

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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living.*

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Syrian churches speaking Malayalam, nor will the Syrian churches invite them to do so. Gujarati merchant caste people in London are not going to join congregations made up of Trinidadian Christians, who are descendants of low caste indentured laborers from South India and who have maintained in their congregations a Trinidadian culture and dominance.

Brotherhood will come. Make no mistake, the Lord God Almighty will bring it. Bible-believing and obeying Christians will institute it. But to give the spirit of love and brotherhood the greatest chance, it must flow through congregations of like cultured people. Bright days and great victories lie ahead, if only we hold steadily in mind Christ's command to disciple whole segments of society, whole ethnoses, whole castes, and tribes, and peoples.

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## **Two Case Histories of Church Growth 1. A Culturally Sensitive Area An interview with Phil Parshall**

Jim Reapsome

*Reprinted from Muslim World Pulse, with permission*

Phil Parshall has ministered in a Muslim country for the past 21 years. His book, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Baker, 1980), drew both praise and criticism. He was praised for suggesting fresh ways to remove Christian cultural barriers standing in the way of reaching Muslims; he was criticized for giving up distinctively Christian positions for the sake of building bridges to Muslims. In this interview with MUSLIM WORLD PULSE he tells of the ongoing struggle to gain acceptance for his views.

*One of the criticisms of your approach is that older Muslim converts don't buy it.*

*Parshall:* Those who feel that way have been influenced by traditional churches. They belong to more ingrown types of churches. They are products of *extraction evangelism*, cut off from their own Muslim family and friends. In many instances, they have integrated into a Western influenced Christian ghetto.

*What about more recent converts who have not had this kind of traditional Western missionary indoctrination?*

*Parshall:* They have no problems with what we are doing. They are coming out of orthodox Islam. In the last two years we have seen 15 heads of families come to the Lord. We have seen a worshipping group established. The believers have put up a building with their own money on their own property. The leader is the headmaster of the village school. We've made things optional with them. It's not legalistic. There is no conflict with them over such things as the fast, washing before praying, and so on, until they run into

traditional Christians. That's why we started in a virgin area where there were no Christians at all.

*What about keeping the fast (Ramadan)?*

*Parshall:* Some missionaries say that in order to be a Christian you must break Ramadan. I'm sorry, but the Bible doesn't say that. I say, let's have a choice in the matter. The Bible talks about fasting. With proper biblical teaching, fasting can be an optional thing. The reason some Muslim converts don't want to keep the fast is because missionaries have told them it's a compromise of their faith. All I am saying is, Show that to me in the Bible. *p. 275*

*Very concisely, what is your approach and how does it differ from the traditional approach?*

*Parshall:* The traditional approach is extraction evangelism. A Muslim goes to the mission compound, he's led along by the missionary or a local Christian, and he comes to a profession of faith. He goes back to his village and seeks to articulate his faith. The people get angry and tell him to get out. Islam is very community orientated. Sometimes it literally is a physical extraction. The missionaries have to send a Land Rover to bring the convert out before he gets killed.

Now I ask, is that necessary? One of our *absolutes is that every Muslim convert must stay in his culture*. Extraction is not an option. The Muslim knows that from the first day he meets us. He must stay within his culture, society and community.

We have proved that it can be done with 100 converts. They have all remained in their communities, by being very careful, by being discreet, and by keeping a style of Christian worship that is attractive to Muslims.

What they see in our church is not so drastically different from what they are used to. We sit on bamboo mats on the floor. We have Arabic writing on the walls. The Koran holder has a Bible in it. They see me with a beard, wearing the clothes of a religious man in their culture. The profile is more indigenous as to what religion is supposed to look like to them.

In all of our literature we use Islamic art forms on the covers. We do not give any financial assistance to converts. That's because Muslims see this as an inducement to conversion.

*Have all your 100 converts been baptized?*

*Parshall:* No, just the ones who have come to that point. They all know it is down the road. Water baptism is biblical, universal, and historical. The problem is that Muslims see this as the time when you bail out of society, and that's exactly what we don't want them to think. That's why I really struggled with this.

Right now we hold off a bit, until a social unit of six, eight or ten people are ready to be baptized together. In the first instance, when we had no Christians in our area, three leaders went down to the river together early one morning. The follower baptized the leader and the leader turned around and baptized the followers. We're delighted with that. It is now possible for these men to go into other areas and baptize new converts.

*What about their keeping the Sheep Feast and sacrifice?*

*Parshall:* Optional, I'm completely at ease about this. The issues are legalism and merit. We make it clear that these practices must not be *p. 276* kept to earn merit to be accepted by God. Also, Christian meaning should be incorporated into these ceremonies.

*What day do you worship?*

*Parshall:* In our country the government has recently switched weekly holidays from Sundays to Fridays. Most of our churches now worship on Fridays.

*You've also been criticized for retaining the Muslim words, Allah (God) and Isa (Jesus).*

*Parshall:* We use religious terms like Allah and Isa because the usual Christian word, *Ishwar*, is abhorrent to Muslims. It was originally a Hindu word taken over by William

Carey. For Muslims, it conjures up idols. So we go back and use their terms and reinterpret them.

*How do your churches organize?*

*Parshall:* We follow the mosque pattern. It's something like the Christian Brethren style. Each church is autonomous. We don't encourage organizational links between them; we don't want bishops, big power structures, and money. The only 'money' is food. When we go to their place, they give us a meal; when they come to our place, we give them a meal, and that's it.

We have no institutions and no plans for any. For meeting social and physical needs, we look to groups like World Vision, World Relief Commission, Food For the Hungry, Salvation Army, and the Mennonite Central Committee. They come and do their thing in Christ's name. By government regulation, they can't preach. They serve a difference audience than we do.

*What about washing before praying?*

*Parshall:* Every Muslim has always washed before praying. Muslims will not pray without washing. Outside our centers we have a pot of water. If the converts want to wash, we don't object. In Islam, this is a meritorious act, to make one ceremonially clean. We tell the converts that washing does not make them clean before God, but if a convert has washed before praying for 50 years, we don't insist that he suddenly stop just because he has become a Christian.

*Some of your critics have said that your pragmatism overrides your theology.*

*Parshall:* Some scholars feel we should give a theological treatise for each of the things we do. I respect and appreciate theological critiques. On the other hand, I am a pragmatist, and if I look at something from my theological orientation, and it's permissible, then I do it. I don't want to spend the rest of my life going to one Th. D after another trying to figure out whether it's alright to wash before you pray. *p. 277*

## II A Multi-ethnic Community

*Reprinted from Evangelical Missions Quarterly, with permission*

Probably the model having the most potential for exhibiting total respect for maintained homogeneous units in a context of true spiritual unity is the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual local church. The First Baptist Church of Flushing, New York continues to show that it can happen. It is made up of a number of ethnic and linguistic 'congregations' that compose the total church. A pastoral staff from Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and Portuguese backgrounds, among others, ministers to 'their' people in separate services. Prayer and Bible study groups flourish in other languages. Even church dinners reflect the ethnic diversity of the church, located in an area where more than fifty languages are spoken.

According to the senior pastor, Rev. Russell Rosser, the key to the healthy life and outreach of the church is their emphasis on relationships. A priority is placed on love and the preservation of unity. Members from the various 'congregations' share weekly in common worship services where the message is often translated. The pastoral staff meets for four hours a week for in-depth sharing in the Word and prayer, and for ministry to each other. The church board reflects the ethnic diversity of the membership. Each group, however, is free to determine the extent and closeness of its relationship to the