

Discipling Muslims “Far as the Curse is Found”

By J.F.

J.F., an American, moved as a tentmaker to one of the Gulf states of the Arabian Peninsula over fifteen years ago with his wife and four children. The slow responsiveness of nationals led to diverse avenues and partnerships toward their aim of church planting among locals. Previous Arabic study in Jordan and seven years of immersive diaspora ministry in an immigrant Arab Muslim community in the US provided experience in evangelism and discipleship among local and expat Arab Muslims.

Introduction: The Problem

Habib’s conversion from Islam had all the indications of a work of God! After a lifetime passing through fundamentalist Islam, Sufism, an Islamic cult, and secular hedonism—with antagonistic resistance to anything Christian throughout—God had opened his eyes. Habib was now pursuing Christ. He walked up to me on his first visit to our international church in Arabia and asked to be baptized. Yet even after a decade of discipleship through study, prayer, counsel, and friendship, he was now “stuck.”

He was depressed and unmotivated, and he was experiencing significant tension in his marriage. An abundance of exasperating circumstances made the presence of stress reasonable, but his spiritual depression and complaint against God went deeper. Counsel and wisdom from Scripture didn’t “work.” After years of walking with Habib through trials, I knew he would likely come out of it, but what was my role as a discipler in the meantime? Was my only choice to wait and pray, or could I be a more effective catalyst for change?

God has used my relationship with Habib and other Arab believers from a Muslim background (BMBs) like him to develop my understanding of my role in discipleship. My objective in this article is to briefly review our commission to make disciples, describe the layers of obstacles we must overcome, and suggest antidotes we can employ enabling us to be a catalyst for change.¹ Along the way you'll get a picture of how I helped Habib.²

Commissioned to Make Disciples

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:19–20, NIV).

The Great Commission is our commission. While God likely used the verb *go* to move you abroad, the main command and verb is *make disciples*. In Greek, the other verbs are participles—going, baptizing, teaching—still with the force of command. The command here to make disciples is not synonymous with the way the term *discipleship* is used today, as a growth program for believers. In the Bible, disciples are followers and learners of the way of Christ and his gospel. In this passage, making disciples includes both evangelizing and helping Christians mature.

In Arabia, where we live, there are many obstacles to becoming a disciple: cultural, historical, social, legal, and certainly religious. Muslims are raised to believe that they already have a path to God. What's more, their religion teaches them about Jesus and his message in a way that makes the gospel, as we understand it, false to them.

1 A functioning body of Christ in the life of the disciple is, by God's design, an effective multiplier to these antidotes.

2 This “helping” has been two-way. God significantly used Habib and the other BMBs mentioned herein to draw attention to my weaknesses and God's manifold wisdom and grace.

Evangelism in our context rarely occurs as the linear presentation of a message from A to Z. We seek to steer conversations to spiritual topics and speak (or read) truth from Scripture in a comprehensible form. Evangelism looks less like the preaching of Acts and more like Jesus' manner of storytelling and asking questions (as we read in the Gospels).

Baptizing Muslims who have come to Christ has its complications and requires discernment. Who should do it? Where? In front of whom? When? Some ask for baptism even before they are believers. Others are held back by fears even after years of walking with the Lord and in-depth study on the topic.

In this article, I will focus on the challenges we face with BMBs in obeying the last part of the Commission: teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded.

Teaching Them to Obey

This would be very easy if it merely meant to teach the commands. In fact, many BMBs begin walking in their new faith asking to be taught the Christian version to their Five Pillars (creed, prayer, fasting, alms, and pilgrimage) and our equivalent of other restrictions of Islamic law. What could be easier!? Why not just provide the new believer a list of commands?

First, Jesus commands more. He does not command *knowledge*; he commands *obedience*. Making disciples must go beyond getting people saved and giving *knowledge* of doctrinal truth and ethics, though it certainly involves that. We must teach them to *obey*. This is more than a class, course, program, or book—helpful though these things may be. And second, a Muslim's understanding of obedience is more like that of the Pharisees, which Jesus opposed vociferously. "What times must I pray? What words do I recite? How do I make myself clean to pray? How much do I give? What days must I fast?" The New Testament does not prescribe answers to give BMBs! This is puzzling to them, and we face the task of

reshaping their understanding from rule keeping to life in the Spirit and obedience from the heart.

This is where it gets messy. (Former teammate RB wrote an unpublished article highlighting the immense challenges faced after initial entrance to the kingdom. He titled it, “Hallelujah, New believer! Help, New Disciple!”) For many of us, our knowledge of Jesus’ teaching far exceeds our practice of what he commands. On the one hand, being born again and receiving the Spirit means we are *new*. In Christ, we are now dead to sin and the old man (the flesh). However, that *old* man still has tremendous influence through culture, traditions, habits, old beliefs, and thought patterns.

The joy of *new* life is only the start of this journey. We must keep going in discipleship, and we must go far. But how far must we go?

Far as the Curse Is Found

While serving as an elder in a diverse international church in Arabia, I taught adult discipleship classes on finances, marriage, parenting, and other topics. I often referred to books which had been very helpful to me, but from my context and experience as an American. While believers from other contexts such as Asia, Africa, or Latin America appreciated the teaching, it became apparent that their challenges in these areas were different. My teaching wasn’t going far enough.

Isaac Watts’s famous hymn “Joy to the World” is traditionally sung at Christmas (though it is really about Christ’s return). This verse gave me a new vision for teaching disciples:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

By *curse*, Watts is referring to the destructive aspects of Adam's sin, which we all inherit and walk in. The curse goes far—not only *geographically* to the ends of the earth and all nations, but also very far in our lives. Ott, Strauss, and Tennant write, “The gospel has not taken hold in a culture until it transforms a culture’s inner beliefs, values, feelings and worldview” (2010, 445).

We want to see the blessings of the gospel go *that far* in the life of BMBs—beyond just “looking good” at church. We want to see transformation that flows from the heart, impacting every sphere of influence of the believer, toward the fulfillment of “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Paul described *his* vision this way in Colossians: “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that *we may present everyone mature in Christ*. For this I *toil, struggling* with all his *energy* that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:28–29, ESV, emphasis mine).

“Mature in Christ” is the objective of Paul’s (and our) teaching. Why isn’t simply *giving* the command enough? Why does helping others toward maturity require so much toil, struggle, and energy from us?

One reason is that maturity requires *growth*. Think how messy it is to raise children. When infants, children are *literally* messy. As they get older, the challenges change from outward behavioral conformity to heart problems in full bloom. Helping BMBs grow to maturity is messy because in the process of transformation, God will expose many layers of the extent of the “curse” in their lives. As you will see, a simplistic approach is not likely to be the necessary catalyst for change.

Seven Layers of the Curse

We will now walk through seven aspects of sin’s curse. I will explain how we teach BMBs to obey everything Jesus commanded. The layers

of the curse can be unpacked in terms of condemnation, ignorance, confusion, stumbling, hopelessness, blindness, and bondage. Each layer has a particular antidote which we must apply, stated in parentheses (summarized in the table at the end of the article).

1) Condemnation (Antidote: Redemption)

Islam is a very sophisticated and self-contained religious system that addresses not only worship but every aspect of one's life and society. Paul says that even religion can compound the curse: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them' " (Gal. 3:10, ESV).

Despite their religious system, Muslims live afraid of God without a certain hope of whether Allah will have mercy on them. They need redemption from the curse—both from Adam and from their failure to keep God's law and honor him. At the most fundamental level the gospel addresses the curse of condemnation from sin and shame through redemption and reconciliation:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:13–14, ESV)

These very verses became Isaac Watts's inspiration for the line, "to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found."

When a Muslim believes, he experiences redemption, is reconciled to God, and can receive all the blessings of the gospel, through the Spirit. However, the BMB does not automatically appropriate these blessings and start walking in obedience! Condemnation is not the only impact of the curse—there are others, including ignorance.

2) Ignorance (Antidote: Teaching the Commands)

Some Muslims come to Christ thinking, “Woo-hoo! Works couldn’t save me, so now works aren’t required!” We must teach the believer, free from condemnation in Christ, how to walk in the Spirit. This is not some new, “whatever-you-feel-like” lifestyle. Scripture gives a shape for the life of the disciple which includes an ethical and moral dimension, without becoming moralism or a new law!

Indeed, a first step is to teach *what* to obey. Where do we start? It depends on the believer’s context. Personally, I don’t start with “Go share your faith.” Hany told me that on his first visit back to his parents in his homeland, he planned to set down his suitcase, take his father out for coffee, and share his faith. I told him, “No way!” I know that sounds strange—perhaps even unbiblical, or at least counter to many methodologies—for a missionary to tell a new believer not to share his new faith! My priority is not to promote fear but honor. I *dishonored* my father in my preaching to him as a new believer. I was more obnoxious than I was faithful to Christ and reaped from my zeal for the rest of his life. Later wisdom and love did not make up for my missteps. I have been so impressed at the courage of many BMBs who are ready to suffer for their faith, but in Hany’s particular context, I was certain that his bold plan was not actually in the interest of the gospel (see 1 Cor. 9:23), but instead reflected his impetuous nature.

Living in a very relational society, I start with the relational commands. My guidance was as follows: “Go home and obey God’s commands to you as a son. Honor your father and mother. Love them. Serve them. Pour out the respect. Live in such a way that they cannot deny you have become the best son of any in their family or neighborhood.” Is the new believer a husband? Wife? Child? Parent? Master? Employee? Subject? Ruler? The Bible describes priorities for these roles (Eph. 5:22–6:8, Rom. 13:1–7), in addition to general teaching on love. Let others see your good works in that role, and you will shine brightly in a dark world. *Then* speak.

Note that the command is not “teach them,” as if you can teach a class, read a book, and consider it *done*. The verb is *teaching*. It is ongoing and involves repetition and reminders. We are lifelong learners, often learning the same lesson over and over.

3) Confusion (Antidote: Modeling and Example)

Christian commands can be puzzling. Kingdom values turn those of most cultures upside down. Biblical teaching is unimaginable. Honest believers may say, “I don’t get it.” They have never seen it! They have no idea what the kingdom might *look* like in their culture. Beyond the command, disciples need *example*. This is one reason God gives qualification standards for elders, so they can show us how to walk with Christ (1 Tim. 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9). Paul said, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

Khalid was in a difficult marriage. It was his second one. He didn’t have a good track record. We spent a lot of time talking about how to love his wife. She was a *difficult* woman. He had never seen a godly husband-wife relationship until he became a follower of Christ and began to observe ours and those of other believers. I couldn’t just *tell* him what to do. To help him communicate in a more godly way, I helped him understand the biblical shape of godly communication by studying Proverbs (addressing ignorance). More than that, I modeled it in communication with him and with his wife, intentionally having him spend time in our home to see how I related to my wife. I also transparently shared about my own shortcomings in my marriage.

BMBs have said: “*Show* us how to do the Christian family, and we’ll figure out how to do the church.” Are you giving disciples the opportunity to see how you obey God?

4) Stumbling in Sin and Folly (Antidote: Spiritual Correction)

Even with teaching and modeling, disciples stumble in sin and folly. This can be puzzling, especially to them! The Bible gives a radical description of the believer’s conversion:

- Death to life (John 5:24)
- Darkness to light (Acts 26:18)
- The kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God (Col. 1:13, Eph. 6:12)
- Enemies of God to adopted sons (Rom. 5:10, 8:15)

How is it that with all this, and the Holy Spirit living in us, that spiritual growth is so messy? Spiritual growth is hindered by the curse. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of condemnation, and salvation begins transformation. Only some aspects are instant, while most are progressive, occurring bit by bit over the course of our lives, and will not be complete until the consummation of all things in Christ (Romans 8).

Progressive sanctification sometimes involves regress due to sin. We must not be surprised when disciples sin. When Walid met a pretty, young BMB sister, he was sure she was God's gift. The rest of us were very wary as she showed few signs of maturity in the faith. He stopped pursuing counsel and announced an engagement party, which we and the church opposed. Should we attend? My wife and I knew that if we did not attend, we would not be able to continue to speak truth into their lives. We retained a voice into their tensions and conflicts. When Walid finally broke up with—let's just call her Babylon—the reality was worse than we could have imagined. His actions and deception had been grievous. How should I respond?

Arab society is controlled by shame, leading many to hide or cover their behavior and not come into the light. What kind of response would your disciple expect from you?

When sins among Christians catch the world's attention, shame is unavoidable, appropriate, and good. A believer's realization that they have dishonored God becomes an opportunity to ask, "Are my allegiances really with Jesus?" If so, we find God is quick to forgive, though the sting of shame before the world will linger. Ed Welch writes, "*He is the God who turns toward you* and keeps coming toward you until he touches you and makes you clean" (2012, 267, emphasis mine).

Walking with believers toward maturity often requires patience when they stumble, and discernment to be—as Paul says in Galatians 6:1—*spiritual*, to restore them. Rebuke or reproof is sometimes necessary, but we must also be *ready with an extended hand* to help the disciple up and help him walk again.

5) Hopelessness (Antidote: Lament and Comfort)

No matter how mature we are, trying circumstances often make us ask, “Is God really good?” God’s curse of the ground and his judgment after the fall touch all aspects of our lives: pain in childbirth, futility in work, natural disasters, sickness, and death.

Karim came to my home after experiencing significant injustice from his former employer and asked if he was possibly another Job. It is not always pleasant to be around someone who is suffering. Despite his complaints, I tried to spend time with him because I want to see discipleship go “far as the curse is found” into his sufferings. I didn’t want to be like Job’s friends, but I also knew I couldn’t stay silent. I brought Karim to the Psalms to observe biblical lament when it seems that God is absent, and we prayed for God to help. We found comfort in the cross with our God who suffers with us. Other dear friends have also despaired due to trials and spoke of suicidal ideation. Here was a signature of the curse: death. The antidote was comfort and lament as paths toward hope in the face of trials.

Our example is Paul who returned to cities he had preached in, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22, ESV).

You cannot rebuke someone into hope. Going as far as the curse is found requires facing the hopelessness that believers face and patiently walking with them back to trust the Father again. Don’t run from others in their pain. They need you to help them lament and hold fast to God’s unfailing love.

6) Blindness and Conformity to the World (Antidote: Putting Kingdom before Culture)

In Colossians, Paul writes to believers: “See to it that no one takes you *captive* by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human *tradition*, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8, ESV, emphasis mine).

New believers are often captive to many lies which they allow to govern their thinking far more than the things they are learning, studying, or even memorizing from the Bible. A disciple is a learner, and making disciples involves lots of *unlearning*. We cannot merely put new truth over the old lies. The old will still manifest its presence, even through the layer of sound doctrine.

The old self acts like an anchor preventing movement toward maturity. It possesses tremendous inertia through the disciple’s culture, tradition, and religion. Peter wrote how we have been ransomed from “the futile ways inherited from [our] forefathers” (1 Pet. 1:18). Our family of origin and the collective culture are both very influential on our beliefs, values, and behaviors. While there are many positive things we have gained from our forefathers, not all are positive. Traditional Arab Muslim culture includes conflict and revenge, harshness in the home (even wife-beating), a very fluid understanding of honesty, and a preoccupation for the honor of man over holiness and the honor of God.

Unfortunately, we are often *blind* to the patterns of behavior we have inherited from our forefathers through our culture. Culture is a powerful mechanism for instilling behavior and beliefs. Paul generalized about the culture of Crete to Titus: “One of the Cretans, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:12–13). Paul was describing the prevailing cultural stereotype of the very men from which Titus was commissioned to choose elders for the churches. (And you think *your* disciples are challenging!)

It is easy to talk about *other* cultures and *their* sins. Friends who are missionaries in Cuba told us stories of the prevalence of stealing there, even by people in the church! ("After all, in communist society, you *all* own *everything*!") We might think, "Thank God *we're* not like the Arabs, Cretans, or Cubans!" But what about my culture? What would Paul say about American culture? Would he commend our rugged individualism? Our constant need for praise and affirmation? Like every culture, Americans have many common traits inherited from our forefathers which hinder our obedience to Jesus's commands.

Missiologist Paul Hiebert writes, "Conversion may include a change in beliefs and behavior, but if the world-view is not transformed, in the long run, the gospel is subverted and the result is a syncretistic Christo-paganism" (2008, 11). The gospel must challenge and transform our beliefs, values, behavior, and worldview until they conform to the will of God and his kingdom.

Our goal is not to be cultural critics but to help the blind see and display the new values of the kingdom of God from the inside out. How far has the curse reached to you through your *own* culture in ways you don't even recognize? Ask people from other cultures who know you to describe what they see in you, to reveal your blind spots. Do you obey the traditions of men and futile ways inherited from your forefathers or everything Jesus commanded?

7) Bondage (Antidote: Deliverance from False Beliefs and Unclean Spirits)

False beliefs come not only from religion but also from family, tradition, culture, and trauma. They make us captive to the curse. They obstruct the flow of the blessings of the gospel into our lives.

Muslims grow up essentially believing that they can never know if Allah accepts them. In Jesus Christ, God the Father fully accepts them and gives his Spirit as evidence. This is liberating truth, but the new believer

often takes months or years to internalize this and let God's acceptance through grace control their thinking and feeling.

Paul describes the antidote to this captivity in 2 Corinthians: "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:4–5, ESV). False beliefs about God, his world, and our identity are like a fortress in our mind, impeding the Bible's teaching and promises from penetrating our lives. The outright lies of a false religion are obvious and can be more easily renounced. More threatening are false beliefs which we cover with true doctrines that we can recite from memory. Only superficially covered, these false beliefs are operating in the background and functionally govern how we view God, self, and others.

When lies govern our thinking, they lead to all sorts of mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational distortions. It is frustrating when what we profess with our lips doesn't show up in our lives! We need to become aware of these strongholds of thought so we can take them captive and be free to obey Christ. Being transformed by the renewing of our minds involves more than reading books and memorizing Scripture. Truth must be intentionally and aggressively applied to the lies. Rob Reimer states, "You must hold on to the truth, precisely at the moment that the lie is vying for position in your heart and in your soul and in your behaviors" (2016, 41).

The evidence of such a false belief or lie at work in a disciple may be depression, acts of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21), or addictive behaviors. The aforementioned antidotes don't bring progress. Repeating the commands, reproving more loudly, and the disciple's trying harder all fall flat before such bondage. There are so many factors involved in gaining freedom from lies and false beliefs, including teaching, prayer, a supportive church community, counsel, grieving past sorrows and disappointments, healing from wounds and abuse, and forgiveness for

defiling bitterness. When you come up against this callous layer, get the appropriate help you need to help the disciple.

To help Habib with the issues I mentioned in the introduction, I drew a tree tracing the many influences. The roots included Arab culture and Islam. In Islam, he concluded there was no such thing as love, and therefore there could be no love in his first marriage. Islam considers human nature to be good, and parenting in Arab culture is often through manipulative indulgence or threats. The trunk included his sin and divorce. Years later as a believer, he learned biblical teaching on parenting and felt very guilty for his neglect of his children. When his eldest came to live with him and his Christian wife, the young adult's behavior was very immature and disrespectful of the stepmother.

Habib's wife hid some of this to honor him, which led to bitterness in her, and all the while he was very indulgent to make up for former absence (the branches). Their witness did not lead to the child's conversion, so he felt like an utter failure, believing his absence contributed to all of the child's shortcomings (the twigs). In his pain, he was numb and could not be empathetic to his wife's wounds (the fruit). Over time, we reviewed commands (1 Pet. 3:7), repentance (divorce), and lament (absence); we also deconstructed the distortions of culture, lies from his religion, and the controlling belief that he caused all his child's immaturity and selfishness and therefore had to indulge it, even at the expense of his wife. God confirmed this through other sources and has brought comfort, healing, reconciliation, and wise boundaries.

Bondage, this last layer of the curse, requires deliverance. Jesus came to set us free from the curse. While our bondage is often to lies, it can also be more directly demonic through unclean spirits. Although we don't go looking for these unclean spirits, it is our western scientific worldview—more than the testimony of Scripture—which causes us to dismiss/discount demonic influence. Although I am gaining more exposure, the topic of demonic deliverance is better addressed by those with more experience (search *Seedbed* archives).

Conclusion

Go, make disciples, far as the curse is found, teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded. Are you appropriating God’s means to experience the blessings of the gospel, going “far as the curse is found” in your own life and the life of those you disciple? Push back against the curse, toward maturity.

When you are teaching believers the truth and see them stuck, when they are not walking in the blessings which flow from the gospel, consider these various layers of the curse and discern where you need to go.

Impact of the curse	Blessing of the gospel	Disciple’s response
<i>When a disciple experiences:</i>	<i>We offer:</i>	<i>We invite the disciple to:</i>
Condemnation	Redemption	Believe
Ignorance	Teaching the commands	Learn
Confusion	Modeling and example	Follow
Stumbling in sin and folly	Correction that is spiritual	Repent
Hopelessness	Comfort	Lament
Blindness, conformity to world	Kingdom before culture	Adopt biblical worldview
Bondage to lies & unclean spirits	Deliverance	Engage in warfare: mental, emotional, spiritual

Table 1. Addressing Aspects of the Curse in the Lives of Disciples.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

May he do so in Arabia, or in whatever field you serve.

Discussion Questions

- What is the author's proposed approach for teaching BMBs to obey everything Jesus commanded? How is this approach informed by Scripture, and how is it informed by his experience discipling BMBs?
- What do you think of the author's framework of seven layers of sin's curse, along with seven corresponding "antidotes" from the gospel (administered by the discipler)? Is this a helpful way of thinking about discipleship, both our own and that of those you are engaging in your context?
- What are some areas where the impact of sin's curse is most evident in the place and among the people whom you serve? In your culture(s) of origin? In your own life?
- Compare and contrast the discipleship approach in this article with that represented in "Proclamational DBS: Biblical Preaching and Teaching in Discovery Bible Studies" in this issue of *Seedbed*. What is the role of the discipler/church-planter? What are the opportunities of each approach, and what are the limits? What can the two approaches learn from one another?

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