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Parabolic Preaching in the Context of Islam

Martin Goldsmith

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I never tire of rereading this article and I make no apology for reprinting it and likewise the poem which follows it. The parables are the classic Eastern way to non-confrontational and dialogical preaching to the cynical and to those who have been warned by their religious leaders to close their minds to Christian teaching. This model, used in a Muslim setting, is equally applicable to people of other faiths—Hindus, Buddhists—and to atheists and Marxists (these are still many zealous Marxists in the Third World). But do not proven evangelists in the West also know the power of a good story?

The poem by Chandran Devanesen may raise some theological questioning but no one can deny its power to motivate for social justice. A Christian group in New Delhi sponsored a mushaira in a community hall in a densely inhabited colony of Muslims. For three hours, fifteen Christian poets recited their own poetry in praise of Jesus Christ. The packed hall of Muslim men again and again expressed their appreciation with their traditional sounds of approval. No stones were thrown. The poets were invited back. Why? Because the mushaira style using Islamic metre is sacred to the followers of the Prophet.

Editor

The European mind is frequently accused of being unduly concentrated on conceptual thinking, whereas Middle Eastern cultures tend rather to a more pictorial approach. The Bible therefore generally stresses teaching through a more pictorial form, although the N.T. with the increasing influence of Gentile thought includes much of a more conceptual nature. God's revelation of himself in the O.T. is fundamentally through his acts in history which are then recorded in verbal form. The language of the prophets is graphic, full of imagery and vibrant with activity—it is in form and character poles apart from our traditional works of conceptual systematic theology. Ezekiel in particular uses under the guidance of God acted visual forms.

In the N.T. also the message of the Word is taught not only with direct verbal communion, but also through visual signs and p. 273 miracles. The structure of John's Gospel interweaves the visual sign and the preached word. The vital significance of the visual is further exemplified in the Book of Acts, which today's scholars see not only as a book of history but also as a doctrinal teaching treatise.

JESUS THE PREACHER AND TEACHER

Jesus himself taught both by his deeds and also by his words. However, it is important to note that his words were again not merely conceptual, but also conjured up visual imagery and were often in the form of stories and parables. In the context of Asian and Middle Eastern peoples we may need to follow the teaching pattern of Jesus in speaking through such pictorial language. In many Asian languages proverbs and stories form the basis of communication. In English too we use such expressions as 'out of the frying pan, into the fire' without the need to explain in detail the significance of such a proverb. In Asian languages there is liable to be a far greater use of such expressions and we need to learn to teach, preach and express ourselves more in this way.

Jesus particularly used the parabolic form for some of his preaching. He actually states that this was in order that some might not understand! His parables allowed those with ears to understand, while those with closed minds failed to grasp what he was saying. Likewise his use of the expression 'Son of Man' for himself was open to two interpretations. His followers could discern the deeper meaning in the context of Daniel, while his opponents might only see it in the context of Ezekiel where it is merely another way of saying 'a man'.

The N.T. has in fact two different ways of preaching—the one is parabolic and open to differing interpretation; the other is clear and unequivocal. Where people are hungry spiritually and some are open to the gospel of Christ we are to use clear preaching. Paul often prayed and asked for prayer that he might 'make the gospel clear as he ought to speak' ([Col. 4](#)). But where hearts are hardened against the Lord and his gospel we are instructed not to cast our pearls before swine lest they trample our message under foot and also attack us personally. The need for such parabolic teaching is however not only to prevent the gospel being blasphemed and ourselves being attacked, but also for the sake of our hearers. If they are unprepared for the reception of the saving message of Christ, they can only reject it. Rejection of Jesus and his gospel is a hardening process—the more people are put into a position where they have to reject the gospel, the more difficult it becomes for them to receive Christ later. [p. 274](#)

I would like to suggest that in hard Muslim areas we may be wise to use this parabolic approach to the preaching of the gospel. It has at least three pragmatic advantages as well as being a biblical form of preaching.

a) Such preaching does not cause anger, opposition and rejection of the Lord. Even in the most fanatical Muslim society there will be no objection to our telling attractive stories which do not in any way refer to the name of Jesus Christ or to specific Christian doctrine, but which may nevertheless introduce people to the sort of questions which will lead to Christ. There is therefore no reason why such preaching should not be engaged in even in core Muslim lands where our traditional forms of preaching would be illegal and impossible.

b) Parabolic preaching suits traditional story-telling cultures. The Christian may thus gain for himself a reputation as a story-teller which will be quite popular. People will then travel considerable distances just to hear his stories and they will then repeat those stories far and near. In this way he may be able to permeate the whole society with a '*praeparatio evangelii*'.

c) Parabolic preaching is ideal for teaching fundamental religious ideas which are the foundation on which the gospel is built—e.g. the nature and character of God, God's basic desires for man, heart religion as distinct from mere externalism. It is impossible for a man to be truly converted to Christ without some basic idea of such fundamentals as God, sin, eternal life. God patiently waited for many centuries before sending his Son to earth

in order to lay a true foundation of basic religion in the life and thought of Israel—surely we too can be patient and willing to impart basic religious concepts before we present the full message of Jesus Christ, his death for sin and his resurrection unto new life?

I personally have used this approach and found it helpful. Let me now share two such stories which I have used often and particularly enjoy! I like to use biblical stories but I islamicize them and do not say that they come from the Christian Bible.

THE WIDOW'S MITE

Two Muslim men went to pay their *zakat*. One was very rich and from his abundance he gave £10,000; the other was very poor, but was nevertheless keen to give something to God and therefore gave the last cent/pence which he still had in his purse. I like to describe the two men in considerable detail with plenty of humour and local colour—and **P. 275** Muslim men join in with gusto in response, for they recognize the rich man's description as apt for some of their particular local figures! Both proud wealth and abject poverty are fun to describe and lead to real rapport with one's audience. Having told the story I ask which gift God was pleased with. The standard answer is that God is no fool and surely prefers £10,000 to a mere one pence! Materialistic men love then to joke about the advantages of £10,000. My story telling has not in any way betrayed my own opinion as to the correct answer. But I then ask the men further: 'Might not God be interested in the motive of the giver's heart rather than the sum of money involved? Does God actually *need* our money?' The hard-hearted and materialistic hardly hear that question and merely leave us with lots of laughter about money and about the particular characters described in the story. Those with open hearts begin to examine themselves and see what their motives are in their religion and how much they actually love God. Some of these come back to the story-teller to ask what really lay behind the story; some will confess that they really don't love God much and their religious motives are poor. They may then ask for a solution to their need. This is actually a confession of sin in its full depth of meaning, whereas so much of our preaching merely touches sins, not sin. But we have come to this stage without any actual mention of Jesus or anything specific to the Christian faith—actually even Islam has its doctrine of the intention of the heart, so we are not in any way going against Islam.

THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

Two men went up to the mosque to pray. One was a good Muslim who knew all the right actions for his ritual lustrations; his Arabic was perfect (I used to tell these stories in lands where Arabic was a foreign language!) and he was accomplished in the words and movements of the *salat*. He therefore went confidently to the centre of the mosque and prayed, but his mind wandered to think about the pretty girl next door! The men enjoy this and there are often many remarks about the various pretty girls in the vicinity—and also comments that some of the proud religious men of the area probably actually think about such things when they pray so piously! Much laughter and banter may ensue! The second man was a real sinner who had led a rather corrupt life (easily described!) and had not prayed for many years. He could not remember how to perform the lustrations and therefore just gave his face and hands a quick wash. He also could not remember in detail how to perform the *salat*, so he was shy to enter the mosque. On doing **P. 276** so, however, he went diffidently behind a pillar, squatted down and began to pray in his own words: 'O God, forgive me; I have made a complete mess of my life, but I long now to follow and serve you ...' Local people recognize the characters of both men as typical of the hearts of

many around them and they make suitable comments! I then ask the biblical question as to which man's prayer God approved of.

In practice I find that unless Muslims have had considerable contact with Christian thought they tend to give the wrong answers to both these stories. Naturally God prefers thousands to dollars to one penny. And likewise God approves of prayers which are according to the pattern he has ordained through Mohammed. Again one suggests that it would be of interest to ask whether God is actually more interested in the intention of the heart than in mere externalisms.

THE RESPONSE OF THE HEART

Audiences can be divided in reaction. Again some will be so busy laughing at the characters involved and comparing them with local folk that they do not get the point at all. Such people would have reacted violently however to 'clear preaching', for their hearts are hardened and unspiritual. At least with 'parabolic preaching' you have spared them any hardening rejection of Christ and you have spared yourself the indignity and pain of being stoned! Such people have enjoyed your stories and will come again for further 'entertainment' and one must trust that eventually God's Spirit will open their hearts to become receptive to the gospel. But others in the audience will begin to get the point and the Spirit will give them no peace as they wrestle with the issues—how can I pray with a clear heart? Does God approve of me and my doings? What are the intentions of my heart?

In strongly Muslim communities I always suggest to seekers with such vital questions that they look for the answers first in Islam. I tell them that as a Christian I know there are solutions in Jesus, but as Muslims they should look deeply at Islam first before they think more of Christianity. I usually suggest they ask the local imam/mullah for the answers, but I warn them not to be fobbed off with trite inadequate answers and then I give them the usual typical answers in Islam and show why they are not adequate! Personally I am convinced that Islam does not have adequate answers to the deep religious questions of the heart and I trust the Holy Spirit to go on convincing men of sin until they find the answer in Jesus Christ. But if converts to Christ have not examined Islam first, they are very liable to backslide under the intense pressures imposed on all Muslims who convert to the Christian faith. [p. 277](#) The worst possible testimony is an apostate who reverts to Islam—it is better that such a person should never have professed faith in Jesus Christ.

I believe that pictorial and parabolic methods can be used in every form of Christian communication from serious theological training through to basic evangelistic literature. In evangelism we Westerners are sometimes too keen to give all the answers at once; we might do better to tell the sort of stories which provoke deep questions and then ask people to write in for more answers if they want. We are also sometimes too quick to abandon the form of stories, parables and pictorial language in favour of the more scientifically precise conceptual language. Can we therefore learn to teach theology in a non-conceptual manner? Also in worship we may well find that the visual and pictorial, for example, the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, will move the heart to love and worship more than forms based only on the conceptual word.

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