

From Snail-Mail to Email and Beyond

by C.M.

I came to work at the Media Centre in Marseille in early 1992 and joined the Bible Correspondence Course (BCC – now Response) section. Immediately, I found myself thrown into the task of correcting courses in Arabic and very soon afterwards, into that of responding to the questions correspondents would send with their lessons – everything ranging from a brief note to a lengthy personal letter.

Before I began the work, I had thought that the most important aspect of it would be to answer difficult questions from correspondents about Islam and Christianity. But I soon realised that its real value was that it provided a channel through which people could study the Bible. That channel was simply a friendship by correspondence, for those who wanted it. These friendships could last a long time. Occasionally we would receive letters from students whose records with us went back twenty years. There were others who stayed in contact for three to five years. Sadly, of course, there were many who wrote only once.

‘One God, One Way’

I saw that many students were happy to study the Bible teaching as presented in the *One God One Way* course without raising serious objections. This course consists of ten lessons: The Creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah 53, Jesus, Last things: heaven and hell. Although the format and the questions are very simple, the content is substantial. It is an excellent introduction for the Muslim who is interested in knowing about the gospel. It has the great advantage of building on the Old Testament and on stories that are familiar to the Muslim from the Qur'an, even if the details are sometimes different. The concepts of sin and the need for a sacrifice to atone for sin are carefully introduced. This paves the way for the student to understand that Christ's death on the cross was part of God's plan from the beginning.

Students' letters

We would always seek to encourage the students, perhaps just by adding a few words of congratulation to their course. There was also a whole range of questions to respond to. These fell into several categories:

1. **Practical.** Students would often ask for help with visas, coming to the West, finding a wife... Knowing the difficulties of the economic situation in North Africa, we could sympathise, but we had to say politely that we could not help. There were also more heart-rending requests, particularly when people had medical needs for themselves or other family members. A generous older lady at the Media Centre purchased drugs on several occasions, which we then sent to the correspondents concerned.
2. **Personal.** Some would write about difficult family situations. I couldn't help smiling when one young man shared his problem: he would be talking to a girl and his face would become red! The most difficult letters of this kind were those from young people who had become interested in the gospel and then faced severe family opposition, perhaps even being thrown out of their home.

When on HMA, I often asked people to pray that the mindset of the parents' generation (or of the next generation of parents) might change and that they would allow their children to make their own choices in the area of religion.

3. **Intellectual** – yes, what I thought I would be doing. There were these kinds of questions too. The most common ones by far were about the 'corruption of the Bible' and Jesus as the 'Son of God', often quoting the well-known verses in Sura 112: '*Allah...lam yalid wa lam youlad...*' (*Allah... did not give birth and He was not born.*) Correspondents also often asked about the Trinity – do Christians believe in three gods? Jesus as God, Son of God, Son of Man – how can he be all three? The Cross – did Jesus really die? How come there are four gospels and not just one? How do Christians pray? How do Christians fast? What do we think of Muhammad?

At the Media Centre, we had a helpful stock of standard replies to these questions. Our aim was to provide a simple, brief and reasoned answer at the right level for the correspondent. I always asked the students to whom I sent these answers to come back to me if they had any questions or comments. But they hardly ever did! How good it would have been to have some feedback and so to be able to improve our responses! I attach as an appendix the answer we used to send about the 'corruption of the Bible'.

Personal follow-up

In handling all these questions, we needed to keep in mind the long-term aim of the response work. This is to keep in touch with students so that they will keep on studying the Bible. After *One God, One Way*, they can go on to *Luke*, *Acts* and other courses. At the same time, we are praying that the Lord will work in their hearts and that they will desire to know Him for themselves. Then, at the right moment, we can offer them the chance of meeting a friend face to face who will be able to explain to them the truths that they have been studying.

I was able to make a few follow-up visits myself in order to meet students who were corresponding with us. I also passed on details of many others who had shown a genuine interest. They were then contacted by workers on the ground. I personally know of a few who are walking well with the Lord today. Of course, it's my prayer that there might be many others I don't know about!

Snail-mail declines but email grows!

I look back on it as a privilege to have been able to serve the Lord at the Media Centre from 1992 to 2001. We saw some significant changes. In particular, the heyday of postal correspondence (and probably also of radio listening) began to come to an end. The first blow that we experienced was to lose the majority of the students who corresponded with us from Algeria. As the civil war developed between the government and the fundamentalists, the postal service deteriorated dramatically and it became almost impossible to maintain a worthwhile exchange of correspondence. Then, from the mid-1990s came the rise of satellite TV, email and the Internet. We can only guess how much pen and paper communication has suffered as a result! Our statistics show a significant and steady decline in letters. However, as postal correspondence has decreased, email correspondence has increased.

For the last five years, I have been helping to reply to Arabic emails as a member of the Internet Response Network, giving half a day or so a week to this work. It has been interesting to

see the contrast with postal letters. One of the first surprises was the dropping of the traditional Arabic greeting! In letters, there would always be a sentence, or even sometimes a paragraph, of greeting, often in a poetic style. In emails, this has come down to a word or two, and sometimes not even that! Email messages also tend to be brief – not more than a few lines at first. Many correspondents must be writing from Internet cafes and so do not have the time and privacy that the letter writer enjoys.

Nevertheless, I have been encouraged to see that it is still possible to develop worthwhile exchanges that can lead to the offer of a face to face visit. Three correspondents who have now been contacted come quickly to mind: A in the UK, son of a Yemeni father and a Russian mother; K in Libya, who must have had his own computer at home (he would sometimes reply within minutes of my sending a message!) and M in Yemen. So the Internet is certainly opening many new opportunities for us.

Future challenges

A particular challenge is to provide the combination of personal interaction and opportunity to study that a former generation had through correspondence and BCC. While we rejoice at good numbers of people emailing our websites, particularly www.maarifa.org, we also want to encourage them to study. The BCC courses on www.risalat-ul-injil and the quizzes and activities on www.shabiba.net are a positive start in this direction. We need to develop these further.

Personal interaction now includes participation in chat rooms and at least one member of the company is already involved in this. As the technology races ahead, we are also looking at offering material suitable for the mobile phone. It goes without saying that we need the Lord's direction in all this. We must continue to present the gospel message in ways that are appropriate and relevant to the audience. We must look to Him to work in their hearts. We must give ourselves to the task of helping those who respond – by providing teaching and encouragement for them and by linking them with those who can help them face to face. We trust that some of them will be truly saved and added to the church.

Appendix: 'Has the Bible Been Changed?'

The following is a brief summary of one of the 'standard answers' that we have in our files.

First, we emphasise the power of God to preserve his word – a concept the Muslim should have no difficulty in accepting. How could man, the creature formed from the dust, change the Creator's word? (I remember Dr Mennis Abdenmour giving the parallel of a human father who had left important instructions for his children: would he permit someone else to enter his house and change them?)

Secondly, we quote some appropriate verses from the Bible, for example:
Psalm 119:89 – *Your word, O Lord, is eternal. It stands firm in the heavens.* These are the words of the prophet David in the Psalms (*Zabour*).
Luke 21:33 – *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.* These were Jesus' words about his own teaching. These statements, from those who Muslims agree were prophets, carry their own weight and force.

Thirdly, we recall the love of Jews and Christians for God's word, and how many Christians died in the persecutions of the Roman Empire in order to preserve the Bible. There is also the stern warning at the end of the Bible against making any changes to God's word (Revelation 22:18-19).

Fourthly, we mention some of the ancient manuscripts on which the New Testament text is based, with complete copies available from the fourth century and smaller sections from early in the second (and possibly, even earlier still).

We conclude with an encouragement to the correspondent to read the Bible for himself. After all, who can judge a book without having read it?

Note: Although we do not reason from the Qur'an in order to defend the reliability of the biblical text, we do echo some Qur'anic phrases here and there in the article. God is *watching over His word (yuhaimin)*. The gospel is *light and guidance (huda wa nour)*. The Christians and Jews are *the people of the book (ahl ul kitab)*. (See for example Sura 5:44-48.)

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