounter a cultural or religious Muslim, you will likely hear stories about Muhammad that seem too good to be true. This is because they are not supported by evidence, even though they are still believed by the masses. You will probably hear that Muhammad fed multitudes with loaves of bread and healed blind people by placing his hands on their eyes. Although the Quran insists that Muhammad never performed miracles, Muslims needed a Muhammad who could compete with Moses and Jesus, one who did perform signs and wonders. This Muhammad was created by forged traditions that aimed to elevate and magnify him. The vast majority of Muslims whom you meet, however, believe that this is the true Muhammad.

Talking about Islam's Two Foundations

Based on the above explanations of how Muslims view the Quran and Muhammad, it is now fitting to discuss how to address them with Muslims. Even though your main goal is to point them to

Christ and your path is toward proclaiming the gospel, it is inevitable that you will tackle these two issues. Doing so will require wisdom from the Holy Spirit but also honesty, boldness, and courage. You must be filled with God's wisdom and humility, without fearing any Muslim rejection or retaliation. Here I offer several basic principles.

First, Christians should familiarize themselves with the Muslim perspective, especially regarding Islam's two foundations—but they need not share these sentiments. Most Muslims would not expect Christians to view the Quran and Muhammad as Muslims do. Indeed, Muslims want Christians to believe the Quran and accept Muhammad as a prophet, but they understand the reality: if Christians did accept and believe, they would convert to Islam.

Second, in evangelizing Muslims, I do not use the Quran because I do not believe it to be holy, sacred, or truthful. The only time I may use the Quran in a conversation with a Muslim is to establish the fact that even the Quran affirms the truthfulness and inerrancy of the Bible. I use the Quran in this case because it is the only book a Muslim will believe. Once I establish the authenticity of the Bible, I never again use the Quran. Rather, I use the Bible because I believe it is God's word through which God's Spirit moves.

When a Muslim asks me if I believe and trust the Quran, I usually smile and humbly say, "My friend, this is your most holy book, and I respect you; if I believed in it, however, I would have become Muslim already, right?" Most Muslims appreciate this answer and smile back at me. In general, I attempt to avoid this discussion in early conversations with Muslims because I want to establish trust, friendship, and, above all, some understanding of Christian truths. Nevertheless, in most cases, my friendship with a Muslim does not end when I share my view of the Quran—even if I do

so at our first meeting. Remember, humility and sincerity are attractive. Even if your answer creates uneasiness in the moment, a genuine, loving friendship can survive an honest statement given with a Christlike attitude.

Third, some Christians advocate using the Quran in evangelism. They have created methods that use the Quran to lead Muslims to Christianity. They tell Muslims that the Quran can prove that Jesus is God and that he was crucified, among many other arguments. These Christians dwell on the Quran more than any other text, even the Bible. In my estimation, they misuse and abuse the Quran, forcing it to make false claims. To do this, these Christians choose specific verses, reread them selectively, isolate them from the surrounding passages, and rely on them solely. Why do they use this untenable method? These evangelists think that Muslims do not trust the Bible. Instead of dwelling on the Bible and encouraging Muslims to read it, these Christians resort to using (or rather misusing) a dead book to establish eternal truths easily found in God's word. I would plead with evangelists not to adopt such methods.

Fourth, since Muhammad is the most venerated and revered person in Islam, any mention of him must be done with care. In some discussions, Christians may sense that Muslims respect and honor Muhammad even more than Allah himself—this is because Muhammad was human and therefore feels closer to them than the ever-transcendent Allah. Thus, Christians should exercise wisdom in order to avoid an explosive situation.

In the early stages of my friendships with Muslims, I avoid mentioning Muhammad. I do not need to discuss him because my focus is on amplifying and glorifying Christ. Whenever the subject comes up, however, I do not use the honorary phrase, nor do

I focus on Muhammad. When it is necessary to mention him with a Muslim friend, I refer to Muhammad as “your prophet.” When Muslims ask me whether I believe Muhammad was a prophet, I seek God’s wisdom and often use one of two answers. Sometimes I say, “Trust me, my friend, it does not matter what I think of Muhammad. I know more about Christ, and I want you to see his love and salvation.” In other conversations, I say, “My friend, Muhammad is your prophet, and I respect you. I read a lot about him in Muslim sources because I know he is important to you. You are important to me. I do not, however, believe in him as you do—if I did, I would become Muslim.” Sometimes Muslims are convinced by my statement, but Christians must understand the real challenge for Muslims with our view of Muhammad: they are frustrated because—according to them—they love Jesus and accept his prophethood, but Christians do not love or accept Muhammad. Their posture is understandable, but most Muslims will not reject you or dismiss your friendship if you respond with kindness.

Overall, Christians do not need to assign Muhammad any honorable status. It is not necessary to pretend that you respect Muhammad. When I use the phrase “your prophet,” it is because I respect Muslims and understand how they revere Muhammad, but I do not have to adopt any similar sentiment toward him. We love Muslims and respect them; however, as with any other world leader, we do not need to misrepresent Muhammad just to please his followers. In reality, any Christian who reads Muhammad’s biography will find ample reasons to question his character and behavior. This is why I always focus on the character and teachings of Jesus. Jesus is unmatched, and any direct comparison between Muhammad and Christ will lead to a stark contrast. I choose to talk about the Creator instead of a fallen human.

Fifth, while I do not focus on the Quran or Muhammad, there are some evangelistic moments when it may be necessary to *shake* Muslims' trust in both and guide them to question their beliefs. This depends on the stage of our friendship and their willingness to think critically. Early in the friendship, I allow Muslims to notice the stark differences between Jesus and Muhammad. I do this by focusing on Jesus and his words. I let Muslims self-criticize, without making assessments myself. Later, after a friendship is established, I may begin to question stories of Muhammad from the Muslim's own sources. At such times, Christians must be equipped to ask good questions and elaborate on them. Thus, the level of your friendship determines how deeply you assess Islam's two foundations. Nonetheless, sometimes you may need to guide Muslims in questioning their traditional views.

This is usually the case when you meet religious Muslims who are well established in their religion. They often come to a conversation believing in the superiority of Islam and pretending that all arguments will lead to Islam's victory. With these Muslims, an evangelist may need to ask tough questions. In these instances, I humbly, kindly, and calmly provide a question that will shock them. I have developed these questions based on my reading and my encounters with Muslims. The questions center on the character of Muhammad and his deeds, especially toward non-Muslims and women. They also tackle the preservation of the Quran and what the Muslim sources reveal about its manipulation after Muhammad.³ Again, I take this approach only with Muslim friends who value nothing except Islam but have never thought critically about

3 You can create a list of critical questions from my other books, Ibrahim, *Concise Guide to the Quran*; Ibrahim, *Concise Guide to the Life of Muhammad*.

it. Here you will need to be not only gracious and kind but also educated about these matters.

In this chapter, my goal was to introduce you—as much as possible—to the common Muslim views about the two foundations of Islam: Allah’s word and Allah’s final prophet. Because we love and respect Muslims, it is crucial that we understand what the two foundations mean to them, in order to avoid obstacles on the path to evangelism. We also discussed principles to help us navigate conversations with Muslims about the two foundations. As biblical Christians, we do not assign divine status to the Quran or any prophethood position to Muhammad. We should always be Christlike in showing kindness, sincerity, and honesty, without fear or hesitation, as we discuss these two Islamic foundations. Trust me, Muslims will appreciate your authenticity. Even if they reject you and your words, they will value your sincere love for them. At some point, if and when they see their true need for hope, rescue, and truth, they will come to you.

Thus, in our conversations with Muslims, we should rarely use the Quran. Focus on the living word of God. Always refer to Jesus with utmost respect: “our Lord Jesus.” When needed, speak of Muhammad to a Muslim as “your prophet.” The Christian perception of the Bible and Jesus is starkly different from how Muslims view the Quran and Muhammad. Be prepared, preach the word, and reach the world.

Final Thoughts

WE ARE LIVING IN A MARVELOUS TIME for the church to engage Muslims with the gospel. Because our world is shrinking through use of the internet and other means of communication, Muslims are exposed to new ways of thinking and religious beliefs, including Christ's gospel. Many of them are questioning Islam. Many are truth seekers and are ready to hear about Christ. In this section, I conclude the book by providing a few final thoughts to encourage you as you proclaim Christ to Muslims today.

1. When Muslims ask you a question that you need to postpone answering—perhaps it is untimely or a bit advanced—you can cordially say, “I think this is an important question, but we need to build a foundation first before we answer it. Instead of rushing to an answer, can we discuss it properly?” This will help you lay some groundwork and even prepare a well-researched answer.

2. You can always tell Muslims that you have read the Quran and Muhammad's biography—that is, only if you did. This usually encourages Muslims to talk with you, although it can also intimidate them if they have never read them. While it is helpful for Muslims to know you have read their important texts, you should not approach the conversation with the goal of “You tell

me about Islam, and I'll tell you about Christianity." This approach often leads Muslims to boast about Islam's superiority and its marvelous truths, leaving the Christian in a defensive position from the start. The conversation becomes more of a monologue than a dialogue because the Muslim friend begins preaching. Personally, I do not ask Muslims about Islam, nor do I pretend to desire an interfaith dialogue. I talk about Christ and do not shy away from the Christian truth.

3. When Muslims respond to the gospel, either by fully accepting Christ or by indicating their interest in learning more, it is important to connect them with Christians. Your best way forward is to invite them to a small group where Christians study the Bible. Inviting them to an American church at this early stage can be overwhelming. The cultural aspect of the service can be too much for them. You must prepare Muslims to understand an American service before you invite them to church. Think about this: In some churches, a man and his wife sit next to each other and might place their arms around each other. Most Americans would see this as normal, but a Muslim would feel it is inappropriate in a house of God. A small group setting can allow the Muslim (or the new believer) to ask questions and inquire about Christian matters in a more specific way.

4. When interacting with Muslims, you will make cultural mistakes, but you will learn from them as you live a lifestyle of evangelism. Do not be so concerned about making mistakes that you panic. Since moving to the United States, I have met loving Christians who want to preach the gospel to everyone around them. One common trait among most of them is that they worry about making mistakes or offending people from other cultures. They act in a very cautious way, as if afraid to offend Muslims. Do

not let your fear of making mistakes paralyze you. Muslims are humans—they, too, make mistakes. They understand that you are from a different culture. Be yourself, and remember that learning goes both ways. Kindness and authenticity will minimize the effects of mistakes, which are to be expected.

5. When ministering to Muslims, it is of utmost importance that you interact with the same gender. Although God can use anyone in any way, it is crucial that male evangelists seek to evangelize male Muslims, and female evangelists, female Muslims. If a female Muslim needs the gospel and approaches a male evangelist, the best way forward is for him to connect her with a female Christian. There are some exceptions. For example, in the earlier story of Pastor Dawood, Samia approached him as *the pastor* of a church, and they met in a church setting. If further conversation would ensue, he would invite his wife to join them. Still, I could fill another book with true stories of problems that occurred because of violating the simple principle of men evangelizing men and women evangelizing women. Do not worry that God will be unable to provide another evangelist for a particular Muslim if you decide to follow this rule.

6. I encourage you to evangelize one person at a time. If you have two Muslim friends, meet with them individually to preach the gospel instead of preaching to both at the same time. The reasons are simple: social conformity and peer pressure. If one is touched by the gospel, the thought of the other's opinion may affect that one's response. In some cases, each will wait until he or she is sure of the other's response. You do not need to put this pressure on either of them. Interacting one-on-one offers a better setting to share more thoroughly, in a personal way.

7. Upon leaving Islam, many converts to Christ face persecution from their own family members or communities. This is even

more severe if the convert is a female. This is the tough reality of conversion (or apostasy) from Islam. In some countries, Muslims give their lives. In other cases, they must flee to Western societies, where religious freedom is enforced, or else they endure harassment and discrimination in their Muslim societies. Do not assume that *all* Muslim converts flee to the West or hide their conversions. Many converts will astonish you with their love for Christ and their fearless lives. I saw many who decided to remain in their Muslim societies after their conversion. (To balance the picture, I also saw some convert to Christ for questionable reasons, including gaining money, receiving visas to the West, or marrying someone.) Christians must understand that sincere converts face real difficulties and risk losing their stability, family, and friends.

Relatedly, we can encourage Muslims who decide they want to follow Christ, but we cannot make their decisions for them. Christ told us, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27). It is a mistake for Christians to assure Muslims that everything will be fine once they follow Christ. Spiritually, we are reconciled with the Father, but in many ways, accepting Christ starts the true war with the flesh, the world, and the devil (Eph. 6; 1 John 2:15–17). We, as Christians, can be supportive, caring, and encouraging to converts, but we must not try to assume the role of Christ in their lives.

8. Christians should learn about Islam, but the best experience comes from interacting with Muslims in real life. Indeed, we must study apologetics in order to defend and articulate the doctrines of our faith, but we should not stop there. We need to diligently interact with Muslims and tell them about our faith in Christ. The more you interact with Muslims, the better equipped you will be to present the gospel effectively and to answer questions about

Final Thoughts

faith: “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet. 3:15). Still, the Holy Spirit can surprise you. While we all should learn and be well prepared, sometimes Muslims are ready to accept Christ with no need for questions or answers. They merely want to flee a religious system that has never fed their soul and to embrace the life given by the Son of God (John 10:10). You should be ready when they say, “We wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21), and answer joyfully, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Abba Father, I pray fervently that you allow us to win many Muslims for you as we proclaim the supremacy of Christ. Open our eyes. Help us wake up and look around. Let us see through your eyes because the fields are ready and ripe for Christ's harvest. Consume our hearts with your love for Muslims, so that we love them with the love of Christ. Show us Jesus, oh God. Show us Jesus in your word, and help us know him more. Help us see his heart, so that we make him known more and more. Oh Abba, who is sufficient for these things? We are yours. Use us for the fame of the only begotten Son! I pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

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