

Lessons Gleaned in Evangelism among Muslim Women

by Joy Loewen

As I reflect on nearly thirty years of ministry among Muslim women, both in the East and the West, I am aware of having learned many lessons about communicating the Gospel. Five significant lessons stand out as turning points in my desire to communicate the Good News more effectively to Muslims.

Understanding the Importance of Being Set Apart

‘Oh, Lord, I can’t do that!’ I tried to explain to God as I knelt by my bed.

I was about forty years old when I clearly sensed the Holy Spirit suggesting that I remove my make-up and my jewellery except my wedding rings. It wasn’t that I was much into fashion but the modest make-up and jewellery I wore had been part of me for quite a few years. I looked very unfashionable in comparison to Muslim women at their parties all decked up with their expensive lustrous gold bracelets and necklaces purchased in the Middle East. Now they would think I was unattractive and they would be embarrassed to associate with plain me. So I presumed, but God was testing me. I was determined to pay any price to bring the Gospel to Muslim women, but, really, it was going too far to ask that of me.

‘Well, try it, my child, and just see what a difference it will make,’ I heard God saying.

By this time, I was sweating it out with God.

‘What will my husband think? What will others think? I will be a prude. I won’t look young and sexy anymore. Besides, there is nothing sinful with wearing make-up and jewellery...’

And so on, went the internal struggle.

Then submission flooded my soul. I got up, put away my make-up and jewellery and waited to see what would happen. That was about thirteen years ago and I can testify that that step of obedience was the turning point of effectiveness in my ministry among Muslim women. The biggest surprise came from the reaction of Muslim men. I now had more open doors to their wives. I discovered that a Muslim man sometimes is afraid a Western woman will corrupt his wife. We are often seen as ‘Hollywood’ seductresses, all out to lure and capture men. Suddenly, as if almost overnight, both Muslim men and women saw me as a ‘religious’ woman. Muslims feel safe among ‘religious’ women. Doors opened for me as never before. Presentations of the Gospel no longer came with mixed messages. I was amazed. Something very important had taken place which I couldn’t quite identify. Slowly I realized that in the eyes of *Muslims*, I was ‘set apart’ for religious purposes.

Understanding the Significance of Using Scriptures

I pondered a new missionary’s comments. He was describing ‘Scripture reading times’ with non-seeking Mus-

lims. I had grown up in a missionary home in an Islamic country and I had never witnessed this approach by any missionary. And in the ten years my husband and I were missionaries in an Islamic country, I had not heard of anyone simply reading Scriptures with non-seeking Muslims. I wondered if it really worked. Everyone I knew basically talked about Scripture with Muslims, but did they actually have them read it for themselves?

After thinking and praying about following that practice and asking the Lord for courage, I decided to plunge in and try it out. First, we tried it in our home when we had Muslims over for tea or dinner. We lined a bookshelf in the living room with Bibles in different languages. They were put in full sight of guests who often noticed them and made mention of them. We'd pull out the Bible in their language and let them look it over. Then we'd ask if they would like to hear a story Jesus told. Finding the portion, we'd ask them to read it out loud and tell us the story back. They often asked where they could get a Bible and then we'd give them one.

Once we felt comfortable and natural doing this in our home, I decided to put a small Bible in a cloth bag in my purse. Every time I'd visit in Muslim homes, I'd see if I could get them to read Scriptures. During conversations I'd bring my Bible out and ask if they would like to hear something on what we just talked about. Most of the time, the Scripture reading was gladly received. After about twenty years in Muslim ministry, another turning point

in becoming a more effective witness to Muslims had just taken place. I discovered that it is far more powerful using the Bible than simply sharing about it. Now our Muslim acquaintances equate us with the Bible. They know the Bible will usually come out during a visit. One day Aliya was in our home when she suddenly blurted out, 'Where's your Bible?' And Khalida, a strongly opposed Muslim PhD student, asked one night, 'Aren't you going to read the Bible with me?'

Understanding the Power of Praying with Muslim Women

'Please pray for me,' my Libyan friend begged. Her doctor had advised her not to get pregnant because she needed a liver transplant and now she was carrying a baby and desperate. This should be interesting, I mused. She is one of the most conservative women I've met. I let her know that I pray in the name of Jesus and I asked if that would be okay with her. After her agreement, I weakly prayed for a miracle. After all, I hadn't learned how to do this in church. Immediately she requested, 'Now pray a second time and put your hand on my stomach.' This woman is desperate, I concluded. I chided myself later for being so weak in faith and spiritual authority. A few months later, I was called to the hospital where Khadija was threatening to lose the baby. She wanted prayer again. Some time later, a beautiful healthy boy was delivered.

Khadija helped me to enter a turning point in understanding the power of prayer on the spot with Muslim

women. I had been in ministry about thirteen years and told many women I would pray for them, which I tried to do, faithfully keeping my word. It was quite a different matter to pray with them and to do it boldly and in the name of Jesus. In the beginning I felt embarrassed and hesitant, but to my joy and surprise, I discovered Muslim women are yearning to be prayed for. It never fails to amaze me to watch them sit quietly in wonder and awe, often wiping away tears. Seldom do I witness this in my own culture. The experience of the strongest presence of God usually comes when I pray with Muslim women.

Understanding the Teaching of Sin in Evangelism

‘Why don’t the women respond more to the red page depicting the cross in the *Wordless Book*?’ I lamented to my husband.

‘Perhaps,’ he replied, ‘it’s because they don’t understand the black page depicting sin well enough.’

Could it be? I did talk about sin but I really had always wanted women to understand the blood of Jesus shed on the cross.

It was my turn to share the Gospel on the women’s ward of the mission hospital in the Islamic nation where we were serving and I decided I would try to explain sin more clearly. My legs began to weaken and I got very nervous. As I stood before about seventy-five patients and relatives, something ominous was happening. I was shocked to find that there was no black page to explain sin. I asked

others to try to find it but they couldn’t either. An eeriness settled in. I put the book down in front of me for a few seconds and then went to pick it up and it was gone. No one had moved. So I looked for something black to use as an object lesson. As soon as I was done, my eyes saw the book lying where I had put it down. Still no black page. I was shaken as I returned home. I fell into a chair strangely exhausted, holding the book in my hand. As I opened it, the black page fell open and I heard inaudible demonic laughing. That day will never be forgotten because I learned a very important lesson. If we want women to understand and appreciate the value of the cross, they must hear a clear explanation about sin.

It has taken me a long time to learn how to explain sin to Muslim women. There is little comprehension about the holiness of God in Islam. Almost every sin of their own can be justified to be legitimate. Someone else’s sin is a different matter. I have found that if a Muslim woman does not get a clear understanding and conviction of her sin, and yet accepts Christ, she will most likely fall away with time. A turning point in seeing a Muslim woman begin to grasp an understanding of sin came when, after giving doctrinal explanations of sin which seemed to fall on deaf ears, I began to share stories of sin and shame in my own life. Initially I was reluctant to share such information, largely because I was afraid they would not want to associate with me, or might spread what I shared so that doors would even close to me as a result. I was amazed to realize that deep

down I really wanted to leave a good impression.

Hesitantly I began to share my own stories. Suddenly, Muslim women could relate to some of the things evidenced in my sinful nature or even a sinful stronghold where I had needed deliverance or mistakes I had made. The Good News was that I could move on to declaring a Saviour – His saving and transforming power, forgiveness and grace. Especially powerful has been the mention of my own sins of lying, cheating, jealousy, hatred, anger, desires for revenge, a family line of occultic involvement, hypocrisy and rebelliousness. I also share our family mistakes in raising our children. All too often, we leave the impression that we are good. Since they want to project the same image, the issue of sin, so important in understanding the cross, is left untouched or not understood. My Tunisian friend understood sin very clearly and came under conviction. Even though she has had her share of trials and testings and even been weakened by them momentarily, one thing she knows is that she has a Saviour who died for her sin. Now the cross looms large for her.

Understanding the Attraction of Heaven in Evangelism

Mom and Dad had just died. Their deaths were awesome because they were ready and anticipating going to be with Jesus in heaven. My many Muslim friends came to me to give their heart-felt condolences, which they are so gifted at doing. Some prepared wonderful meals to honour

me. How precious these women have become! They go far beyond sending a sympathy card or having flowers delivered. They will cry and sit with you. But one thing they cannot do is give hope to the bereaved. The very mention of death terrifies the average woman. Tala had created a beautiful homemade sympathy card for me but she left a blank where the word *death* was to be written. She could not utter the fearful word. Because my heart was so full of fresh emotions after the deaths of my mother and father, words came tumbling out. As I spoke words about our beautiful heaven, I watched them in amazement. Their reactions seemed to say, 'Tell me more'. And so I did.

The words in Revelation 21:3-4 and 22:3-5 about heaven capture their hearts without fail. This has proven to be one of the best ways to get a spiritual conversation going. For example, Aswad's full-term baby boy was born dead and her grief was beyond bearing. She didn't have a Bible in her language. But I had her read verses on heaven from Revelation and she couldn't stop reading.

Then she responded, 'We believe when a baby dies, he will bring us fruit in hell.'

I couldn't believe it. She had already destined herself to hell and was at least comforting herself that her baby would come and bring her fruit. I explained that Jesus could take both her and her baby to heaven.

She wanted so badly to believe that but dejectedly repeated, 'Well, we believe....'

More than ever, I was determined from that point on to keep talking about heaven. Many Muslim women convey their involvement in praying or fasting for the departed soul of their loved one to reach heaven. There seems to be an underlying belief among many that their prayers or sacrificial fasting will bring about a safe arrival and perhaps even influence God as well as hopefully gaining them merit from engaging in this religious work. I like to use a powerful verse from 1 Peter to affirm that the crucified and risen Jesus is the One who can safely bring us to heaven, the longing of every Muslim woman's heart.

Christ also suffered when he died for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners that he might bring us safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was

raised to life in the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18 NLT).

In conclusion, I discovered that putting into action what I learned about my calling, Scripture, prayer, sin and heaven were significant turning points in my becoming a more effective witness for Jesus among Muslim women. Some of these lessons, though learned earlier, were fleshed out once again when Manal, my North African sister, surrendered her life to Jesus, was baptized and moved in with us for in-depth discipling and to be in a safe haven where she could receive a lot of loving care. Her most apparent spiritual growth seemed to take off when I shared about my own journey in dealing with sin and finding God's deliverance and grace.