

SEEDBED

Third Quarter for 1995

Vol. X, No. 3

Editor: Sam Schlorff

CHURCH PLANTING FORUM

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A SPECIAL NUMBER ON THE JESUS MOSQUE IDEA

One of the functions of SEEDBED is to serve as a forum for the discussion of ideas. One controversial idea that has recently been the subject of considerable discussion among Christian workers in the Muslim World is that of the so-called "Jesus Mosque." Simply put, this idea states that we should no longer be thinking in terms of churches in the traditional mold, inasmuch as this type of church is inevitably marginalized and segregated from the majority society, and ineffective for reaching the majority. The new approach seeks to raise up fellowships of believers who remain *within* the majority society--in *Jesus Mosques*. The theory is that a true saving faith in Jesus Christ may be validly expressed through the practice of Islamic forms of worship, such as the Ritual Prayer (Salât) and the fast of Ramadan, by giving them "Christian meanings."

The idea of devoting an issue to the *Jesus Mosque* idea suggested itself nearly a year ago when I received a letter from Warren Chastain in which he mentioned, among other things, that he was planning an article on the subject, and then a few days later I received the attached article from John Mansour. The two accepted my proposal but it has taken until now for Warren to produce his article. Just a word about the two authors: Mansour, who has written previously for SEEDBED, is a Western Christian writing under an assumed name for security reasons. Chastain, whose overseas experience was in Indonesia, is currently Consultant in Church Planting at the Zwemer Institute. Following the articles we list several articles for those who wish to read further, and a brief review of a book exemplifying the Jesus Mosque approach. In a future issue, Mansour will have opportunity to reply to the article of Chastain; we also invite our readers to send us their comments and critiques, but *please* let's focus on principles. The Editor

DO MUSLIM FELLOWSHIPS DAMAGE UNITY?

by John Mansour*

This paper attempts to deal with an issue often raised in relation to the planting of communities of Muslims who follow Jesus. This is the notion that if these are culturally distinct groups of Muslim believers who meet separately from those who are "ethnically Christian" we are damaging the unity of the Body of Christ. Perhaps it is not this that bothers some as much as the perception that believers who remain within the Muslim community are cut off from the bounds of "Christendom". Clearly, this is an important issue in church planting that must be thoughtfully and prayerfully addressed.

In order better to understand the issues involved, this paper will examine the nature of the religious and cultural differences that separate Christians from Muslims, the early church's approach to different cultures, and the notion of *ecclesia* in the New Testament. We will conclude with a look at how the Bible treats unity, with implications for our response as we engage in church planting.

"Becoming Christian"

Why can't Muslims just "become Christians"? This would not seem to be a problem if the only real difference between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East were that of faith. In reality, however, they are two *culturally* separate communities, with differing customs, holidays, dress and even linguistic forms. Often, they do not socialize with one another, choose to live segregated from each other, and choose different lines of work. Finally, each group has ingrained prejudices against the other (especially regarding intermarriage).

The problem comes when we require a Muslim to change all of these ethnic forms, since (so far) the only ones who follow Jesus are within the Christian community. We want him to have fellowship with other believers, but for him to do so he must adopt a different culture (*in addition to* the necessary step of conversion to Christ). The result is rejection by his family and friends. We see the same problem occurring in the case of Catholics and Orthodox Christians who are required to become Protestant in order to follow Jesus. Whole movements of "Charismatic Catholics" and "Orthodox Renewal" groups have emerged to deny this premise. These are made up of those who love their own people and do not want to be cut off from their brethren "according to the flesh".

"Religion," East and West

Many Westerners tend to perceive religion as something personally held, by autonomous choice. Historically, however, this individualistic approach to religion has not been the norm even in the West. Just a hundred years ago shop-windows in the US could have signs saying "no Jews or Catholics," or something similar.

In the Middle East, religion is not primarily a matter of personal choice. A person is born Muslim, Christian, or other, must marry within his or her community, and remain within its boundaries throughout life. Belief is not important unless the community says that certain beliefs are out of bounds. Practice is much more important. Muslims may be

atheists, freethinkers, and whatever, as long as they show by a few symbolic gestures that they belong to the community. They will probably need to keep the Fast, (or at least not break it in public), and observe the Feasts. Praying regularly is less important, but this depends on the country and how conservative it is.

"Disunity" on the Home Front

It is interesting that many of us consider Muslim fellowships as detrimental to "unity," but never give a second thought to the ethnically divided churches in our own home towns. While in the US recently, I went to a church service in Washington, DC, of which the membership was almost entirely white and yuppie. Not a block away was a church that appealed to urban blacks, and very likely there was also a Hispanic church somewhere in the vicinity. Now, if you asked the people in the first church what they thought of blacks they would very likely say that they are very welcome. The same would be true of the other churches and their attitudes to other ethnic groups.

So why don't more blacks and Hispanics go to the first church? Because they are *more comfortable* among people like themselves! They like being with people who think and talk the same way, speak the same language, and have the same tastes in music and liturgy. *Why then do we have a double standard when it comes to believers and churches in the Middle East?*

Islam as an Evil Empire

Some will say that in the Middle East the issue is religion, not ethnicity. Islam is a demonic, evil empire from which people need to be liberated. The women need to be freed from a paternalistic system that shrouds them under an oppressive veil. The problem with this perception is that it too simplistic. You can no more make generalizations about Islam than you can about Christianity. You can just as easily make "Christendom" out to be an oppressive, paternalistic, narrow-minded system that enslaves millions. One need go no further than the writings of Bertrand Russell and other left-wing Western writers to see this.

Many times have I been in a prayer meeting where someone prayed zealously for the destruction of Mecca, as if this were the key to the "downfall of Islam" (I myself have probably prayed like this in the past). We would do well to remember that Jesus rebuked his over-eager disciples for wanting to call down fire on a recalcitrant village (Luke 9:54-55). His rebuke came, at least in part, from a concern that such an attitude goes against our calling to be messengers of reconciliation and mercy. The Scriptures clearly indicate that our conflict is not with "flesh and blood," but with the spiritual "principalities" behind them (Ephesians 6:12). When we attack someone's ethnic identity, in reality we are attacking the foundations of his very life, not the forces of evil. This does not mean that we should not confront lies or expose erroneous thinking. But what is beneficial, or at least neutral, in the culture should be affirmed and not torn down. Much of Muslim Middle Eastern culture that Westerners may perceive as "oppressive" or "demonic" also happens to be very close to the culture of First Century Palestine, and the culture of the Prophets and Patriarchs.

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Both the Islamic world and Christendom may be seen as "big umbrellas". Under the cultural/religious umbrella of Christianity we find a wide range of beliefs: the nominally religious, the secular, regular attendees (but unregenerate), sectarians (Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, etc.), and a minority who claim to be "born again." Interestingly, the majority are not too interested in how one defines "being a Christian." I still remember a particularly vitriolic debate on the editorial page of my hometown newspaper in which a few "born again" Christians argued heatedly that Mormons are not Christians, while the bulk of the mail poured scorn on their narrow-mindedness.

Is this not also true in the Muslim world? We find there Sunnis, Shias, Alawites, Druze, Ahmadiyya, and the like. To a greater or lesser extent all claim the name "Muslim." And in Bangladesh and Indonesia groups of followers of Jesus also call themselves Muslim. Why then is the idea of an Islamic Jesus movement so resisted by expatriate workers elsewhere?

Jews for Jesus; Muslims for the Messiah

Let's turn to an example closer to home: the "completed Jew" or "Jew for Jesus." No one objects that a Messianic Jewish movement damages the "unity of the Body of Christ". Why is this? Frankly, it is because Jews have better PR than Muslims. Years of "Bless Israel" theology have guaranteed that.

Some will no doubt say that "Islam is a distortion of the truth, but Judaism is a religion from God. After all, they believe in the Old Testament." This argument would hold water if either First Century or modern rabbinical Judaism were a religion of simple belief in the Old Testament. However, Jesus attacked the Judaism of his time for its hypocrisies and distortions of God's Word, yet without repudiating His Jewish identity. In the teachings of modern Judaism likewise, a whole superstructure of doctrine has been added to the Scriptures, embodied in the Mishna, the Talmud, the Tosefta, and the Targums, not to mention the Kabbala and assorted commentators. This body of interpretation ends up producing a religion as distorted and distant from grace as anything in Islam. Yet it contains elements that may be used as bridges to faith, or "redemptive analogies" as they have been termed.

The Messianic Jewish movement has had success because those involved see themselves as being true Jews who follow Jesus, not "Jewish Christians." They love their people so much that they fight to remain within the community. This is not a gimmick to get them converted and then say to them in effect, "Surprise! You're really a Christian now."

In a similar way, a movement of Muslims for Jesus that remains within Islam will really take off only when those within it see themselves as both truly Muslim and truly followers of Jesus. I believe that this has happened already in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Egypt, and that it can and will happen in many more Muslim countries. Elsewhere we have already seen examples of groups proclaiming allegiance to Christ and yet rejecting identification with Christendom. All this is not to deny that Muslims can be won to Christ individually by traditional approaches. However, is this *all* that we want? Don't we desire to see groups of believers (*ecclesiae*) and even a movement?

The Early Church's Message

Considering the first Jewish believers' perception of the way the gospel was preached to the Greeks, it must have been difficult for them to imagine that God would allow Greeks to come to faith. The Jews were not on good terms with the Graeco-Roman world around them. Look at Paul addressing the crowd in Acts chapter 22. He preaches in Hebrew, and they listen to him talk of his vision of Jesus. What drove them into a frenzy was his claim that God had sent him to the Gentiles! In a similar way, the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19) was likely stoked by mutual Greek-Jewish antagonism.

How did the gospel ever overcome this huge barrier? First, God acted sovereignly, using dreams, visions and miracles to point out to leaders such as Peter that He intended to bring the Gentiles to faith. Even then, the Jewish believers did not really take off with the good news to the Gentiles. God had to "recruit" some special people for the task, the most outstanding being Saul of Tarsus. The message which they preached, however, was not a gospel of "fulfilled Judaism." They had to translate the gospel and clothe it in Greek dress in order for the Greeks to fully understand it.

In the inspired Scriptures we find Paul quoting two pagan authors, Epimenides of Crete and Aratus the Stoic, in his preaching (Acts 17:28). Paul also quotes Epimenides in his Epistle to Titus, and goes so far as to dub him "one of their own prophets" (Titus 1:12). Similarly, John's gospel uses the notion of the "Logos," developed by writers such as Philo, to point to the pre-existence and preeminence of Christ. Donald Guthrie has also noted similarities to the works of Philo in Hebrews ("Hebrews, Epistle to the" in the *New Bible Dictionary*). The apostles also used pagan religious terminology; terms such as *mysterion* (mystery), *epoptes* (initiate), *zoe aionios* (eternal life) and *telete* (initiatory rite), were taken from the mystery religions and used to illustrate the gospel. Concepts such as rebirth through baptism were also common among these cults.²

It is hard for us to understand the thoroughness of the translation procedure that these first evangelists to the pagan world used in order to present the gospel. The vast majority of the Church Fathers, such as Justin, Aristides, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Clement and Origen, all made use of pagan writings. Michael Green illustrates what happened in his book, *Evangelism in the Early Church*. He concludes:

"Yes, the lives, the message, the deaths of Christians showed that the risk of taking the gospel and translating it, as thoroughly as a Justin did, into other thought forms was a very worthwhile procedure. They used the Greek epics; they used the Homeric myths, and also Stoic and Epicurean philosophy when it suited them. ... this is the characteristic aim which the Greek exponents of the gospel set themselves: to embody biblical doctrine in cultural forms which would be acceptable in their society. Not to remove the scandal of the gospel, but so to present their message in terms acceptable to their hearers, that the real scandal of the gospel could be perceived and its challenge faced. That was their aim. Many of them must have succeeded in it much of the time, or there would have been no Church strong enough to face the repeated persecutions from the state in the second and early third centuries. Often the attempt was a failure; something of the content of the message was lost with its Jewish wrappings which had been discarded. That was regrettable, but inevitable--assuming that

the attempt to reach the Gentiles was worth making. And to question that is to question the universality of Christianity itself. If Christ is for all men, then evangelists must run the risk of being misunderstood, of misunderstanding elements in the gospel themselves, of losing out on the transposition of parts of the message so long as they bear witness to him. Christians are called to live dangerously. The principle of the incarnation must be carried into Christian preaching."³

We do not see the radical nature of the translation that occurred because we ourselves are heirs of the Gentile church. Unfortunately, the Jewish branch of the church died out, probably sometime in the fourth or fifth century.⁴ Nonetheless, we will once again be facing these same first-century issues as the gospel goes to Hindus, Muslims and other megablocks of unreached peoples in our day.

The Ecclesia

Part of our problem is that we do not really understand what the church is, according to the New Testament. We impose on the new church standards from our own culture--forms of worship, dress, language, and the like--because we think that's what the church is. The following traditions, among others, have no root in Scripture, and date from after the time of Constantine:

church buildings	church names	pews
sermons	choirs	liturgies and rituals in worship
seminaries	clergy/laity distinction	denominations, etc. ⁵

This is not to say that these are necessarily bad. Nonetheless, when we begin to pass these on along with the gospel, we nullify the power of the gospel of grace, which is able to work from *within* the culture, as leaven works in a lump of dough.

One writer argues that there is no Biblical imperative for a believer in Jesus even to use the name "Christian". Citing studies of the term, he concludes, "The point of all this is to demonstrate that followers of Christ did not identify themselves as 'Christians' in the time of the New Testament, and consequently there is no Biblical necessity for us to use this term to describe our identification with Christ! Historical factors led to its adoption by believers, but we are not bound by this anymore than we are by other practices adopted and practiced by the church, such as: church buildings, Sunday school or identifying ourselves by our denominational affiliation..."⁶

The New Testament term "ecclesia" did not denote a building, or the forms of expression used to approach God. It denoted the community of believers in Jesus. Those within the ecclesia, the body of Christ, have given allegiance to Christ, not to "Christianity" or to the "Christian" community (most of whom, remember, do not follow Christ). "Christendom" then, is not synonymous with the Body of Christ.

True Unity

Within the world wide community of followers of Jesus is incredible diversity. Probably the only thing they have in common is Jesus himself. Yet somehow God claims to make

these diverse elements one through the Spirit. The Apostle describes the astounding nature of this spiritual unity in Ephesians 2:14-16: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." Paul claims that the edifice of Judaism (expressed in Jewish cultural forms) which stood between Gentiles and God, the "yoke of the Law," has been pulled down. Gentiles may now come to God by faith in Jesus *alone*! This greatly angered many Jews, who saw it as compromise and blasphemy. It also flew in the face of the human tendency to seek *uniformity*, something visible from the outside. God had established *unity*, a common purpose that is shared though not always visible.

Paul acknowledges the inscrutability of this unity: "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 3:4-6) Why did Paul call the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers a mystery? Could it be that he was simply pointing out that to an outside observer there was little in common between the Gentile church and the Jewish church, both organizationally, culturally, and linguistically?

Observe how the early church handled cultural diversity: "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do." (Galatians 2:9-10). If this situation happened today, many would sadly shake their heads and mutter about how James and Paul just couldn't cooperate. Yet true unity in diversity was established! Cultural differences were acknowledged and respected, but were considered irrelevant to the cause of true unity under the one head, Christ. Jewish believers could keep the law as a way of honoring their people and heritage. Gentiles could keep their own culture, and still be believers. And the Judaizers (uniformitarians who said you had to become Jewish to follow Jesus) were repudiated at the highest level.

Nonetheless Paul had continually to struggle against those who tried to undermine the gospel to the Gentiles. The power of ethnocentrism was so strong that many of the first Jewish believers could not really believe in a message of grace through faith in Jesus alone. This is the same issue that we are facing in Muslim evangelization today: What must a Muslim do to be saved? What must he believe to be saved?

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Our theology may be one thing and our practice another. Are our actions consistent with what we preach? Peter believed in salvation by grace alone, but Paul rebuked him to his face because he was not "acting in line with the truth of the gospel" (Galatians 2:14). What did Peter do to deserve this? I always wondered why Paul rebuked him so harshly when all he did was eat with other Jews. The issue, however, is bigger than that. Peter

ate with Jewish believers and not with Gentile believers because they followed the Jewish ceremonial law and the Gentiles did not. They were not part of the "in" group. They were not acceptable, they were different, and they were "unclean."

How would a Gentile understand Peter's *actions*, as distinct from his *words*? He would have seen that to be *really* acceptable, to be *really* part of God's people, one had to keep the Jewish customs. Otherwise, he would be shunned as an outsider to the covenant. Paul calls this kind of behavior for what it is: "nullifying the grace of God" (Gal. 2:21). Are we not in effect nullifying the grace of God when we speak a Christian subdialect with Muslims, when we maintain our Western religious practices, when we refuse to adopt Islamic cultural forms because they are "unclean?" How unlike the incarnation of our Lord who was willing to become one with the people in order to transform them from within!

The real issue we are facing, then, is that a *false* unity of the church is being pushed on us, a cultural uniformitarianism. Most of us can easily see and reject the false unity pitched by the World Council of Churches, an ecumenistic vision based on organizational unity under human headship. What we don't see is our own cultural imperialism, since the dominant Christian culture in the world (American evangelicalism) happens to be the one we are most familiar and comfortable with. We don't see ourselves imposing anything heavy or difficult, since we are happy and comfortable with our own culture. The rest of the world, however, may not be so interested in becoming culturally "Americanized" in order to come to faith in Christ.

Much of what has been written above is disturbing. It implies a change in the ways we are accustomed to operating. While many will not agree with the extent to which the author is prepared to take the incarnation of the gospel, let us seek to encourage, understand and support one another as much as possible in our diversity. Our goal should be to maintain a unity of love that will testify to our allegiance to the Lord of Love, Jesus Christ. If uniformitarianism is a false unity, then true unity, love for God and love for our fellow man, will expose the false even as counterfeit gems fade next to the real thing.

¹For a secular Jesus movement in Brazil, see Jim Peterson, *Church Without Walls*, NavPress, 1992

²Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, pp. 121-2.

³Ibid, p. 142.

⁴See Ray Pritz's Ph.D. dissertation, "The Jewish-Christian Sect of the Nazarenes," The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

⁵Taken from James H. Rutz, *The Open Church*, Auburn, Maine: The Seed Sowers, 1992, p. 73.

⁶M.H., Contextualized Identification, unpublished paper.