



Texts in Context

Mission among Muslims *A Sermon Series*

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FIFTY YEARS AGO, MISSION AMONG MUSLIMS WOULD HAVE BEEN DESCRIBED AS mission *to* Muslims. Even to see Muslims required travel to countries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. The strong prohibition among Muslims against conversion to any other faith has made it difficult to show them what Jesus Christ means for the life of the world.

Today, Muslims live among us, especially in urban areas, perhaps five million and increasing. Some are people who have moved to this country and brought their faith with them. Some are converts to Islam, many of them African-Americans who have found in Islam a faith that respects their racial and ethnic character more than the Christian faith has done. The latter are often called Black Muslims, but prefer to designate themselves by other names. It is important to be aware that about twenty percent of humanity is Muslim, and over forty-six nations of the world have a Muslim majority.

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In opening editorial remarks it was suggested that the whole church must be called to a thinking and acting concern for Muslims and their needs. The most obvious way this could happen would be through careful preaching. The author presents three sermon suggestions that may assist clergy to raise up the call to serve our Muslim brothers and sisters. One might speculate what a difference it would make if clergy preached to this issue.

To be in mission among Muslims is a challenge to all Christians. Muslims are people of faith. They worship one God. Islam means surrender; a Muslim is one who surrenders to God (Allāh). They glorify the power and majesty of God, but they also speak of God as merciful, benevolent, one who forgives sins. At the same time, Muslims believe in the unqualified unity of God and in God's will as determining their lives. They believe that God graciously gave direction through the book called the Qur'ān, which they regard as God's ultimate word. The Qur'ān was given through Muhammad (570-632 A.D.), who is revered as God's final prophet and the noblest of human exemplars. They respect Jesus (Īsā Nabī) as a very important prophet of God. Many stories from the Old and New Testaments are in the Qur'ān. However, when Christians speak of the Trinity or of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God, Muslims hear strange and blasphemous ideas that deny the unqualified unity of God. Muslims believe that the purpose of life is to be the servants of God in this world and to hope for the reward of paradise in the next world. Muslims believe that God gives the necessary guidance to human beings that will enable them to walk on the straight path and be worthy of salvation.

It is our task to be among Muslims as witnesses to God's love in Christ. This requires us to understand Muslims and be understood by them. We must find ways of introducing them to the Lord Jesus Christ that keep them open to the gospel. Doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation come only after Muslims understand the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The following text studies approach mission among Muslims from three viewpoints.

2 Cor 5:17-21 speaks of our renewal in Christ and of God's reconciliation of the entire world to God. It embraces the whole world, including Muslims, and invites us to be ambassadors for Christ to the whole world, also the Muslim world. It is set in terms that can communicate clearly and non-threateningly to Muslims.

In Acts 1:6-8, we see the disciples—and ourselves—eager for the coming of the kingdom without really understanding what the kingdom means. Jesus challenges all of us to understand the kingdom in all its fullness by accepting our role as witnesses to him, our risen Lord. This witnessing extends to the ends of the earth, also to Muslims.

Gen 12:1-3; 17:18-21—Muslims consider themselves to be children of Abraham through Ishmael; the Qur'ān and Islamic tradition attribute some of the Isaac story to Ishmael. The purpose of this sermon is to remind us of the importance of Ishmael in the story of Abraham and symbolically to show the gracious yearning of God for Muslims.

I. RECONCILED AMBASSADORS: 2 COR 5:17-21

Theme: In our calling as reconciled ambassadors to Muslims, we are entrusted with bringing the dimension of God's saving reconciliation to people who regard God's guidance as God's ultimate gift.

Paul makes tremendous claims: he says that if a person is in Christ all things

are new; all the old has been put away. He says that in Christ God has reconciled the world to himself. These are universal claims, asserting a completely new creation and the reconciliation of the world, not only of certain people or even humankind. The most worrisome claim is that “we are ambassadors,” bearers of the word of reconciliation, pleading that people be reconciled to God. We, the students of Paul, need to accept that same ambassadorship, for we are in Christ and therefore a new creation.

It is to this surge of claims that we need to turn our attention as we listen to the text and ask ourselves how this can apply to our living among and witnessing to people who do not know Christ as we do, especially Muslims.

Paul wrote out of a situation of stress, opposition, and challenge much like our time. The challenge of new opportunities was always before him. Opponents questioned his apostleship, for he was not one of the original disciples, and because he was making some strange arguments for the mission to non-Jews. In Corinth he had to deal with messy problems within the community of believers: division, immorality, selfishness, and readiness to keep the gospel as one’s own property. He needed to find a word of encouragement and challenge, both for himself and for his readers.

Paul begins with an affirmation of what God does for one in Christ. Nothing but “a new creation” will suffice. He undoubtedly thinks back to his own Damascus road experience, but is ready to apply that “new creation” to all who are in Christ. The newness that he experienced is part of the life of all whom Christ has called and challenged. They need reminding, and Paul is reminding them.

To explain the new creation, Paul speaks of God’s act of reconciling the world to himself in Christ. He refuses to be parochial and restrict the reconciliation to any group, but insists on the world (*kosmos*), everything. He also makes it clear that reconciliation is from God in Christ; the world, good people, people of faith, nations of honor have nothing to do with it. This is God’s act in Christ. Just like us, Paul needed that, for he knew the depths of his own rebellion against the truth, a rebellion that began in his struggle with the law and culminated in his persecuting the church of God! Certainly reconciliation was impossible for him to initiate; in his rebellious zeal he was convinced that he was doing the work of the very God against whom he was rebelling. God’s act of reconciliation in Christ made all the difference for him; he was convinced that it would make the same difference for all.

Only as Paul recognized God’s act of reconciliation for the world could he recognize his task as an ambassador of that reconciliation to others. As Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to accept this reconciliation, we have the boldness to take that same stance. We plead with others, inside and outside of the faith, to be reconciled to God in Christ.

Such pleading is presumptuous, of course. Who are we to claim the right to force our religion upon others, especially upon others who have their own ordered religion and culture – as Muslims do? Pleading is not forcing, and what we plead is not Christianity as such; it is witnessing to the faith that is in us. We do it all the time, whether as parents to children and children to parents, as friends to friends,

as Christians to Christians. We do this, not only with words and arguments; in fact we often recognize the limitation of words and arguments, and settle for a quiet witness of our lives. That same ambassadorial responsibility is ours as we relate to those outside of our faith communities.

This text shows us a way in which we can be ambassadors to people of the Muslim community, without entering those topics that are most sensitive and apt to polarize. The Muslim sees God as merciful and forgiving. The Muslim respects ʿĪsā Nabī (Jesus) as a great prophet of God. Against this background we can live and speak a witness to God’s reconciliation in Jesus the Christ. Let the Muslim know how we value that reconciliation by God’s grace, apart from rules and laws. At a later time, when that reconciliation is felt and understood (when the new creation happens) the more difficult questions of Jesus as Son of God and of his death on the cross can be dealt with.

A sermon on this text should remind the hearers of the new creation which God has granted them with all the amazing grace that is involved in it; it should also challenge the same newly-created to carry their message by deed and word to all about them. The reputed “impossibility” of converting Muslims to Christianity is not the issue. Ambassadors represent their masters. We can do no less, and the Spirit of Christ then works the new creation in those who hear and understand. We rejoice in the knowledge that in many parts of the world the Spirit of Christ has led Muslims to see and understand God’s reconciling love in Jesus the Christ.

Suggested Outline:

1. *God’s saving reconciliation invites all people.*

It is God who does the reconciling in Christ; God reconciles the whole world, not just the faithful. Emphasize God’s initiative to all the world.

2. *As we are reconciled, we become Christ’s ambassadors to bring that invitation to the nations.*

Develop the idea of ambassadorship as gaining its validity from the sending person or body, not from the ambassador. Our apparent presumption is validated by the one who sends, not by the one who is the ambassador. How much more valid when the sender is God through Jesus Christ!

3. *To Muslims we bring a new dimension of good news: God saves and reconciles through Jesus the Christ.*

Muslims see God as granting guidance to equip them for all their needs and for receiving forgiveness and heaven. To this we say that God reconciles the world; forgiveness and wholeness come from God. The gift of guidance gains full validity from this reconciling gift.

II. INEVITABLE WITNESSES:
ACTS 1:6-8

Theme: Muslims understand what it means to witness about Islam to others; we are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ in deed and word. Muslims can see the

Christian witness of loving deeds as much as, and often before, they can hear the spoken witness to Jesus Christ.

The disciples have been with Jesus for forty days after the resurrection. They now look forward to an answer to the question that must have been haunting them: Where do we go from here? They ask about the coming of the kingdom, probably expecting that now things will be different with the risen Lord among them to change the political, social, economic, and religious situation.

The answer is both less and more than they expect. The kingdom comes as God decides, not as they request. They will be witnesses of the Lord, beginning in a small way and moving to the ends of the earth. The answer is couched in predictive terms, "you will be my witnesses," so confidently spoken that the disciples/apostles are swept up in it more completely than if it had been stated as a command.

Jesus' prediction that they would be witnesses lays great responsibility upon the disciples, as it does upon us. If they and we are followers of the Lord, we are witnesses. Our witness may be good, bad, or indifferent, but it will still be witness to our Lord. That responsibility is serious and worrisome.

Jesus gives assurance of the presence and power of the Spirit. The Spirit builds the kingdom; empowered by that Spirit, Jesus' followers live as witnesses in the world. The book of Acts shows how that witnessing played out in the lives of the apostles, especially Peter and Paul, as well as in the lives of such saints as the eunuch of Ethiopia, Dorcas, Lydia, Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos, etc. The witnessing Spirit was in all of them.

"In Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Jesus outlines the practicality and the universality of the challenge to witness. They are to start at home, spread out in concentric circles and continue to the ends of the earth. The words, "Samaria" and the "ends of the earth" spell out the depth and breadth of the challenge. Samaritans were hated neighbors with a parallel but opposing culture; the people at the ends of the earth would simply multiply the challenge for witnessing. It takes little imagination to apply this to our present challenge.

We struggle with our witnessing to people who are different. At times it seems that they cannot hear us or even see us as we struggle to witness. The patience required of us is great. Our witness is underlined and made effective not by our strength, but by the power of the Spirit, which the Lord gives to all his followers. This understanding is particularly important in our life of witness among Muslims, toward whom the historic witness of the Christian church has usually been one of opposition and condemnation rather than of invitation.

A sermon on this text should challenge all our thoughts about a parochial view of the church and internal kingdom-building which we find so comfortable. The explosive power of the Spirit makes all of us witnesses to all, beginning at home but extending to all the world. This extension to the world, while certainly speaking of mission efforts throughout the world, also challenges us in our present society where we work and live with people from all over the world and from

many different faiths, including Muslims. To hesitate because of our insufficient knowledge of Muslims and their culture is to misunderstand the task of witness. We witness, perhaps mostly in deed, backed up by our words; it is the Spirit of God who makes that witness effective and saving.

Suggested Outline:

1. *Jesus challenges us in all our confusion to be his witnesses.*

We are often overwhelmed by the challenge to be witnesses; we don't know enough. Jesus knew the ignorance of his followers and still sent them out. The power is God's, not ours.

2. *We are Jesus' witnesses as surely as we are his followers.*

Jesus says we *will be*, not *should be* his witnesses. We *are* witnesses; the question is what kind we will be. This permeates our entire life and action, not simply our words.

3. *Our witness among Muslims challenges us to witness with our acts of love and to speak of Jesus as our Muslim friends are open to such words.*

"Ends of the earth" can put a spin on our witness. Before we can witness with words, we need to prepare the ground with deeds. This is particularly important with Muslims; the long history of misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians requires the witness of deeds. When we are trusted and find open ears and hearts, the witness of our words can be effective. In all of this the Spirit is the enabler.

III. ANOTHER CHOSEN PEOPLE: GEN 12:1-3; 17:18-21

Theme: In the story of Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, as well as in our parallel traditions, Muslims and Christians are "half siblings." We are called to recognize the long history of enmity and injustice between Muslims and Christians, and to search for common ground as we witness to Muslims of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Muslims, Christians, and Jews all regard Abraham as the father of the faithful. Christians and Jews follow the line through the patriarchs, Moses, the judges, the kings, and the prophets. Muslims, while honoring this line of leaders, kings, and prophets, look to Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, as their ancestor. This common ancestry is not merely a symbolic parallel; it speaks of the parallel interests of these faiths. All speak of one God who is to be worshiped and is merciful and gracious to all, of the importance of human beings and of their ethical responsibility toward God, humankind, and all of God's creation. It is out of this commonality that we can live out our witness to Muslims.

The call to Abraham (12:1-3) comes with suddenness, intensity, and promise. God calls him to move out, away from family and home, to an indefinite destination, toward a promise of being blessed and becoming a blessing to all nations. This promise goes down through the generations of patriarchs, leaders, kings, and prophets. The gospels build from this promise and the rest of the New Testament

uses it as a continuing point of reference in acclaiming Jesus the Christ as the fulfillment of the promise.

The story between the call to Abraham and the question of the priority of Ishmael or Isaac (17:18-21) makes it clear that the promise comes from God's unprompted choice; Abraham comes across as God's flawed choice, sinful but forgiven. Even the birth of Ishmael comes out of a faltering faith that decides that God needs the help of Sarah's maid Hagar, since Sarah is barren. One would suppose that Hagar's son, Ishmael, would be an outcast not only from Abraham's family, but also from God's plan.

In 17:18-21 God repeats the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah. Abraham pleads the case for Ishmael. God's answer is No and Yes. No, the covenant will be through Sarah's son Isaac and his descendants. Yes, Ishmael will be blessed and be the father of a great nation. When Isaac is born, Ishmael loses his place in the family; Sarah insists that he and Hagar be sent away. Her demand and Abraham's compliance place both of them in danger of dying in the desert. God's intervention saves them; Ishmael survives and later returns at Abraham's death to join Isaac in burying their father. The name Ishmaelite is used to describe wandering merchants; they appear in the Joseph story as the people who bought Joseph and took him to slavery in Egypt (37:25-27). We know very little else about Ishmael and the Ishmaelites from the Bible. In Gal 4:21-31, Paul uses the story of Hagar/Sarah and Ishmael/Isaac as an allegory, not to make moral judgments on Ishmael and Isaac, but to distinguish between law and gospel, human action and God's promise.

Muslims take pride in their connection to Abraham and Ishmael. Hagar and Ishmael are viewed as being under God's special care and, together with Abraham, they are the early heroes of true faith in God. We can do no less than to respect that pride and build from the things that we have in common with Muslims. We can listen attentively and respectfully as they recount their pilgrimage from the patriarchal connections.

A sermon on this text will emphasize the undeserved choice of people by God. God's choice of God's people does not depend upon their connection to Abraham—if that were so, Muslims would be far closer than any of us who are, ancestrally, Gentiles. Only in Christ does anyone become one of God's people. Our continuing faithlessness and God's enduring faithfulness simply underline the greatness of God's mercy.

With this understanding of God's mercy, we can look at the Muslims with new eyes. They have an ancestral connection with the Abrahamic covenant that is as great, if not greater, than ours. We have received the covenant by God's grace in our baptism; we live in it by that same grace. When we profess that the covenant is for the world, do we recognize that both ancestrally and in their faith Muslims are near to the covenant, just as Ishmael was near to it? Do we have the respect for Islam and the patience to be living witnesses of what the covenant of God means to us? The Qur'an calls Abraham the friend of God. Can we find new ways of sharing

with Muslims how God has fulfilled the covenant of friendship in Jesus the Messiah?

Isaac and Ishmael went their own ways. Those ways have been both parallel and, sadly, conflictive. It is time that we learn to find ways to live lives of understanding, love, and cooperation, which will witness to our Muslim sisters and brothers the very love that God has given to us all in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Suggested Outline:

1. *Muslims and Christians maintain claims to the same ancestry from Abraham through tradition and respect for the biblical witness.*

Retell the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael (Genesis 16; 21:9-21; 25:7-18), emphasizing the promises to Ishmael. Muslims respect Abraham as Jews and Christians do, but remember Ishmael as a faithful man of God. Can we listen to and respect this?

2. *Those claims have been battered by centuries of ill will, misunderstanding, and rivalry.*

Early Islamic history shows much tolerance by Muslims of Christians and Jews. Intolerance grew during the Crusades and has continued to the present day. If blame could be assigned, it is doubtful that Christians would have less than Muslims. Today is a time of continual relationships across religious boundaries. Can we find ways to heal the hatred of centuries?

3. *We are called to work for peace and healing through listening to our Muslim brothers and sisters and to a life of witness to the saving love of God in Jesus Christ.*

Christian missions in Islamic areas have taught us that a presence of love and service must prepare the way for the witness of words. When the witness of words begins, the witness of listening and serving must undergird those words. In this way, we can approach Muslims as friends with a message of peace, reconciliation, and the love of God. Arguing about differences between Muslims and Christians is never helpful; consider, as a parallel, Paul's witness to the Gentile world, especially in his sermon in Athens (Acts 17:16-

34). ⊕