



Baptism in MUSLIM MINISTRY:

Time for Change

Daniel Sinclair

I was recently conducting my two-day training on *Church Planting Essentials* in a North African country among workers from a variety of agencies. While we were discussing “How to disciple Muslim-background believers (MBBs)”¹ a brother raised his hand and asked, “So where does baptism fit in here?” Clearly from his Southern Baptist background this was not something to be skipped over. I confess to having been a bit bothered at first, thinking this is complicated and it would get us off-track. But I proceeded to give my normal *song and dance* about how the whole area of baptism needs more examination and how most ministries to Muslims haven’t sorted this one out yet. But even as I was speaking the thought arose in the back of my mind, “He’s right. I’m tired of muddling and dodging this issue.”

While there certainly has been some baptizing of believers in many of our ministries, so many other teams have

shied away from baptism because it’s too problematic. It’s almost as if there’s been an unspoken agreement among some of us: “Though we’d love to see the MBBs in our ministries get baptized, we understand if most of them don’t want to. It’s a problem waiting for a good solution.”

It is the contention of this article that this is no longer good enough. We owe it to our dear brothers and sisters from Muslim backgrounds to lead them toward obeying Jesus’ command of baptism. But let me be quick to add: I am not advocating that we pressure them, or that we just get them to do it because we say so, after a token Bible study—nor that we, the expatriate church planters, necessarily do the baptizing. At the end of this article are some recommendations on ways to move forward.

Why Baptizing is a Problem

A year ago in a Levant country I was enjoying the rich hospitality of a

brother, a “Muslim follower of Jesus.” Because I knew that he was very strong in his faith and testimony, that he was very knowledgeable of Islam, and that he hadn’t yet been baptized, I asked him, “Are there any practices in Islam with water or washing that might be useful in regard to baptism in Christ?” Really my intent was not to be provocative, but was just from a desire to learn. But you would have thought my question was, “Are there useful ways for you to jump off this 5th floor balcony?” and he quickly changed the subject.

The first problem is that in most of our contexts baptism is viewed as a rite belonging distinctly to the Christian religion. If there is a Christian minority, it is of “them,” not at all of “us.” For a Muslim to be baptized is therefore perceived as a clear act of converting out of Islam and into Christianity, socially, spiritually, culturally and maybe even legally. For those ministries in

which new believers self-identify as “Christians,” this isn’t a problem. So be it. But for those aiming at a more contextual approach, not wishing to convey conversion² in a social and cultural sense, this is a genuine dilemma. The hope is that the perception by one’s family of apostatizing³ can be avoided.

The second challenge is that of heightened persecution. Although the act of baptism in some Muslim contexts isn’t a big deal, in most other contexts it is perceived to be a huge, irreversible step, virtually inviting severe retaliation from family or mosque.

These are very real problems and issues. But should they leave us in a state of avoiding baptism in our ministries? Should the perplexities keep us in a stalemate, waiting in a sort of holding pattern for someone to figure out how to make it all easy? No. Despite the hurdles—which do indeed need to be addressed—we must move forward in baptizing for three compelling reasons.

1. Because Jesus Said So

The rite of baptism was developed during the Intertestamental Period, and was famously utilized by John the Baptist. John’s baptism centered on repentance, and climaxed in the baptism of Christ himself (though ironically he had nothing to repent of). Then after Jesus’ resurrection and before His ascension he gave extraordinary training to the Eleven, “*appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*” [Acts 1:2-3] Wouldn’t you love to have been part of that! It was during this time that Jesus made it clear that from now on all His followers were to

be baptized. However this would not merely be a baptism of repentance, but one signifying full identity with Christ (in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit), particularly in His dying and rising from the dead. Cleansing from sin was also in view, but of lesser significance than our connecting as His disciples with His death and resurrection. Baptism was to be the experiential and visual sign of a complete life-change, as He is now my Savior and Lord.

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It is in this context that Jesus gave the simple job description of particular significance for all apostolic church planters: “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*”⁵ [Matthew 28:19-20, NIV]

In hindsight I realize that for years I was guilty of a kind of *obedience-optional* way of discipling. In the back of my mind was the notion that the risks and consequences my dear Arab MBB friends face are different and more severe than my own. So I must not press them too hard. But such discipleship is actually a contradiction. A disciple who doesn’t want to obey Jesus is not a disciple. We all struggle at different times with different things, but the genuine intent of the heart of a real

follower is to submit to and obey Him. This is why I love the emphases of *Disciple-Making Movements* (DMM) methodology.⁶ From the very beginning the core of this approach is that people learn what God says in His Word and determine how to obey it. Each week in a (three-column) Discovery Bible Study (DBS) the participants read and reflect on a passage of Scripture. Even for pre-believers the third column’s question is, “If this is God’s word, then how am I going to obey it?” The answers must be in the form, “I will....” Once the group become believers, the question simply changes to, “Since this is God’s word, how am I going to obey it?” It is encouraging to learn that across the Muslim world in DMM-type ministries Muslims are being baptized in larger and larger numbers.

2. The Crystal Clear Teaching in Acts and the Epistles

In the New Testament there are 106 occurrences of *baptism* (and baptize, baptist), 44 of which are in Acts and the epistles. In the book of Acts we find nine instances of people being baptized:

1. Pentecost: 2:38, 41
2. Philip in Samaria: 8:12-16
3. Ethiopian eunuch: 8:36-38
4. Paul: 9:18; 22:16
5. Cornelius & his large group: 10:47-48
6. Lydia and her household (in Philippi): 16:15
7. Jailer and his family (in Philippi): 16:33
8. Corinthian believers: 18:8; 1 Cor.1:14-16
9. Ephesian disciples (formerly John’s): 19:3-5

Most of the references in the epistles (5 of Paul, 1 of Peter) refer to their experience in actual baptism, and then draw a spiritual inference from that.

Most, or possibly all, instances occur immediately upon faith. We can't always be sure of the time between believing and being baptized. But in no place do we see a long gap of time.

There does not appear to be any difference in the practice between different apostles. Some have suggested that baptism as such was a particular Jewish rite of initiation. While that may have been true of John's baptism, it clearly became applicable to Gentiles in an ongoing way. No variation can be discerned between the baptism of Jews and Gentiles, or of the practice varying between one cultural context to another. Indeed, Ephesians 4:5 ("*one Lord, one faith, one baptism*") stresses the singular nature of baptism for all believers. In no context was it considered optional.

Surely many of the Gentiles baptized in the book of Acts would not have

been familiar with baptism as such.

Just as many of our believers today need explanation and persuasion, so it was with believers centuries ago.

3. The Power of the Definitive Step

We know that spiritually, in the inner-person, coming into the kingdom of God changes everything. That is why we are given so many terms for this metamorphosis: we're born again, we move from death to life, we're a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come, we have a new citizenship, we've died with Christ and been raised with Him, we're now seated with Christ in the heavenlies, and so on. How sad then if we rob our MBB brothers and sisters of the privilege of reinforcing this new life in the dramatic and never-to-be-forgotten act of baptism! In their faith they have crossed an eternal threshold. And the Bible clearly teaches that they should symbolically cross the threshold through water. Imagine the results in a person's heart over the years if this never happens. The ambiguity in one's life can be deadening.

Likewise, if somehow, however unintentionally, we convey to them that partial obedience is OK, and that totally remaining an unbaptized *closet* believer is OK, is that really OK? Then we're somehow shocked when the church doesn't form and progress. Yes, the fears and dangers they face are significant. Were I in their shoes I doubt I would do better in terms of conquering those fears. But can we trust the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts and give them spiritual power to overcome? I believe we must.

Bounded Set vs. Centered Set?

OK, I know you're tempted to skip this section, because you've already read about "Bounded Sets vs Centered Sets" too many times. But please stay with me here. It has become vogue lately to say that for a Muslim (or for anyone, really) coming to saving faith in Christ is a process. It may take a long time. We can never know when he or she "crosses the line" to faith. Indeed, is there a line? If there is, what is it? And is it my job, really, to know who is "in" and who is "out"? Therefore we shouldn't press

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people toward decisions or definitive steps, but rather just keep pointing our friends to Jesus.

Almost always the bounded versus centered sets theme is cited. You know, bounded sets mean those who are “saved” or “in the church” or “going to heaven” are those who

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are on the right side of a line, usually a line of profession (or baptism) or theological understanding. Some favoring a centered-set approach say no, that it is too artificial and a poor reflection of what’s really happening inside the heart. What really matters is whether one is moving **toward** Jesus rather than **away** from Jesus, regardless of what side of the line they’re on⁸. That is, does their arrow point toward the Center or away from

it (Him)? For example, in bounded set *theory* during Jesus’ ministry Judas would have been considered “IN,” whereas Nicodemus would have been “OUT,” which is not really how things turned out, was it? So, I understand this. I get it.

However, I believe these concerns and arguments are, at best, half-truths. They take a few biblical points, but completely ignore many dozens of New Testament passages. The simple fact is, in the book of Acts and in the epistles, it was extremely clear who was “IN” and who was, well, not yet in. This is utterly true in the book of Revelation as well. It was also a significant theme in Jesus’ teaching. It’s just that in the Gospels the form of His followers see-sawed from small to large to small to medium, people coming and going—always a bit amorphous. Jesus knew this is how it would have to be until the Church would be solidified and established at Pentecost. At that point, clear identity in Christ became very important.

When one enters the Kingdom of

God through faith in Christ as Lord and Savior, he or she is entering into the New Covenant which Christ inaugurated. Jesus emphasized this especially in the Upper Room. With covenants, you’re either in or not in.⁹

I have to admit I’m not wild about the word “saved.” Sounds very “old time religion,” doesn’t it? But around forty times in the New Testament “saved” is the terminology used to denote being right with God, of being a true believer / follower / disciple of Christ. Less frequently used phrases include being “obedient to the faith” or “entering the Kingdom of God.” It is abundantly clear in the various passages that there are those who are presently “saved” and those who are not, or a time when an individual was not saved and then he is. Was there a line that one crossed? Absolutely. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, I’m convinced from the extensive and consistent New Testament data that the experience of saving faith—of crossing the line, if you will—is a combination of what must happen internally and

externally. On the inside, we read many times that we must repent and believe. And we also read that on the outside, in our actions, it is crucial that we confess our faith, be baptized, and get involved with Christ's *ekklesia* in community. What happens in the heart is salvific and the outward actions are essential visible follow-through steps. Does this mean that what is visible (e.g. being baptized or part of a believers group) is always 100% true of spiritual reality? Of course not. But the exceptions to that would have been true in the early church as well, and it's not something that put the apostles off.

So what's the point of this little digression? Simply that all the fuzziness factors, the issues of nuance, and our inability to peer into the human heart, do not diminish the need for us to teach disciples to obey all that Jesus commanded, including baptism.

So Where Do We Go From Here?

I'll be honest with you. In my role in the Middle East when I think of our teams really moving ahead with the aim of baptism among Arab MBBs, I kind of *gulp* and wrestle with a sense of unbelief. I'm nevertheless convinced it's the right thing to do, that we must operate in obedience, and we must trust God to provide for His MBB church.

DMM teaches that a major transition point in the successful DBS groups is that the seekers become believers. Really, at some point in successful groups people begin to fall in love with Jesus. They confess faith in Him. At that time then, for a season the DBS passages should be about

baptism. Of course there will be resistance. Even lost people often have a genuine respect of baptism. But the believers are then soaked with God's Word concerning this vital step. Certainly the expatriate church planter does not pressure the new believers to get baptized. Indeed he or she is probably not even in the meetings. But as the pattern has already been set for the participants studying the Word and deciding how they will obey the particular passage and subject, so it is with baptism. At some point people say, "yes," from their hearts. What is the role of the expatriate church planter in this?

I'm not personally aware of anything that would suggest that baptism must be public.

It is a vital one, as he or she gives leadership from the outside, coaching and training the *person of peace* / *group facilitator*, establishing direction, and setting passages to study.

Of course, in most contexts the prospect of baptism will raise the issues of contextualization and identity. Are these new ones in Christ now "Christians?" Or are they "Muslim followers of Jesus?" Something else? They will likely make these determinations for themselves, and they will figure out how it shapes for them the step of baptism. These are good discussions to have. About the issue of baptism being seen as

culturally Christian, it should be stressed with the new believers who are studying it that baptism pre-dates both Christianity and Islam, and it has never been a symbol of a changed religion, but rather of a changed heart.

I'm not personally aware of anything that would suggest that baptism must be public. However, it does seem normative for it to be with other believers, as one thing it does signify is becoming part of the community of faith. And it serves to be an edifying, faith-building community experience, reasserting and rehearsing the fact of the gospel, every time another one is symbolically crucified, buried, and resurrected with Christ.

While I'm an immersion guy personally, I believe we need to be flexible regarding the mode of baptism. Again, they will likely be deciding this question for themselves. It won't be for us to say, "Hold on. You must get every square millimeter of your body underwater for at least three seconds in a bathtub, lake or church baptismal."

I'd like to close now with an account from a very "high-identity, high-practice" context in an Arab country. The story below is not unique, as we are hearing of more and more MBBs being baptized, in good numbers, even in the trickiest of places. This encouraged my heart, and I trust it will encourage yours as well. 

Dear friends...

Bob & I were driving back today from a 2-day prayer conference when we received an SMS from our dear MBB “Matt”:

“hi bros, all is fine. pray 4 the guys... SAI [a key mosque leader] is guided by the Holy Spirit(*) 2 b bptztd 2moro at 9am... Joe & SAA [a new MBB who’d been studying the Word for 2yrs in the group!] were encouraged and they will get bptztd too. “Ian” will join us too. Pls pray for such an advanced step... more Lord Isa !”

We & others have been praying for this to happen for months, and when we got the SMS we almost jumped for joy were it not that we were driving in the car (!!):-)

This is BIG. this is the 1st MBB imam that we know of who is getting bptztd, and not just one, but TWO on the same day!!! They will be bptztd in [certain body of water]. And our fellow brother in the Lord “Joe” who rejoined the flock about 6 months ago will also be bptztd. These significant steps of obedience, in line with JC’s commands and the Word’s exhortation are, we sense, a tremendous leap forward for the Kingdom here. At our conference, it was prophesied that BIG things will happen in our region in 2012. It’s already beginning...

Obedience is growing.

Praise God.

[the TL]

(*) The Spirit-led stirring behind this all is that SAI had a vision from the Lord about 7-10 days ago - while he was praying, he saw (while his eyes were open) himself coming under a waterfall and being washed by this powerful fountain!! As soon as he saw this he knew in his heart the Lord was speaking to him about being bptztd! (He had witnessed Ian’s bptsm last year on the beach... and knew that Matt had been baptized 5yrs ago.) so after spending several days studying the Word about this with the other brothers in their study grps, he knew his time had come :-)) --- isn’t God good!?!?

¹ The term “background” does not necessarily mean something in one’s past and not one’s present. I personally believe that the term “MBB” can broadly refer both to those who consider themselves former Muslims as well as those who self-identify as Muslim followers of Jesus.

² Except for proselytes to Judaism, none of the occurrences of “convert” (both noun and verb) in main English translations refer to conversion in an outer, social identity sense, i.e. the way it is normally *heard* today.

³ Arabic *kuffaara*

⁴ See Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology, An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, UK: Intervarsity Press, 1994), chapter 49.

⁵ Note from verse 16 that this was a command specifically to the Eleven, i.e.

apostles. While this *great commission* probably has general application to the Church, its particular application is to those called to apostleship.

⁶ Such as described in the book *Miraculous Movements* by Jerry Trousedale.

⁷ This was their second baptism. Clearly baptism in Christ was markedly different from John’s baptism of repentance.

⁸ Paul Hiebert’s original paper on “bounded-set thinking” did indeed encourage differentiations “between those who are followers of Jesus and those who are not,” even with a centered-set view. But many since then have taken these new approaches to disparage the importance of such.

⁹ Two of the three references Jesus makes to the “church” are about church discipline. That of course

pertains to boundary points (along with issues of personal restoration).

¹⁰ This includes a range of past or aorist tense, present tense (usually in the passive participle), and future tense (i.e. *will be saved*).

¹¹ E.g. Simon the Magician’s baptism in Acts 8.

¹² One team leader comments on variations he has seen in southeast Asia: “It has gone from sitting in a chair and being washed with dippers of water (an Asian type ritual), to a whole group, when they read over and over again about baptism, going to a river together, standing in the river in a circle holding hands, and on 1,2,3 going under together. In another group, they simply choose one of their *salat* washings to say, this day, this washing, is my baptism identifying with Christ - his death and resurrection.”