

What is the biblical basis for an “insider” approach to ministry to Muslims?

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The Jews in the time of Paul did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, they did not believe in the Holy Trinity, and they did not believe that Jesus died for their sins nor that He rose from the dead. They were trying to earn their way to heaven by their works. They had many traditions and customs that were not solidly based on the Word of God, yet Paul did not hesitate to enter their places of worship. The Jewish community in the time of Paul was very similar to the Muslim community today.

Non-Muslims can only assist Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) in raising up “insider” movements. Only MBBs who have not been harshly extracted from their community can fully carry out this kind of “insider” approach, and the type of community they live in will most likely influence how that approach will manifest itself. An “insider” movement in a mystic Sufi community will look somewhat different than an insider movement within a fundamentalist Salafi community.

Socio-religious “insider” movements will probably usually be transitional in nature (but not always), since at some point they will most likely be expelled from the non-believing community, as were Jewish Christians in Paul’s time. Hopefully, by that time, they will be able to continue as cultural insiders, retaining some degree of a positive identity. The expression of “church” for “insider” MBBs will normally be through a house church model. Pray that God raise up these movements throughout the Muslim world. (Ephesians 2:19-22; Acts 2:42; 5:42; 6:7; 11:19-26; 13:1-3; 14:21-23; 15:1-41; 20:20; 28:17-31; 1 Timothy 4:13; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:7,17).

The following passages illustrate Paul’s method, and we have included some quotations from commentaries that reflect on this philosophy of ministry that Paul employed.

Acts 17:1-2, 17:17

“... they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews, and according to Paul’s custom, he went to them...”

“So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.”

John Gill

To the Jews in their synagogue— for though the Jews had put away the Gospel from them, and the apostle had turned to the Gentiles; yet he still retained a great affection for his countrymen the Jews, and as often as he had opportunity, attended their synagogues, in order to preach the Gospel to them.

1 Corinthians 9:19-22

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

John Gilchrist

What, then, is the Biblical approach to Muslims in the light of this method into which the great apostle allows us to enter? It is simply this - in the same way that he became as a Jew to the Jews, so each of us must become as a Muslim to the Muslims. We must discover the beliefs of the Muslims, their view of prophetic history, their assessment of Jesus Christ, and their overall religious perception of life, and present the Gospel against that background. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

Thomas L. Constable:

It was the apostle’s custom to follow Jewish ways when he was in the company of Jews. He did so to make them receptive to him and his message rather than antagonistic (cf. Acts 21:20-26). He did not do this because he felt obligated to keep the Mosaic Law. He did not feel obligated to do so (Rom. 6:14). The salvation of Jews was his objective in observing Jewish laws and customs, many of which dealt with abstaining from certain foods (cf.8:13). He had circumcised Timothy at Lystra for this purpose (Acts 16:3). (1 Corinthians 9:20)

John MacArthur:

Within the limits of God’s Word and his Christian conscience, Paul would be as culturally and socially Jewish as necessary when witnessing to Jews (cf. Rom. 9:3; 10:1; 11:14). Also see Acts 16:3, 18:18, and 21:20-26. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

David K. Lowery

Paul made it his custom to seek out the synagogue in each town he entered (Acts 17:2) in order to win the Jews (Rom. 1:16)... He was willing to subject himself to the scruples of the Jews (e.g., Acts 21:23-36) in order to gain a hearing for the gospel and win them to Christ. Yet he never compromised the essence of the gospel at the heart of which was salvation by faith, not works (Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9) and freedom from legalism (Gal. 2:4-5). (1 Corinthians 9:20)

Donald Tingle

God did not ask the world to step into His realm to understand Him; we as Christians believe that God stepped into our world so that we could understand Him. Likewise, we must take that great step into the house of Islam, as guests, and let Christ be seen there, if the gospel is ever to be seen truthfully by the Muslim world. ("Islam and Christianity" p. 28.)

Matthew Henry:

Though he looked on the ceremonial law as a yoke taken off by Christ, yet in many instances he submitted to it, that he might work upon the Jews, remove their prejudices, prevail with them to hear the gospel, and win them over to Christ. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

Adam Clarke:

In Acts 16:3, we find that for the sake of the unconverted Jews he circumcised Timothy. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

John Wesley:

To the Jews I became as a Jew - Conforming myself in all things to their manner of thinking and living, so far as I could with innocence. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

A.T. Robertson:

He was emancipated from the law as a means of salvation, yet he knew how to speak to the Jews because of his former beliefs and life with them (Gal. 4:21). He knew how to put the gospel to them without compromise and without offence. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

John Gill:

"And unto the Jews I became as a Jew" - That is, in religion; or with respect to some religious observances peculiar to the Jews, for he himself was really a Jew by nature; who became as one unto them in this sense, when he for their sakes circumcised Timothy at Derbe, or Lystra, purified himself at Jerusalem, shaved his head at Cenchrea, observed their sabbath, and abstained from some sorts of food forbidden in the law; and his end in so doing was, not to confirm them in such usages, but that he might hereby have the greater influence over them, and by little and little bring them off of these things, or, as he says, that I might gain the Jews; bring them over to Christ, and off of a dependence on their own righteousness, for justification before God. (1 Corinthians 9:20)

Galatians 4:10-11

You observe days and months and times and years. I fear for you, lest somehow I have labored among you in vain.

Thomas L. Constable

Paul himself observed the Jewish feasts after his conversion (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8; Acts 20:16). However he did so voluntarily, not to satisfy divine requirements. He did not observe them because God expected him to do so but because they were a part of his cultural heritage. He also did so because he did not want to cast a stumbling block in the path of Jews coming to faith in Christ (1 Cor. 9:19-23; cf. Rom. 14:5-6). In other words, he did so to evangelize effectively, not to gain acceptance from God.

Conclusion

Paul kept going to the synagogue after he put his faith in Christ, even though the people who congregated there did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God, nor that He died for their sins, nor did they believe in the Holy Trinity. They were trying to win their way to heaven by keeping the Law (Romans 9:31-32). Paul loved them and desired their salvation (Romans 10:1). He was very willing to go to the Jews at their place of worship, and interact with them in the context of their own customs. Jesus, Himself, is the ultimate example for all of us concerning incarnational ministry (Philippians 2:5-11; John 1:14; Hebrews 2:9-15 and 4:15). We want to help raise up Muslim Background Believers and encourage them to imitate this biblical strategy in Muslim communities around the world.