

UNDERSTANDING AND ASSESSING THE TEACHINGS OF COMMON GROUND CONSULTANTS

By Don Little, Missiologist serving with Pioneers

1 Peter 2:9-10 (ESV)

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who *called you out of darkness into his marvellous light*. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Originally from Canada, Don Little has served in ministry to Muslims in various roles for more than 30 years. In addition to ten years spent with his family as a tentmaking church planter in North Africa, Don has also ministered to Muslims in Europe, India, Egypt and Canada. In January 2009 he completed his doctoral thesis on discipling believers from Muslim backgrounds in the Arab world which emphasised the challenge of keeping believers within their social networks throughout the discipleship and church planting process. With 25 years of service with Arab World Ministries, as AWM merges with Pioneers this year, he continues to serve, now with Pioneers, as Islamic missiologist for the Arab world and editor of SEEDBED. He also teaches Arabic and Islamics at Houghton College in Western New York, USA.

(This article was extensively rewritten in response to detailed input from CGC teachers Jim Nelson and Craig Johnson (pseudonyms), whose input I requested. Though I significantly disagree with key parts of their paradigm, I am attempting to present them as fairly and sympathetically as I can. Jim Nelson's response to this article follows. Note also that quite a few of their responses to and commentaries on my points are in the extensive endnotes.)

The Common Ground Training Conference

The registered charity *Common Grounds Consultants, Inc.* (henceforth, CGC) put on a four day by-invitation-only training conference in January 2009. More than 300 attended, from all over the United States and Canada, who had interest in virtually every part of the Muslim world, including diaspora Muslims. CGC can be found at <http://comgro.org/>. The leadership of CGC consists of a number of former and current members of The Navigators, Frontiers and many other groups who have served in the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and in Southeast Asia. They are based in Minneapolis, MN, and can be reached by emailing: [info @ comgro.org](mailto:info@comgro.org).

The event was held in a large non-denominational church near Atlanta, GA, that is fully committed to the CGC ministry paradigm. The church first became involved in ministering to Muslims after Sept 11, 2001. They had initially, post 9/11, invited Jay Smith to teach them apologetics and how to argue with Muslims (as they put it), and then they discovered the Common Ground approach and experienced brand-new breakthroughs using this approach of ministry to Muslims. Since then the church has begun developing a number of ministries inspired by the CGC approach. See for example, <http://www.generationsalaam.com/>. The tagline of the Generation Salaam website reads 'a generation seeking the true peace of God.' They have also begun another ministry called *Jesus in the Qur'an* (<http://www.jesusinthequran.org/>).

The Main Components of the Common Ground Ministry Paradigm:

At the risk of over simplifying, I want to try to describe some of the key points of their paradigm and of their approach to ministry to Muslims. Input received over four full days cannot be adequately communicated in a couple of pages, but this will give you a broad stroke understanding of their ministry approach.

1. Building Bridges into the Muslim's world

The Common Ground (CGC) approach is a creative effort to connect with and reach out with the Gospel to Muslims. This approach builds bridges from the Muslim worldview through sympathetic use of the Qur'an to allow new believers in Christ from Muslim background to self-identify *as Muslims*. They seek to use an insiders' approach, and believe that both Jesus and Paul were effective 'insiders'. The *tagline* that goes with their logo expresses a positive vision of what they seek to do. One of the Scripture texts they use as their identity and foundation is the well-known declaration by the Apostle Paul that he seeks to be all things to all men that by all means he may be able to win some. They cite I Corinthians 9:22b-23, which, in the New Living Translation reads '*Yes, I try to find **common ground** with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News, and in doing so I enjoy its blessings.*'



2. Obeying Jesus and remaining Muslims

The origin of the Common Ground paradigm was an outflow of sincere Muslims being drawn towards Christ and asking: 'Can I remain a Muslim and still love and obey Christ?' Since Islam is a culture as well as a religion,

the question requires discerning. According to CGC, there are two questions built into the above question: (1) Can a Muslim keep the legalistic, works-based, anti-Christian, anti-Jesus and anti-Bible traditions that Islam generally teaches, and love and obey Christ? And (2) can a Muslim keep the cultural and *religious* practices that do not violate Scripture or conscience, and love and obey Christ? The answer that CGC gives to this second question is an emphatic 'YES!'¹ As they have studied the Scriptures seeking to understand how faithful followers of Christ can remain culturally Muslim, they have developed a unique set of interpretations of Scriptures and of the Qur'an. They have also developed practical approaches that flesh out the conviction that it is perfectly fine for Muslims to remain *Muslims culturally and religiously* and be disciples of Christ so long as this does not violate the Scriptures or their conscience.

3. Emphasis on the Kingdom of God

CGC places a strong emphasis on the *Kingdom of God* instead of emphasizing religions and religious identity and separation. The desire is to get Muslims to enter the Kingdom of God, as Jesus taught, through repentance and faith in Isa, rather than to become 'Christians' and no longer 'Muslims'. In stressing these things, they gave their own clear definitions of the terms they are using:

Christian: One who is culturally Christian, whether or not he or she has faith in Christ

Muslim: One who is culturally Muslim, whether or not he or she has faith in Christ

Church: A fellowship of true believers – the people of God obeying the Word of God, and following the Spirit of God

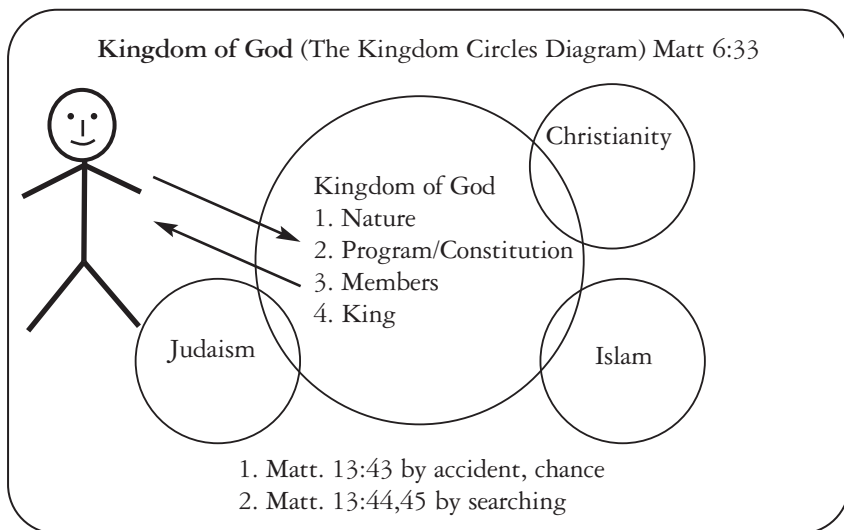
They thus make a point of not encouraging *conversion* of a person from one religion to another. However, they are not new in this emphasis – I do not know of any contemporary mission efforts that do seek 'conversions' defined this way, as moving from one *religion* to another. With these new and limited definitions understood, then it is clear why they have no interest in any Muslim becoming a *Christian*, since they *redefine* conversion to mean leaving one culture (Muslim) to join another culture (Christian). They do not want people joining the 'Christian Religion.' They want them to follow Christ *within their culture* as Muslims, and thus live in the Kingdom of God under the rule of the loving Father in their Muslim environment. Though they make a major point of this emphasis, it is my experience that most everyone seeking to introduce Muslims to Christ would fully agree with them in saying that they are not asking believers to visibly *join* a different religion or religious group. The disagreement that many of us have is with the way that CGCC redefines the idea of conversion in this narrow Muslim sense, to mean only the switching of religions, rather than the more biblical sense, that of repenting of their sin and rebellion against God and obeying Christ.

4. Muslim worldview-friendly communication tools

CGC have developed a number of approaches to talking with Muslims that help them engage in meaningful conversations about Christ without triggering the normal Muslim rejections that they believe are based on *misunderstandings* of both the Qur'an and of biblical Christianity. Two of the main ones are known as the 'Kingdom Circles' and 'the Seven Signs'.

The Kingdom Circles are used in a first conversation with a stranger or friend and are seen as a spiritual interest filter to help the evangelist discern whether the person might have any spiritual interest or openness at all. Many who have learned how to use this little discussion tool have found it quite helpful in getting Muslims interested in understanding more of the Kingdom and of the nature of the Gospel that alone gives people access into the Kingdom, regardless of their religion. Some have seen some dramatic breakthroughs in their efforts through using this tool and the Seven Signs. One sketches a simple diagram on a scrap of paper or a napkin of three overlapping circles, one at a time, while carefully elucidating the meaning of the Kingdom of God and discussing the relationship that Christianity and Islam have to it. The result is something like the sketch here, which expresses what 'People of the Book' believe. *Do not over interpret this sketch.* CGC gives a detailed set of instructions to help talk about the meaning of the Kingdom and how people access it. It is meant only as a discussion tool. As the discussion winds up, those who indicate a desire to understand more about what one has to do to be able to enter the Kingdom of God are invited to participate in a study of the Seven Signs.

The Signs of God, mentioned in the Qur'an (7: 9, 36 & 40 and so on) are said to



be those given to the prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah and Jesus. The study of the signs seeks to show how each of these prophets point forward to the coming of Jesus. Typically, CGC people will invite interested people to a Holy Books study in which they explore the seven signs that God has given that confirm his word. They then begin by looking at the story of the above-listed 'prophets', looking at the Qur'anic version and the Biblical version of each story. As they progress through the signs, they explain the plan God has put in place for the redemption of humanity that involves putting everyone who believes in the Messiah onto the 'right path', through the provision of a sacrificial lamb that will take away the sins of the world. As the series of studies continues, they spend less and less time in the Qur'an and more and more time in the Bible, until, by the time they reach David, they mainly use the Bible to explain the ongoing prophetic thread through revelation history that points forward to Christ. This is a 'Muslim-friendly' variation on the chronological approach that draws on the Qur'an as a bridge into the Muslim's worldview.

5. A strong respect for the Qur'an and Mohammed, and sensitivity to how both are highly esteemed by Muslims

Though CGC teachers would not likely see themselves as giving undue authority to the Qur'an, they do display an appreciation for the Qur'an and all the truth that it does contain. They particularly emphasize all of the great information the Qur'an gives about Isa (Jesus) and they make much of the Qur'anic texts that speak positively of Jesus and the Bible. They treat the Qur'an as a book into which God has sovereignly placed much that is of value and much that points back to the Biblical revelation of God and of Christ. They build much of their approach to the Qur'an on the belief that God can use anything that is true in the Qur'an as signposts that will point Muslims to Christ and the fuller revelation of God that is in the Scriptures. Citing Paul's quotation of pagan poets in Acts 17, they argue that when one knows the teachings of Socrates, or the plays of Shakespeare, one can find much in them that point to Christ and to truths that Christ taught. Mining the Qur'an for truths that parallel the truths of the Scriptures is taking the same approach we would take with people who respect and draw on the teaching of Socrates or Shakespeare.

Some of this is simply a good healthy appreciation of and respect for where Muslims are that enables believers to engage in fruitful conversation from inside the Muslim mindset. Some, however, appears to go to somewhat unusual lengths in their valuing of the Qur'an and of Mohammed's good qualities, and I do not remember hearing them criticize Mohammed or the Qur'an. In fact, they make

They treat the Qur'an as a book into which God has sovereignly placed much that is of value and much that points back to the Biblical revelation of God and of Christ. They build much of their approach to the Qur'an on the belief that God can use anything that is true in the Qur'an as signposts that will point Muslims to Christ and the fuller revelation of God that is in the Scriptures.

it a central tenet of their approach to never criticize either when talking with Muslims.² However, this is a very common *ministry strategy* and not a CGC innovation, and one that I follow most of the time in conversations with Muslims.

They do not point out contradictions in the text of the Qur'an, nor its teachings on jihad and the commands to kill all enemies of Islam when they do not submit to Allah.³ They view the Qur'an as a neutral book that can be mined for ideas and texts that point the reader, even a devout Muslim, to Jesus the Messiah.⁴ They see the Qur'an as pointing back to and confirming Jesus and the message he brought.⁵ They suggest that Mohammed was a reformer, a preacher of one God to idolaters, and that he spoke against the evils in his cultural context.

CGC teachers study texts in the Qur'an much the way Evangelicals would handle a Scripture text. They read it and understand it at 'face value' – that is, they do not normally read it the way a Muslim would interpret it from their traditional teachings and the Hadith. Instead, they draw on their Christian worldview and suggest alternative interpretations of Qur'anic texts that are very different from what Muslims normally believe. They seek to persuade Muslims that the Qur'an may have had perspectives on many things, and especially about Jesus, or Isa, that are in line with Christian beliefs. For example, CGC put together a series of Qur'anic texts to show that the Qur'an actually teaches or supports the following ideas: (1) the authority of the Bible as a judge of the Qur'an itself, (2) the exaltation of Jesus beyond any other person, (3) the annunciation, miraculous conception and birth of Jesus, (4) the death and resurrection of Jesus and other important truths. They find that once Muslims believe in Jesus they see such ideas quite clearly in the Qur'an, and thus see how the Qur'an supports some key things that they now believe about Jesus.

Commendable Aspects of Common Ground Consultants (CGC)

1. Using the Qur'an as a Bridge

I respect CGC's attempt to use the Qur'an as a bridge to help Muslims travel from where they are within the Islamic religious system to Jesus the Messiah. One of the presenters told us that he sees the Qur'an as a candle, having some light, and the task of the evangelist is to come alongside the person and gently and wisely guide them toward the glorious full light of Christ. Blowing out their candle first (by attacking the Qur'an) just puts them into complete darkness, which causes more problems. We need to draw them gently and gradually toward the blinding light of Jesus until they no longer have any use for the candle since they are in the presence of the 10,000-kilowatt spotlight of Jesus. The goal is the exaltation of the Christ of Scripture in the eyes of Muslims.

2. Helpful new Communication Tools

CGC are developing some potentially valuable tools that can help many of us in communicating the Messiah to Muslims. These tools generally carefully take into

account the Muslim worldview and seek to speak directly to people who live within that mindset and who are proud to be Muslims.

3. Emphasis on the Kingdom of God in Sharing and Teaching

They have a strong and *somewhat* balanced emphasis on the need for us to proclaim and speak about the Gospel as the 'Gospel of the Kingdom of God.' They find it to be helpful for communicating with Muslims (using the Kingdom Circles as one tool for doing this) and they believe that as Evangelicals we have inappropriately lost sight of the Kingdom of God in our understanding and proclamation. They stress the central role that Christ has as the one who proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God. This emphasis is good, provided it is kept in balance with the rest of the scriptural presentation of the nature of the Gospel, emphasizing, for example, some of the themes that Paul stresses, such as righteousness coming by faith and the importance of the resurrection in which Jesus' death was vindicated and given its saving power.

4. Their love for Muslims

I commend their love of Muslims and passionate work and desire to see as many as possible won to our Saviour and Lord, the Christ. These men and women care deeply for their Muslim friends and desire that they enter into all that God has for them. Their hearts are burdened that Muslims find saving knowledge of the Messiah.

5. Their Serious Study of the Qur'an in order to use it Well

I commend the seriousness with which they study the Qur'an, searching it, scouring it even, for any hints of texts or ideas that might point Muslims to see the Messiah from within their own book. They tell enough stories of how this works to make me believe that they have seen many men and women, and some movements, led toward Christ using this *bridge*. Jim Nelson sold a CD with dozens of studies on the Qur'an, which I purchased. He also presented an excellent talk in which he showed how to present the Gospel in a way that worked within the honour/shame paradigm. CGC people are serious about the Gospel and serious about communication with Muslims in a way *they* can understand.

6. A Gracious Attitude towards People whose Approach they Challenge

Though they disagree with more traditional approaches to ministering to Muslims,⁶ they try to avoid caricaturing those approaches unfairly – though they did not completely succeed. They generally were cautious and *did not harshly criticize or belittle* the ministry approaches of others. One particularly helpful talk was entitled 'Two Kinds of Muslim Believers'. In it, the presenter did a point by point comparison and contrast between the perspectives and self-identity of what they called 'converts to Christianity' versus 'Muslim believers' (MBs). The

perspective taken was that both ways of following Christ are legitimate and that both types of people are committed to Christ as Lord and Saviour, and both have their primary identity with the true followers of Christ, which is the true church of believers.

Areas of Concern

One particularly helpful talk was entitled 'Two Kinds of Muslim Believers'. In it, the presenter did a point by point comparison and contrast between the perspectives and self-identity of what they called 'converts to Christianity' versus 'Muslim believers'

Having just re-read the extensive critique and condemnation of Common Ground by John and Anne Span⁷ and the somewhat more generous but still strongly critical assessment by Jay Smith⁸, both published in the St. Francis Magazine (www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/) in August 2009, it is hard to avoid the conviction that the people leading Common Ground are *seriously* off track. I am somewhat sympathetic with some of the Spans' critiques, but I found their tone ungracious and their negative conclusions stronger and more condemning than warranted. I spent quite a bit of time with Jay Smith during the CGC consultation in January 2009 and my discussions with him during and following the event helped me as I sought to interpret what I had heard and experienced in Atlanta. Yet, I feel that his critique (mentioned above) is also too categorical and unsympathetic to what people in CGC are actually doing. Nevertheless, I still do have a few serious concerns about Common Ground,⁹ which I will express now. Several other concerns, such as what I consider to be inadequate exegesis of scripture to support their positions, I will leave for another time.

1. CGC has an inadequate and flawed view of conversion

The opening session of the consultation dealt with the use of the word 'convert' in the New Testament and it was argued that the word 'convert' is a poor word choice, speaking *biblically*, for a person who follows Christ. Their view of conversion was then given in the definitions they gave of the words 'Muslim' and 'Christian' (see section 3.3 above) as someone who is merely 'culturally Christian' or 'culturally Muslim'. From then on, all uses of these words assumed this rather unhelpful and inadequate new and narrow definition of commonly used and richly connotative terms, and led to strange and vague combinations of vocabulary, such as the consistent use of 'Muslim believers', as being those who were culturally Muslim who now believed in Christ. Yet the expression 'Muslim believer' in normal English usage is at best vague, and would most naturally refer to Muslims who actually believe in their *own* faith. Conversion was thus *redefined* to mean moving from identification with one social-cultural group to another culturally defined group. This is what sometimes regrettably happens in the Middle East, for example, when a person leaves their Muslim community, takes on a Christian name and seeks to enter the rather culturally foreign Christian community. Though almost everyone I know working among Muslims in the Arab world and in Asia seeks to avoid just such community extractions, or

transfers, it is simply NOT helpful to limit the rich biblical and theological understanding of the term 'conversion' to only use it to describe such a cultural transference from one community to another.¹⁰

The longer I reflect on this question of how we define the terms, the more I am concerned that their redefinition, and shrinking of the meaning of the word 'conversion' is at the heart of the confusion that CGC's teaching causes, and is one of the main mistakes that I believe they are making. I suspect that they are allowing a common Muslim *misunderstanding* of the nature of conversion to reshape the way they think of conversion. In contrast to their assertions to the contrary, the word 'conversion' in the Scriptures normally refers to repentance of faith that 'converts' one's heart from rebellion against God to eager submission to and belief *in Christ*. It does not refer to changing religious communities. The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology devotes fully *eight pages* to a discussion of the three main word groups that refer to conversion that are closely tied together in meaning and usage throughout the New Testament, and none of these words are dealt with in the CGC presentation of their understanding of 'convert', which is only used a few times in the New Testament. Here is what Fritz Laubach says in his discussion of the English theological term 'conversion' as it is found in the New Testament (NT):

Repentance, penitence and conversion are closely linked. Whenever someone gives his thought and life a new direction, it always involves a judgement on his previous views and behaviour. This process is expressed in the NT by three word-groups which deal with its various aspects: *epistreph*, *metamelomai* and *metano*. The first and third both mean turn around, turn oneself around, and refer to a man's conversion. This presupposes and includes a complete change under the influence of the Holy Spirit....

Epistreph is found 36 times in the NT... 18 times (it is found) with its theological meaning of conversion especially in Acts and the Epistles.... When (people) are called in the NT to conversion, it means a fundamentally new turning of the human will to God, a return home from blindness and error to the Saviour of all (Acts 26:18; I Peter 2:25).... Conversion involves a change of Lords. The one who until then has been under the lordship of Satan (cf. Eph. 2:1ff) comes under the Lordship of God, and comes out of darkness into light.... Acts always speaks of conversion as a once-for-all and self-contained event (Acts 9:35; 11:21). From Acts 15:3 it is clear that the word 'conversion' very soon became a technical term that needed no further explanation. (Fritz Laubach, 'Conversion', in NIDNTT, Vol 1. pp. 353-355).

CGC's attempt to redefine 'conversion' and use it to apply *primarily* to a switch from one religious community to another is simply not acceptable and it does not help their communication. Their argument that the term 'convert' and the idea of 'conversion' is primarily viewed negatively in the New Testament simply does not stand up to scrutiny. Their unusual definition and use of this key theological and biblical term led to increasingly disturbing levels of confusion about the way things really are in the *spiritual realm*, as opposed to just the social and cultural realms. When people commit to be obedient disciples of Christ, they enter into the body of Christ, the spiritual church, and take on completely new psychological and spiritual *identities*. They become new creatures in Christ, through faith. As the scripture text that heads this article states, they are called out of darkness and into the light. Their decision to declare allegiance to Christ means that they also cease to be submitted to Mohammed, no longer see the Qur'an as scripture and cease belonging, spiritually, to the Muslim *Ummah*.

CGC's consistent attempts to encourage followers of Christ to remain within the Ummah, retain the name Muslim, and continue to worship God in the mosques,ⁱⁱ causes tension with their new spiritual identity in Christ.

CGC's consistent attempts to encourage followers of Christ to remain within the *Ummah*, retain the name Muslim, and continue to worship God in the mosques,¹¹ causes tension with their new spiritual identity in Christ.¹² Indeed, we do want to do everything we can to help disciples of Christ in Muslim communities to remain in their families and their social networks and to share Christ with those they know and love, just as CGC seeks to do. However, by encouraging Christ's disciples to retain their Muslim *identity* and religious community *commitments* fully, I believe they are working directly in opposition to what conversion means.¹³ Fundamentally, it means that believers leave the *spiritual* darkness from which they have been called (not the cultural milieu), to follow Christ.¹⁴ Encouraging new believers to remain within the mosque, to continue to be known as faithful believing Muslims (that is, one who accepts Mohammed as the final apostle), is asking them to remain within the context of the spiritual darkness from which Christ has removed them.¹⁵ I am not suggesting that conversion means physically leaving the community, or joining the *other* community – the Christian sub-culture in the region. Rather, I believe that converts to Christ (they are not converts to 'Christianity' in spite of what CGC argues) must clearly identify themselves as Christ's followers (they need not use the word 'Christian') who no longer have allegiance to Mohammed or honour the Qur'an as scripture. This does not mean, of course, that they should malign Mohammed or the Qur'an either. They simply no longer revere them as they previously did.

The extent to which this counsel has the potential of betraying believers from Muslim backgrounds was illustrated to me when CGC showed the videotaped testimony of an Arab Muslim who had come to faith in Christ in the US as a

student. Following his faith in Christ and conversion to 'Christianity' (as he put it!), he joined a local church (in the States) and grew as a believer. He had many problems from his family back in his home country when he told them he had 'become a Christian.'

Then this young believer encountered and embraced the teaching of CGC. Equipped with this new way of identifying himself as a 'Muslim believer' who follows Christ, he returned to his family in his Arab country, told them that he was indeed still a Muslim, and was welcomed home with great rejoicing by his family. They now understood that their son, whom they thought had joined 'Christianity', had in fact returned to the Muslim *Ummah* and was once again a Muslim, going to the mosque with them and living again as a Muslim.¹⁶ This story was presented as an example of the positive outcomes that result when a believer in Christ is rightly guided to remain within his Muslim community and retain his Muslim identity. This believer could now live among his Muslim family and share his love for Jesus without restraint. I hope that this had positive outcomes, and I was told that it has led to many of his family also following Christ. Yet I suggest that this same process of him learning to follow Christ without becoming an 'American Christian' should have happened, and could have happened, without him needing to describe himself once again as a Muslim and claim that he was still a loyal Muslim, which was not true to the normal meaning of words.

2. CGC has an inadequate understanding of the church, both local and universal

Sitting through the sessions, I often felt as if the CGC people have largely disowned any form of the institutional church, that is, the actual established way that most Christians worldwide are nurtured and taught, and involved in worship and fellowship. In their efforts to distance themselves from the weaknesses and flaws of the church around the world, as these flaws appear in local churches, denominations and groups, I felt as if they were undervaluing the universal church itself.¹⁷ I do not know why they have such a negative view of the institutional church, especially the American and Middle Eastern churches, so I will resist the temptation to speculate as to the reasons for their rather unhelpful low-church ecclesiology.¹⁸

Their concern is to help start movements of Muslim followers of Christ, and clearly, they do *not* desire to see a movement of explicitly named *churches* of former Muslims. They spoke of small groups of believers, or churches, meeting to read and study the Bible and pray together, dependent on the leading and work of the Holy Spirit. Yet it seemed to me that these were almost seen as simply support groups for Muslims whose primary social identity and network remains their Muslim communities, just as campus ministry groups sometimes serve as

support groups for students whose primary social network is at the university (and thus some do not join local churches). Though they would disagree, their goal does not appear to be building up these new groups so they would become solid and mature *churches* of *disciples*¹⁹ that would one day take their place as authentic and valued corporate members of the worldwide visible body of Christ.²⁰

In their consistent refusal to apply the label 'Christian' to these Muslim followers of Christ, they separate almost entirely from any identification with the contemporary global church.

Because of the often very negative views of Christians and Churches held in the Muslim communities in which they work, CGC teachers recommend that workers distance these new followers of Christ from any connection to that local body of Christ. In their consistent refusal to apply the label 'Christian' to these Muslim followers of Christ, they separate almost entirely from any identification with the contemporary global church.²¹ In my estimation, they undervalue the importance and strength that comes from linking their networks of house groups of 'Muslim believers' to existing churches in their communities and beyond, when possible.²² They appear to believe that Muslim believers, who remain visibly identified as mosque-attending Muslims, have no need of becoming a part of, or connected to, any existing fellowships that are identified as churches.²³ I agree that connecting fellowships of such believers to existing churches in Muslim communities is often *far* from straightforward, and sometimes of questionable practical or missional value. However, CGC appears to rule out any possible value in connecting Muslim believers with local national believers (though they report that such connections do sometimes happen) because they see them as being part of two different religious communities that have different, separate religious and social identities.²⁴

Allow me to add, in sympathy with what CGC is trying to do, that I fully acknowledge that one of the biggest challenges in church planting in the Middle East, and in parts of Asia, is indeed the vexing question of how to relate new believers and groups of believers coming out of Islam to the believers found in neighbouring churches. Such believers are often part of non-Muslim cultural groups that are either despised or oppressed by the Muslim communities in which they live. Believers from Muslim backgrounds whom I have spoken to in several Middle Eastern countries, who have had extensive contact with existing evangelical churches in their cities, generally find that contact to be the hardest part of their experience as believers. Some have even chosen, after long struggle, to break off all continuing contact because it is simply too hard to deal with the negative attitudes toward them, held by Christian background believers. CGC's way of tackling this enormous challenge has much to teach us, even if we do not embrace the full message of almost *entire* separation that CGC models.

3. CGC is too generous in its assessment of Islam, the Qur'an and Mohammed

CGC appears to downplay the demonic undercurrent and power behind Islam itself.²⁵ In their desire not to offend Muslims, they present an almost politically correct view of Islam as a religious system, or at least of its founding documents, that is virtually benign²⁶ and harmless.²⁷ They appear to underestimate the spiritual power of darkness that is acting within the Islamic religious system, not just within Folk Islam.²⁸ Though they do not say this, the impact of their teaching about the Qur'an and Mohammed suggests that the overall impact of Islam as a major world religion can be positive and uplifting for those *within Islam*.²⁹

Combined with this is a very positive assessment of the value of the Qur'an, and its value as a source of truth. Some presentations praised the Qur'an in ways that made me believe that CGC considered God actively responsible for the 'revelation' or at least the appearance of the Qur'an in history.³⁰ It almost sounded as if some believed that all that Muslims need to do to come to true faith in Christ is to open their eyes to the truth already given about him in the Qur'an. Though I know two Muslims whose search for Christ began in the Qur'an, it is very rare for Muslims to come to faith in the Christ of the Gospel except through some form of contact with the Scriptures, with believers or with Christ directly in dreams, something with which both Jim Nelson and Craig Johnson concur.

This positive view of Islam and of the Qur'an was accompanied by a very positive understanding of the man Mohammed and the good that he brought to our world in his example and teachings. Some presenters had no problem referring to Mohammed as a prophet without qualification. They pointed to the many 'good things' that they believe Mohammed brought and the way he called people away from idolatry to worship one God. Though I do not think they equated his prophetic status with that of any true biblical prophet, they had become so accustomed to using Muslim language about Mohammed that they continually talked about him as a prophet, without qualification. How can Mohammed be any kind of a prophet, except for a *false prophet* when so much of what he teaches directly contradicts the New Testament view of God, of Jesus and of the nature of man and the need for redemption? I am very uneasy with this kind of affirmation that Mohammed has some sort of valuable prophetic role.^{31,32}

CGC's very positive perspective on Islam as a religion, on the Qur'an as a valuable source of truth and on Mohammed as an exemplary leader and some sort of 'prophet', leaves me quite uncomfortable. I know that the CGC presentation of Islam has been developed to communicate respectfully with serious Muslims.

Though I know two Muslims whose search for Christ began in the Qur'an, it is very rare for Muslims to come to faith in the Christ of the Gospel except through some form of contact with the Scriptures, with believers or with Christ directly in dreams.

Nevertheless, it seems as if they have adopted a *sanitized* version of Islam typical of those presented to Western non-Muslim visitors to mosques. Having lived among Muslims for many years, I found their positive treatment of everything Islamic to be not at all reflective of the generally negative nature of Islam, its holy book, and its founder Mohammed.³³

Concluding Reflection & Assessment

=====

We can learn to use their tools and gain a keener awareness of how Muslims may view Western Christians without embracing their insider paradigm.

=====

So what are we to think of CGC and their approach to ministering to Muslims? There are a number of commendable and praise worthy aspects to what they are attempting to do and their attitudes of compassion towards Muslims. However, I believe that taken together, the faulty and unhelpful teachings of CGC outweigh the merits of the ministry. Probably the most positive aspects of CGC is their longing to see Muslims come to know and follow the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God, and some of the tools that they have developed for engaging Muslims in conversation – tools that are sensitive to the way Muslims feel about Mohammed, the Qur'an, Islam, Christians and Christianity.

If you are invited to participate in a CGC conference and would like to learn how to use their tools, by all means, do go and learn what is of value to learn from these brothers and sisters. We can learn to use their tools and gain a keener awareness of how Muslims may view Western Christians without embracing their insider paradigm. It was good for me to be with them and to listen carefully and with an open heart to their teaching, and I think I came away with an increased appreciation of how devout Muslims see themselves. Nevertheless, I believe that following their teaching and advice on how to disciple those who believe in Christ, and on how to stimulate movements of Muslims to Christ that remain inside the Muslim religious institutions, will not yield strong, Christ-honouring churches that can be a testimony of God's saving grace in Muslim communities. My responders, of course, beg to differ.³⁴

=====

The goal is to disciple new believers so that they become mature and committed participants in their house churches who strive to remain in their social networks and witness for Christ in culturally natural and appropriate ways.

=====

Should we be seeking to help form communities of Christ-followers who remain within mosques and continue to think of and describe themselves as Muslims as CGC urges? Should we not rather help create churches of Christ-followers who identify themselves clearly with Christ, the Messiah, even as they avoid importing foreign elements in their church fellowships, and avoid the wrong kinds of

connections with foreigners? The goal is to disciple new believers so that they become mature and committed participants in their house churches who strive to remain in their social networks and witness for Christ in culturally natural and appropriate ways.³⁵ We aim to see mature churches multiplying within Muslim

communities – churches that can clearly live out and exhibit the difference between those who follow Christ and those who follow Mohammed. Such communities of Christ's disciples do not need to become Westerners, or associate with Western Christians, but they do need to be known by their Muslim neighbours and communities as those who are *identified with the name and character of Christ*. They need to live in the light and not remain within the darkness from which the gospel has called them.³⁶ To echo Peter, in the text that heads this article, we are calling believers who were not previously a people, to become *God's people* (not Mohammed's). We are calling them to be part of this new and holy nation, the *church*, a people who proclaim the glories of the one that called them out of the darkness of Islam into the glorious truth and light of the Gospel of *Christ*.

-
- 1 Jim Nelson's comment: If an American asked if he could remain an American and still love and obey Christ, this also requires discernment. If he means can he retain his promiscuous, money-loving, self-centred lifestyle and love and obey Christ, of course not. If he means can he still eat hot dogs and watch the Super Bowl, then of course he can.
 - 2 Jim Nelson's comment: CGC does make it a central tent not to criticize Muslims, Islam, the Qur'an or Muhammad. Whatever our personal beliefs, criticizing these to a Muslim is not just rude, but it ends any conversation or relationship. 1 Peter 2:17 says we should honour all men, which would include Muhammad.
 - 3 Jim Nelson's comment: 'Jihad' in the Qur'an, which means struggle, is not what the terrorists claim it is. The 'kill them' verses (Qur'an 2:191, 4:89,91, 9:5) refer to unbelievers in the 7th century and do not apply today, much less refer to those who 'do not submit to Allah'. It is very similar to the 'kill them' verses in the Bible (Joshua 6:17 for example).
 - 4 Jim Nelson's clarification: I think it is clear that Islam has used the Qur'an to mislead many millions of people, but it is where they are right now, so we need to start there. We follow Philip's pattern in Acts 8:35, when he began with the scriptures the eunuch was reading to explain Christ to him. In the same way, we start from the Qur'an and point them to Jesus.
 - 5 Jim Nelson's comment: This assumes that there are contradictions. As I have looked at the Qur'an in Arabic, the NT in Greek, and the OT in Hebrew, I feel these can all be understood in a way to be reconciled if a bridge building methodology is used in love and respect. How would we feel if Muslims pointed out all the 'contradictions' in the Bible (one demoniac Mark 5:2 or two Matt. 8:28; one angel in the tomb Mark 16:5 or two Luke 24:4; crucifixion at the third hour Mark 15:25 or the sixth hour John 19:14, etc.)? We feel that we can reconcile all these 'contradictions,' and they feel they can reconcile theirs. This just shows love and respect for other people.
 - 6 Craig Johnson's comment: We bless all approaches where people come with a deep love for Jesus and share this with their Muslim friends. We do feel strongly that we can avoid mistakes that come from the more traditional approaches.
 - 7 John & Anne Spam, 'Report on the Common Ground Consultants Meeting,' St. Francis Magazine 5:4 (August 2009), 52-73.
 - 8 Jay Smith, 'An Assessment of the Insider's Principle Paradigms,' St. Francis Magazine 5:4 (August 2009), 20-51.
 - 9 I hold these concerns in common with the Spans, Jay Smith many others. I attended the hurriedly organized one day conference, in October 2009, hosted by Josh Lingel, of I2 Ministries entitled 'Insider Movement Conference: A Critical Assessment.' Many of the speakers shared

strong reservations and critiques of the perspectives of those who encourage and support insider movements and about CGC in particular, during that event. Visit www.i2ministries.org for both a synopsis of the conference and the entire contents which are available for purchase. They are holding a second conference Oct 1-3, 2010 at Liberty University. Though I share some of the reservations and concerns expressed during this event, I was uncomfortable with the sometimes confrontational and judgemental tone of some of the critiques. I believe we need to hold some meetings in which some of the main spokespeople from both sides can sit down and talk through their concerns face-to-face. These kinds of one-sided events are simply ramping up the controversy and not really clarifying the issues that separate fellow labourers.

- 10 Note that this entire conversation is dealing with the topics and terminology of English. I am NOT making any comment on what are the appropriate ways for converts to Christ to describe themselves in their native languages, whether that be Arabic or Chinese! That discussion is a different and challenging discussion that is related to the present discussion of the term 'convert' or 'conversion.' Perhaps part of the confusion that I believe CGC generates is that it brings in meaning to such words from other languages and then tries to apply them to the English words.
- 11 Read Craig Johnson's objection here, and see my response: 'CGC never encourages followers of Christ to worship God in the mosque; we encourage new believers to continue to associate with their Muslim community which often gathers at the mosque.' **DL replies:** I trust this is true, but in your material you presented a case study of a Muslim believer who describes very positively how he is able to continue to worship God and pray in the name of Jesus while in a Muslim prayer service in the mosque. When such case studies are presented as positive models of Muslim believers, I think it is fair to say that CGC is promoting this model.
- 12 Jim Nelson's comment: This is not what we promote. They go to the mosques for social identity and for evangelism. True worship is in spirit and truth, and can happen anywhere. If it happens in the mosque, fine, but growth and discipleship take place in small groups (cell-churches or house fellowships, if you will) outside the mosque.
- 13 Jim Nelson's correction: No, this is not what we mean. We should help them examine the religious commitments, and as with anything in culture, reject what is unbiblical, accept what is neutral, and revise what needs it.
- 14 Craig Johnson admits the confusion that this 'redefinition of 'convert' brings and says the following: We have since added a piece in our consultations that may be helpful: What changes after a Muslim believes in Christ? (1) No immorality (2) No folk Islamic beliefs (3) Some Islamic doctrine, (they retain the belief in One true God, angels, heaven, hell, and the Scriptural doctrines, but they now see Christ as Lord and Saviour and the atonement for their sins, and the Holy Spirit as the one who indwells them, etc.) (4) Fellowship with other true believers, often in their homes (5) A change of character, transformation by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and a love for the Scriptures (6) Persecution for their first allegiance to Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.
- 15 Jim Nelson responds: There are spiritually dark places, e.g. universities. Should new believers at a university be encouraged to drop out? No. They should leave dark practices but we are to be light in the darkness. Matt. 5:15-16.
- 16 Jim Nelson's comment: Leaving the 'ummah' is equivalent of renouncing one's citizenship. Is *that* the gospel? If that is all that happened, I would agree that it is bad. But he has won most of his

Though I share some of the reservations and concerns expressed during this event, I was uncomfortable with the sometimes confrontational and judgemental tone of some of the critiques. I believe we need to hold some meetings in which some of the main spokespeople from both sides can sit down and talk through their concerns face-to-face.

family and friends to faith in Christ, and has free access to share about Christ with them. His new creation in Christ (2 Cor.5:17) has a chance to shine in the household Matt. 5:15-16. That would never have happened as a Christian in America.

- 17 Jim Nelson's rebuttal: The institutional church contains believers in varying proportions, but its denominations, buildings, ordination, clergy, etc are creations of men. See *Pagan Christianity*, by Frank Viola and George Barna. The Bible is the standard one must use in cross-cultural work. Theologies, methodologies, orders of service, etc. are not cross-cultural. I am very much against exporting man-made systems. Here in the US, I am a member of and go to a church, teach SS, etc., and that fits in this culture (even though much of this culture is unbiblical). However, I don't want to export it.
- 18 Jim Nelson's response: The Church universal, the body of Christ, is the whole reason we want to see Muslims saved into. We love the Church, but much of what are called 'churches', denominations, etc. are tradition, and are not Biblical. By many such traditions, they make the word of God void. Mark 7:7-9, 13. We try to give the church the position it is given in the NT – groups of believers, not a denomination, not a building, not a statement of faith, etc. (1 Thess. 1:1, Romans 16:7, Acts 8:1, 9:31, 12:5, 14:27, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15, 16, Phil. 2, etc.)
- 19 Craig Johnson objects: We in CGC have the DNA of discipleship from our organizations and will never lose our deep commitment to discipleship for these new believers. It seems we did not adequately emphasize our commitment to discipleship in this consultation.
- 20 Craig Johnson explains: They have an authentic, valued membership before God, but the institutionalized church struggles with Muslim followers of Christ. Perhaps the bigger problem is with the institutionalized church. It is wonderful to see our Muslim followers of Christ sit with Christian followers of Christ and Jewish followers of Christ. Together they express their love for our Lord and for each other. It is a beautiful picture of the universal church.
- 21 Jim Nelson disagrees: They have very good relationships with others in the true Church/Body of Christ. It is true that they have very little in common with unbelievers within 'churches.'
- 22 Jim Nelson responds, and Don replies: This sounds like a nice idea, but have you ever tried it? They have nothing in common with each other besides Christ. How many inner-city black-Baptist churches have good 'linked networks' with suburban, white Episcopal churches? The gap is actually much bigger between Muslim believer house churches and existing churches. Plus the very creation of those linkages would often destroy the witness of the Muslim followers of Christ within their social network. **DL's response:** Yes, we have tried it, and it is NOT easy. However, that is often a key role that expatriate workers can play, in linking fellowships of believers from Muslim backgrounds together with some of the leaders in Christian background churches. Jim Nelson: Great! We also strive to do this where appropriate.
- 23 Jim Nelson defends this practice, and then I respond: Not the existing ones. Were you around when the Jesus movement of the late 60's contacted the existing churches? The churches didn't want anything to do with them. The Calvary Chapel movement grew out of the repulsion of existing churches of the new believers in Jesus whose 'culture' was very different. **DL's response:** Do we copy the errors of the past or the good patterns? It is wonderful that Calvary Chapel developed into a solid Christian group, many other Jesus people groups died out after distorting the Christian faith beyond recognition. The objective is not to separate, but to creatively link together so as each group can correct each other's errors.
- 24 Craig Johnson explains: As we look at the example of Paul in the book of Acts. He rarely brought Gentile believers to Jerusalem; he did not have them participate in worship with other believing Jews in the temple. When Peter went to Antioch he miss-communicated the truth of the Gospel just by not eating with Gentile believers. This called for a serious rebuke. We cannot

The Bible is the standard one must use in cross-cultural work. Theologies, methodologies, orders of service, etc. are not cross-cultural. I am very much against exporting man-made systems.

take too lightly the seriousness of having the Gospel entrusted to us and then not thinking through well what we communicate with our actions. Unfortunately this is often not well thought through and some good-hearted workers hinder the very Gospel they want to preach (see I Cor. 9:1-19).

- 25 Jim Nelson responds, and then I reply: Every structure, religious, political, social, etc. has demonic powers affecting it. This includes Islam, Christianity, communism, democracy, KKK, a Christian mission, etc. We must break any demonic bondages, wherever they are. **DL replies:** I agree that we have to break demonic bondages wherever they are found. However, surely there is a difference between the demonic bondages found in a typical evangelical church in the West, and the demonic bondages in the KKK. All intellectual systems are not created equal. And just because there can be demonic deception in a Christian group does not mean that we should not be aware that the Islamic dogma and system is itself a deception and it is responsible for the demonic deception and spiritual darkness so common among Muslims.
- 26 Jim Nelson disagrees: Not at all. I see the Islamic religion as a big bondage to millions.
- 27 Jim Nelson responds: This is why we have sessions on Folk Islam and Spiritual Warfare. We cannot and will not down-play this spiritual battle. We have lived too long in Muslim countries to think that Islam is harmless. Craig Johnson also responds to this critique: I would say no! Rather we come to our Muslim friends with respect and gentleness trying to be Biblical in our approach to the lost (I Cor. 10:32-11:1, I Pet. 3:14, 15, Col. 4:5, 6). Attacking an unbeliever and his beliefs rarely leads to him finding Christ. Jesus attacked religious leaders who were leading many astray, but his general ministry model was of seeing the value and dignity of every person and treating them with respect. His instruction is to do to others as you would have them do to you, summing up the whole Law and prophets (Matt. 7:12)
- 28 CGC has a very good set of teachings on how to deal with the demonic and to help people to be delivered from demonic oppression. Thus, CGC demonstrates an awareness of the personal and demonic side of evil and have much experience and good advice on dealing with it. My concern is that they do not seem to see that the typically high level of demonic oppression and bondage found in Muslim communities is built into Islam as a religion and into the ideological system of beliefs that is Islam. Thus, believers need freedom from the spiritual authority of Islam itself, and not just from the demonic oppression that comes from Folk Muslim practice of it.
- 29 Jim Nelson responds: None of us have said this nor belief this. We have found that by finding areas where we share common ground, by respecting what they respect and honor they will reciprocate and allow us to share about the One, Jesus the Messiah, whom we honor and love.
- 30 Jim Nelson comments and then DL replies: Compared to some African tribe who knows nothing about Jesus, I see that God has sovereignly allowed a lot of truth to be in the Qur'an. **DL replies:** I used to think that Islam contained more truth than animist religions, but I am not so sure any more. Also, animists' response to the Gospel has historically been far more positive than has the response of Muslims to the Gospel. Thus I question the general value of the information about Jesus that is found in the Qur'an. Typically it prevents Muslims from seeking Christ rather than stimulating them to get to know the Messiah.
- 31 Jim Nelson responds and DL replies: I feel he is a man who desired for his people to have Scripture, and who did his best to present what he could discover of the Scripture to his people. (For example, Qur'an 10:94, 4:136, 16:43, 21:7, 26:196, etc.). **DL replies:** Though this may

All intellectual systems are not created equal. And just because there can be demonic deception in a Christian group does not mean that we should not be aware that the Islamic dogma and system is itself a deception and it is responsible for the demonic deception and spiritual darkness so common among Muslims.

have been true, it surely cannot be said about Mohammed's later teaching and example once he gained political control. Mohammed's earlier apparent 'piety' is overwhelmingly made irrelevant by the sum total of who he was and what he started. He fits well into a not-atypical pattern of other world leaders who started out well-intended and ended up promoting much evil.

- 32 Craig Johnson defends Mohammed, and DL replies: How often we make assumptions without careful investigation. Reading various biographies by sincere people, several who are Christians, reveals much good in the life of Muhammad. Of course, it is wrong to venerate Muhammad, as some Islamic traditions do. It grieves my heart when I see both the name of God and Muhammad's name at an equal level in large letters in a mosque. This is wrong. Yet Muhammad did much good; he cared for the poor, he stopped the infanticide of new-born baby girls and he changed the Arab world from following many false deities to understanding there is only One True God, the God of Abraham. Fear, worship, and serve this one true God is perhaps the primary message of Muhammad. **DL replies:** But ultimately, what Mohammed did, by his leadership and prophetic message, was to overrun Christian lands, subjugate Christians and destroy church buildings as his followers conquered Christian nations. Mohammed raised up a worldwide religion that is everywhere strongly opposed to everything that is at the core of the Gospel. So, again, even though he may have initially done some good things, his overall track record and legacy is just the opposite of that of the Messiah whom he opposed.
- 33 Craig Johnson says it is more a matter of emphasis: We have never endorsed everything Islamic. Did you somehow miss the session on Folk Islam? Or did we not present clearly enough the dangers of Folk Islam? We could spend time in our seminars denouncing the evils that have happened through Muslims and at times the organized institution of Islam. We don't dwell on this because we assume with the media in the West and anyone's experience with lost Muslim friends, has more than informed people of negative things that have happened in the name of the religion of Islam. The lost are lost and still in the domain of the evil one. We try in our consultations to provide teaching and tools that will equip labourers to more lovingly and effectively bring the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom to their Muslim friends and contacts.
- 34 Craig Johnson comments: However, it has. We are aware of several examples and movements. But it does take hard work, much discipleship and training and a wonderful work of the Holy Spirit.
- 35 Craig Johnson agrees, sort of: Yes, this is the goal of an Insider Work and we trust many other ministries.
- 36 Both Jim and Craig respond: (Jim) The light is *supposed* to shine in the darkness!! The light is not supposed to be put under a bushel, or be taken into a light store. (Craig): Yes, they no longer participate in the evil practices of darkness yet they remain in the households with their families and friends being the salt of the Kingdom and light to those still in darkness (Matthew 5:13-16).

Mohammed's earlier apparent 'piety' is overwhelmingly made irrelevant by the sum total of who he was and what he started. He fits well into a not-atypical pattern of other world leaders who started out well-intended and ended up promoting much evil.
