

BRIDGING THE GAP FOR MUSLIMS

Bridging Concept

A bridge is a link that connects two opposite sides of a gap. The purpose of a bridge is to transport people or vehicles from one side to the other. “Building bridges” has been used extensively as a missionary strategy aimed at reducing the resistance of those we desire to share the gospel with. Steve Hawthorne, author of the study guide for the Perspectives course, states: “Ever since Paul’s day missionaries have been learning about effective relationships that span the gap between cultures.” (Page 105.)

The incarnation is used by many missions strategists as our model. As Jesus humbled himself and entered our world, we must also traverse or cross the cultural gap by humbling ourselves and entering into the world of our target person or group.

The building bridges approach seeks to find common ground between the cultures of the missionary and recipients. By acknowledging that we have common beliefs and interests we begin to engage people of other cultures and religions with the hope that it will earn us a hearing.

“Building Bridges of Love” encourages us to find loving ways to express our faith toward Muslims and cultures. Our love is a witness in itself because it reflects the love of Christ. Our love for others opens doors for us to share the gospel.

Friendship is one of the expressions of our love for others we hope to reach. It is considered by many to be one of the most effective bridges. Friendship earns us respect and trust and therefore the right to be heard. Ministries to international students promote this approach. Friendship partners are recruited from churches to befriend international students and develop long term relationships with them.

Behind the concept of building bridges is a presupposition that a Christian worker must begin with where people are. We engage our audience with the familiar before introducing the unfamiliar. This is interpreted to mean we must begin with a Muslim's beliefs and culture because that is "where he is." Therefore, the Quran is used extensively as a bridge to the Bible or to the Christian message.

Fouad Accad's book "Building Bridges" does just that. It uses the Quran extensively to break down the resistance of Muslims who have objections to the Bible and an outright Christian message. This book published by the reputable Nave's Press has inspired the Common Ground, the Camel Method, and the Insider Movement more than any other.

This article is an invitation to rethink the concept of building bridges in Muslim evangelism.

While I fully agree with the principles of love and friendship and I do not have an objection to using the Quran in our witness, I call on those who have become deeply entrenched in this mindset to re-examine the approach based on the word of God. We need to redefine the concept of bridges. The danger in the common ground approach lies in the fact that bridge building can be misleading. Building bridges must not be thought of as a means to mitigate between two opposite worldviews. This can lead to syncretism. Rather, it should be viewed as a passage from darkness into light, from death to life, from hell to heaven. We invite Muslims who are living in darkness to cross it to discover the great light of Christ. It is Jesus, not the Quran, nor friendship nor acts of love that is the bridge. Christ is the only bridge. He is the one who reconciles man with God and brings the prodigal home. "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (I Timothy 2:5)

False Bridges

It is an indisputable fact that, unlike atheists and people of other world religions, Muslims do believe in a Creator God. They acknowledge

many facts about Christ, revelation, prophets, heaven, hell and much more. The Quran in fact contains 93 verses that speak of Jesus. His virgin birth is no small admission. Jesus is viewed as a great prophet who has performed miracles that Muhammad never claimed to perform. Muhammad is told by God that the Quran is a confirmation of the message of the Injeel and the Torah. Most importantly Jesus is given the divine attribute of creator. He created a bird out of clay. Hypothetically, these are bridges we can and should build on.

I have known Muslims who on their own have come to the conclusion that Jesus is greater than Muhammad. One who was preparing to be an Imam and has memorized the whole Quran as a student at most reputable Islamic seminary al-Azhar wrote a paper that Jesus is that “great sacrifice” the Quran speaks of in the story of Abraham. This led to his expulsion and imprisonment which in turn led him to cross over from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the Son he loves...
(Colossians 1:13)

God indeed can use the Quran to rescue Muslims away from the darkness of Islam.

Yet we must guard against the risk of a mental syncretism between the two belief systems. Muslims are confused when they see a Christian worker carrying a Quran and quoting extensively from it. In many cases they have assumed that this is a convert to Islam.

From my studies in the field of Psychology and my experience working with Muslims for over 40 years I have observed that changing a deeply rooted belief is best done not by directly confronting it but by presenting a completely new and fresh alternative. The goal is not to modify a Muslim’s mindset but to transform it. Not to add Jesus to the mix but for Jesus to be all in all. Not to deepen the Muslim’s admiration of his Quran but to cause him to love the Bible as the only word of God. For example, rather than trying to begin with the Islamic concept of Jesus as a prophet I would simply share from scripture the supremacy of Christ and

let Muslims come face to face with his glory. Maha from Egypt began to read the gospel of John which led her to abandon Islam. In her testimony she stated: As I began to come face to face with Jesus I fell in love with him and wanted to give my entire life to him. I know many who feel the same. It is not about a change of belief about Jesus, but it is about falling in love with the Savior and Lord.

Although the bridge building approach has been used for many decades, relatively few Muslims have responded by coming to Christ through this method. Claims of great results have been found to be exaggerated. Recently some have begun to notice that the initial response fades away in time because Muslims attracted to this approach ultimately return to Islam. The main reason for this is that their mentors have not confronted them with the falsehood of Islam and have not challenged them to be born again and abandon the old and embrace the new (2 Corinthians 5:17). Thus they have lingered too long on the bridge that supposedly would guide them to the other side.

No transformation is possible if Muslims retain the Islamic mindset. Could it be that the very bridges that seemingly span the gap actually widen it? Or perhaps these are false bridges that deceive seekers and detract them from finding Jesus, who is the only bridge that leads the lost to the right destination!

No matter how similar to Christianity Islamic teachings may appear to be on the surface, the discrepancies are even greater. It is a temptation to linger in the comfort zone, acknowledging the positive aspects of Islam and ignoring the great chasm that separates from God. Our ultimate purpose must be to communicate the gospel of love, hope and salvation. This is not possible if they remain in the context of darkness that blinds them from seeing the Truth. We do not only call Muslims to come to Jesus. We call them away from Muhammad. We must not only direct them to value the Bible, they must abandon the Quran. The gap is only bridgeable, when Muslims recognize that they are sinners and need the Savior. Before a Muslim can grasp the implications of the death of Jesus and his victory

over darkness and sin, he must realize his lostness and catch a glimpse of the hope of eternal life.

How will Muslims be convinced that Jesus is the only bridge? They need a road map and signposts along the way. At every junction Muslims have to make the choice whether they want to linger in the familiar, the Quran, their beliefs and practices, or whether they will take the “narrow” way that leads to life.

The Bible not the Quran is the Road Map

Why would a Christian preach Jesus through the Quran? Is the revealed word of God inadequate to lead to Jesus? It is the most powerful road map for leading Muslims and non-Muslims to Christ. No ministry is ever fruitful without a strong emphasis on scriptures. I have seen and heard more stories of people coming to the Lord through the Bible than through any other means. I am surprised at the many “tools” of evangelism that do not include the scriptures. Although God has used many other tools such as dreams and visions, without the Bible those who have been touched by God through other means never blossom. I have heard many great testimonies by Muslims who have dramatic experiences with Jesus and down the road they have backslid and left the faith. The major reason for this is that they have not saturated their minds with the words of God. The Bible is the most effective and the only book that is accompanied by “deep conviction” from the Holy Spirit. God’s Word, which to some extent has lost its value in the “Christian culture”, has incredible impact on the Muslim reader. Why try to lead people to the Bible through the Quran when you can go directly to the Bible?

I will never forget the Saudi I met on a flight from New York to Jordan. For two hours he argued with me how the Bible cannot be trusted. His eyes literally bulged when I put the Arabic New Testament in his hands. He began to read and read as though I was not there. Since my “debater” had forgotten me, I took advantage of his new distraction and enjoyed a long nap. When I woke up he was still reading and ready to

discuss what Jesus meant when he taught that purity is in the heart not external or ritualistic. (Mark 7)

Equally unforgettable is a recent incident with Shiite Muslims in South Lebanon who wanted me to debate their Imam in the local mosque. While waiting for the Imam to show up, I read selections from the Bible, including the Psalms. Others in his living room were so awed they forgot to talk to me about the debate until I reminded them later. When one of them realized that the others were mesmerized by the Bible he blurted “We cannot trust this book it has been corrupted.” The trustee of the Mosque who hosted the meeting yelled at him “Shut up and listen!”

We need to believe in the word of God as the greatest and most effective tool for evangelism and beyond. Otherwise we will be looking for all kinds of other tools which are inferior no matter how helpful they may be. No human being has ever been able to match the power of God’s Word, which speaks for itself:

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

After the sinner comes to Christ, the Word of God becomes the most useful tool for:

“... teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped to every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

If we do not express to our Muslim friends the value of God’s word, we cannot expect them to value the Bible. And without the Bible they cannot find the bridge from death to life. The Bible plus the Quran is a message we must avoid at any cost.

We are the Signpost

Without the evangelist, no evangelism takes place. The road map maybe difficult to navigate for someone who is disoriented and lost. The evangelist opens the road map and points the way to the bridge. The evangelist is therefore a signpost to guide the traveler. This is clearly stated in (Romans 10:13-15):

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

How then can they call on the one they have not believed in?

And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?

And how can they hear without **someone preaching** to them?

And how can they preach unless **they are sent**? As it is written, “How beautiful are **the feet of those who bring good news!**”

This passage clearly puts the responsibility on the Christian worker who is sent to preach the good news of the gospel. Jesus gave us the marching order to go to the world, to preach, teach and make disciples. There is no substitute on earth for the evangelist. The role of the evangelist has been overlooked in favor of more impressive means of communication: the internet, literature, radio, TV, videos, and mass campaigns etc. I cannot emphasize this point enough. We are Christ’s ambassadors:

“We are Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:20).

God often uses a number of people in the lives of the lost to bring them to a saving knowledge of Christ. Paul in (1 Corinthians 3:5, 6) explains:

“What is Apollos, And what is Paul? Only servants through whom you came to believe— as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollo’s watered it, but God made it grow... For we are God’s fellow workers, you are God’s field, God’s building.”

As Christian workers, we are signposts who lead people to the only bridge, Jesus. Someone appropriately said that “we are the only gospel that some people may ever read.” God has chosen us to be his spokespeople. We bear the major responsibility to spread the word and to point people to Jesus, who is the only true bridge between God and man.

Jesus is the Bridge

The Bible tells us that there is “one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 3:12). If we use all kinds of methods, theories and approaches as bridges we undermine the fact that Jesus is the only true bridge. If we present Jesus as the only bridge, our message will be simply announcing the good news that God loves Muslims, that they can have a personal relationship with Him, that their sins can be forgiven, that they can have eternal life through Jesus, and that they can become children of God and join His international (universal) family of believers. As new believers, they need to know that the truth will set them free from their insecurities and fears and that Jesus will give them all he promised, including joy, peace and eternal life.

The great gap is not between Islam and Christianity but rather between God and man. Islamic concepts which seem to be similar to Christian beliefs are far from being reliable bridges in communicating the gospel to Muslims. In fact, embedded in these beliefs are deceptions which hinder Muslims from seeing the truth clearly.

Bridging advocates are motivated by a desire not to offend their Muslim friends. They are convinced that a Christian should have a generous attitude towards Muslims, acknowledging the truths they possess. However, if we remove the offensive aspects of the gospel, such as the cross and the deity of Christ, we have not helped our Muslim friend to

hear the truth. And it is these truths about Jesus which would put them on the right road to salvation.

Conclusion

It is possible to use common beliefs as starting points. We cannot and should not ignore the Muslim's recognition of God's existence, his acknowledgment of Jesus and many other biblical facts. However, if distinctions are not clearly seen by our Muslim friends, they will not be motivated to cross to the other side. In order to cross the bridge and reach the other side, the Muslim needs to be convinced that on the other side he will find satisfaction to the deepest thirst for, forgiveness, salvation and eternal life. We must seek transformation for the Muslim rather than modification.

As messengers of the good news our approach should be to share the simple yet powerful news of God's love and His plan for the salvation of the world. Our message needs to be fresh and attractive. Most Muslims are not Muslims by choice. Many of them are seeking answers to their deep insecurity about God and eternal life. If I had just one hour with a Muslim, I would explain how he can obtain eternal life through trusting in Jesus. He may or may not accept, but at least he would have heard. This is our mandate.

It is not conversion to the Christian religion that we are seeking, but regeneration, i.e. the rebirth of a Muslim's heart and mind — the transformation of his entire worldview. The great gap is only bridgeable by the work of the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin. It is "not by might nor by power but by my Spirit," says the Lord (Zechariah 4:6).

Muslims who respond do not respond to our message but to the voice of God beckoning them to His fold. The Holy Spirit in turn responds by giving new life to those who respond to Him. Our goal is to see God transform the hearts of Muslims until the lost image of God in them is restored, and they are brought back to God.

The concept of bridges must be redefined for it must not be thought of as an integration between two opposite religions. Rather, it should be viewed as the path from death to life. The Muslim who is living in darkness can cross it to find the great light of God. There is only one bridge, Jesus, who reconciles man with God and brings the prodigal home.

Muslims are already disposed towards revering God's word. It is immaterial what Muslims think about the authenticity of the Bible. Arguments about how it was collected and the evidence of the authentic manuscripts cannot ever match the power of the word when a Muslim begins to read it.