

On Cross-Cultural Transmission

Muslims Coming to Christ in Turkey

by James Bultema

I have compiled and analyzed conversion stories as part of my doctoral research on Muslim-background Turkish believers who came to Christ between 1970 and 2000. (For brevity I site only a sample in this article). I have asked, “What were the factors that brought these believers to Christ?” And “What are the commonalities among those factors?”

I had a difficult time fitting the factors that surfaced in the stories into the list of seven ‘Fruitful Practices’ outlined by Adams, Allen and Fish.¹ If I had known about that list prior to my information gathering, I could have been more intentional; nevertheless, the causes of conversion that did surface are perhaps from more open-ended research, and they are causes expressed in the believers’ own words.

I have, however, attempted to group these causes into meaningful categories, and I ended up with three categories that I am sure are familiar to us all. I say ‘familiar’ because it seems to me that these categories can encompass not just the many specific reasons why Turks have come to Christ, but also the myriad reasons why persons of all nations have come to Christ all the way back to the era of the Apostle Paul. Even so, I believe it’s helpful to explicitly identify them, and I’ll do so using three summary words: Word, witness, and worship.

By ‘Word’ I mean God’s Word, in its many forms. Far and away the most common form among my narrators was the written form, in a language they could understand. However, I also included in this category dreams and visions that certain narrators had in which they beheld Jesus or a representation of God and received from him supernatural revelations.

The second category is ‘witness.’ By this I mean the ways followers of Jesus attest to him and the new life that he gives. What struck me with regard to this category is the multiplicity of means and methods by which Christian witness goes forth. And effectual witness sometimes goes forth with the testifier being totally unaware. I think of the narrator who cited the movie *Ben-Hur*, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and two culturally ignorant tourists from Texas as three key encounters that led him to the door of conversion.² I think of another who

James Bultema has lived in Turkey for 20 years, serving primarily as the founding pastor of the St. Paul Union Church and director of the St. Paul Cultural Center in Antalya. He is presently pursuing his Ph.D. in Religious Studies at Leiden University.

said that the rational deist Victor Hugo, the TV series *Little House on the Prairie*, and a Catholic priest were all instrumental in bringing him to Christ.³ Yet another recalled that the first crucial factor that got him (and fifteen of his friends) into a church was news that the church was giving out hundred dollar bills, wine, and young women.⁴ Now that’s a distorted witness to be sure, but my point is that the Lord used even that rumor to get this young man into church, where he continued to attend, and came to genuine faith in Christ, and went on to become one of the prominent thinkers and theological writers in the Turkish Church today.

The third category is ‘worship,’ which takes in all those reasons that involve experiences in a local church. One narrator, who had been suffering from intense depression and was on the verge of suicide, said that the first time he was ushered into church he was intensely prayed over for 2½ hours. His second time in church was as a converted follower of Christ, and he went on to become one of the leading evangelists in the Turkish Church today.⁵ A friend took another young man to a distinctly *Turkish* Christian service, just to prove to him that such an oddity actually exists. That young man was stunned by that experience, and subsequent visits and conversations with the pastor led to his conversion and eventual baptism.⁶

I have taken these three broad categories and made my own list of seven from them. They are 1) Word, 2) witness, 3) worship, 4) Word-witness, 5) Word-worship, 6) witness-worship, and 7) Word-witness-worship. From 30 interviews I wanted to analyze what naturally surfaced from their memories regarding their conversion experiences and explanations. One could certainly add more combinations than I have come up with; for example, in the ‘Word-witness’ combination sometimes the ‘Word’ factor was primary and in other situations the ‘witness’ factor was of principal importance. I figured that

such detail, however, is probably unnecessary for the purpose of this paper.

Among these 30 narrations where a single cause was cited, ‘Word’ came into play five times, while none of the thirty referred or alluded to ‘witness’ or ‘worship’ alone as the reason for conversion.

When narrators testified to two major influences or causes of conversion, the ‘Word-worship’ combination accounted for only one story, while ‘witness-worship’ accounted for four and ‘Word-witness’ accounted for four-



teen. Narrations where all three came into play—‘Word-witness-worship’—accounted for a total of six accounts.

Figure 1: Categorization of the causes of conversion among 30 believers.

1) Word	1, 7, 16, 17, 26	5
2) Witness	—	—
3) Worship	—	—
4) Word-Witness	5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30	14
5) Word-Worship	23	1
6) Witness-Worship	14, 18, 19, 29	4
7) Word-Witness-Worship	2, 3, 4, 6, 11, 13	6
Total		30

These data suggest several conclusions and implications, and I will relate

these as much as possible to the article “Seven Themes of Fruitfulness” (see endnote 1). First, *the written Word of God surpasses other causes of conversion to Christ*. At least this has been true in Turkey. The Word of God contains the *dunamis* of God—his written Word is ultimately his mighty voice—and so we could expect that the practice of its distribution would account for the greatest number of conversions.

To underscore this conclusion, let me share with you more findings from my research:

Figure 2: Periodic growth rates of the Turkish Protestant Church from 1960 to 2005.⁷

Begin	End	Annual rate	Approx annual rate
1960	1983	0.1053 (10.53%)	11%
1983	1988	0.0986	10%
1988	1991	0.3571	36%
1991	1994	0.3925	39%
1994	1996	0.1385	14%
1996	2000	0.1310	13%
2000	2002	0.2657	27%
2002	2005	0.0886	9%

To figure the average annual growth rate of the Turkish Protestant Church, I went back to its beginning, when it had only a few members in the early 60s, and came up with as many trustworthy reports of numbers of believers as I could find all the way up to 2005. During these four and a half decades, you see one period—from 1988 to 1994—that towers over other periods with respect to the growth rate. The reason for that spike in growth is quite simple: the New Testament in modern Turkish was printed and distributed, beginning in mid 1987. We have another spike from 2000–2002, and that is because the whole Bible in modern Turkish was first printed and distributed at the beginning of that period.

In my opinion, the Bible Correspondence Course (BCC) in

Turkey has had an incredible amount of influence for Christ over the years, simply because it got the printed Word out and, through well-thought-out didactic studies, helped people to understand it. Even the summer worker who, at a bus stop, gave L. an *Injil* in Turkish—a book that not only overwhelmed him, but also led him to fellowship with believers, to faith in Christ, and to fruitful service as a pastor—helped him more in moving toward conversion than a skilled Turkish speaker who would have told him a nice gospel story, but left him empty-handed.⁸

A closer look at the data than I have given bears out that *the use of already established social networks does hasten the spread of the gospel*. However, in not one case have the conversions happened simultaneously. Whether it's been short or long, there almost always seems to have been some degree of social upheaval when a Muslim comes to faith in Christ. A consolation, though, has been that in the majority of instances patience does pay off: either the conversion of relatives finally occurs or some level of reconciliation and relational reorientation takes place.⁹

I think it would be too much to say, though, that “Fruitful workers ... tend to be more effective when they allow the gospel to transform networks among whom trust relationships already exist, such as within families or other natural social groups.”¹⁰ To ‘allow’ something is a passive course of action, and, as powerful as God’s Word is, the transformation of a convert’s social network may never happen, even if relational reorientation does occur.¹¹ The convert may simply have to get to know, love, and worship with those who were formerly strangers. The article goes on to quote a practitioner: “Bringing strangers together and calling them community is not comprehensible in most contexts”¹²—but such an incomprehensible work, I would argue, leads to

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a display of the beauty and majesty of the church.

I think of Hayri. If you would ask him to tell you his story of coming to faith in Christ, he would tell you how he has never once heard the words “I love you” from his parents, and how there really was no show of love in his family. Although he still lives with his elderly Muslim mother and helps to take care of her, he would say that his spiritual family has superseded his biological family, because the love that he experiences in Christian fellowship is akin to the love of God in Christ. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ These practices are elaborated in the article by Adams, Allen, and Fish “Seven Themes of Fruitfulness.” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26:2, Summer 2009 (see ijfm.org)

² F. (see appendix #1).

³ T. (see appendix #2).

⁴ Z. (see appendix #3).

⁵ H. (see appendix #4).

⁶ Zinnur in Muratoglu, *Neden Hristiyan Oldular?*, 169-173.

⁷ I am indebted to David R. McCormack (PhD in Applied Statistics) for his statistical assistance.

⁸ L. (see appendix #5).

⁹ O. (see appendix #6).

¹⁰ Adams et al, 78.

¹¹ A. (see appendix #7).

¹² Adams et al, 78.

Appendix

Below is a sampling of ‘unofficial’ conversion stories used for this article.

1) F.

Orphanage raised; read the Koran at about age 17 and recalled that Jesus was not crucified, elsewhere was crucified; saw the movie *Ben-Hur* and was indelibly impressed by the fact that Jesus *was* crucified in the movie. He researched in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to learn the truth about the matter; it seemed to be so. Tried to get a Bible, but the Bible Society shop always closed. One day while walking by a tourist attraction (Muslim mausoleum), he stopped to talk with two inappropriately dressed tourists, who happened to reveal an NIV Bible; they ended up sharing with him from Genesis, and on and on, and eventually invited him to the Dutch Chapel for church the next Sunday.

On Cross-Cultural Transmission: The 19th Century Muslim-Christian Frontier

“There is enough to show that Crowther, the African leader of an African mission, had developed an African Christian approach to Islam in an African setting. It parted company from the assumptions about Islam that had been current in missionary writing in Crowther’s formative years; there was no denunciation, no allegation of imposture or false prophecy...He began with acceptance of what the Quran said of Jesus, and founded the body of debate on that premise.”

“Crowther’s early experience in Sierra Leone had taught him that confrontation where one party cries ‘Jesus is the Son of God’ and the other ‘No, he is not’ was useless. In his mature years on the Niger, he sought for common ground at the nexus of the Quran and the Bible: the themes of the status of Jesus as a great prophet, his miraculous birth, Gabriel as the messenger of God. Crowther seems to have had courteous and friendly relations with Muslim rulers, and to have nourished a hope of reaching beyond them, through the Christian community, to the as yet barely Islamized peasantry under their control.”

Andrew Walls, “Africa as the Theatre of Christian Engagement,” in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, pp. 144-146

2) T.

Read the Koran, seeker, late teens; interesting to him why Jesus didn't die, but just taken away. Had school-work on Victor Hugo (negotiating about Christianity and the life of a priest, opening chapters), description of Christianity attracted him. Finally, *Little House on the Prairie*—the Christian life of the Ingalls Family drew him in. Went to St. Antoin Catholic Church, Father Luigi, very godly man, spent much time with him; went to Bible Society, and got a Bible.

University studies: Arabic, Persian, & Islamic history. Back & forth between Christianity & Islam, trying to sort it all out. But, key: back to Bible, OT, and seeing Jesus in the OT, prophesied. Koran first telling about Jesus, but then back to sources of Koran, source of NT, and that's where he saw Christ foretold, and consequently became more of a dedicated follower of him.

3) Z.

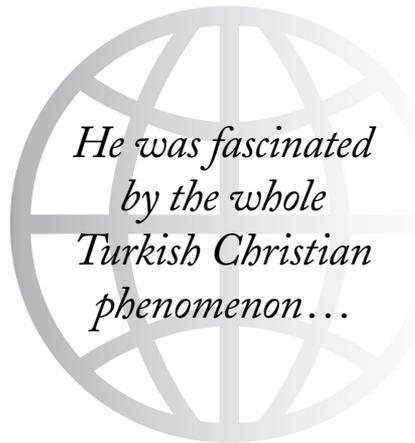
Z. first became interested in Christianity when he heard that they "pass out hundred dollar bills every Sunday, drink wine, and lure you with young women." Obviously, he was disappointed the first time he and fifteen friends went to an Anglican Church service in Izmir and found out that that wasn't so.

He was, however, quite pleasantly surprised by his experience there, which included a debate with an American woman, and he kept going back, time and again, even though fewer and fewer of his friends would go with him. He also met Turkish Christians, who took him to a local Turkish church, and he was fascinated by the whole Turkish Christian phenomenon—especially the person of Jesus.

The following year, during university studies in Ankara, he made a decision to follow Christ, and shortly thereafter he got caught by the media working at a Christian children's camp, and he was on television and in the papers in the worst way. His parents discovered the reality of his new life and were

very, very angry. While his relationship with them dragged on for years, never to recover from this blow, it eventually was dashed for good when they yelled at him and blamed Christians, without a hint of condolences, when one of his good friends, N., was murdered in Malatya in 2007.

But, to sum up, it was a blend of biblical logic & truths, the witness of believers, and the fellowship of the church and Bible studies that caused Z. to convert. It all started, however, with the lure of supposed dollars, women, and wine



4) H.

Born in '69 to an Alevi family. His father was an atheist, mother was a fairly devout Muslim, but there was no adverse reaction after he came to faith.

In '94 he became a believer, after meeting a Korean believer the year before. He had been living wildly, partying throughout the night and such, but he was unhappy. He also contracted a serious illness, or depression, and for weeks he was in bed. From his family's religious contacts some came, citing sins, curses, or a *jinn* (an evil spirit) as the cause. And they paid these Islamic leaders/clergy a lot of money to treat him. But his condition continued for at least a year. He even went to a psychologist, but still all efforts to help him failed. He went through a second year, and planned on suicide. The day he was going to do it, however, he decided not to, since family guests were coming and he didn't want to ruin the event with his death.

That night he prayed out to God, whom he did not know, for desperate 'last-minute' help, and then cried himself to sleep. At about 4 a.m. he awoke, and saw illuminated in the dark a hand, which was there even after he closed his eyes and reopened them. Then he heard a voice, which said to not fear, but to take his hand, and go with him. He went to take it, and the hand disappeared.

Soon after that, H. met C., first Turkish Christian he had ever met. They became good friends. He invited H. to church to be prayed for, and they prayed for 2½ hours over him, in the midst of intense spiritual struggle. He ended in a state of peace like he'd never had before, and they gave him an Injil and sent him on his way. No money was requested.

He decided to continue on in the Islamic faith, thinking that was a valid option, but eventually the depression began to return. He returned to C., who put a choice before him: stay unchanged and go through with your suicidal thoughts, or commit your life to Christ the Savior.

The second option scared him, but he knew it was what he needed to do. He gave his life to Christ and began to read the Injil again (he had only started before). And three years after he came to faith, his girlfriend came to Christ, then his brother, his mother, and tens of people thereafter he's had the privilege of leading to Christ.

5) L.

Born in '67 to a Muslim family in Istanbul, studied English & English literature. He came to know Jesus at the age of 20, while in university. He worked in translating and at the International Bookhouse. His mother was very aggressively against his becoming a Christian; his father was initially neutral, but then, because of mother, grew angry. Passionately evangelistic when he became a believer; this intensified the problems. Eventually, L. eased off in the avid evangelism; reconciliation occurred finally with his family.

But he never lost—just deepened—his commitment to Christ.

He was seeking God during his teenage years and thought he would find him in Islam. Started to take Quranic courses, but became disenchanted with this faith. One day in '87 (when the modern translation of the NT came out), he met a foreigner at a bus stop (who proved to be a short-term worker) who talked English with him and gave him a New Testament. L. read it and was overwhelmed, and wondered why he had never had this book or was told about Jesus before.

He really wanted to meet a *Turkish* Christian, because he never had. He was introduced to S., a believer, and after talking with him, decided to become a follower of Jesus too. S. eventually fell away from the faith, but L. carried on. The role S. played, though, in bringing L. to the point of decision, was crucial. L. joined a newly emerging church, and eventually became a pastor himself.

6) O.

Born in 1971 to a devout Muslim family, O. too took up Islam with dedication, going to the mosque, praying, and reading the Quran no less than 3 times in Arabic. But still he found no sense of peace with God; on the contrary, a kind of disenchantment, and a belief from reading psychology that he was different from his fellow countrymen.

What first piqued his interest in Christianity was his parents commenting on Christians' lives and witness, as seen on television, as being better than that of Muslims. About this time he also, from reading the Quran, became turned off by the view of God that he got from that book.

Sometime later, after he was married, he saw in a newspaper one day an ad that said, "Have you ever read the Injil?" He jumped at the opportunity to obtain a copy. When the envelope from Kadikoy came, however, it was opened and empty. O. managed to get the telephone number and call to

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explain the situation, and within weeks a copy of John's Gospel reached him.

He had no idea how to read it. Should he ceremonially wash himself first, as with the Quran? Finally, he heard, "Rise and read, rise and read," which he did. He read it from beginning to end in one night. Then he set it aside, touched, but not converted.

Later, he got a hold of the BCC again and asked for the whole Bible. They sent him one, and while reading the Torah he was touched by the faithfulness of God and his desire for obedience. He continued reading, through the psalms, the Injil, and somewhere along the way he decided to become a Christian and wanted to be baptized. He tried to make this happen, but he knew no other Christians.

Through a change at work, and a promotion to a high-level position in Antalya, O. met a co-worker who confided in him that he was a believer in Jesus. O. couldn't believe it; he right away exclaimed that he too was a Christian. These two ended up getting baptized together, and getting involved first in the church in Antalya, and eventually O. became pastor of the Turkish church in Samsun.

Only years after O. became a believer did his wife repent and believe, and initially his parents angrily disowned him, but before long his relations with them improved and normalized, so that they now have warm visits and he even shares with them from time to time.

7) A.

A. came from a nominally Muslim background, but claims he really was an atheist by the end of high school. Being a very bright student, he earned a position in a prestigious university, but got involved in a socialist movement, protested against the government, and failed all his classes. Unable

to bring himself to tell his parents, he traveled to Heidelberg, Germany and enrolled in the university there.

One day on a street in Heidelberg he heard English being spoken, and realized that he was listening to a group of Americans tell or talk with others about having peace with God. A. broke in. Being rather anti-American, he basically said, "How can you talk about peace with all the fighting going on in Vietnam?" They explained they were talking about personal peace, peace with God, and so on. They invited him to a Saturday meeting, which seemed to be a time of sharing testimonies about coming to faith in Christ. At that meeting, an elderly man sat down next to him and gave him a NT in Turkish—the first he had seen of such a thing. He took it, went home, & read it with interest.

Before long, what he read led him to want to leave the apartment in which he was living, where drugs and the like were being used (had two roommates at the time). He was reading the Injil night and day. He got a new place to live, and expressed a desire, to the one who gave him the Bible, to want to learn more about it. He was taken to meet with a group from Siegen, where he met and learned a great deal from Thomas Cosmades. He also got involved in Torchbearers, where he met and sat under the teaching of people such as Major Ian Thomas. At the end of a three-month course there, A. gave his life to Jesus and was baptized.

His family reacted very strongly to this news; his father disowned him & they never reconciled. None of his brothers & sisters has come to the faith, but at least he now has good relations with them.