

Making the Story Meaningful

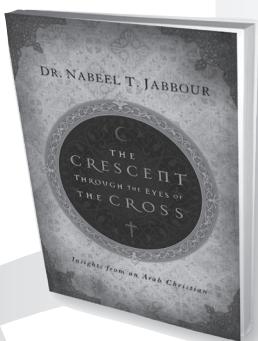
Relational Evangelism among Muslims: Is There a Better Way?

by Nabeel T. Jabbour

Muslims who become Christians need to pay the cost of following Christ and should not develop dependency on us, the Christians. God will provide for their needs.

—A French Christian

In response to American Christians who tried to convert him, Ahmad wrote, *"If I converted to Christianity, my support system in life would be completely demolished. I would become, as it were, homeless and without family. How would I live? Are you able to provide for me a completely new support system?"*



Editor's Note: This article is Chapter 14 of Nabeel T. Jabbour's new book *The Crescent through the Eyes of the Cross: Insights from an Arab Christian* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2008). Used by permission.

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Paul, in his letter to Titus, gave advice on how to care for his church. In 2:4-5 he advised Titus what to teach older women and what they in turn should teach younger women. Paul wrote about the older women, "Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God." The word *malign* is a difficult word in English. It means treating something—in this case, the Word of God—with disrespect or contempt.

Here is the list of what older women should teach younger women. There are seven commands:

1. Love their husbands.
2. Love their children.
3. Be self-controlled.
4. Be pure.
5. Be busy at home. In other words, young wives should take care of their domestic responsibilities. (In those days, the roles of the husbands and wives were more defined. The husband earned the money, and the wife took care of the domestic responsibilities.)
6. Be kind.
7. Be subject to their husbands.¹

What surprises me in this list is the absence of a command to evangelize. What if the husband of this young wife is not a believer in Christ? Shouldn't she share with him the gospel? Shouldn't she proclaim to him the truth of the plan of salvation? Paul expected himself to evangelize. He said, "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16). In his advice to Timothy, Paul wrote, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul and Timothy were mature Christians, and it was expected of them that they should proclaim the truth of the gospel. In contrast, nowhere in the letters of Paul do we see him asking young Christians to proclaim the message of the gospel. Why is it that young wives in Titus 2:4-5 were not commanded to proclaim the message of salvation?

Scenarios on Marriage

I will create here two fictional situations that are in reality *composites* of the situations of *real people* I have known in Egypt or in other parts of the world where I have lived. These two scenarios are developed in light of Titus 2:4-5. The first scenario describes a violation of this passage, and the second scenario demonstrates what happens when the commands in Titus 2:4-5 are put into practice.

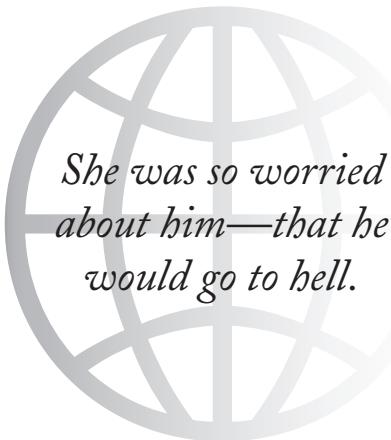
The First Scenario

Let us imagine a young woman who six months ago married a middle-class man in a third world country. Both she and her husband came from a nominal Christian background, and neither had a personal relationship with the Lord. This young lady grew up as an only child in a relatively rich family who spoiled and pampered her. She never learned to cook or keep her room tidy or carry out any domestic responsibilities. Her college studies were all she cared about.

After she got married, she slept in every morning till about nine, and the rest of

the day she lived an idle lifestyle. She did not have a job and was not motivated to look for one. Her husband, on the other hand, woke up every morning at six and went to work an hour later. He returned home from work every day at about five thirty. This husband tolerated his wife's self-centered lifestyle and ate sandwiches for his meals. Whenever the dirty plates and cutlery piled up, he washed all of them before supper and started using the clean dishes and cutlery.

One day the wife met an American couple who were missionaries in her



city. She connected with them in a deep way, and on that same day they shared with her the message of the gospel. She was powerfully struck by the love of God and was relieved from the fear of going to hell. As soon as she returned to her apartment, she was eager for her husband to come home so that she could tell him the good news. When her husband came home at five-thirty, he went straight to the bedroom to drop off his briefcase, and he found that the bedroom was as untidy as always. He went to the kitchen to make tea and could not find one clean cup or glass. He realized that it was the night to wash all the piled-up dishes.

His wife joined him in the kitchen and, excited about the experience she had that day, started talking about her new American friends. She communicated to him how eager she was for him to meet them. She told him how she heard and understood what Jesus did on the cross and that she was

worried about him—that he would go to hell if he did not believe in Christ. Her husband watched her quietly and thought to himself, *She is not only a self-centered and lazy woman, but now she has also become a religious freak.*

Suppose that on her insistence he goes with her to meet her American friends. Most likely his motives would be to psychoanalyze them to figure out what they do to influence foolish women to become religious freaks. In his attitude, he would be maligning the word of God.

Perhaps as you were reading this story, people you know came to your mind.

The Second Scenario

Let us imagine this same self-centered wife meeting the American couple and connecting with them very deeply. The connection was strong to the degree that they felt free to share with her the message of the gospel. As she had a deep realization of the truth about how much God loved her, all of a sudden she also had a deep understanding of how sinful she was. For the first time in her life, she realized that she was a very self-centered and lazy woman, and in tears she pleaded to God to forgive her. Upon returning to her apartment, she called her husband and told him that when he arrived home, she was going to tell him something very important.

The rest of that day she worked on cleaning the apartment for the first time. After hours of cleaning and washing the dishes and piled-up clothes, she decided she would like to cook something for her husband. Unfortunately, she did not have a clue about what he liked to eat, let alone how to cook it! So she called her mother-in-law, found out what his favorite meal was, and got the recipe. For the next couple of hours she worked in the kitchen.

When her husband returned home at five thirty, he smelled the aroma of his favorite meal coming from the kitchen. Rather than going to the bedroom to drop off his briefcase, he went

straight to the kitchen and asked his wife, "Where is my mother?" She answered him, "Your mother is not here." So he asked her, "But who is cooking?" She responded by saying, "I am cooking." "But you do not know how to cook," he said. "Yes," she said, "but I called your mother and found out what you liked and got the recipe from her, and I hope it will taste the way you are used to."

That blew his mind. He went to the bedroom to drop off his briefcase and, to his amazement, found it was as tidy as it was on his first honeymoon night. *What happened to her?* he wondered. So he went back to the kitchen and asked her about the amazing change. In humility and brokenness she told him that she had met this American couple and they had told her about Jesus. Then she said to her husband, "I do not understand how you tolerated me all these months and did not divorce me. I wonder if you will ever be able to forgive me for my self-centeredness and laziness. Will you please forgive me?" "Of course I will," he said, "but tell me what happened and what motivated you to change." So she told him more about the American couple and how they talked to her about Jesus.

That evening was an unforgettable evening for him. Sitting at his dining room table, he actually ate his favorite meal cooked by his own wife. During the meal, he asked her questions about the American couple, and it seemed as if he was curious to meet them. He encouraged her to visit them whenever she wanted. He told her that she could go that same evening if she desired. In his case, he preferred to watch TV because he wanted to unwind and forget about his work. She told him she preferred to watch TV with him rather than going to the home of her new friends alone.

That evening the wife secretly made a huge decision. She decided to wake up at six rather than nine and fix breakfast for her husband. The next morning at six, for the first time in six months, she heard the alarm go off, but her

I told him not to tell anyone that he had met me or that he was reading the New Testament. He agreed to follow my advice...

inner clock was geared for her to wake up hours later. So she turned over and fell back to sleep. At seven she heard the door of the apartment close as her husband went to work, and she literally pulled herself out of bed. After she finished working in the apartment, she called her mother-in-law and asked her for more recipes of meals that her husband loved.

At five-thirty her husband came back from work and had forgotten what happened the previous day. As soon as he opened the door of the apartment, he smelled the fragrance of another of his favorite meals and remembered what happened the day before.

Sooner or later, this husband would want to meet the American couple God used to change his wife. Upon visiting them, would he be maligning the Word of God as they shared with him the gospel? Of course not!

Scenarios on Connecting with Muslims

Here, too, I will create two fictional situations that are really *composites of situations of real people* I have known in various parts of the world. They concern the wisdom of Paul in Titus 2:4-5.

I myself will play a role in these two scenarios, and the composite character will be a young Egyptian man. This time the fictional treatments will focus on witnessing to Muslims. The first scenario describes a violation of the spirit of Titus 2:4-5, and the second scenario demonstrates what happens when the spirit of the commands of this passage are put into practice.

The First Scenario

Let us imagine that during our years in Egypt, my wife and I had been asking God to connect us with Muslims who had a deep desire to know Christ and were willing to get into the Gospels to read His story.

One day I met a university student in Cairo, Ali, who was an answer to our prayer. After spending some time with him, I found out that he had been looking for a New Testament and did not know how to get one. He did not dare go into churches and ask for an Injil. Furthermore, he knew of only one Christian bookstore in Cairo that might have it. But what if somebody who knows his family saw him going into that shop? What if he did not know how to ask for the Injil? He was too embarrassed about his ignorance. So I told him that I had an extra copy and would love to give it to him. That day was the first time he had ever seen a New Testament. I showed him the table of contents, and I explained to him what we call chapters and verses and the difference between the Gospels and the Letters.

Then I asked him if he would be willing to get together once a week to go over the chapters he had read. He agreed to meet with me the following Tuesday. I asked him to share what he liked when he came, and I told him we would discuss together what he didn't understand. Furthermore, I told him not to tell anyone that he had met me or that he was reading the New Testament. He agreed to follow my advice and returned to his home.

His family was relatively well-off, and in their apartment he had his own bedroom. But he could not be sure his privacy would not be invaded. In Egypt it is quite acceptable for parents of the same sex to go into the bedrooms of their children without knocking on the door. So whenever Ali wanted to read in the New Testament, he would get under the blanket with his flashlight and New Testament and pretend that he was asleep.

Week after week he came to our apartment, and he was amazingly eager and

yearning for a relationship with Christ. The times I shared with him were unforgettable. It is energizing and fun to see the Scriptures through the eyes of an honest and eager seeker.

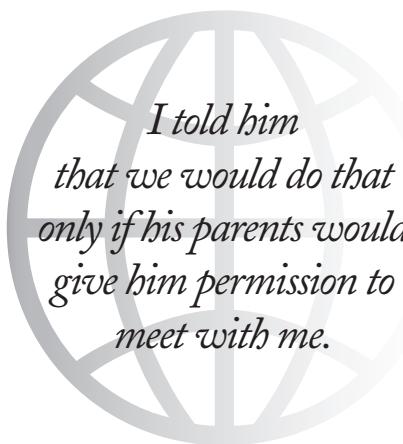
Six months later Ali came to our home and told me that he had put his faith in Christ. We talked about it, and I found out that he had had a genuine encounter with Christ. I told my wife about it, and she congratulated him on the biggest decision of his life. Then I asked him whether he had told his parents about his decision, and he was surprised by my question. Because of my earlier advice, it seems he thought his relationship with Christ should remain a secret. So I shared with him the importance of telling his parents.

The next Tuesday he came to our home and poured out his excitement about the relevance of Christ to his life and about his motivation to study and become a better student. I asked him whether he had told his family about his faith in Christ. With shyness he told me that he did not have the courage to do so. I warned him that he needed to be careful not to be ashamed of Jesus. Then I shared with him how the young Christians in the book of Acts asked God for boldness and courage and that when they had the courage, they discovered many opportunities to witness about what Christ did in their lives. I encouraged him to tell his parents and even showed him what verse in the New Testament he could use when he talked with them.

Ali left our apartment that day sad and discouraged, yet he did not want to be ashamed of Jesus. When he reached home, he found his father in the sitting room quietly reading the Qur'an. Ali's knees were literally shaking with fear. He quietly went into his bedroom, got the New Testament from under his mattress, opened to the passage that I suggested, and put his thumb in that page. Then he went and sat quietly next to his dad so as not to interrupt his reading. After minutes of waiting, during which he could hear his heart pounding with fear, his father all of a

sudden stopped reading and asked Ali, "Have you been going to the mosque to pray?" Ali said, "No." The father asked him, "Why not?" Al's response was that he had become a Christian. The father could not believe his ears!

So Ali boldly started reading to his father the verse I had selected for him. With anger and screams, the father snatched the New Testament from Ali, tore it to pieces, and threw it from the window. Still screaming, the father expelled Ali from the house and told him that he was no longer his son. So Ali left the apartment



and went down the stairs. His uncle next door heard the screaming and found out what happened. Ali heard his uncle say, "I will report him right away to the secret police."

A few hours later Ali came to our apartment. He told me the news about how he had been bold and courageous in witnessing and how his dad had expelled him from the house. Indirectly he was telling me that he had no place to stay and didn't know where to go. I congratulated him for his courage and assured him that Christ would take care of him. Then he told me that his uncle had gone to the secret police and reported him. When he told me this, I lost my peace. I began wondering whether the secret police had followed him and saw him coming to our home.

I had been planning to invite him to stay in our apartment until the situation at his home calmed down. But after he

told me about his uncle, I thought it would be too dangerous to invite him to stay with us. So I excused myself and started calling friends of mine who had been praying for Ali for the past six months. I told them about Ali's predicament, especially with the secret police, but none of them agreed to let him stay at their homes. So I raised some money from those friends, and we decided to have him stay in a clean, cheap hotel until we could determine what to do with him. In the meantime, we started investigating the possibility of getting him a visa to America, Australia, or some other country. My friends and I came to the conclusion that it would be better for Ali and for us if he were to leave the country.

Although Ali is a fictional character, he is a composite of real people I know by name. His situation is a microcosm of the type of evangelism that has been taking place in the Muslim world for centuries. For one lady I know who endured a similar situation, it took sixteen years to restore her relationship with her extended family.

The Second Scenario

Let us imagine that one day I met the young man Ali after my wife and I had prayed for years that God would connect us with Muslims who were open and eager to know about Jesus. What an answer to prayer! After he shared with me his desire to have a New Testament, I offered him the extra copy I had. I showed him the table of contents in the New Testament and explained the difference between chapters and verses. Then I showed him my Bible and pointed out the table of contents in the Old Testament. I asked him if he would be willing to get together once a week in a certain place in downtown Cairo to go over what he had read. He was eager to do so.

I told him we would do that only if his parents would give him permission to meet with me. He looked at me with a strange expression on his face as if he were telling me, *Don't you know what my father will say? Do*

you come from a different planet? So I opened my Bible to the book of Exodus and showed him the Ten Commandments. I explained that those Ten Commandments are a summary of the *Shari'a*, or the Law of God, in the Old Testament. We focused on the commandment to honor his father and mother, especially in light of the fact that he was still a student and his parents covered all his expenses.

I told him that we needed to be consistent, not obeying God in one area and bluntly disobeying Him in another. He turned to me and asked me whether I was really serious about his getting the permission of his parents. I said I was. That day I made two big mistakes: I forgot to get his phone number, and I forgot to ask him his family name. All I knew was that his name was Ali. I decided that when I saw him the following week, I would ask him for his family name and for his phone number.

The following Tuesday I went to the place where we were supposed to meet. He was not there. I waited for him for about an hour, and he still did not come. It was a very discouraging experience, but I came up with excuses such as, "Maybe he forgot our appointment." The following Tuesday I went again at the right time, and he still did not come. Again I was very discouraged for losing such a precious person, but I decided to pray for him every night before I went to sleep. I was prepared to pray for him for years. Faithfully, night after night, I asked God that He would connect Ali with others who could go with him on the rest of his journey to Christ.

Six months later I was in downtown Cairo and a miracle happened. In a city with millions of people I saw Ali by accident, or more correctly by providence. After praying for him on a daily basis for six months, I loved him and was overjoyed to see him. I gave him a big hug and asked him about our appointment six months earlier. He told me that he had obeyed the commandment of honoring his parents and told his dad about me. His father's

Their body language communicates clearly that they are afraid of getting contaminated by the environment of Muslims while the Qur'an is being chanted.

response was, "Don't go to this man again." I told Ali that he did the right thing by obeying his dad, and I asked him how he was doing. He told me that one of his uncles had died the day before, and so many relatives had come from the south of Egypt for the funeral that their apartment was packed with people. I asked Ali whether it would be appropriate for me to go and give my condolences to his parents that evening. He thought that was a very good idea and gave me directions to his home.

For three evenings after the death of a relative, friends and relatives customarily go to the family to give their condolences. The women go up to the apartment while the men go to the makeshift tent in the shape of a very big room which is erected in the street in front of the building. The size of the makeshift tent varies according to how rich the family is. The bigger tents have the capacity to seat almost one hundred guests. When they build tents, they close the road, except for the sidewalk, and they create a detour for the traffic. The seats are arranged in a U-shape. Facing them is a platform on which an Imam sits, reciting the Qur'an over a microphone. Above the tent they place huge loudspeakers so that the chanting of the Qur'an can be heard by the whole neighborhood. It is a way to announce to the neighborhood that it is the right time to come and give condolences. The custom is for the *Sheikh*, or Imam, to chant the Qur'an for about twenty minutes. Then they break for about half an hour. During the break, men converse with one another, but when the chanting resumes, people stop talking and listen respectfully.

That evening I drove to Ali's, and luckily, not far from his apartment I found a parking spot. As I walked toward it, the chanting of the Qur'an helped me quickly find the tent. When I entered the tent, I looked for Ali. He

was sitting next to four other men, all wearing suits and neckties. The Sheikh was chanting the Qur'an, so I went toward Ali and his close male relatives, shook hands with them, and found a chair not far from the Sheikh.

Some Christians in Egypt, whether nominal or true believers, tend to be prejudiced against Muslims. I used to have that prejudice too, but God in His grace started healing me. When prejudiced Christians go to give their condolences to a Muslim family, they take a deep breath of "clean Christian air," hold their breath, and go in to visit. Their body language communicates very clearly that they are afraid of getting contaminated by the environment of Muslims while the Qur'an is being chanted.

In my case, I found a chair, sat down, and really enjoyed listening to the chanting of the Qur'an. The voice of the Sheikh was good, and the passage he was reciting was familiar to me. As I listened attentively, I asked myself whether what was being chanted was in agreement with what the Bible teaches or not. In the meantime, without my knowing it, Ali whispered to his dad and told him that I was the man who insisted that he ask for his dad's permission before seeing me and reading the Injil with me. Ali's father started observing me, and from my body language he saw that I was not "holding my nose" out of fear of getting contaminated.

When the Sheikh stopped chanting, I went to Ali and asked him to introduce me to his father. Right away, he and his dad created a space for me to sit between them. For the next twenty minutes I focused on Ali's dad and asked him questions: "How old was your brother? What was his sickness? Did he suffer a great deal? Did he have children, and how old are they? How

is his wife doing?" The father was doing all the talking, and every now and then I asked a question. After that conversation, I felt that the purpose of the visit was accomplished, so I stood up to leave, shaking hands with the relatives of Ali as I walked out of the tent. To my surprise, not only Ali but also his dad came out of the tent to walk with me about ten or twenty meters to show their respect. They do that only with distinguished guests.

In response, I did what was expected. I stood with Ali and his dad and expressed my gratitude to them for wanting to honor me. I told them that they needed to go back to the tent in order to be with their guests, but they won the argument and walked with me for a while. Then I stopped them again and thanked them and insisted that they should return to their guests. This time I won, so I said good-bye to both of them again and went to look for my car. They walked back to the tent. Before I found my car, Ali came running with the great news that he asked his dad for permission to meet with me, and his father gave him permission.

Let us suppose that Ali and I got together on a weekly basis to read together the life of Christ, not for six months but for two and a half years before he put his faith in Christ. In the meantime, my wife and I got to know his family. We visited them several times, and they visited us as well. My wife got some recipes from his mother and gave private lessons in English to Ali's sister. Every Christmas and Easter, Ali's parents paid us a formal visit and even brought us gifts. They were very happy with the transformation that was taking place in the life of their son even before he declared his faith in Christ. His grades at the university were improving. His conduct at home changed dramatically. In the past, when his mother asked him to do some shopping for her on the way back from the university, he would yell at her, saying that he was very busy in his studies and that she should ask his sister to do the shopping.

Now a clear change of attitude had taken place. Before going to the university, Ali would ask his mother if she needed anything from the supermarket. The New Testament and the Bible that Ali possessed were not hidden under the mattress but were on his desk in his bedroom. At times he would leave them on the table in the sitting room. Sometimes his father or sister or mother would read them, and no one thought of it as wrong or unusual.

Finally, three years after our initial contact, Ali put his faith in Christ. The six months after we first met were



not a waste of time. I was praying for him on a daily basis. During the two and a half years we were reading the Bible together, I did not take him out of his context. At times his father would ask me questions about Christ based on what he was reading in the Bible. I was reaching not only Ali but his family as well. After Ali put his faith in Christ, he did not change his name to Steve or Peter. He was still Ali, who now loved Jesus and whose life was being transformed.

This story is fictional, but it is a composite of real people I know. It illustrates a type of evangelism that does not yank individuals out of their context but rather ministers to them within their context. In the next chapters, we will look at the Scriptures to see if this approach to ministry is allowed or even encouraged in the Bible. We will also look in greater detail at what it means to reach individuals in their context. **IJFM**

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Go back to the beginning of the chapter. What do you think of the Frenchman's statement? To what extent is Ahmad justified in what he said?
2. As you look at the seven commands in Titus 2:4–5, how can a wife who comes to know Christ influence the life of her nominal husband and draw him to Jesus? Do you know families who look more like the first scenario?
3. In the second set of scenarios regarding connecting with Muslims, do you know from experience people who fit one of the two composites? Does the second scenario have the ring of truth in it? In what way?
4. Can you think of a few texts in Scripture that teach that a person should not to be taken out of his or her context but should be given the opportunity to believe the gospel in a natural setting?

Endnotes

¹ Submission is often confused with subservience, or being like a "doormat." Yet submission is very different from subservience. Jesus was submissive, and Paul was submissive, but both were very far from being subservient. Submission has its roots in believing that God is in sovereign control of our circumstances and that no one else determines our destiny.