

PART 3: BETTER UNDERSTANDING AND COMMUNICATING WITH MUSLIMS

A Muslim-Christian Dialogue on the Role of Works in Salvation

by Dale Martin

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One principle of effective witness to Muslims is listening to them and allowing them to identify the issues that they find important in the discussion. It is then up to us to present to them our biblical understanding in those areas. At a recent dialogue meeting between Muslims and Christians on the topic of salvation, the role of works became central in the discussion. The two main objections expressed by the Muslims centred upon the apparent lack of works necessary for salvation in Christianity and the *carte blanche* Christians seem to have for sin in their lives after conversion. In Christianity, the easy grace of God for the believer appeared to these Muslims as a license or excuse for sinning since sin can be so easily forgiven without working for that forgiveness. They found this principle to be incongruent with Islam and could not accept it as an expression of authentic biblical Christianity. After listening to their objections, we presented the following comparison that clearly portrays the role of works in salvation and shows them that the grace of God is not an automatic excuse for

Christians to sin without concern for the consequences.

Both the Muslims and the Christians present agreed on the following formulation for the role of works:

ISLAM

Faith + Works + Allah's Mercy =
Salvation

CHRISTIANITY

Faith + Grace =
Salvation + Works

In Islam, the combination of three things results in salvation: the faith of the believer, the works or deeds of the believer and Allah's mercy at the point of judgment. In Christianity, works have their place on the other side of the equation. For the Muslim, works *lead to* salvation but for the Christian, works *grow out of* salvation as a response to the grace one has received from God. Quoting from Romans 3:28, we explained that we are justified by faith 'apart from observing the law.' Citing verses from the book of James, we contended

that works would be demonstrated in the life of the believer as a normal consequence of regeneration.¹ James even states that someone who claims to be saved but does not demonstrate a changed life has a dead faith.² Thus, that works would be demonstrated in the life of the believer as a normal consequence of

regeneration.¹ James even states that someone who claims to be saved but does not demonstrate a changed life has a dead faith.² Thus, works are an evidence of authentic conversion and accompany it, even though they play no role in earning our justification in any way. Salvation plus works must appear together in the believer's life as an authentic sign that the faith plus grace on the other side of the equation is genuine. Works can also be understood as acts of obedience that are done because of a genuine faith and as evidence of our submission to the will of God.³

Our Muslim friends were also able to see that the Christian does not have blanket permission for sinning at will, as this would call into question the veracity of his salvation as well as his or her submission to God.

By means of this formulation, the Muslims present were able to see that works are taken seriously and have an important role in Christianity since they are an outcome and the evidence of salvation and submission to God. Our Muslim friends were also able to see that the Christian does not have blanket permission for

sinning at will, as this would call into question the veracity of the person's salvation as well as his or her submission to God. For the Christian, works – as

the sign of an authentic conversion – also lead to assurance of salvation, which is absent in Islam, except for martyrs who die in battle defending Islam. Islam teaches that only at the point of Allah's judgment can a Muslim know if he or she has been accorded salvation. Recent studies of former Muslims demonstrate that assurance of salvation was highly influential in their coming to faith in

1 James 2:17: 'Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.' James 2:26: 'For as the body apart from the spirit is dead.' *English Standard Version, Crossway Bibles* (Wheaton IL: Good News Publishers, 2001) p. 1216.

2 James 2:22: 'You see that faith was active along with works, and faith was completed by his works.' James 2:24: 'You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.'

3 This of course needs to be distinguished carefully from an empty legalistic practice of works that is done out of self-righteousness and not genuine faith.

4 J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin and G. Marks, 'Why Muslims Follow Jesus: The results of a recent survey of converts from Islam', *Christianity Today*, October 2007, Vol. 51, No. 10

Christ.⁴ Therefore, a biblical theology of works as the evidence and assurance of salvation in the believer's life may be very attractive to Muslims who are seeking to understand and compare their faith to ours.

Much of the Muslim's misunderstanding on this point may be the result of contact with nominal Christianity and our western style of extremely informal practice of 'lifestyle' faith.⁵ A more formal and ritualized practice of Christianity would be more attractive to many Muslim seekers than what they see as the loose and careless, informal Christian practice of most westerners. Viewing us through their Islamic framework, they often equate this with a lack of commitment and dedication on our part, and call into question the authenticity of the Christian faith, reinforcing their view that Islam was given to replace and update a corrupted Christianity.

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Our dialogue with Muslims has forced us to clarify our theology of works. The biblical emphasis we place on faith and grace in salvation is certainly appropriate. However, it is not helpful when it means that the role of works in the life of the believer is ignored or becomes extinguished in our theology

or praxis. For Muslims, this appears to be a central issue, and they need to see how the role of works is affirmed in Christianity. The principle of cultural congruence applies here – that things are more acceptable

when they are similar to what we already know in our own culture. It suggests that Christianity will be attractive to Muslims when they are able to observe a large degree of similarity between what they already believe and what they perceive to be our beliefs and practices.⁶ Therefore, it is essential that we clearly understand the role of works and that we are able to communicate this well to Muslims in a way that helps them take Christianity seriously.

5 Muslims are encountering what Keener has so aptly stated: 'a common modern conception that faith is a once-for-all prayer involving no commitment of life or purpose and is efficacious even if quickly forgotten.' Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (IVPress, Downer's Grove, 1993) p. 696.

6 David Greenlee (ed) *From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way* (Authentic Media, Waynesboro, GA, USA, 2005) p. 44.