

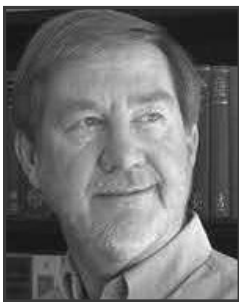
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Making Disciples for Jesus from among Muslims

Gordon Nickel

Many mission workers have found disciple-making among Christians of Muslim background to be one of the greatest adventures in ministry. The context and challenges of this particular work are unlike any other. The special challenges require the worker to rely more heavily on the Lord Jesus for strength and fruitfulness. The unique context draws out biblical truths that may not be glimpsed in the midst of a religion not explicitly formulated in denial of gospel affirmations.

There are plenty of guides along the lines of “how to witness to Muslims.” If one searches for resources on making disciples of Christians from a Muslim background, however, very few resources seem to be available. Moreover, the subject has been confused in recent years by advocacy of mission methods that seek to erase the lines of



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Christian identity. Much effort has been poured into discussion of this new advocacy and comparatively little into describing the contours of biblical discipleship with the Muslim context in mind.

The evangelical Anabaptist heritage can be seen as a great resource for disciple-making among Christians of Muslim background. First of all, that heritage fully appreciates the truth and power of the gospel and the centrality of gospel witness. Second, the Anabaptist story provides insight into the suffering that often comes for taking a public stand for Christ. Third, from among many other features, the evangelical Anabaptist vision takes seriously the teachings of Jesus on human behavior, including a peaceable response to situations of conflict.

By God's grace Mennonite Brethren (MBs) have also gathered valuable experience in ministry among Muslims in Central and South Asia, Indonesia and North Africa.¹ Such ministry continues apace today in new mission locations. Practical experience applies the biblical teaching on discipleship and the lessons from the Anabaptist heritage to a new context, learning in the process new lessons about how God works in challenging situations by His Spirit.²

The MB Confession of Faith as set out by Canadian MBs is very helpful for focusing the main areas of discipleship.³ The ICOMB Confession of Faith also spotlights many important aspects of discipleship.⁴ Contextualization of these confessions to the situation of Christians in Muslim settings can prove a blessing to many. In this short chapter, content from the confessions will be brought into a structure that reflects a practical emphasis. From the biblical content on disciple-making that MBs cherish, what is particularly relevant for belief and practice among Christians of Muslim background?

Strong Biblical Teaching

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus said when he was about to ascend to heaven after spending three years with his closest disciples (Matt. 28:18).

How did Jesus then use that great authority which God the Father had given him? Not to rule an earthly kingdom. Not to provide his followers with health and wealth. Certainly not to fight those who had opposed him! Rather, Jesus commanded his followers to make disciples for him! By doing so, Jesus focused the goal of mission: to make disciples of all nations.

The original Greek word for "nations" in the biblical phrase "make disciples of all nations" (NIV) is *ethne*, and this helps us understand that all cultures and people groups are included in disciple-making. Jesus wants people of all backgrounds to be

his disciples, as we also see in John's vision of the Lamb in Revelation 5:9: "You were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (*ethnons*)."

The MB Confession of Faith provides an extensive list of key biblical passages that inform the article on discipleship. The list includes the famous passage about taking up one's cross and following Jesus (Mark 8:34-38), as well as Jesus' own commands to follow his teachings (John 8:31-32; 13:34-35; 15:14-15). It highlights the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). A striking feature of this list is that it seems to have no difficulty in offering strong discipleship material from virtually every letter of the apostle Paul, as well as from the letters of James, Peter and John. For example, it specifies Peter's teaching on suffering for doing good: "because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:20-21).

Because the harsh treatment of the disciples of Jesus during the first century so closely resembles the treatment of converts to Jesus by the Muslim community since the rise of Islam, the list of biblical passages in the MB Confession promises to be a valuable resource. In this sense the New Testament is a great gift for the disciple-maker of Christians from Muslim background. All that is needed is an appropriate contextualization of the biblical truths for the Islamic context.

Following Jesus

Discipleship to Jesus means a life of joy. "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love," Jesus told his disciples. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10-11). Discipleship is the joy of the students' fellowship with their Master, who has made them his friends (John 15:14-15).

The disciple-maker must first of all be a disciple of Jesus. He or she must fully absorb what the New Testament says about the followers of Jesus and then walk accordingly. The MB Confession of Faith states, "By calling his followers to take up the cross, Christ invites them to reject the godless values of the world and offer themselves to God in a life of service." Disciple-makers accept Christ's invitation eagerly. Translated into the Muslim context, the new Christian rejects the religious system of Islam and the anti-Christ values that it teaches.

Questions that Islam Raises

Islam does not teach discipleship to Jesus but rather points to another figure as the focus for authority and obedience—that is, to the messenger of Islam. The Muslim confession of faith, the *shahada*, magnifies only Muhammad as the messenger of

Allah. The Muslim scripture, the Qur'an, repeatedly commands obedience to "Allah and his messenger"; Muslims understand this messenger to be Muhammad. On the basis of such expressions in Muslim scripture, the jurists of Islam developed an extensive and elaborate Law based largely on what they understood Muhammad to have done (*sunna*) and said (*hadith*).

Wherever field workers strive to obey the Lord Jesus in his Great Commission, they will certainly encounter resistance from the Muslim community. This is not because workers are imposing Western cultural understandings, or "extracting" believers in Jesus from their home environments. Jesus' command to make disciples is, after all, a Middle Eastern command, not an idea from the West. The New Testament is full of indications that an exclusive loyalty to Jesus will bring the disciple suffering.

Rather, the resistance that disciple-makers will encounter is due to the Muslim perception that the gospel gives loyalty and authority to someone other than Muhammad. "To reject Christianity is with Islam not merely the natural and intelligible reaction of every religion or world conception that has sufficient vigor in it to want to maintain itself; with Islam it belongs to its religious creed. To accept Christianity implies the explicit recognition of the error of Islam."⁵

The Qur'an presents a brief picture of the followers of Jesus (*hawāriyyūn*, ex. Q 3:52), but does not say anything about the content of the teaching of Jesus or the shape of discipleship to him. Later Muslim traditions, especially Sufi stories, portray Jesus as an ascetic wandering from place to place with a band of followers. However, nowhere is Jesus the "Lord of both the dead and the living" as the New Testament proclaims (Rom. 14:9).

This lack in Islam highlights the importance and beauty of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel accounts and the descriptions there of his relationships with people. It urges disciple-makers to fill this void in the minds of new Christians with New Testament content. Without straightforward and persistent instruction on the teachings and behavior of Jesus, attention will tend to drift back inexorably to the Muslim insistence on the authority of the messenger of Islam.

Indeed, it has often been through encountering the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that Muslims have come to Christ in the first place. For example, two former Muslims now serving Jesus fruitfully in Western Canada, Wajdi Iskander and Muhammad al-Halaaj, testify that it was by reading Matthew 5-7 that they decided to become disciples of Jesus, despite the high personal cost that each had to pay. One of these has written up his testimony in a beautiful book, *More than a Dream*.⁶

The cost of discipleship for most Christians from Muslim background is another urgent question raised by the Islamic context. In the development of Islamic Law,

Muslim jurists chose to formulate a “Law of Apostasy” that stipulates death for any Muslim who wants to leave Islam. This feature of Islamic Law certainly raises the stakes for those who decide to follow Jesus. It also forecasts why the Body of Christ is so necessary in this context, why the guidance of the disciple-maker is so important, and why a biblical understanding of suffering for following Jesus is so relevant.

One other special feature of the Muslim context, hinted at above, is that Islam is not merely a religious commitment or philosophy that ignores Jesus, but one which incorporates a deliberate denial of New Testament affirmations about Jesus into its scripture, the Qur’an. Hendrik Kraemer described this as the “antagonism to and indignant rejection of some cardinal elements of Christianity (Jesus’ Sonship, His death on the Cross and consequently such doctrines as the Trinity and Reconciliation or Atonement).”⁷ In this sense Islam is “anti-Christ”—that is, denial of the divine glory and redemptive death of Jesus is an integral part of its system.

A Place Among The Sanctified

As important as the work of the disciple-maker certainly is, a lone Christian worker is never adequate for the needs of the new Christian from Muslim background. For the many challenges that the new Christian will face, he or she needs the full resources of the Body of Christ. This is one of the great blessings of salvation, according to the words of Jesus himself to Saul on the Damascus road. Jesus sent his apostle to the Gentles so that they could receive forgiveness of sins and also “a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18).

The Body of Christ is the international, multicultural fellowship of the disciples of Jesus. They are the “called out” ones (*ekklesia*), called out of every other loyalty and spiritual commitment to worship and follow the Lord Jesus alone. Paul certainly saw this as one of the astonishing blessings of being “in Christ Jesus.” “There is neither Jew nor Greek,” because the wall of hostility has been broken down by the cross (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-18). And if that highest of all ethnic walls is broken down, then all other human divisions disappear as well (Col. 3:11).

The ICOMB Confession of Faith states explicitly that Christians are called “to turn from individualism to interdependence with others in the church,” and “are baptized by water into the fellowship of the church.” This emphasis on church is very important when one considers the strength of the Muslim “nation,” which Muslims call the *umma*. Kraemer, who learned to know Islam well in Indonesia, highlighted the Muslim conception of the *umma* to be one of the key reasons for the tenacious grip that Islam has on its adherents.⁸ “The secret of the iron rigidity of Islam is that its real ‘holy’ and its real ‘god’ is group solidarity.”⁹ That conception tempts Muslims

to remain in the *umma* on the one hand, and encourages a kind of violent fanaticism towards those who want to leave Islam on the other. However, all Muslims who believe in Jesus are “called out” of the *umma* and “baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Though disciple-makers cannot supply the fellowship that only the Body can provide, disciple-makers can definitely nurture and facilitate that fellowship by their teaching and example.

Guidelines for Belief and Approach

Making disciples is an aspect of ministry among Muslims which many Christian workers have found the most rewarding. This is about meaningful relationships with new Christians from Muslim background “...teaching them to obey everything I commanded you” (Matt 28:20). The command of Jesus is to teach, so the worker need not hesitate to do so. Disciple-making means a vigorous teaching of the disciple to obey. “Everything I commanded you” includes not only the words and example of Jesus in the Gospel, but also the preaching and teaching of those who spoke and wrote in his Spirit.

This opens up to the Christian worker a large area of positive teaching that has been very attractive to many Muslims, both in witness and disciple-making. The commandments of Jesus go against what Muslims understand from their messenger at many important points. For example: the response to violence. Jesus taught and modeled a way of peace, in which there is no revenge against evildoers, and indeed the enemy is to be loved. Jesus willingly laid down his life rather than fight those who seized him (Matt 26:53; John 18:36). This is in stark contrast to the commands to fight and kill in the Qur’an, and to the conduct of the messenger of Islam in Medina according to the standard Muslim accounts.

The disciple-maker should anticipate the kinds of teaching that may be most important for new Christians who have been told falsehoods about Jesus for most of their lives. For example, Muslim youth are instructed by their imams that not only is it wrong to call Jesus the Son of God, but that merely to utter this phrase is so terrible that it shakes the foundations of the universe (Q 19:90). Disciple-making among Christians of Muslim background should therefore excel in this particular teaching.

Paul Asghar Ali, born a Muslim near Delhi, India, encountered the glory of Jesus through a miraculous answer to prayer in Jesus’ name. He immediately set out on a quest, however, to discover why Christians call Jesus the Son of God. Asghar could not proceed into discipleship until he was able to find a Christian to answer his urgent questions. New Christians need the same kind of thorough and straightforward

instruction on such themes as the historicity and necessity of the death of Jesus and its many benefits. Wherever there is denial and falsehood in Islamic teaching, there must be joyful gospel affirmation from the disciple-maker.

Demonstrating True Faith

The MB Confession of Faith specifies that Christians show their discipleship in the way they treat other people, in the way they speak, and in their sexual purity. The disciple-maker's teaching and modeling of Christ-like behavior becomes especially important in the Muslim context because Islam has historically devoted its greatest efforts to the formulation of law. The concept of Muslim divine law is called *shari'a*, its practical outworking is called *fiqh*, and the actual written details are called *furū'*.

The massive Muslim works of *furū'* stipulate the minutia of ritual practice as well as every imaginable interpersonal act. As the British scholar Norman Calder described it so eloquently, "Since the topics of the law cover all the major categories of a pious, and a social, life ... a work of *furū'*, formally at least, constituted a literary depiction of social reality in normative form."¹⁰ In other words, "Islamic culture" is understood by Muslims to be completely based on divine law, which they believe in turn to be based on the Qur'an and Muhammad.

The behavior of a disciple, by contrast, must be based on the teachings and example of the Lord Jesus. Fortunately, there is much for the disciple-maker to teach, both from the Gospel accounts and the letters of Paul, Peter, and other apostles. Paul's pattern is often to first explain the benefits of the death and resurrection of Jesus to the believer and then, on this basis, to detail the "law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2) for the disciple in a practical and pastoral way. Romans 12 and Colossians 3 are two good examples of this pattern.¹¹

"Filled with love and gratitude, disciples delight to obey God," states the MB Confession. Indeed, it is the privilege of disciple-makers to explain and model the wonderful truth of obedience out of gratitude. Islamic doctrine teaches obedience out of fear of punishment on the one hand, and hope for escape from hell on the other. Islam is a reversion to the false expectation that people will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law (Rom. 3:30). The good news of Jesus, however, is that salvation is a gift of God through the death of Jesus. The gift sets us free to do the good works that God has prepared for us (Eph. 2:8-10).

One part of disciple-making that is potentially very important, though somehow rarely discussed by Western missionaries, is leading new Christians from Muslim background to renounce the religious commitments they once held. The word *Islam*, after all, means "submission." Islam is a person's submission to a religious system that

has sociological, moral and spiritual dimensions. The spiritual dimension of Islam, as we have already explained, has an anti-Christ quality: it knowingly rejects the divine glory and redemptive death of Jesus, along with all of the spiritual blessings that flow from these truths. The moral dimension of Islam leads people into ungodly practices because Muslims have based human behavior on what they believe to be the sayings (*hadith*) and life example (*sunna*) of the messenger of Islam.

Those who submit to an anti-Christ system need to be set free. A scholar who has been very helpful in this area is Mark Durie of Melbourne, Australia, whose expertise is in Southeast Asian Islam. Durie has written a book titled *Liberty to the Captives: Freedom from Islam & Dhimmitude through the Cross*.¹² This book, in addition to contrasting the example of Jesus from that of Islam's messenger, offers "Prayers of release from Islam" that disciple-makers can use with new Christians from Muslim background.¹³

Anabaptists have not generally been known for their insights into the spiritual dimensions of powerful religions. However, the MB Confession of Faith urges disciples to "reject the godless values of the world" and to "resist worldly values and systems, the sinful nature, and the devil." If the godless values of the world are to be rejected, how can we take a sanguine view of a religious system that denies the truths about Jesus whereby people are saved?

Parameters of Practice

Some Christian workers in the last several decades have said that once they lead Muslims to faith in Jesus, they need to step back and let the new disciples deal with many difficult questions on their own under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is hard to understand this approach when we begin our ministry from what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission. Jesus instructed his followers to teach new disciples to obey *everything he had commanded*. True, new disciples need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. True, disciple-makers must not pass on merely cultural traditions as the commandments of Jesus. However, this still leaves plenty of room to the disciple-maker for teaching, and to not take up the challenge to teach thoroughly would amount to disobedience to the Lord.

The hesitancy to teach may relate to either a lack of familiarity with, or a misunderstanding of, a worthwhile mission concept known as "critical contextualization." Disciple-makers from another culture need to be careful that they don't equate their own cultural understandings with the teachings of Scripture. They also need to allow local Christians to own the decisions they make. But the process includes an important component of teaching what the Bible has to say about the matter at hand.¹⁴ No disciple-maker need hold back in this area.

Another temptation, especially in recent years, has been for Christian workers to seek for a way that new Christians from Muslim background might avoid suffering. For disciple-makers from Europe and North America, this may be understandable. Western workers rarely pay a severe price for taking a stand for Jesus in their societies. They may therefore wish that those they disciple in Muslim societies escape suffering as well. As we have noted above, however, the Muslim context has a “Law of Apostasy.” It treats the leaving of Islam as treason, and prescribes the death of the apostate in Islamic Law.

In a desire to somehow overcome this “problem,” which is certainly a major hindrance to the open conversion of Muslims to Christ, some Western workers have proposed that new believers in Jesus remain within Islam. They have begun to argue that Islamic identity is merely a cultural category along with the foods that people eat and the clothes they wear. They argue, therefore, that since we do not ask new believers in Jesus in other societies to give up their cultural identities, we should not ask believers in Jesus in Muslim societies to give up their Islamic identity. Remaining Muslim, reason the advocates of this method, new believers in Jesus will not trigger the persecution that would come if they clearly identified as Christians.

Here we encounter the striking contradiction of expecting new believers in Jesus to “reject the godless values of the world” (MB Confession of Faith) and at the same time seeing some Christian workers ask new believers to remain in a religious submission (*Islam*) that explicitly denies the divine glory and redemptive death of Jesus. It is at this point that evangelical Anabaptists need to depart from fashionable mission trends, however popular or energetically justified, and pursue instead the teaching of Scripture and the spiritual heritage of Anabaptist history.

Though some recent trends in mission advocacy and practice have necessitated the setting of parameters, they should not be allowed to distract from the central thrust of our theme. Disciple-making among Christians of Muslim background is first of all, and most importantly, a great adventure in serving Jesus. “Go and make disciples of all nations,” Jesus commanded. To know and fellowship with new believers in Jesus saved out of the “nation” of Islam, and to encourage them in the ways of the Savior, is a joy and a privilege.

Notes

¹ James R. Krabill, David W. Shenk, and Linford Stutzman, eds., *Anabaptists Meeting Muslims: A Calling for Presence in the Way of Christ* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2005), esp. 156-8 (Afghanistan), 164-6 (India), 317-328 (Islamic Intercession and Christian Atonement), 334-346 (Dialogue with Muslims), and 361-9 (Apologetics).

- ² Gordon Nickel, *Peaceable Witness among Muslims* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1999), 47-66.
- ³ “MB Confession of Faith,” http://www.mbconf.ca/home/products_and_services/resources/theology/confession_of_faith/detailed_version/
- ⁴ “International Community of MB Confession of Faith,” http://www.mbconf.ca/home/products_and_services/resources/theology/confession_of_faith/icombo_confession_of_faith/
- ⁵ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: International Missionary Council, 1938), 354.
- ⁶ (Edmonton: Salaam Ministries, 2012). Available at <http://www.salaaministries.com/introducing-salaam/morethanadream/>
- ⁷ Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 354.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 222-3.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 353.
- ¹⁰ Norman Calder, “Shari‘a,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, C.E. Bosworth et al, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 1997), Vol. IX, 323.
- ¹¹ While the historical tendency of Islamic Law has been to specify human behavior down to the last detail, it is interesting to note the opposite impulse in the law of Christ. After listing a number of individual commandments, Paul writes that all of the commandments “are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Rom. 13:9, cf. Matt. 7:12, James 2:8).
- ¹² (Melbourne: Deror Books, 2010).
- ¹³ Durie, *Liberty to the Captives*, 75-85.
- ¹⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 89-91.

Recommended Reading

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Study Questions

1. The author refers a number of times to “methods that erase the lines of Christian identity” or “fashionable mission trends,” and lists some of them. Recall at least three of these that have become hindrances to true biblical discipleship.
2. List five key ingredients toward authentic disciple-making among Christians from Muslim background.
3. The author believes we need to recover the biblical practice of renouncing former loyalties and practices. Give two biblical examples where new believers renounced their former ways, either in word or in deed.

