

Don't rush into Afghanistan Without the Right Stuff

—Greg H. Parsons

As you might guess, talk is in the air about going into Afghanistan. People have taken survey trips there. Mission agencies are poised to go in with funds and short-term teams. More than 300 organizations have signed up with one umbrella organization expressing their plans to move into the country soon. Some have experience in the Muslim world and are planning with that experience in view. Others do not.

A few weeks ago, some visitors shared with our staff about working in the Muslim world. They have been in this part of the world since the mid-1970s. They shared one story about the time they took a team up into a remote mountain area to do medical work. Their plan: Serve the people — and keep your mouth shut!

(At best, that sounds like a waste of time and at worst, it sounds like heresy. We Americans are so forceful in our personality and style, and that spills over into the evangelical church. We've heard that "just living the witness" doesn't work to bring people to Christ. So why would we get behind the idea of just serving people?)

One reason we share the gospel the way we do is that our society is so "burned over" with—and sometimes by—the church. Beyond that, we have a certain style that has developed as the standard "acceptable" way to do it. But the gospel message was spread in different ways both in the Bible and historically. Why

would we expect it to spread the same way in other places — especially in the Muslim world, today?)

Back to the "servants" in the Muslim culture

After they did their medical work one day in a remote mountain village, they saw a Muslim evangelist, climb-

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ing up the mountain with his little medical kit (he could help, too!) and his side pack full of Islamic literature to share a more aggressive form of Islam with this village of nominal—in his mind—Muslims. He told the outside medical team, "You should not be here!" After a heated confrontation, including weapons flashing, the village elder told this Muslim man to leave and subsequently invited this couple up to his home for dinner. That evening he asked all kinds of questions about a Bible he had gotten months before, and they had opportunity to share God's love with this influential leader well into the night.

Our normal reaction to this would be to poke fun at the methods of the Muslim evangelist. But many a Christians uses a similar approach: do a little service or work in your "job" as a way to get into a country. We, too, use our little medical kits or candy or videos or whatever. But even effective tools like the JESUS film used without understanding the worldview of the people can do more damage than good — some people need to be prepared to understand a message well.

It would be like the small-town "evangelist" from the U.S. who has a crusade in India for a week and then claims to have "evangelized" that city! Of course all the people raise their hands to "receive" Jesus. They already have millions of gods; there is no problem adding another! In general, people in Asia don't want to say no to a well-off Westerner who seems to be in charge! Then the evangelist returns home and talks of reaching a village or city with hundreds or thousands making "decisions."

What is the right stuff?

It is a bit ironic that the couple I mention above, who have been

faithful to serve the people there and live with them throughout a range of governments and transitions, started out serving hippies who used to travel through the area. When the hippies couldn't stay in the country, this couple felt led to stay longer, and they ended up raising their family and reaching out in love to their Muslim hosts. We may never know how many lives they have touched, but we do know that God seems to honor servanthood.

On the other hand, there has been so little fruit in this part of the world — that is, the Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist worlds (other than Korea and a few other pockets) — that we must ask the question if service is enough. Servanthood must be at the foundation of our work, but we also desire to pursue all of what God wants. What we really need are people who go with the servant's heart *and* with a learner's attitude — especially when it comes to how we share the core message about Christ that seems so clear to us in the Western world.



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