



Going Far Enough

By RALPH D. WINTER

Those of us responding to Phil Parshall's excellent analysis "Going Too Far" are not mainly disagreeing with him but enthusiastically accepting his invitation to bring these things out into open discussion. Time may show us all to be wrong in one way or another. My contribution has been made much less demanding due to the excellent responses already given by Travis and Gililand. I certainly endorse all five of Parshall's "Guidelines."

I add these words because I feel we need to take seriously the wealth of experiences and events during over 1,000 years since Muhammed's death, and we need to realize the most important result of all this may be a better understanding of the New Testament!

In the first place, that 1,000+ year dynamic record involves deep and almost constant heresy within the very Christian tradition of

which we are so often proud. I have already described some of the powerful political and cultural factors in the rise of both Christianity and Islam, in Chapter 33 (The Kingdom Strikes Back). There has always been a lot of disturbing debate about the best way to believe. Early Christian theologians have struggled to define at different times Arian, Athanasian, Monophysite, Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim theologies, etc., as heretical without singling out any one of them as "non-Christian."

What needs to be very clear in the present discussion is the fact that in recent history Christians and Muslims have each developed highly sensitive and extensively prejudicial attitudes toward each other, especially since the Crusades. This especially makes it very hard to peel away layers of prejudice and think objectively.

It is incredible how political

configurations can warp our sensitivities. True blue American democracy worked closely with Russian Communist Allies when it was necessary to put down the Nazi juggernaut. Once that threat was removed we returned to American/Soviet conflict again. Conflict and polarization in former Yugoslavia is just as great between Croatian and Serb (both Christian) as it is between either of them and the Bosnian Muslims, and objectivity is virtually impossible.

Thus, my first point is that our attitudes in this discussion must take into account the possible warping of our perspective resulting from historical events. Semi-barbarian Christians from Western Europe committed awful atrocities against both Eastern Christians in Constantinople and Muslims in Jerusalem. Eastern Christians were considered by Western Christians as heretical as Muslims. Today, a simple Bible-church believer might suffer even greater culture shock inside a highly decorated Catholic cathedral than he would in a Muslim mosque.

Indeed, for centuries there have been millions of "Muslims" who believe that Jesus is the Son of God, as well as millions of "Christians" who are very foggy on that point, such as devout, Bible-revering pentecostal "unitarians" in Mexico.

In other words, whether believers in Jesus are called Muslims or Christians does not make a whole lot of difference when it comes to precise doctrinal fidelity to the Word of God. Within the 32 million "African Initiated Churches" you can find almost every sort of heresy, but we tend automatically to be tolerant of their theological understanding and are willing to give them time to understand the Bible better—partly because it is our habit to call them Christians. Basically, mission strategists are less concerned to get these 32-million people out of these movements than they are to get the Bible into them.

Could not this be the case with those thousands, and perhaps some day millions of "Muslims" whose main problem is that they are not as familiar with the Bible as they ought to be? Can't we think of the Qur'an as we do the Apocrypha and let it gradually take a back seat to our Bible simply because it is not as edifying intellectually or spiritually? That will happen despite the emotional attachment Muslims may have to its Arabic and its cadences (no better understood than Catholics used to understand the Latin Mass). What a handicap the Qur'an has in comparison to the meaningful flow of drama in the Gospels! And what a handicap if, like the Latin Mass for so many centuries, the Qur'an

cannot and must not be translated into any other language! How can it ever compete with the Bible? Maybe the Torah and the Injil simply need to be re-discovered within Islam the way the Bible has needed again and again to be rediscovered within Christian and Jewish history.

Then, speaking of tolerance, it is not widely recognized by Christians but it is nonetheless absolutely true that throughout history Muslims have been more tolerant of Christians than the reverse! For thirteen centuries Muslims have been in charge of Jerusalem, and during that time they have preserved four quarters: Muslim, Christian, Armenian, and Jewish. Until modern times only when that city has been under Christians or Jews have all others been dealt with genocidal violence.

Finally, we are forced to re-study the New Testament. The major missiological issue there is precisely how to go far enough. Do we feel sure Cornelius was hell-bound before Peter got to his door? Is there such a thing as being "saved" from legalism that corresponds to the Evangelical concept of "a second (or third?) work of grace"—often called filling of the Holy Spirit, deeper life, entire sanctification, baptism of the Spirit? If we are not entirely sure among ourselves whether such a second work of

grace is necessary to pull people out of hell into heaven, then let us not hastily judge the level of faith of Muslim seekers. Part of Peter's explanation, in Acts 15: 8, was a "God who knows the heart." That is precisely what we as humans don't know. Let us not let our theological formulations outrank the Word of God.

Across the centuries of our own history, and the mission fields of the world, movements to Christ have rarely if ever been entirely sound by our present biblical understanding. Today we would not accept Luther's eschatology, nor Calvin's willingness to execute heresy. All our backgrounds, in fact, are "sub-Christian" and syncretistic. Should we not be as eager for Muslims to know Christ and His Word as we are grateful that our forefathers were allowed to catch dim rays of light from that same Word centuries ago?

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