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WITNESSING TO MUSLIMS PART TWO

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Islam has as many branches and sects as Christianity. The two major ones are the *Sunnis* and the *Shias*. They split over the issue of apostolic succession. When Islam's founder Muhammad died unexpectedly in A.D. 632, he had left no arrangement for a successor. His followers divided into two camps. The Sunnis were those who thought the leader should be elected democratically from among his closest followers, and the Shias were those who thought the leaders should be related to Muhammad. Perhaps 85 to 90 percent of all Muslims would call themselves Sunnis. We will consider witnessing to Sunnis in this installment, and in Part Three we will turn our attention to the Shias.

The word Sunni comes from the Arabic *Sunnah*, which simply means "the trodden path," or "tradition." In the Islamic context, it means someone who follows the exemplary pattern of conduct established by Muhammad, believed to be the model for all humankind.

Since Muhammad was just one solitary man, confined to a slice of time in seventh century Arabia, he could not foresee the problems Islam would face in its rapid expansion into other lands. His followers — who were imbued with Muhammad's obsession with law — had to devise new laws based on their understanding of what Muhammad would have done, if he had remained among them. This process took almost two hundred years and resulted in the formation of Islamic or *Shariah* Law.

A Sunni, then, is a person who believes that the true way of life is to attempt to keep the laws of Islam (*Shariah*) derived from the Qur'an and the other collected sayings of Muhammad. For this person, paradise is the reward of those whose good deeds outweigh their bad on the day of judgment. With such a Muslim believer, there are two evangelistic approaches that can be used: to show the futility of the idea of salvation by law, and to show the inadequacy of Muhammad's life as a model for all humankind. Both approaches ultimately lead to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Muhammad, in his obsession to discover and execute the will of God, set in motion a movement that resulted in a wild proliferation of laws attempting to cover every facet of life. By borrowing from the Egyptians the idea that God would weigh our good deeds against our bad deeds in a balance scale on the day of judgment, he betrayed a lack of understanding of the function of law. The law does not save; it condemns.

Christians can begin by complimenting the Muslim on his or her zeal to keep the law of God as he or she understands it, but then we must go on to show that the law has the ultimate function of showing us where we failed. As Paul wrote, "the letter [law] kills, but the Spirit gives life" (1 Cor. 3:6). Our Muslim friends also need to be disabused of the idea that 51 percent performance is good enough to obtain salvation. Show them what James wrote: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). To this could be added Paul's words in Romans 3:20, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin," and in Galatians 3:24, "The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). This then leads on to a discussion about Christ. And this discussion can be based on materials from both the Qur'an and the Scriptures.

In Qur'an 7:158, Muhammad asked people to follow him. Elsewhere in the Qur'an, Muhammad testified that Jesus was among those nearest to God, held in honor in this world and the hereafter (Qur'an 3:45). Muslims understand this to mean that Jesus was sinless and all-righteous, something that the early Muslims never claimed for Muhammad. In fact, in several Qur'anic passages (16:61; 40:55; 42:5, 30; 47:19; 48:1-2) we read that Muhammad was exhorted to seek forgiveness for his faults, that not a single living creature would be left on earth if God punished everyone for their wrongdoing, and that one of Muhammad's military victories served as an assurance of forgiveness of his sins, past and future. It is pointless for Muslims to argue for Muhammad's sinlessness or to compare him to Jesus, whom Muslims consider to be both sinless and alive in heaven, near to God right now. The contrast could be more sharply drawn by pointing out that Muhammad's grave is in Medina today, whereas Christ is alive in heaven with God.

In the Qur'an (2:253; 3:45-49; 4:158, 171; 5:49; 19:33; 89:22) it is noted that Jesus was called the Messiah; He was born of a virgin; He was among the righteous ones — those nearest to God; He received strength from the Holy Spirit; He could give sight to the blind, cure lepers, and raise the dead; He prophesied His own death and resurrection; He was called a Word from God and a Spirit from God; and finally, He is coming back with thousands of angels to judge the world. All these characterizations add up to a powerful picture of a Christ who was more than a prophet, and — on Qur'anic terms alone — superior to Muhammad.

From this point on, it is up to the Christian witness to lead the Muslim friend into a study of biblical material on the person and nature of Christ. One suggestion would be to start with John 1:1-14, where Jesus is set forth as the eternal Word of God, an idea Muslims implicitly accept. Then go on to show the purpose of God for Him in becoming a man: to carry out the will of God in accomplishing the salvation of lost humankind, who would not be saved by the law, either Islamic or Mosaic.

— *Don McCurry*