

A Cross and a Dove

Harold Vogelaar, a Middle East missionary with the Reformed Church in America, once saw a striking painting by an Egyptian Muslim artist named Muhammad.

Muhammad had painted a portrait of a powerful young man. The man held a sword in one hand and a dove in the other. Vogelaar asked Muhammad what the painting meant. The artist replied that the dashing figure symbolized Islam – which always came offering peace but, if it was not accepted, carried a sword to impose Allah’s will on society. Vogelaar asked Muhammad whether he had ever considered painting a man who held the dove of peace with two hands.

Muhammad thought for a long time and then replied, “I would have to paint a portrait of Jesus” (Thomsen 1996:196).

Vogelaar’s conversation points to an important fact about gospel witness among Muslims. There are aspects to the gospel message which especially come to life in the context of Islam. The New Testament calls the Christian message the “gospel of peace.” This peace dimension is portrayed as a crucial part of the “song” we sing when we tell the good news of Jesus. In fact, the peace “notes” are characterized as an extremely attractive part of the song. In the history of Christian mission, has there been some hesitancy to include the peace dimension in the gospel message? Can the song be complete, can it make its full attraction felt, if it is not the gospel of peace? This chapter celebrates the gospel of peace and the following chapter attempts to show how the nature of the gospel should affect our manner of gospel witness.

There are many good reasons why the peace emphasis must be a part of our gospel witness among Muslims. Among them is the long shadow of a campaign of violence against Muslims initiated by the leaders of the medieval church and carried out by fighters who considered themselves Christians. Europeans fought and killed Muslims under the banner of the cross – the symbol of God’s unconditional love. They created resentment among Muslims which continues until today and left in their wake deep misunderstandings about the nature of

the Christian faith. The gospel must be reclaimed from these misunderstandings.

Another reason for a peace emphasis is the striking contrast which appears when we put the authors of the Christian and Muslim faiths alongside each other. When we compare the stories of Muhammad and Jesus and compare the Scriptures associated with those two figures, issues of peace and nonresistance come into the spotlight.

The military dimensions of original Islam and its uninhibited embrace of the political are certainly crucial factors in deterring the Christian from a positive response to Muhammad. For they are so sharply, and in some apologists, so confidently alien to New Testament criteria, as to seem to warrant unreserved rejection by any thinking that has even remotely understood Gethsemane. (Cragg 1984:31)

Muslims themselves notice these contrasts, and Christian workers of all backgrounds serving among Muslims tend to give them greater significance. These contrasts in turn point to crucial differences in how God is understood in the two faiths.

A third reason to sing the notes of peace is that violence is one of the most urgent contemporary challenges in our world. Reports of violence in Muslim contexts come to us in a steady stream. And the 1991 Persian Gulf War presented the striking phenomenon of Western Christians approving, and even participating in, the killing of Iraqi Muslims. “Christians and Muslims are being forced to think together on this extremely difficult but essential topic because our common human future depends on it” (Thomsen 1993:125).

Peace at the Heart of the Gospel

In the first recorded encounter of Jesus’ disciples across cultural and religious boundaries, Peter calls the gospel “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). Paul also calls the Christian message the “gospel of peace” in his list of spiritual weapons in Ephesians 6 (v. 15). It appears Paul took the gospel of peace from the Isaiah text he quotes in Romans 10:15. The messengers in Isaiah 52:7 “bring good news” and “proclaim peace.” They come with a message of comfort and salvation which

makes people burst into songs of joy. Their message of peace is so attractive that even their feet are made beautiful!

At the heart of the gospel is a story of peacemaking. The good news is that the divisions between people, and between people and God, have been done away with through the death of Jesus on the cross. Paul writes, “For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made [Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14). God reconciled all things to himself by making peace through the blood of Christ, “shed on the cross” (Col. 1:20). The New Testament locates the point of reconciliation for people of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious communities at the cross of Christ.

This means that whenever we proclaim the gospel with integrity, we proclaim peace as well. We tell people that because of the faithfulness of Jesus, “we have peace with God” through him (Rom. 5:1). The Christian message is one of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19). We tell people that God has made them his friends, and that through Christ he doesn’t hold their sins against them but rather offers forgiveness. The ministry which God has given us is to plead with people on Christ’s behalf: “be reconciled to God” (v. 20).

The death of Jesus on the cross also breaks down the walls between people. The New Testament stresses that even the high wall between Jew and Gentile has been demolished. “Reconciliation with God,” writes Mennonite mission leader Stanley Green, “always assumed and declared to be coextensive with reconciliation to one’s fellow humanity, is inextricably at the very core of the gospel message” (1990:24).

Jesus gave a special blessing to people who make peace (Matt. 5:9). He taught his disciples to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them (5:44). Muslims are often intrigued by Jesus’ teaching to turn the other cheek toward someone who has struck you on the right cheek. “Do not resist an evil person,” Jesus taught (5:39). The disciples had the opportunity to see Jesus live out his own instructions. When the soldiers came to seize him in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told his companion to “Put your sword back in its place” (Matt. 26:52). Jesus did not resist arrest, or humiliation, or beating. And when Jesus was dying on the cross, his followers heard him say,

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Denial of the Savior

The early Christians understood the peace dimension of the gospel and obeyed the teaching and example of Jesus concerning peacemaking. Church history tells us that the early Christians were almost uniformly pacifist. They could not visualize themselves fighting against others for whom Christ had died. No Christian writer before the reign of Constantine (312 A.D.) justified the participation of believers in warfare. Their objection to fighting was based not only on a revulsion to Roman idolatry but also on a desire to be obedient to Christ.

Unfortunately for gospel witness among Muslims, the history of Christian-Muslim encounter after the rise of Islam in the seventh century has been marked by violence. The best-known episode in that sad story is the period of the Crusades, which began nine hundred years ago. The period was finished in two hundred years, but the poisonous influence of the Crusades is with us still. Pope Urban II organized the first crusade in 1095. Armies from Europe assembled at Constantinople in 1097, marched down through Asia Minor, and captured Jerusalem with great slaughter in 1099. Four crusader states were established. One of these was recaptured by Muslims already in 1144; Jerusalem held out until 1187. There were some eight crusades in all. Their most solid military accomplishment was the capture of Acre and a strip of the Palestinian coast in 1191 and their retention for a century.

The Crusades marked a change in Christian attitudes to war. After Constantine had become emperor of the Roman Empire, Christian thinkers had developed the theory of a “just war.” But even when fighting for a just cause, soldiers had been required to do penance for the deaths they caused. Before the Crusades, Pope Gregory VII proclaimed “that it was meritorious, not sinful, to fight in a just cause to promote right order in society” (Watt 1991:78).

Laurence Browne, British scholar and missionary to Muslims in Lahore, Pakistan, wrote “One cannot help regarding the Crusades as the

greatest tragedy in the history of Christianity, and the greatest setback to the progress of Christ's kingdom on earth." The tragedy, wrote Browne, was that Christians denied "the Savior who bought them," and that the church approved it. "It was for Christ's honor that they fought, but they were ignorant of what sort of deeds would do honor to Christ" (1933:144).

Thou Shalt Not Kill ... the Turk

When the Anabaptist movement began in Europe in the 1520s, the Ottoman Turks were on the move from Turkey toward Europe. They conquered Hungary in 1528 and laid siege to Vienna in 1529. Needless to say, the Austrians considered the Turks a serious threat, and public feeling was high to fight the enemy. In this situation Michael Sattler, an Austrian Anabaptist leader, made a remarkable statement about Muslims.

Sattler was the leader chosen to preside at the great Schleitheim conference on Anabaptist principles in southern Germany in 1527. But soon after he returned home from the conference, he was arrested by the Austrian authorities. The record of his trial and martyrdom was carefully preserved. One of the accusations made against Sattler was that he had said, "If the Turk were to come into the land, one should not resist him" (Yoder 1973:71). When Sattler had the chance to defend himself in court, he responded, "If the Turk comes, he should not be resisted, for it stands written, thou shalt not kill. We should not defend ourselves against the Turks or our other persecutors, but with fervent prayer should implore God that He might be our defense and our resistance" (Yoder 1973:72).

Sattler understood that the command of Jesus not to resist the evil one – and the Lord's own example of nonresistance – was the Christian's duty in relating to Muslims even when Muslims were national enemies and military aggressors. His statement to that effect was not well received amid the fear and war-fever of Austria at the time of the Ottoman invasion. How would that statement have been received among North American Christians during conflicts in the Middle East in recent decades? Sattler's insight on fighting Muslims can be summarized in a very straightforward mission axiom: you

can't tell a Muslim about the love of God in Jesus Christ and bring him into the joy of discipleship by fighting and killing him.

Choice of the Hijrah

The issues of peace and nonresistance come into sharp focus when we learn the stories of Jesus and Muhammad. Muslims themselves are well aware of the differences in the two stories. Ahmad Shawqi, a leading Egyptian man of letters in the early 1900s, wrote of Jesus:

No threat, no tyranny, no revenge, no sword, no raids, no bloodshed
Did he use in his call to the new faith (al-Husayni 1960:300).

Such statements make an unspoken comparison. This does not mean that Muslim writers like Shawqi are comparing the messenger of Islam unfavorably. Kenneth Cragg explains that writers like Shawqi see Jesus' life as incomplete because it lacked the political vindication and "manifest success" of the messenger in Medina (1985b:51). Noting the contrasts between Muhammad and Jesus in the matter of violence is not considered an insult by Muslims.

The story of Muhammad's behavior in situations of conflict or suffering was set out in popular Muslim biographies such as Ibn Ishaq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* (available in Alfred Guillaume's translation *The Life of Muhammad*). According to the Muslim accounts, a major event in the life of Muhammad was his migration from Mecca to Medina called the *hijrah*. During thirteen years of preaching in Mecca, Muhammad had seen little favorable response and had often been mistreated. In 622 A.D. according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad decided to migrate to Medina to take up political leadership. In Medina Muhammad became both messenger and statesman, both preacher and general, both teacher and judge. The *hijrah* meant a "flight from powerlessness in Mecca to political empowerment in Medina" (Shenk 1995:284). The English translation of Ibn Ishaq's biography devotes some 200 pages to Muhammad's fifty-two years leading up to the *hijrah* but gives more than 450 pages to the ten years of rule in Medina, including reports of battles, raids, intrigue, political maneuvering, assassinations, and military conquest.

The change in tone from Mecca to Medina is also reflected quite strikingly in the Qur'an as well, according to Muslim chronologies of its chapters or

sūras.” Medinan sūras like “Women” (4) and “Repentance” (9), for example, contain repeated commands to fight and kill. Meccan sūras such as “Cattle” (6), by contrast, indicate a reckoning for unbelievers on the Day of Judgment, but prescribe no punishment in this life.

The Muslim biographers of Muhammad describe their messenger’s activities in Medina as positive and worthy of emulation. By human standards, Muhammad’s success as a statesman and warrior in Medina must be seen as a completion of his career as a prophet in Mecca. It is only a standard “from above” which puts this behavior into question.

In his book *Muhammad and the Christian*, Kenneth Cragg works carefully at an evaluation of the messenger of Islam. Cragg notes the tendency in Islam, above all other faiths, to place trust in political religion – to see political power and physical force as a friend that cannot be dismissed. This is a legacy of Muhammad’s hijrah, Cragg concludes, the “power equation” which linked the word of Allah with the force of the sword. Cragg questions persistently whether force and power can accomplish the will of God. He points out that while force may ensure survival, it also generates hypocrisy. Fighting evil into submission merely makes it go underground. “The power that sanctions truth inspires deception” (1984:46). What happens to the quality of religious allegiance when people conform only because of the threat of force? Cragg asks. He uses a verse from the Quran, “Let the people of the gospel judge by what God has sent down in it” (5:47), to hold Muhammad up alongside “the ministry and Cross of Jesus our Lord” (159).

David Shenk summarizes this crucial gospel distinction in a helpful way: The Islamic understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God and the manner in which the community of peace is established and preserved is the opposite of the gospel understanding. The way of the *hijrah* and the way of the cross are fundamentally different foundations on which the respective communities, *ummah* and church, are established. The emigration of Muhammad from suffering in Mecca to political triumph in Medina and the journey of Jesus from triumph in Galilee to crucifixion and death in Jerusalem are movements in opposite directions (1995:286).

Way of Suffering Love

To the Christian mind, nurtured by Jesus and the Gospels, it will always be a burden and a tragedy that force has been so uncomplicatedly enshrined in the very canons of Islam via the pattern of the *Sirah*. For that sufficient reason, any appreciation of Muhammad *in situ* must resolutely retain the contrasted meaning of the love that suffers as the Christ. (Cragg 1984:51)

Kenneth Cragg continues his masterful query of the compatibility of God's will with the use of physical force in *Jesus and the Muslim*. There he suggests that the temptation to take a shortcut to fulfilling the will of God came to Jesus as well. Political power was available to Jesus just as it was to Muhammad. The third temptation of the devil in the Matthew 4 account, notes Cragg, is the option for power. "Satan has Jesus visualise political empire with its compelling shortcuts to the goal and, because of these, its inevitable compromise with evil, with brutality and force." Jesus refused the temptation in the knowledge that "the Messianic task and the political arm" are not compatible (1985b:154).

But Jesus' perception went deeper, writes Cragg. His commitment to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42), takes into account the full measure of human evil. That evil will not be conquered simply by resisting it physically. Humanity will only be redeemed if its sin is vicariously borne. The death of Jesus on the cross, writes Cragg, "is the power of love that faces and undergoes the worst that we can do in sinfulness and for that very reason masters it without remainder and so accomplishes our forgiveness" (1985b:179).

Cragg asks whether a linkage of God's word with political power and physical force really reflects a realism about human evil and the remedy it requires. Restraining cannot forgive, and retaliation keeps the evil alive and even accentuates it. How then can evil be truly redeemed?

Only "taking" wrong forgivingly, takes it away. The wrongdoer has then no cause to perpetuate his enmity, no reason to despair of himself and no occasion to entrench himself in evil. On the contrary, there is in his neighbor's "peace" that which closes the account, frees the spirit from enmity and hate, restores the broken community between the persons, and truly "overcomes evil with good." We cannot have it so, however,

without knowing that a cost is born, is readily and sacrificially paid, by the soul that wills forgiveness, whose “peace” is active, compassionate and ready. (182)

This is exactly what happened in the cross of Christ, writes Cragg. And what we see in Jesus must lead ultimately to our whole concept of God. Daud Rahbar came to this conclusion after a thorough study of the theology of the Quran, and it led to his conversion: “When I read the New Testament and discovered how Jesus loved and forgave His killers from the Cross, I could not fail to recognize that the love He had for men is the only kind of love worthy of the Eternal God” (1960b:8).

Cragg does not present these penetrating insights merely to make interesting observations in comparative religion. Rather, he takes pains to highlight these thoughts because they express something essential about *the nature of the gospel itself*. In his experience, the Muslim context has drawn out truths about the gospel which Christians often miss or neglect in other settings. Peace, reconciliation, and the way of the cross are essential components of the good news we share. They in turn have implications for our manner of gospel witness among Muslims.

The words of Jesus about peacemaking, and the stories about his gentleness, go out in the Muslim world with great power and invite a crucial gospel distinction. Have Christians made the peace teaching and the example of Jesus an essential part of their message to Muslims? If not, why not? Could it be because we are embarrassed about the ways in which Christians in the past have acted against the way of peace? Is it because we struggle with the perspectives of Christian who allow for the use of military force? Is it possible that uncritical loyalty to our countries sometimes makes us see the way of the cross as foolish and impractical?

Gospel witness among Muslims must match the gospel’s peaceable nature. Witness which does not take peace into account is less than authentic. After relating the story of the dove of peace which appears at the start of this chapter, Mark Thomsen writes, “It is only as we become two-handed bearers of peace that we bear witness to God who comes not to crush the human family into conformity to God’s will but who is willing to be crushed to

constrain our wills and draw our hearts and minds to the ... cross" (1996:196). That is the subject of our next chapter.

References:

- Browne, Laurence E. 1933. *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Brunk, George, III. 1994. "The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ." In *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, 2, *Theological Foundations*, ed. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, 39-54. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis.
- Christian Witness Among Muslims*. 1971. Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press.
- Cooper, Anne, comp. 1985. *Ishmael My Brother*. Monrovia, Calif.: MARC.
- Cragg, Kenneth. 1984. *Muhammad and the Christian: A Question of Response*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis.
- , 1985b. *Jesus and the Muslim*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- , 1996. "A Christian Among Muslims." *Evangelical Review of Theology* 20:136-140.
- Green, Stanley W. 1990. "Anabaptism and Ecclesiology in a Context of Plurality." *Mission Focus* 18, 23-25.
- al-Husayni, Ishaq Musa. 1960. "Christ in the Qur'an and in Modern Arabic Literature." *Muslim World* 50, 297-302.
- Khair-Ullah, Frank S. 1975. "Evangelism among Muslims." In *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 816-824. Minneapolis: World Wide Publications.
- Kraemer, Hendrik. 1960. "Islamic Culture and Missionary Adequacy." *Muslim World* 50, 244-251.
- Kuitse, Roelf S. 1985. "Witness: 'Accounting for the Hope in Us' (1 Peter)." *Mission Focus* 13, 41-42.
- Martinson, Paul Varo. 1996. "Dialogue and Evangelism in Relation to Islam." *Word & World* 16, 184-193.
- Rabey, Steve. 1996. "Mission-Minded Design Strategy for Muslim World." *Christianity Today* (March 4): 76.

- Mahamah, John. 1997. "Global Clues for Multicultural Ministry: An African Perspective." Paper presented to Evangelical Missiological Society Conference, Caronport, Saskatchewan, May 24.
- Rahbar, Daud. 1960b. "A Letter to Christian and Muslim Friends." Hartford, Conn.: published privately.
- Rasooli, Jay M., and Cady H. Allen 1983. *Dr. Sa'eed of Iran*. Pasadena: William Carey.
- Riley-Smith, Jonathan, ed. 1990. *The Atlas of the Crusades*. New York: Facts on File.
- Shenk, David W. 1995. *Global Gods*. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press.
- Toews, John E., and Gordon Nickel, eds. 1986. *The Power of the Lamb*. Winnipeg: Kindred.
- Thomsen, Mark W. 1993. *The Word and the Way of the Cross: Christian Witness among Muslim and Buddhist Peoples*. Chicago: Division for Global Mission, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
- , 1996. "The Christian Mission in the Muslim World." *Word & World* 16, 194-202.
- Watt, William Montgomery. 1991. *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions*. London: Routledge.
- Yoder, John H., ed. and trans. 1973. *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press.
- Youssef, Samir. 1997. "How to Reach Muslims with the Message of Jesus Christ." Private paper, January. Surrey, British Columbia.
- Zwemer, Samuel M. 1949. "Francis of Assisi and Islam (1182?-1226)." *Muslim World* 39, 247-251.

CHAPTER NINE

Peaceable Witness among Muslims

Indonesian Mennonite church leader Charles Christano tells the story of receiving a telephone call in the middle of the night. A man on the line told how his daughter had been in an accident and that she needed blood urgently. But the local hospital had no blood to give and neither had the Red Cross. The Red Cross had referred the father to Charles.

“May I ask who is speaking?” said Christano.

“I’m ashamed to say,” came the reply.

“Why?” asked Christano. “There’s no need to be ashamed.”

Hesitantly, the man gave his name, prefixed by “Haji.” Christano recognized that he was speaking with an important man in the Muslim community of his Indonesian town.

“What is your daughter’s blood type?” asked Christano. Then he phoned four members of his congregation whose blood matched and told them to get down to the hospital.

Because of the blood given by the Christians, and the prayer of Christano for the girl that night, the Haji’s daughter survived.

One night about a month later, two vans pulled up in front of Christano’s house. The Haji brought his entire immediate family as well as other relatives to see Christano. As a gift they brought a complete bunch of bananas, which they said was from their own tree.

“Of all the people who might have given blood at the hospital,” asked the Haji, “why did it have to be you?”

“When I grew up, I was taught to hate Christians,” he said, looking at Christano quizzically. “When I grew up, I was taught to hate the Chinese.” The Haji said that there were plenty of other Hajis in his neighborhood, but none had been willing to help.

“Why did it have to be you?”

Christano relates this story to illustrate an important principle of Christian witness to Muslims. The message of the cross – the symbol of God’s unconditional love – must certainly be proclaimed to Muslims, he says. But

the way in which Christians proclaim can be the deciding factor in whether the message reaches its goal. If the gospel message struck the Greeks of Paul's day as "foolishness" and the Jews as "a stumbling block," says Christano, then we shouldn't be surprised if Muslims have difficulty accepting it as well. But will the behavior of Christians, and their method of witness, make it easier or harder for Muslims to hear the words? Christano insists that the gospel must be related gently and sacrificially. If Christians approach Muslims with arrogance or lack of sensitivity, it will only make the message harder to receive.

Christano lives in a city which is a center for Muslim devotion in Indonesia. It is very difficult for a Muslim like the Haji to take a stand for Christ. But Christano works toward that goal with hope and prayer and great patience. The Haji has not taken the step of faith in Jesus Christ. For Christano, no sacrifice is too great to make that step possible.

Imitation of Christ

In the last chapter we saw that there are aspects of the gospel which are often appreciated more fully in the Muslim context. The nature of the gospel (the song) points us toward appropriate ways of communicating the gospel (singing). "The difference between the cross and the hijrah has specific and practical implications for Christians and Muslims. For the faithful church, the way of obedience to Christ is a life of suffering, redemptive love, even toward one's enemies" (Shenk 1995:286). How would these implications take practical shape in gospel witness?

When Jesus first sent out his disciples on a missionary journey he told them, "I am sending you out as lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3). He instructed them that the first thing they were to say when they entered a house was, "Peace to this house" (v. 5). "The missionary is to be careful about his or her audience. Bless with peace those who hear. Receive peace back from those who do not hear, and leave them" (J.E. Toews 1986:13).

The New Testament attracts our attention to the way in which Jesus behaved in the face of violence, and it presents this as the example for Christians to follow in their witness. Peter writes, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should

follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). Peter also gives practical examples of actions of Jesus that Christians must imitate: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (v. 23).

Peter, of all the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry, had been given the best chance to consider what methods of witness would match the gospel. It was Peter who forbade Jesus to go the way of the cross (Matt. 16:22). It was Peter who drew his sword in an attempt to prevent the soldiers from taking Jesus to his death. Jesus had to rebuke Peter, “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men” (Matt. 16:23). Human zeal and force and technique alone do not accomplish “the things of God” – because God’s way is “from above.” In fact, trying to solve spiritual problems with physical means often sets back our witness because it confirms prejudices and misunderstandings about the gospel. We must, like Peter, come to see the wisdom of the cross.

The Cross, by its very quality, calls for emulation. It has to be taken up.

Those who know themselves redeemed by its power are called to become themselves redeemers through its secret. . . . ‘What is lacking in the sufferings of Christ’ (Col. 1:24) is not their efficacy but their imitation (Cragg 1985b:183).

In imitation of their Lord, the first Christians made a nonresistant, defenseless witness. They were ready to die for making a witness to Christ, though never to kill for it. Comparing the first two centuries of the church with the first two centuries of Muslim expansion highlights peaceable gospel witness in a striking way. The spread of Islamic preaching went hand in hand with military conquest. The rapid expansion of the church, by contrast, took place at a time when Christians had no access to political power and themselves prohibited the use of force.

Beyond the Crusades

Christian leaders of later centuries drifted from the defenseless witness of the first Christians. But not all believers agreed with the church’s growing use of political power and physical force. For example, during the Crusades Hubert of Romans noted that some critics were saying “that it is not in

accordance with the Christian religion to shed blood in this way, even that of wicked infidels. For Christ did not act thus” (Riley-Smith 1990:80).

However, most criticism of the Crusades was directed at abuses of the movement rather than at the movement itself. At that time the only identifiable nonresistant groups were the Cathars and the Waldensians whom the Catholic Church considered heretics. But others saw at least that fighting against Muslims was not the way to spread the Christian faith. The founding of the Franciscan and Dominican orders in the thirteenth century marks the first attempt from Europe “to abandon forceful means to re-establish Christ’s kingdom, and to organize missions to win converts by peaceful means” (Cooper 1985:125).

The name of Francis of Assisi is associated with this movement. He went to visit the Sultan of Egypt while the Fifth Crusade was still in progress. Defenseless, he preached the gospel to Europe’s enemy (Zwemer 1949). Soon after, Franciscan monks followed his example and went to preach the gospel in northern Africa. The climax of this movement was in the work of Ramon Lull of Majorca. Lull saw the failure of the Crusades and stepped forward to boldly proclaim “the power of loving persuasion as the only means worthy of Christ” (Cooper 1985:126).

Frank S. Khair-Ullah quotes the words of Erasmus, whose writings had an influence on the thinking of the Anabaptists. “The best way and most effectual to overcome and win Turks,” Erasmus wrote about 1530, “would be if they shall perceive that thing which Christ taught and expressed in His life to shine in us” (1975:821).

It is important, when thinking about Christian failings of the past, clearly to state that these actions went against the nature of the gospel itself. We may want to confess these sins on behalf of the Christians who committed them. During the late 1990s, some European-background Christians retraced the routes of the crusaders to ask forgiveness for their atrocities. We too may want to repent on behalf of the crusaders.

Nevertheless, the fact that Christians dishonored Christ in the past should not make us hesitate to honor Christ today. The gospel message was never the problem. The problem was that Christians did not obey the gospel – they did not live lives worthy of the gospel. Our hesitating to offer the gospel out of a

sense of guilt for what Christians did in the past will only mean that people will not hear of God's great love for them in Christ. The dishonoring of the gospel among Muslims in the past should propel us to strive to present the gospel of peace and the glory of Christ. Only in this way can the Christian mistakes of the past be undone.

Patrick Sookhdeo, a convert to Christ born to Muslim parents in what is now Guyana, warns against contemporary methods of Christian witness among Muslims which seem to have a combative edge. He speaks against "a crusade mentality whereby we see Muslims as enemies....Of the past we can only repent. In the present we must ensure that all we do is in a Christlike way" (Rabey 1996:76).

Truth without Imposition

Those who bear witness to Jesus leave their hearers full freedom to consider and respond. They rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to "convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). They may attempt to persuade the hearer of the truth, as Paul did (2 Cor. 5:11; Acts 19:8), but they don't try to coerce or manipulate or offer external inducements. "Witness comes exposed, without the power to coerce. When coercion enters in, witness is perverted. Witness seeks not its own welfare, but the welfare of the other. When methods are introduced that compromise the integrity of the other, witness is perverted" (Martinson 1996:188).

Kenneth Cragg sees a model for witness in the way in which God "commends" his love to us (Rom. 5:8). He finds in the Greek verb *sunistemi* the sense of presenting the truth peacefully in the expectation that the hearer can recognize it. "The truth has to find its acknowledgment in the other's consent" (1996:136). The Christian worker too must follow this model. "God does not 'impose his love on us.' Nor does he dictate it. Instead, he offers or invites. 'Behold I stand at the door and knock.' This is the divine pattern." This means that there is no place for imposition in Christian witness. Rather, Christian will do everything they can to make the truth 'recognizable' for the hearer, but will then wait in faith for a favorable response. "We commend a gospel of divine love," writes Cragg (1996:139).

Paul uses the same Greek verb again in 2 Corinthians 4 when he describes his method of witness: “We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we *commend* ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (v. 2). Paul considered the ministry of gospel witness a sign of God’s great mercy. He did not lose heart on the basis of the response. Neither did he resort to methods out of keeping with the gospel message to produce results. He left the results to God.

Peaceable gospel witness makes a distinction between strength in the power of the Holy Spirit and the human forcefulness which cannot accomplish God’s intentions. Putting our trust in skill, ingenuity, or physical methods may betray a lack of confidence in the power of God. George Brunk III describes how a proper understanding of God’s role should shape our approach:

Irenic witness to the claims of Christ is one that takes its strong, un-apologetic stand on the stage of history to be seen and heard. It is strong in commitment and conviction without resorting to psychological manipulation or external coercion. Just as in instances of suffering evil we defer to the retribution of God, so in our mission, once we have shared the story of God’s grace to us in Jesus, we defer to the visitation of God’s spirit in the listener to persuade. An irenic witness can afford to exercise great patience while the Lord works. (1994:52)

With Gentleness and Respect

The behavior of Jesus is the standard for Christian lifestyle among Muslims. Our lives should radiate the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” which Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians 10. Paul seems to be saying that this meekness and gentleness accomplish what no physical force can do, and that is to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (v. 5). Our lifestyle should imitate the friendliness of Jesus – his easy, natural way of relating to women, children, and men. Following Jesus means making good friendships with Muslims. Communicating our respect to these friends and showing integrity in our relationships are essential parts of good friendships.

We can find some very helpful instructions for a peaceable witness in the letters which the first missionaries wrote to the first churches. Peter wrote

that Christians should always be ready to give an answer “to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Then he describes the manner of this witness: “do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pet. 3:15).

Peter’s advice is highly relevant for Christian converts in an Islamic context because it was written to a community of Christians who were suffering for their confession of Jesus. Peter admonishes his readers not to respond in kind to the hostility of the opponents of the gospel. “If they would let their actions be determined by the actions of their opponents, the devil’s circle of evil and hate would never be broken. The response should be determined by Christ, by his example that should be followed” (Kuitse 1985:41). Opposition was not a reason for Christians to be fearful or silent. But Peter urges them in this difficult situation to make sure their manner of witness is characterized by gentleness and respect.

Modesty, gentleness, and courtesy (different translations of the Greek word *praútes*, also used in 2 Cor. 10:1) are words describing an attitude of not imposing oneself on others and taking care that the other is not hurt so that the gap does not become deeper because of words that are misunderstood. The second word is “respect” or “reverence” (*phóbos*, which also means awe or fear) for the other person – despite opposition – as a creature of God, as one for whom Christ died. An attitude of courtesy and respect is part of the way the Christian accounts for the hope that is in her or him (Kuitse 1985:42).

Christians with experience in Muslim ministry echo Peter’s advice. John Mahamah, a convert from Islam to Christ in Ghana, counsels, “We need to approach people with the attitude of humility, mutual respect and the love and power of God” (1997:8). A beautiful book which arose out of the African experience, *Christian Witness among Muslims*, urges gospel messengers to avoid arguments in conversation with Muslims (1971:21-24). Samir Youssef, Arabic missionary with MBMS International, suggests that when dealing with Muslims, we “earn their trust with kindness and patience.” Out of many years of experience as an evangelist in Egypt, he counsels: “Don’t argue or debate with Muslims because it causes confusion; it opens the door for criticism and hatred; and it increases mutual animosity and discrimination.” Youssef’s

advice includes a peacemaking dimension: “If you hear someone cursing you during your ministry” – for example, calling out *kāfir* or heathen – “don’t get upset; accept it in the spirit of love (1 Cor. 13:4-7)” (1997).

Martyr Witness

Jesus told his disciples that they would be faced with violence from religious and political authorities because of their witness, and he told them how to respond. “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say” (Luke 12:11). Jesus sent out his disciples on an essentially defenseless witness. The only power they possessed was the power of the Holy Spirit – who would give them both words and protection in the moment of danger.

Today in many Muslim countries, Christians are experiencing persecution in various ways. These include harsh living conditions under *sharī’a* or Islamic law, armed attacks by violent Muslim groups, victimization under blasphemy laws, imprisonment and assassination of Christian leaders, and harassment and killing of converts. Reports of this suffering come to us, for example, from Sudan, Iran, Egypt, and Pakistan. What response would match the gospel of peace?

When opponents of the gospel mistreat the messenger for bearing witness to Christ, or decide to kill the convert, the peace teaching of the New Testament requires a martyr witness. According to Revelation 12:11, the martyr witness of Christians is an essential part of Satan’s defeat: “They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (*marturías*).” They use no physical weapons, but they have a spiritual weapon which is sure to overcome Satan: “They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.”

John Mahamah reports the growth of churches in Ghana which have many members from Muslim background. The church of 200 he pastored there was three-fourths converts. He says the gospel in his context is “a message of blessing married with suffering.” He adds that where people he knows are effectively planting churches in Muslim contexts, it is because they are suffering with their members (1997).

Love the Assassin

A fine illustration of what it means to minister among Muslims in imitation of Christ comes from the life of Dr. Sa'eed Kurdistan, sometimes known as the "beloved physician of Iran." Dr. Sa'eed was one of the finest medical doctors in Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century, and his story is a beautiful encouragement toward peaceable witness.

Sa'eed grew up in the northwest corner of Iran, in a region called Kurdistan. He was part of a dedicated Muslim family: His father was a Muslim religious leader, and when he passed away, Sa'eed became a *mullah* in his father's place.

Everything he heard about Christianity assured Sa'eed that Islam was superior. Then one day some Christian evangelists came to his town. One of them asked Mullah Sa'eed to teach him the Persian language. As Sa'eed spent time with this Christian, he began to see that his earlier impressions of Christianity were wrong. He learned about the good news of Jesus Christ; he also learned a lot from the truthful and humble way in which the Christians lived. One day he was especially impressed to hear them pray for God's blessing on friends and enemies alike. That surprised Sa'eed because as a mullah he was often hired to write prayers for people for the destruction of their enemies.

After much research, personal struggle, and counting the cost, Sa'eed committed himself to the Lord Jesus. Later Sa'eed received the chance to study medicine and dedicated his life to serving the people of Iran as a physician. He served anyone who needed help, whether prince or peasant. The people really liked his help, but they were continually insulting and persecuting him because he had left Islam to follow Christ. One time he operated on the eyes of a Sultan. The surgery was successful. At just about the same time a Muslim leader sent a letter asking Dr. Sa'eed to come to him so that he could "explain Sa'eed's difficulties and dispel his doubt."

Dr. Sa'eed sent back a bold – but typical – response that "I have no doubts, but rather I'm certain. Perhaps it is you who need the assurance which Christianity provides."

This reply made the Muslim leader angry. He hired a notorious assassin named Mahmud Khan to kill Dr. Sa'eed. When Dr. Sa'eed left the Sultan to go

to another town, the road through the mountains was so dangerous that the Sultan sent with him an armed escort of fifty men.

The Muslim leader meanwhile told the assassin to intercept Sa'eed on that road and put him to death. When the Sultan got wind of the assassination plot, he sent his fastest messenger to the caravan to tell them to go by another route. Sa'eed was saved.

Many years later, Dr. Sa'eed set up his practice in the city of Teheran. One day a man in an army uniform came to his home suffering from an abscess on his neck. Dr. Sa'eed was conducting a Bible reading at the time, so he greeted the visitor in a friendly way and asked him if he minded waiting until the Bible reading was finished.

On completing the reading, Dr. Sa'eed left the room to sterilize a scalpel. After a moment of silence, the army captain spoke to the others: "You gentlemen don't know me. Many years ago I tried to kill this man, but this is the way he has treated me and my relatives all these years."

Dr. Sa'eed helped the man. When the man left, the others asked the doctor to explain. Dr. Sa'eed told them, "The man you have just seen is Mahmud Khan, the notorious bandit of Kurdistan. Once when I was traveling in a caravan in the mountains, a Muslim leader sent this man along with a band of his henchmen to kill me, but God's mercy preserved us by a change of route."

In the years in between, Mahmud Khan and twenty-five members of his family had been confined in a house in Teheran for a year and a half. During this time, Dr. Sa'eed had served as their family physician free of charge (Rasooli & Allen 1983:176).

Let our Methods Match

Dr. Sa'eed of Iran dedicated his life to serving people who were continually insulting him and trying to kill him for his loyalty to the Lamb. He knew only the power of the Lamb – that power that comes from the Lamb laying down his life, forgiving his killers from the cross, and being slain to take away the sin of the world.

Some strategists may say that Dr. Sa'eed's way of witness cannot amount to much. They might call for more aggressive and focused methods. But the beloved doctor's story is worth reflecting on. Iran is a difficult country. Since

1979, the mightiest countries of the world have been unable to force Iran to change even its foreign policy! Is there any military power on earth which can accomplish the will of Jesus for the Muslims of Iran? No, the weapons of this world cannot make disciples for Jesus. But the power of unconditional love in action and readiness to die for the gospel of peace will win and already have begun to win the hearts of Iran's people for Jesus Christ.

Can we learn to trust God that matching our methods to the gospel's peaceable content will be the best way to proceed in witness among Muslims? The nature of the gospel itself points us in the direction of vulnerability and sacrifice. Can we "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev. 14:4)? For Christians who would serve Jesus among Muslims today, the challenge is great.

The deeply humbling fact remains that the Muslim world (specifically the Muslim, Arabic-speaking world) has never in its whole history had a chance to see the Christian church as she is according to her true nature and calling but has always been presented with lamentable caricatures. The church's opportunity is now here. The great question is this: will the opportunity be taken? If so, then a new dimension of thinking and of spiritual and intellectual preparation emerges and as it does so calls for new inventive answers and a new kind of commitment (Kraemer 1960:251).