

**A**MONG THE great challenges for Christian missions in the 21st century is evangelism among the Muslim peoples who comprise over 1 billion souls throughout the world. Those who confess the faith of Muhammad do not comprise a single homogeneous group, however, but represent hundreds of various ethnic and linguistic peoples groups. The majority of Muslims live in northern Africa, southwest Asia, and the island nations of Malaysia and Indonesia. Also, due to worldwide immigration, there are large Muslim populations in the major cities of Europe and the United States.

### THE DESCENDANTS OF ABRAHAM

For too many Western Christians, the Muslims are an alien people, a people to be feared because of the terroristic actions of those on the political fringe. To be certain, the Muslim worldview is vastly different from that of the semi-Christian West. In order to develop some familiarity with these peoples, however, it might help if we could come to see the Muslim world from a Biblical point of view.

The Muslim people are a Biblical people in that their ancestry can be traced to our mutual spiritual father, Abraham. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and both sons received a covenant blessing from God. We are well aware that the descendants of Isaac were God's covenant people through whom we have received "the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants . . . and the promises" (Romans 9:4, *NASB*). But many Christians are unaware of God's covenant with Ishmael, Abraham's oldest son: "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of

# GOD'S BLESSING FOR ISHMAEL

BY DANIEL TOMBERLIN

twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation" (Genesis 17:20, *NASB*). Just as God's desire is for all Israel to be saved (Romans 11:26), that is, to recognize that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4, *NASB*), so too God's desire for the descendants of Ishmael must be that they will be brought to the knowledge of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:14).

### A TROUBLED HISTORY

Although Jews, Christians and Muslims share a common spiritual ancestry, the relationships between these peoples have been troubled. The first major conflict between the Christian world and the Muslim world occurred as a result of the Muslim invasion of Christian Europe in the eighth century. During this time of Muslim expansion, many ancient Christian strongholds were conquered by Muslim armies and remain under Muslim control to this day. In an effort to regain these ancient Christian lands, the church sanctioned the Crusades, a series of wars against the Muslim world that lasted from the 11th through the 13th centuries. The third major conflict between Muslims and

Christians occurred during the 15th through the 17th centuries when the Ottoman Empire sought to become a world power. Although this may seem to be ancient history to the casual observer, the seeds planted during these brutal conflicts continue to bear much fruit—bitter fruit that continues to hinder the advance of Christian witness to the Muslim world.

### MODERN TENSIONS

The ancient tensions between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael make headline news even today. The Arab-Israeli conflict in Palestine, the Persian Gulf War, and the recent conflicts in the Balkans are modern manifestations of ancient hostilities. These conflicts are little understood by the casual Western Christian observer. For many Christians, Palestine is the Holy Land which belongs to the Jews. It is that simple. The Persian Gulf War was a conflict over national sovereignty, human rights and oil. It is that simple. The Balkan wars are ethnic conflicts. It is that simple. These conflicts are anything but simple, however. All too often the role of the Christian church in these conflicts has been to further alienate Muslims by presenting the Christian faith in terms of political objectives that do not take into consideration the very real concerns of Muslim communities.

If the gospel of Christ is to be successfully presented to the Muslim world in the 21st century, then Christian leaders must fully develop a "Muslim friendly" theology that takes into consideration the particular concerns and culture of the Muslim peoples. This can be done without compromise to the basic truths of the gospel. Although the task before us is great, there are signs that the Holy Spirit has already begun the work of bringing the descendants of Ishmael to the knowledge of Christ.

## THE ETHNIC TURK BELIEVERS OF BULGARIA

Due to the military expansion of the Ottoman Empire, the country of Bulgaria was occupied by conquering Muslim armies for 500 years. During this time, many ethnic Turks migrated from their homes in Turkey to live in Bulgaria. Today there is a large Muslim, ethnic Turk population living in Bulgaria. Although they are not the natural descendants of Ishmael, they are his spiritual descendants, just as Gentile Christians are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:6-8).

During my travels in Bulgaria, I have been introduced to several small groups of ethnic Turks who have converted from Islam to faith in Christ. One such convert, Arif, is the pastor of about 70 believers, all of whom are former Muslims. Arif was converted to Christ about 10 years ago in Sofia, Bulgaria. His wife was blind due to a malignant inoperable brain tumor. Out of desperation, Arif and his wife attended a Christian crusade in which his wife received prayer. After 30 minutes, his wife had regained her sight, and she was totally healed. As a result of this miracle, Arif and his entire immediate family confessed faith in Jesus Christ. But this decision was not without serious consequences. Because of their conversion, their families have disowned them. Arif has not spoken to his father or brothers since his conversion. Such rejection is common among Muslims who convert to Christ. But Arif and his family have no regrets. Arif has founded a church in Razgrad, Bulgaria, which is actively

involved in evangelizing the Muslim Turk population of that city.

## CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CHRISTIANS, CROSSES AND CHURCHES

I have preached and worshiped in several of these "Turk churches," and I have discovered that the centuries



of animosity between cultural Christians and cultural Muslims present various difficulties. Among Muslim converts to Christ, acceptance of the traditions and symbols of official Christianity is difficult. Pastor Arif shared with me that most Muslim converts prefer not to be called "Christians" but "believers." Further, they do not call their places of worship churches but rather "prayer houses." Also, one will not find a cross displayed in the prayer houses

of these believers. This may be hard for Western Christians to understand, but much of the warfare and conflict between cultural Christians and Muslims through the centuries was done under the sign of the cross. For Muslims, the cross is not a symbol of salvation, but a sign of political and military oppression. Almost certainly, no

Muslim convert to Christ will be heard to sing, "I will cherish the old rugged cross!"

## AN OPEN DOOR

The work of the Holy Spirit among Muslims is not limited to Bulgaria. There are other Muslim groups coming to faith in Christ. If the Western church is to be successful in encouraging these new believers and engaging in successful evangelism in the Muslim world, we may need to further explore "seeker sensitive" methods of evangelism and adapt them for world mission. The believing Turks of Bulgaria, who are instrumental in carrying the gospel into Turkey, may represent a natural open door to the gospel in the Muslim world. If the Western church can supply the resources and encouragement, it may very well be that in the 21st century many Muslims will come to faith in Christ and God's promise of blessing upon the descendants of Ishmael will be realized! ☪



*Daniel Tomberlin presently serves as pastor of the Northwoods Church of God in Thomasville, Georgia.*