Barriers and Bridges in Making Friends

If you have the privilege of being in Jerusalem, you may go to the site from where it is believed that the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven. It is the Mount of Ascension on the top of the western slopes of the Mount of Olives. There you will find a domed building under Muslim guardianship. Christians are allowed in once a year to hold a service on Ascension Day. In the building there is a slab of stone with an imprint in the shape of a human foot. The guide will tell you it was made by the foot of the Lord Jesus immediately before He ascended into heaven.

If you stand at this spot and look down on Jerusalem and out over the city you may remember that this was the place where the Lord Jesus said the words, ***"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."*** (Acts 1:8)

If you look down over Jerusalem today, you can see the Temple Mount and at the far end is the Al Aqsa Mosque and the beautiful mosque of the Dome of the Rock – both really important Muslim buildings. There is very often trouble and the police or Israeli army units have to be sent into the area to maintain order between the Muslims and the Jews. Looking around from the Mount of Ascension you can see Judaea and in the north Samaria – the West Bank mainly occupied by Palestinian Muslims with a scattering of Israeli settlements.

If you could see to the "ends of the earth" – i.e. a global view – you would see that Islam is the largest religious group outside "Christendom". The number of Christians (nominal and believers) is not growing. By 2050 A.D. it is estimated that it will be about the same as it is now (2017 A.D.). Perhaps there will be a higher number of true believers. However, the number of Muslims is growing in overall percentages. This is mainly because of their high birth-rate. By 2050 A.D. numerically Muslims will be the largest religious community in the world.

I would like us to look at some of the "barriers" in making friends with Muslim peoples and then look at some of the possible "bridges" that will help us overcome these "barriers".

In talking about Islam, people sometimes give the impression it is totally of the devil. There are also those at the other end of the spectrum who see Islam merely as a variant form of mono-deism along with Christianity and Judaism. There is probably some truth in both these views. In Islam there are similarities and affirmations of Biblical faith and these can help us construct "bridges" to the hearts and minds of Muslims.

They may also help us in the whole area of contextualisation – using some of the elements in various Muslim practices as "bridges" over which the truth of the Gospel may travel into the hearts and minds of those we are seeking to reach with the Good News about Jesus.

On the other hand, in Islam there are many differences and denials of Biblical faith. This calls for additional information especially where "theological" Islam has integrated within it a great deal of "folk" Islam (animistic practices) as well as elements of the occult. This may result in "a power encounter" since you may have to confront cultic pre-Islamic elements that have been mixed in with orthodox Islam. This is particularly so on the local/popular level where many of the poorer sections of society live.

Being locked into one approach such as "The Four Spiritual Laws", or any other formula however good it might be in a "Californian" context, is not very Biblical. If the Lord Jesus could say to one Jew, ***"You are not far from the Kingdom of God"*** (Mk. 12:36) and to another Jew, "***You are of your father the devil"*** (Jn. 8:44), we clearly see that many different approaches are needed. As we make friends with Muslims we will find that some of them are not far from the Kingdom and perhaps we will find others that could be said to be "of their father the devil".

Some examples of Theological Barriers and Bridges

- **God Himself**

In the area of "bridges" we have the term 'Allah'. Allah was used by both the Jews and the Christians who lived in the Arabian Peninsula long before the time of Muhammad. When Muhammad referred to Allah he meant the One Creator God referred to in the Bible. In the Quran it says, *"Your God and our God are one."* Even so, there are some major differences between our understanding of God and the understanding of our Muslim friends. We are both talking about the Creator God described throughout the Bible. Our emphasis on the 'unity of God' is similar to the 'oneness of God' in the Quran. Even the grammar of the Arabic "Call to Prayer" seems to have been influenced by the Hebrew 'Shema' (saying), **"The Lord our God, is one Lord"**.

The attributes of God in Christianity and Islam are very similar. One of the 99 names of God is *Wudud* (the loving one). So the difference is not that God is not a God of love in Islam, but that in Islam God's love is only reciprocal love – Sura 3:31-32, *"God only loves those who love him. He does not love those who are disobedient"*. So there is no message like 1 Jn. 4:10, ***"This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."*** There is nothing similar to Rom. 5:8, ***"But God demonstrated His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***

Even some of the Muslim denials are not so clear. For example, is the Quran denying the Trinity when it says, *"Say not to three"* (Sura 4:169-171) or is it denying tri-theism (i.e. three separate gods). If this is the case, we would also deny the concept. But if it is denying the Trinity, then we have a major conflict. But there are some very helpful comments that we can use as "bridges" in making friends with Muslims.

- **The Concept that God is a Spirit**

Muslims are very concerned that there should be no material aspects to God. Anthropomorphic terms such as God having an "arm" or a "hand" are very troubling to Muslims. This has been so down through the centuries. In fact this issue arose when the Old Testament was translated into Greek – the Septuagint.

So God is a Spirit and in the Quran the Lord Jesus is also called *'a Spirit from God'*. (Sura 19:17) What the Quran means by 'the Spirit' may not be what the Bible means by 'the Spirit'. Yet in the Quran, there is a sense that the Spirit of God was on the Lord Jesus and so in the womb of Mary when the Lord Jesus was conceived He could be called, *"a Spirit from God"*. (Sura 4:171) So the Holy Spirit can indwell human beings.

The term 'Holy Spirit' has quite a range of meanings in the Quran. These include the meaning of a divine being above the angels who descends from God (Sura 16:104) and who supported the Lord Jesus (Sura 2:84). So although you do not have a Trinity, you do have the concept of God as a Spirit who could indwell the Lord Jesus and who could be a "being" able to support the Lord Jesus. So this is a possible "bridge of understanding" we can use with our Muslim friends.

A Muslim once asked a friend, "What is the chief purpose of humans?" The friend came from a good Presbyterian background so he said, "To glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." His friend asked, "What does that mean?" Then he asked if it would be possible for the two of them to get together sometime to discuss what it really means "to glorify God". So this is a possible way we can build "bridges" and overcome "barriers".

- **The Understanding of us as human beings**

In both the Bible and the Quran human beings are created by God and given dominion over the physical creation. So we are under God and over creation. This means we have the same understanding of human beings as Muslims and so we can work together with them in development and relief projects, in medicine and in scientific research. Together we can follow our mandate to develop and have dominion over the created earth.

On the other hand, in Islam human nature is considered neutral or even good. The Quran says our basic disposition is neutral or even Islamic. (Sura 30:30) This is a crucial topic since it determines what we believe is necessary for salvation.

When we come to discuss the Lord Jesus there are tremendous areas of "bridge building". There are 93 references to the Lord Jesus in the Quran and most of these affirm what we, as believers, believe to be true. Here are a few examples:

Sura 5:17: This speaks of the Virgin Birth

Sura 9:34: The Lord Jesus is a statement of the truth – similar in some ways to John 14:6

Sura 10:94: "*So if you have been in doubt about what we revealed to you, then ask those who have already been reading Scripture before you. Truth has come to you from your Lord, so do not be a doubter."* The implication is, 'If you are in doubt, check with Christian believers'.

Sura 4:171: This speaks of Jesus as an apostle of God, a "sign" – similar to Hebrews 3:1, ***"Therefore, holy brethren, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus …."***

Sura 19:21: (The context is the angel – *'our spirit'* of 19:17) He appears to the Virgin Mary and says to her, *"We intend to make him a sign for humankind and the mercy from us."*

Many of the miracles of the Lord Jesus recorded in the Gospels are also found in the Quran. These include raising the dead, giving sight to the blind and healing lepers. No miracles are ascribed to Muhammad in the Quran. The 'miracle' is receiving the Quran from an angel.

In Sura 19:19 we read, *"He said, I am only a messenger* (the angel appearing to Mary) *from your Lord, to give you a sinless son."* This is significant because Muhammad is told to ask forgiveness for his sins! This raises an interesting problem, but don't raise it often and when you do raise it, do so very tactfully.

The Lord Jesus is called a "servant" in the Bible. See Phil. 2:6-7 where the "servant" humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the Cross. In Sura 19:30 we read, *"He* (the Lord Jesus) *said, 'I am indeed the servant of God, who has given me Scripture and made me a prophet'."* Clearly, **our** understanding of this is quite different from that of our Muslim friends. Their view is that the Quran clearly says the Lord Jesus was a servant, so He was not God, not divine, not the Son of God and He shouldn't be worshipped in any way at all!

Our view comes from Phil. 2:8-9, ***"And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a Cross. Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."*** This is something Muslims would not accept!

You may not want to go further in interpreting these verses at an early stage in your friendship. Let us look at other passages in the Quran to show how other verses can be used as "bridges".

Sura 4:157-159: *"And on account of their saying* (i.e. the Jews), *'We killed the Messiah Jesus, Son of Mary, Messenger of God, whereas they did not kill him, <u>they did not crucify him</u>, although it was made to seem thus to them."* There is a degree of confusion about how to interpret these verses. Some Muslims have suggested that there was a crucifixion, but someone else was made to look like the Lord Jesus and that person was killed. God took the Lord Jesus up to Himself in heaven.

There are other problem verses such as Sura 19:33-34, *" 'And peace is upon me the day I was born and the day I die and the day I am resurrected alive.' That was Jesus, son of Mary, a word of truth about which they doubt."*

The problem here is that these Quranic verses appear to say different things. Some Muslims have argued that His body died, but not His soul. This fits in with some other Quranic reasoning where Muhammad is speaking to some Muslims after the great battle of Uhud. This battle was fought in 625 A.D. against the Muslims living in Medina by Meccan forces seeking revenge for the Muslim

victory won the previous year in the battle of Badr. At Uhud Muhammad was injured and many of his followers and others were killed. The implication is that those who are killed in Jihad are not dead except in body. They are alive in God's presence, but we are not aware of it.

This fits in with the reasoning of the Lord Jesus in Mt. 10:28, ***"Don't be afraid of those who kill the body, but can't kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the One who can destroy body and soul in hell."***

There may be another way to interpret this material. The Jews thought they had killed the Lord Jesus, but only God has power over life and death. This fits in with other Quranic reasoning. The battle of Badr was fought in 624 A.D. by Muslims led by Muhammad against the Meccans with a much larger army led by Abu Sufiyan, the leader of the Umayyads in Mecca. This victory, won at a high price for the Muslims, was a symbol of the victory of Islam over polytheism and unbelief. It was a demonstration of divine guidance and intervention on behalf of the Muslims. As they returned to Medina after the battle, they were very pleased with themselves and said, "We are the best fighters". But Muhammad told them, "You did not kill them, God killed them." So it is another possible interpretation of, "You did not kill the Lord Jesus the Messiah".

There is another Quranic verse where God says to the Lord Jesus, *"I am going to bring your life to an end".* This fits in with what the Lord Jesus said to Pilate, ***"You would have no power over Me, unless it was given to you by power from above."*** (Jn. 19:11)

So you can see that what is a "bridge" and what is a "barrier" is sometimes hard to tell!

- **"Bridges" to understanding the Bible**

The Quran says that it confirms the Bible. Sura 3:3, *"God revealed the book to you in truth, verifying what was before it; God revealed the Torah* (Old Testament) *and the Injil* (Gospel) *before as guidance for humanity."*

In the Quran Christians are told to make judgements about Islam on the basis of the Bible (Sura 5:51-57). All this suggests that the Bible is true. Also, Muslims are asked to believe in the Bible when they read the actual words and don't get it second-hand (Sura 3:78). Finally, the Bible is protected.

These are some of the "bridges" for useful conversations. But you will find that your friends will often raise further "barriers", especially when you say something about the Gospel that they think contradicts the Quran. There are two or three passages in the Quran they will often refer to such as:

Sura 2:41-42: Here the implication is that the Jews concealed the truth of Scripture. The text was correct, but verbally they distorted its meaning or concealed its meaning. So the text of Scripture is not wrong.

Sura 2:73-79: Here the accusation is that they understood the text of Scripture, but changed it anyway. They read it (the Bible) correctly, but spoke a distortion of what they read. Remember that at the time people had very low literacy rates. So Muslims believe the text of the Bible is correct, but the Muslims who had arrived in Medina (that initially had a large Jewish population soon after the Hijra) were trying to understand Judaism with the hope that the Jews would become Muslims. They didn't!

For an example look at Haman, the villain in the Book of Esther, who plots to massacre the Jews when his vanity is hurt by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him. The Book of Esther was written about 465 B.C. in the Court of Xerxes (486-465 B.C.). But the Quran puts the story of Haman and Esther in the Court of Pharaoh in the time of Moses. Moses lived in the time of the 'New Kingdom' (~ 1550-1070 B.C.).

Another example is Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron in Exodus. She is confused with Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus. These confusions led to some of the charges that you find in the Quran – not that the text of the Bible is wrong, but that Jews were possibly unable to read the text and oral tradition was incorrect.

- **Another Theological Area: Sin and Salvation**

Because Islam is the only major world religion to arise **after** Christianity and also because it includes some Biblical material, a number of issues have arisen.

One example is the story of **Adam and Eve and the Fall of Mankind** in Gen. 3. This can certainly be used as a "bridge", but there is a significant little change! Sura 20:115 says, *"We had commissioned Adam before, <u>but he forgot</u>, and we did not find resolve in him."* (Read Sura 20: 114-121)

The implication is that Adam had no intention of sinning, but was absent-minded. What is hinted here is that we should not take sin so seriously – i.e. we should take it much less seriously than it is taken in the Bible.

So our human nature in the Quran is either neutral or even good. While in the Bible we are by nature ***"children of wrath"*** (Eph. 2:3).

The Quran keeps raising problems in its analysis because it says that most people go astray. Well, if your nature is basically good, or at least neutral, why is it that nearly everyone goes astray? We would say that **<u>all</u>** go astray. The Quran says that God has sent prophet after prophet, yet they were rejected. Why was this so? Their rejection was followed by God's judgement. Why do we see this repeated over and over again in human history if our human nature is fundamentally good or at least neutral?

Further, the Lord God is very similar in the Bible and in the Quran. You can find nine out of the 10 Commandments in Islam – all except the Sabbath. They are scattered throughout the Quran and not all in one place as we find them in Exodus 20:3-17. When we look at the details of Islamic Law, in many cases these are similar to Rabbinic Law.

As a "bridge", forgiveness is necessary in Islam. But as a "barrier" no means of forgiveness is given. So it is not necessary for anyone to die in our place. God is God and He can forgive whom He wills or not forgive whom He wills.

So a major difference between us and our Muslim friends is that they think there is no need to be "born again" because there is no need for a complete transformation of our human nature since we are basically "good".

In Islam you are saved by works alone. In Christianity you are saved by faith alone. In Islam works lead to salvation whereas the Bible teaches us that works are the product of salvation. This is the special emphasis of the Pauline letters. Works are the fruit of salvation rather than anything that helps us to earn our salvation.

When we look at the religious observances of Islam, we notice that all the details of the observance of The Five Pillars of Islam (*arkan al-Islam*), considered obligatory for all Muslims, are borrowed from Judaism or Christianity. An example is the **direction of prayer** – where you pray and which postures you should use are borrowed largely from Jewish prayer routines.

The Shahada: *"There is no God but God……"* is similar to the Jewish Shema, **"The Lord our God is One."** But both Jews and Christians would reject the second part of the Shahada, *"and Muhammad is the apostle of God"*.

Prayer (*Salat*): Perhaps 95% of Islamic ritual prayers could be said by a Jew or a Christian without compromise. The remaining 5% are about Muhammad being the apostle of God.

Almsgiving (*Zakah*): As believers we too are called to give to those in need. Traditionally *zakah* is set at one 40^{th} (2.5%) of one's liquid assets and income generating properties. This is to feed the poor, encourage conversion, ransom captives and help travellers on pilgrimage.

Fasting (*Sawm*): As believers we too are called to fast, but this is never to earn our salvation as it is in Islam. For a believer it is a private discipline – usually to give more time to intercessory prayer.

The Pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*): this takes place during the first 10 days of the month of *Dhu al-Hijjah*. Again this pilgrimage is very similar to Old Testament Jewish practices even down to the small details. Of course it is to Mecca rather than to Jerusalem.

So we have looked at some possible "bridges" that may help us share the Gospel with Muslims. The second major focus is to look at the "barriers" we face, but in less detail than the "bridges".

- **Spiritual Barriers**

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12)

This calls us to **frequent, focused prayer** on the situations we are involved in as we share the Gospel with our local friends.

- **Sociological Barriers**

In most Muslim cultures most things are forgivable except disloyalty to the group (tribe/family). This is a major "barrier" for those thinking of coming to faith. A person may be convinced intellectually, that the Lord Jesus is the only source of salvation. But he or she could not think of the consequences of bringing dishonour on his or her family and community by publicly becoming a follower of the Lord Jesus.

- **Ideological Barriers**

There is a great deal of ignorance about Christianity and yet Muslims often think they know everything that is of any value in Christianity. Muslims speak of the time before Muhammad as "Days of Ignorance" in spite of Greek science and the spread of Christianity as far as India and China by the Church of the East.

- **Psychological Barriers**

In most Muslim cultures there is a great deal of emphasis on honour and pride. This is especially true in Arab culture. There is an Arab proverb that says, **"To make a mistake and to admit it, is to make two mistakes!"** So it is very hard to admit that you are wrong!

- **The History of the conflict between Christianity and Islam**

This started when Islam spread out of the Arabian Peninsula to the north where the Byzantine Empire (called a 'Christian' Empire) ruled from Constantinople. To the west there was Egypt that was filled with Coptic Christians. To the east there was Persia that had many Christians from the Church of the East that extended as far as southern India.

In the Middle Ages there was the tragic conflict between 'Christian' Europe and the rulers in the Near East in order to capture Jerusalem – followed by a series of Crusades.

In the 18th -20th centuries most of the Muslim World was under colonial rule by nations that were considered to be 'Christian' – Great Britain, France, Holland, Portugal, Germany and Russia.

Finally, today there are all the complications that have been raised by 'Christian' support for the political state of Israel and the West Bank with little regard for the displaced Palestinians.

All of these historical and current problems are "barriers" that have to be overcome.

- **Cross-cultural "Barriers"**

Although Christianity started in the Near East, the way that the "western" (especially evangelical western) churches have taken it forward and continue to express it, is nearly always through forms and thought processes that have been filtered through Greek logic and are expressed in a western way of thinking, reasoning and expressing things. On the other hand, Islam fits the mindset and the worldview of most Muslim cultures.

- **The Christian Churches**

In so many parts of the Muslim World the Christian churches look very much as if they were built for the hated Christian colonialists and this is often true. These churches have been attacked by the Muslim majority and any nationals who use these churches are seen by Muslims as their enemies and certainly not as people to be loved. Under Islam Christians and other 'Peoples of the Book' were *dhimmis* which meant that they had to pay taxes on their income and land. There were other restrictions in dress, occupation and residence as well as a certain amount of religious freedom.

They didn't have the protection by the state afforded to Muslims. *Dhimmis* were seen as the enemies of Islam.

How would the Lord Jesus deal with these "barriers"?

It is important to think this through. Read carefully John 4 – the conversation between the Lord Jesus and a Samaritan woman. The obstacles the Lord Jesus had to overcome are very similar to those we will meet in speaking to Muslims.

The Samaritan religion and Islam are both distortions of Judaism. Today some survivors of the Samaritan religion live in Nablus on the West Bank. As a people, they opposed the rebuilding of the temple by Ezra and Nehemiah. They built a temple of their own on Mount Gerizim in the Hellenistic period. The law was central to both and the patriarchs and prophets are almost the same in both. So what the Lord Jesus said to the woman is very similar to what He would say to a Muslim today to overcome some of these obstacles.

There were three obstacles

1. She was a Samaritan woman.

Try to grasp in your mind an understanding of what a "barrier" this was. The Samaritans were considered 'mixed race'. To the Jewish community they were seen as more hostile than pagans such as Gentiles, Greeks, Romans etc. They were descendants of the Jewish people that hadn't gone into exile at the time of the Babylonian Captivity and who had intermingled with the Canaanites and others when the bulk of the Jews had gone. When the Jews came back from exile, the Samaritans were willing to help them rebuild the temple. But their help was angrily refused. The Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was destroyed by the Jews. So the Samaritans were always thinking how they could get revenge.

To understand the next example you need to know what 'a dog' means in the Arab World! In our family we like dogs; they jump up and sit on our laps. But in the Arab World dogs are considered really dirty creatures!

If a Jew, on his way to worship in the temple, was touched by the body of a dead dog he would be totally defiled. On one occasion the Samaritans collected a large number of dead dogs on the Day of Atonement and somehow smuggled them into the Temple area and scattered them everywhere so the Jews couldn't go into the Temple area until after the Day of Atonement. You can imagine the anger! So imagine the confusion when the Lord Jesus told the story of the <u>Good</u> Samaritan. It was a logical impossibility!

So how did the Lord Jesus overcome all this negative history and prejudice? What would we have done? We would probably have done something for the people so that they would know we were nice friendly people. Our "Christian" way is usually to do good things for the other people in order to influence them.

But the Lord Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink. This is the reverse of the 'Christian' way. Probably in all Muslim cultures people want to be known as generous. The Lord Jesus was willing to receive! If we are always doing good things for other people and they are never able to do anything for us in return it can be very difficult to continue a friendship. This is especially true in cultures where it is very important to be known as generous. Did the Lord Jesus need that water? He could have caused a hundred angels to bring Him a swimming pool of cold water – but He didn't! He was willing to become a debtor to that woman so He could give her something so much more important.

In Muslim cultures hospitality is very important – giving it and receiving it. Jesus wanted to establish a social contact with this woman and so He took the initiative. You might not think this is so very difficult, but for many Arab Christians who have lived under Muslim repression for centuries, to take the initiative of reaching out to their Muslim neighbours can be a tremendous challenge.

Notice that the Samaritan woman said to the Lord Jesus, ***"How can you, a Jew, ask me, a woman of Samaria, for a drink?"*** This doesn't sound to be a very hospitable reply! Notice how very patient the

Lord Jesus was with her. We will need a great deal of patience to overcome the obstacles that we presently have or that we will later come up against. We are beginning to see some major breakthroughs in the Muslim World, but we are also seeing the need for greater patience in slowly removing the roadblocks.

In John 4:10 we read, ***"Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water'."*** Again in verse 13 we read, ***"Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him, will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life'."***

One of the greatest tasks we have if we want to be witnesses to Muslims is to discern their felt needs. Sometimes these are the same as for the rest of us – friendship, affirmation, rebukes given kindly, a helping hand in trouble, loyalty etc. But for many there is a sense of loneliness.

There is also the area of Folk Islam with the occult and animistic practices. Here there is a fear of evil spirits – forces like the Evil Eye that might harm them or some enemy who has paid someone to put a curse on them. If they see the Lord Jesus as their Saviour from fear, it is usually quite a while before they see Him as their Lord and Saviour from sin and its terrible consequences.

So we need to discern what their felt needs are. We need to find out which are the greatest needs and begin to show how the Gospel can meet their particular felt needs.

Back to John 4:12, ***"Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us this well?"*** What could the Lord Jesus have said in answer to this question? Perhaps, 'Yes, I am far greater than Jacob. I am the Messiah!' But that is not what He said! Why? What was the expected role of the Messiah? It was that of a very powerful Jewish political leader who would throw out the Romans and rule the land and probably persecute the Samaritans even more! So this woman needed to know much more about Him before He could begin to use the term without being misunderstood.

There are many terms used by both Muslims and believing Christians that have completely different meanings depending who is using them. One example is, 'the Son of God'. In Mecca, before the birth of Islam, "Daughters of God" were worshipped around the Kaaba. So Muslims think a title such as 'the Son of God' is like the paganism of their ancestors that Islam delivered them from. The Quran says, *"How can God have a son?"* It is not possible, for God has no wives or consorts. We know that this is not what we mean by the title 'Son of God'. So we should never use the term without defining it very carefully. Often it is better to choose other terms to avoid any misunderstandings.
[John's Gospel 3:36; 5:20-22; 10:17; 16:15 – Note that the Lord Jesus was sent by the Father and therefore He existed before He came into the world. See also Hebrews 1:2-3]

Look at the miracles where Jesus demonstrated His omnipotence:

- The stilling of the storm at sea with a word (Mt. 8:26-27)
- Multiplying the loaves and fishes (Mt. 14:19)
- Changing the water into wine (Jn. 2:1-11)

Jn. 2:11 says that the Lord Jesus did these miraculous things to ***"manifest His glory".***

Col. 1:19 says, ***"In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."***

Note how the Lord Jesus used <u>concrete illustrations</u> – ***"A spring of water welling up to eternal life"***.

So how did the Lord Jesus usually teach? He used parables. Did Paul use parables? No, he didn't. Yet they were both Jews. The Lord Jesus was a Semite using a Semitic language to speak to Semites and he used <u>concrete illustrations</u> because stories communicate better than abstract theology.

Paul was a Jew. He grew up in Tarsus a Hellenised city greatly influenced by Greek culture and his journeys largely took him to Hellenised peoples. Greek has all sorts of shades of meaning in order to develop rational arguments. It gives you the ability to say, "This is true and therefore something else cannot be true".

So the Lord Jesus and Paul each used the appropriate medium and style to fit their audience.

John. 4:16, ***"Go, call your husband and come back."*** What do you think the Lord Jesus was trying to do here? Here are three things He might have been doing:

1. Raising the problem of sin that the woman needed to deal with
2. Trying to encourage whole family conversion

   [One of the problems of working in cultures with a strong group solidarity is that it is very hard for an individual to make an independent decision to become a follower of the Lord Jesus. If this does happen, the result is that the new believer is either extracted or expelled out of their community. Some time ago in Bangladesh it was very rare for an individual to get baptised. Normal practice was that the head of the family gets baptised with all his dependents, so the whole family unit moves together. It is at least possible this is what the Lord Jesus was doing.]
3. The Lord Jesus may have had what some believers call "a word of knowledge" revealing to Him enough about this Samaritan woman to enable Him speak to her in a relevant way.

John. 4:20: the woman said, ***"Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."*** Does the Lord Jesus get into an argument here about the direction of prayer? No, notice that He avoids getting into unnecessary arguments on secondary issues. A little later on He says clearly that salvation is from the Jews. She probably didn't want to hear that! But it was essential. She had to recognise that salvation could only come through the Judaeo-Christian channel. So notice how he avoided all non-essential arguments and focused on what was essential.

One of the greatest challenges for us is how to deal with "barriers" without getting into unnecessary arguments. The Lord Jesus continued in v. 23, ***"Yet a time is coming and has now come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit and His worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."***

Muslims have many "Christian" spiritual aspirations and the Gospel answers many of these aspirations. So this Samaritan woman left and went to her town and said to her people, ***"Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?"*** (Jn. 4:29-30) Her witness helped and eventually this resulted in there being many believers in Sychar (v. 39-42).

So we can have friendly discussions in public, but never debates. We need to talk about **our experience** of God. A personal testimony of what God has done for us is not something anyone can argue against and it shows how the Lord Jesus, by His Spirit, has transformed your life. Our role is basically to lead people to the Lord Jesus and let them hear His word from Him. In other words, we need to use the "bridges" and seek to overcome the "barriers" so they will see and meet the Lord Jesus as He is.

In Saudi Arabia a family were praying out in the desert at mid-afternoon prayers. In front of them was a mirage. It looked like a lake of water, but that is not at all what it was. It was just sand! There is a vast difference between a mirage and living water! We can only find "living water" in the Lord Jesus, the Messiah.

I was born in India and I have always enjoyed Kipling's Jungle Doctor books. In one story a boy called Gunga Din had the job of bringing water to his colonial masters. Our job, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, is to be 'Gunga Dins' taking the Living Water to all who need it. This should be our supreme goal because our Lord Jesus commanded us to go to <u>all nations</u>. (Mt. 28:19-20)