

HOW DO WE REACH MUSLIMS?

A review article by Rev J. Tangelder

Canada's secular newspapers treat Islam as just another religion, privately observed by many Muslim newcomers. But Islam is not merely a religion. It is a holistic faith, embracing culture and the state. It is a worldview and a way of life. For example, one cannot understand the politics and of the Middle East, without some understanding of the dynamics of Islam. In the Middle East the Muslim world is a political and religious boiling pot; it has the largest military buildup, the most wars, poor economic performance, and no real democracies. Military dictatorships, warlordism, corruption, frustrated populations, and the rising force of Islamism (militant Islam) are a recipe for disaster. While we may lament and fear the resurgence of Islam, if we are serious about our Lord's Great Commission (Matt. 28:19 -20) we cannot ignore the compelling realities of the Muslim world. We are called to praise the Lord's name forever and His power and glory to proclaim! And I am convinced the Reformed holistic worldview is uniquely suited for mission work among Muslims.

How?

How should we then reach Muslims with the Gospel? According to Dr. Greg Livingstone, church formation and growth by people movements are what God had in mind for the Great Commission. In his book *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities* he focuses especially on the approximately 400 million Muslims living in cities across North Africa, the Middle East, and Central, South, and Southeast Asia. He is passionate about mission work among these people, lost without the Savior. He notes that in that vast region few Christian churches of former Muslims exist with their own national elders, especially in the cities. But he suggests that in many dominantly Muslim cities, a large number of Muslims exists who deeply desire to be acceptable to God and who are not satisfied with the status quo.

Livingstone believes a church planting team of expatriates can establish viable churches of former Muslims. He calls it "a do-able task." He argues that a local church or a fellowship of churches (a denomination) and not mission agencies should send and support missionaries to establish a sister church in a Muslim city. He describes the need for learning Arabic, Islamic, and culture awareness. He also refers to the attitudes, and skills that must be utilized. He stresses that a blueprint for church planting must be both Biblical sound and culturally appropriate. For example, he says missionaries must understand that baptizing children of a believing household leader (or a believing mother, 1 Cor. 7:14b) is exactly the reading of Scripture that seems most natural to Muslims and other eastern people. He notes that it is likely that westerners tend to interpret the Bible in a more individualistic manner, through the grid of teachers in "the one man - one vote - go your own way" culture. Livingstone also uses two case studies, and a theoretical step-by-step approach in Baghdad, Iraq, to illustrate his missiology.

Livingstone is realistic concerning the tremendous obstacles missionaries face in the Arab world. In the Muslim's view, any effort to convert to Christianity is essentially robbery committed against the established Islamic community. Expatriate missionaries face persecution, the fear of expulsion, or failure. Livingstone believes that a team environment is the best way to overcome obstacles. The team should be supervised by a leader who is motivated, provides biblical pastoral care, and good administration. Livingstone is optimistic about the success of mission work among Muslims. He says, "Would God be putting Muslim peoples on the agenda of his Church if he was not intending to bring unprecedented numbers of Muslims to himself?"

His book contains a wealth of information about Islam, cultural habits, and missionary strategies. Since Islam is Christianity's severest challenge and books on the subject of missions among Muslim are scant, Livingstone's book is noteworthy. Anyone involved in mission work among Muslims can benefit from it and will be challenged by it. The book reflects Livingstone's great zeal for the lost, and years of experience as a missionary. It would be wonderful if all of us shared his mission ardor. I don't know how it is possible to believe and to confess the Gospel and not have our eyes focused on the world outside the Church which doesn't know Jesus Christ as Savior and King. How many Reformed congregations in North America are reaching out to the Muslims in their cities, let alone starting a church planting ministry in the

Middle East? However, despite all the good things Livingstone's says in his book, I have some pertinent reservations.

Pertinent Reservations

Gregory M. Livingstone was the North American Director for North Africa Mission. This group was founded in 1881 and changed its name to Arab World Ministries in the early 1980s. He served fourteen years with Operation Mobilization, in India, the Middle East, and Europe. He studied at Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, and holds a D.Miss. Degree from Biola University. He is currently the director of Frontier, the largest mission agency of church-planting teams among Muslims. He states that his approach to missions builds on a foundation commonly called "the church growth school of missions" and its extensive literature. He says that he works with the premises taught by Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner and Ralph Winter, and – particularly in the Muslim context - Phil Parshall. Both Parshall and McGavran advocate people movements for church growth. They claim that mission outreach should normally begin with Muslims who share the same social status and argue for homogeneous churches. They think that an attempt to link a newly converted Muslim rural farmer, a middle class merchant, and a member of the royal family into a church body is unrealistic in any culture. But this "homogeneous unit principle" does not do justice to the body of Christ. The beauty of the Christian Church is that her members come from every social segment of society, the rich and the poor, the illiterate and the learned (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 1:26-31; James 5). Believers one and all, as members of the communion of saints, "share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts" (Lord's Day 21: Q&A 55). Livingstone also tends to be judgmental of Christian Egyptians, Pakistanis, etc. How can he say that very few are Christian? Isn't this the judging work of the Holy Spirit?

The church growth school appears fascinated with scientifically discoverable facts, the use of management techniques, marketing psychology, and communications to spread the Gospel and establish churches. Livingstone's book is laced with jargon borrowed from the American business world. Missionaries are called "change agents" and evangelists "communicators." Seminary education does not appear important. Livingstone says that the commitment to keep growing in an understanding of the Word of God, and an ability to teach others, can be better learned in the midst of the ministry than at seminaries. But I recall how the Dutch missiologist professor Dr. J.H. Bavinck stressed in his lectures the need for both a sound spiritual foundation and a solid academic education in preparation for the mission field.

Livingstone states that Muslim ministry must begin with finding out about Muslim's "felt needs." But this notion of "felt needs" does not address the plight of every human being fallen into sin, whose natural tendency is to hate God and his neighbor (Lord's Day 2: Q&A 5). The message of the cross is still foolishness to those who are perishing, "but to us who are being saved it is power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). To Livingstone methodology seems more important than theology. For example, there is no discussion of the traditional marks of the Church. Creedal agreement among missionaries is not considered necessary. Church planters should be equally happy to have either George Whitefield - a Calvinist - or John Wesley - an Arminian - on their team. Livingstone says that team leaders must have an understanding of the big picture and be prepared to tolerate ambiguity and inconsistency. He is also a strong advocate of contextualization of the Gospel. Every unnecessary hindrance, both theological and sociological, should be reduced to facilitate a Muslim to become a follower of Christ and enjoy church life. But should Koran/Bible discovery groups be held in homes? Livingstone makes the novel suggestion that one might experiment by "having a Muslim teacher give the Koran part of the study, meeting under the theme 'Seeking God's Ways for Twentieth Century Man'." How is this possible when the Muslims believe that the Bible is a corrupted work and that the Koran is not a human (or even angelic) product, but wholly from Allah himself who revealed it to the prophet Muhammad?

Instead of the novel church growth school approach to church planting, I suggest that we seek our inspiration from the long history of missions, our confessional Reformed traditions and missiology for our work among Muslims.