



Can a Distracted Church Reach Muslims?

Greg H. Parsons



The overall impression of the June 30 *TIME* cover story is that opinions related to converting Muslims are all over the map. Some people share in ways that are bolder—and can cause trouble, while others live out their witness in more sensitive or guarded ways—which may not make progress. Rather than further discuss pros and cons of witness in the Muslim world, I'd like to focus here on U.S. Christianity in general.

American Christians look at an article like *TIME*'s and react all kinds of ways. Some say, "Of course we should be out there spreading the good news." Others secretly wonder why we are sharing with Muslims anyway; "they don't want to hear, so why go?" one elder told me 20 years ago. Even with our increased focus on the Muslim world, we are involved in so many other good things and, after all, we can't "save" everyone. So, some might argue, let's focus on the "easy" people groups who welcome us and offer less challenge.

Perhaps we get involved in other good things because we are not sure what to do to reach out to those who hold other faiths strongly. Or perhaps we are simply distracted by all the opportunities within Christian circles. Think about it. In the last couple of weeks, what kinds of Christian activities and causes have you heard or read about with which you could get involved? Whether it

is in our churches, on Christian radio or TV, via mail or email—there are hundreds of ministries and causes out there. Many of them are considered "worthy." Are they?

Perhaps we get distracted because Christians like to feel we can fit in and not stick out too much. A friend who works in the Muslim world has a full beard. He was interacting with another friend who noted that "holy" men in various religions have beards. Whether it is Jewish rabbis, Hindu sadhus, or Muslim clerics, everyone who is genetically capable has a beard if they are seeking God (or just fitting in with their culture). Everyone except Christians, that is. Evangelical leaders in particular don't have beards. In fact,

to various ministries. But it becomes a problem when a ministry becomes an end in itself—something we need to watch even here at a mission-focused structure. When the Church is not being built where the gates of Hades hold sway, no amount of passion about a specific issue should displace the things Jesus wants done.

Paul is also far more concerned with the building and extending of the Church than anything else. He worked diligently both to grow deeper the lives of those in existing churches—as in 1 Thessalonians 2, as they and others reached out to see it go places it hadn't—as in Romans 15:19-21. Paul appears to have settled on a distinction between the temporal and the eternal and to have focused his efforts accordingly. He also labored to see God represented more accurately, helping all—believer and non-believer—to see God more clearly and to glorify Him in all we do.

Ahat the future of the U.S. as a nation may look like may hinge more on what the Church here does to advance those tasks that we know Jesus wants us to do, rather than on other causes, however urgent they may sometimes seem.

Evangelicals seem to pride ourselves on fitting in to our culture. We want to blend in, to "relate." But perhaps we've tried so hard to fit in that few see any difference.

It might seem that God has blessed us for our own sake. Yet if we don't pass on those blessings like Abraham was told to do (Gen. 12:1-3), will God continue to bless us and use us for His purposes?

Paul and Jesus give us a clue as to what those purposes are for us today. Jesus made two statements that direct the way to extend God's global purposes most effectively: "I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19) and "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). To be sure, God calls us

I hope and pray that when many of us said or sang "God Bless America" in recent months and years, we realized it is a prayer and that we prayed it for other nations—like Iraq and Afghanistan. I also pray that the Church in America can continue to powerfully contribute to the advance of God's Kingdom in the future. God is certainly working through other parts of the Body of Christ to extend His Church to every people—as He has for centuries. What the future of the U.S. as a nation may look like may hinge more on what the Church here does to advance those tasks that we know Jesus wants us to do, rather than on other causes—however urgent they may sometimes seem. ☽



Rev. Greg Parsons is General Director of the U.S. Center for World Mission. He's been on staff at the USCWM for 20 years.