

# the alter call

## A Partner in Asia tries to sow a seed of change at an Islamic religious meeting.

About five thousand men, that would be my guess. The meeting had all the hallmarks of an evangelistic, revival-style gathering, with preaching, meetings and a theme of 'Let's win the world for Islam'. I was visiting friends in town, and across the road from their house was an open playing field which was now the site of a weekend-long *Islami* (religious meeting). It was jam-packed full of flowing white *Punjabis*, flowing white beards and flowing with words.

So I wandered over.

I was greeted with enthusiasm, for here was someone with whom to put into practise that which was being preached. A local mullah greeted me warmly and began regaling me with advantages of the unity of Islam. Unfortunately for him, there was a profusion of different headstyles, and I asked awkward questions about why, if Islam was one, there were so many different groupings. Faced with these sticky questions, people passed me up a ladder of seniority till eventually I was sitting with a head mullah from the capital city.

So, here I am, sitting in a tent, face to face with this very pleasant head mullah. We're surrounded by an

eager crowd of about a hundred faces, bearded and unbearded, all spellbound, waiting to see how this would play out. For about fifteen minutes I listen in fascination to a description of the appeal of Islam – its unity, its brotherhood and its goodness. It's truly an impressive sales pitch. He's good.

### A few questions for the mullah

As he ran out of steam, I began. I said that I agreed with him that our life should be oriented toward Allah and his path. Indeed, to be in communion with Allah should be the goal of our lives. A daily goal. But here I had some questions. When we say prayers, we have to wash so that we are clean and Allah will hear our prayers. 'Yes.' And at the next time of prayer I need to wash again. 'Yes.' Because in that time I will have become unclean. 'Yes.' But what if I want to stay in contact with Allah? What if I want to stay in communion with him: how long can I stay clean? 'Pardon?' How long can I stay clean so that I can be in spiritual union with Allah? (Here we get into Asian-style bargaining) An afternoon? But surely that's not very long...? A weekend like this? But what about when I go back home...?

Eventually we settle on the idea that the most disciplined, the most ascetic, holy man could stay clean for forty days.

### A suggestion

At this I sigh. 'Sir, it seems to me that we have a problem. We're supposed to be slaves to Allah (*Abd'Allah*). But it looks more like we're slaves to dirt and pollution. We want to stay clean, we want to stay in communion with Allah. But the world and its pollution touches us and makes us unclean. The world's pollution is stronger than us. Rather than being slaves to Allah, it looks more like we're slaves to pollution. It has power over us. Wouldn't it be good if maybe... just maybe... if Allah's Holy Spirit (*Ruh'Allah*)\* came into our lives; then his holiness would be more powerful. Instead of the world touching us and making us unclean, the Spirit of Allah could flow through us and touch the world, making it clean. Wouldn't that be a freedom?'

### A response

Through this my whole concentration had been on the head mullah. Was he getting angry? Was I going too far? I was watching his face closely for any clues that I should back off.

However, as I spoke about being free from pollution, something broke my concentration. This something was a tangible, an audible, response from the crowd of men listening. There was a palpable sense of, 'Oh Allah, yes! Wouldn't that be good!?' The strength of this response came as a surprise to me, and I was just adjusting to it when I had to readjust to the fact that older, wiser men were chastising people in the crowd – 'Don't agree with him', backed up with a forceful clip round the back of the head.

Ah, time to ease off.

'No, no, no, you don't understand. You're a foreigner.' 'You're right, my friend. I'm just a stupid foreigner. I was just wondering... Just wondering.'

After cups of tea, small talk and Salaams, I leave. Hopefully a seed was sown. Hopefully, those with ears to hear will let that seed grow into good fruit.

As I wandered off, I wondered: had I ever heard a gospel message

preached like the one I had just been led to give? Not to my knowledge. And yet this is gospel, good news, to my brothers here. It's not what many of us would naturally think of as the message of the gospel, but it's a major part of the message we need to proclaim. I think of it as a piece of music. In the West, we hear the tune of the gospel as having a focus on salvation of the individual from sin by Christ's atoning sacrifice and God's grace touching our hearts; it's a message of love and compassion, with overtones of honouring God. Here, however, the main focus is on the status of Christ, his Lordship meaning he is entitled to save, and God's grace brings a freedom from pollution and gives material provision (such as food on my plate); the main notes are of honour and the overtones are of love and compassion. Played in the right way, this message can resonate in hearts in a palpable way.

*\* A Koranic description of Jesus. 'Ruh Allah' or 'the Spirit of God.' Is seen in sura iv (al-Nisa'): 169, where it is written: 'Verily the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is the Apostle of God, and His Word which He conveyed into Mary, and a Spirit (proceeding) from Him.' Al-Baydawi comments: "(Jesus is) a spirit from Him"; possessed of a spirit proceeding from Him, not mediately but direct, both as to origin and essence. Or "a Spirit" because he giveth life to the dead, and to the hearts of men.'*

## Allah?

Through the ages, Christians have tried to convey the Living Word through the everyday language of the people they are reaching out to. Christians took up the words 'Theos' and later 'Gott' (amongst may others) to talk about the Creator. Both of these originally had connotations not compatible with God as revealed in the Bible. However, we now read them exclusively as 'God'. When the message goes to new cultures, we need to find terms that start where people are at, whether that's in New Guinea, Brazil or the Middle East. Do we drop this custom just for a Muslim neighbour?

'But surely there is a big difference between the understanding of Allah and the true nature of God?' True! True indeed. But we all start with a poor understanding of who God is. For some of us he was God the policeman, for others he's God the kindly grandfather. As we get to know him, these misconceptions are replaced by knowing him in relationship. The people I know who have used the word 'Allah' all their life but now know him through Jesus almost all say, 'I knew Allah before, but now I know him so much better. I see him so much more clearly and my relationship is so much deeper through Jesus.'

Very few of my colleagues want to stop using the word 'Allah' in their prayers; instead, the word is infused with new, fresh and dynamic meaning.

### Prayer pointer

- ♦ Pray for Muslims seeking spiritual truth.
- ♦ Pray for Christians seeking to engage wisely and sensitively in relationship and discussion with their Muslim friends and neighbours.
- ♦ Pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in these situations.