

Hot Topics for a Hot Summer

Islam

July 13, 2014

PRELUDE – Build Your Kingdom Here

Worship Songs – Your Love Never Fails / How Deep the Father’s Love

Intro Video

Feature – “What A Savior”

Good morning everyone.

As Shannon said, today we are going to be taking a look at what has been arguably one of the hottest topics on the docket for at least the past two decades; regularly appearing on the nightly news in one form or another; most frequently portrayed as the fundamental motivation for terrorists and their destruction ...

<pie chart> Islam – the second largest religion in the world with 1.6 billion men, women and children who believe that “there is no God except Allah; and the Prophet Muhammad is Allah's Final Messenger.”

... which, you probably know already, is the fundamental declaration of faith of Muslims everywhere. “No God except Allah and Muhammad is his final messenger to this world.”

It’s a little hard to believe that such a seemingly benign statement could produce such turmoil and fear worldwide but it has and it does. You’d have to be living under a rock to not be aware of the growing influence of Islam and more importantly the growing concern over that growth especially in light of recent events. Just a little over a week ago, an extremely brutal organization called the Islamic State in Iraq in Syria declared that it had established “a caliphate” – Islamic rule – over parts of Iraq with intentions of expanding throughout the Middle East and perhaps beyond.

Let’s check out a brief report from CBS News that describes what’s going on.

<END SLIDE SET 1>

Video – ISIS: Who Are The Islamic Militants? (1.8 min)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

So, how do you feel about that? Do groups like ISIS and Al-Qaida represent the true intentions of Muslims worldwide? How should we respond to the growing influence of Islam not only around the world but even here in our own backyard?

That’s what I want to talk to you about this morning.

And, as I did last week and likely will do in each of the weeks to come, I want to lay my cards on the table up front and tell you that I am biased when it comes to this subject.

1. I am concerned about the radical extremism that has associated itself with Islam and what it could accomplish if it is not stopped. This is not “much ado about nothing.” There is a clear and present danger that must be

taken seriously. To do otherwise would be foolish.

2. While I am certainly aware that the USA is far from perfect, I believe it is the greatest country to ever exist in history not because of its military might or its economic power but because it was founded on the principles of free speech and free exercise of one's religious faith. And I believe those freedoms are worth fighting for (and literally, if necessary). If the day ever comes when an organization such as ISIS or Al-Qaida threatens to destroy the freedoms we have as Americans, I would be in favor of whatever military response is necessary.

Having said that about a *potential loss of freedom* from external forces, I should also say that I am more concerned about the *actual loss of freedom* that is taking place right now in our country from internal forces. When it comes to the practice of religion and speaking one's mind based on religious convictions, more and more those who hold to a Judeo-Christian worldview are being marginalized and ostracized ... but that's a subject for another day. (Actually, I talked about that at length in last summer's Hot Topics series – it's online in the media section of our website if you want to check it out).

3. Finally, and most importantly, I'm a Christian. And that means that I believe that Jesus of Nazareth – not Muhammad – is the way, the truth and the life and that no one comes to God our Heavenly Father without coming through Him. (As the song said, I believe that Jesus – not Muhammad – is higher than any other). And I believe that the Bible not the Quran is the ultimate written revelation that guides us into spiritual truth.

So, those are the biases I hold (or, some might say, *the biases that hold me*) as I have thought about this subject and prepared to speak to you today. Hopefully that gives you some context ... which I think will be important ... because I suspect I am going to say some things in this message that will surprise you and shake some of you up a little bit, so I want you to have that as context.

So, with all that said, let's get into it. How should we respond to the growing influence of Islam in our world? And when I say "we" I'm specifically referring to Christians, although I think what I am going to say could apply equally well to non-believers and people who are not Christians.

Four Possible Responses

In preparation for this message, I've done a ton of research; reading and listening to others who are far more educated than I am on the issue – everyone from Muslim apologists (believers and leaders who are highly articulate and present a rational, well-reasoned defense of their faith) to those who are convinced that Islam is nothing but pure evil and hatred in a not-so-clever disguise.

As I have worked through all of that (with my own specific biases in view), it seems to me that there are four ways that those who are not Muslims could respond to the spread of Islam. As I give these to you, I'm going to put them in an order that I think not only makes the most sense logically but is also the most "Christian." In other words, for a person who has received Jesus as savior and is attempting to follow in His ways as Lord, I think this is the order which is most in keeping with what we believe to be true about God and his will for this world.

Before I give you that list, I've got to say one more thing, and that is, when I give you this list, it is highly possible that you are going to disagree with me on this and you're certainly welcome to do so. But, if you're a believer and follower of Jesus, *you still have to love me* ☺ because this issue – like the one we talked about last week (environmentalism) – is

what the Bible calls “a matter of conscience.” And we talked about that two weeks ago as part of the ground rules for this series, so I won’t go back into it other than to say check it out online if you weren’t here.

The first and least preferable option (in my opinion) when it comes to Islam is to ...

Option 1. Fear it because “they” (Muslims everywhere) are secretly (or not so secretly) trying to take over the whole world.

Unfortunately, this is a response embraced not only by quite a few evangelical conservative Christian leaders; it’s also the position of quite a few political leaders in our country – conservative and liberal. “There is a huge plot and ordinary Muslims are in on it,” the thinking goes, “and we need to be afraid lest we fall victim to it.”

Offered in defense of this position are the many and recent terrorist atrocities committed in the name of Islam as well as statements like this one from a radical Muslim cleric.

<END SLIDE SET 2>

Video – “Muslim Flag Over the White House” (2.0 min)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 3>

Well, there you go – proof indisputable. “We believe that one day the flag of Islam will fly over the White House.” Scandalous!

Except for the fact that Judaism teaches the exact same thing ... not concerning the flag of Islam but the flag of YHWH, the God of Israel (if there was a flag).

Through the words of the OT prophet Isaiah, God has said:

*“By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.”
Isaiah 45:23 (NIV)*

One day, if this is true, the Hebrew flag will fly over the White House because everyone (including the Muslims) will bow to YHWH.

Of course, the Apostle Paul later interpreted this scripture as applying to Jesus of Nazareth.

God exalted him [Jesus] 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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:9-11 (NIV)

So, one day, if this is true, the Christian flag (if there’s such a thing) will fly over the White House.

Do you see my point here? Every one of the monotheistic religions teaches that, in the end, it will be vindicated. Everyone, according to every one of these religions, will see it to be the truth and submit to it. And, it sure sounds like some of those who submit will do so involuntarily!

So, does that mean all of these religions should be feared? Maybe.

If adherents of any religion – Muslim, Jewish or Christian – try to bring about its apocalyptic vision by force, it should be feared. Furthermore, any religious group that holds a sword to someone’s neck and says “convert or die” ought not only to be feared but met with equal or greater force whenever possible. That’s called evil – and, biblically speaking, you either run from it or you lock it up or you kill it.

Now, some would say, “But, Rick, this is a Muslim issue because there aren’t any Jewish or Christian groups doing that kind of thing these days. Clearly, significant numbers of Muhammad’s followers believe they are doing God’s will in declaring holy war on the infidels – regular people who do not believe that there is ‘no god except Allah and Muhammad is His final messenger.’”

That’s true.

But it’s just as true that there was a day in history when many so-called Christians believed they were doing God’s will by carrying out a holy war against the infidels. And they had Bible verses to back them up. But they were wrong.

(By the way, lest you think I am playing into the hand of those who say that religion is the cause of all wars, let’s not forget that the most brutal and murderous regimes in all of history were atheistic. Abuse of power is not surprising because people – religious or not – are sinners through and through).

So, my point is that there are always going to be people who take scripture out of context and twist the truth for their own selfish purposes and do it with all sincerity in the name of God. It was a problem in early Christianity.

Paul wrote ...

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.

Romans 16:17-18 (NIV)

It happened in Christianity and it’s happening today in a lot of the Muslim world.

“But, Rick, wasn’t Muhammad a warlord? Didn’t he personally kill his enemies?”

Honestly, I don’t really know. As I said earlier, I’ve done a ton of study on this and it’s just not clear to me. There’s a good case to be made for both sides.

But what I think and what you think really doesn’t matter. What matters is what his followers think. And while the radical extremists believe jihad is justified, well over a billion other Muslims disagree with them. Well over a billion Muslims believe that Muhammad was man of peace; that any of his violent actions were in self-defense and that is, for them, the only justification for violence.

“But why don’t they ever come out against the terrorists?”

They do. You and I just don’t hear about it in the media. With every terrorist act that receives national and

international attention, there are scores of Muslim individuals, leaders and organizations that issue statements of condemnation.ⁱ But that's not news ... just like all the Christian individuals, leaders and organizations that condemn Fred Phelps and his ignorant followers for gay-bashing at funerals aren't news. Fred and his friends are the news. That's just reality.

So, bottom line (and I know I've spent a lot of time on this one because I hope and pray if you are a Christian, you will not embrace this option) ... the truth is that there are Islamic extremists who are evil, who do want to take over the world by force. And they should be stopped just like any evil individual or group should be stopped. But they are not representative of what the vast majority of Muslims in this world believe their religion teaches.

The second possible response to the growing influence of Islam (and this is only slightly more preferable, in my opinion, than the first option) is to ...

Option 2. Assimilate it (or, at least, attempt to assimilate it) into a “religious melting pot” along with the other great monotheistic religions (Christianity and Judaism).

In other words, “let's just realize that they're saying basically the same thing. They just have different names for God. The Jews call him YHWH and the Christians call him Jesus and the Muslims call him Allah. So, what's the big deal?”

And, on the surface of it, that seems reasonable. All three of these religions descend from Abraham of the Old Testament book of Genesis. Abraham had a son named Isaac through whom the Hebrews – and eventually Jesus – descended and a son named Ishmael through whom the Arabs – and eventually, Muhammad – descended.

“So, because all of them come from Abraham,” the thinking goes, “they must all be pointing to the same God. If we could just get these three religions and their adherents to realize that they're just different ways of saying the same thing, we'd go a long way towards peace in this world.”

While I appreciate the motivation for this option, the truth is that this option is intellectually bankrupt especially when it comes to any attempt to “melt” or combine Islam with Christianity. It's true that Islam and Christianity share many of the same faith stories – Jesus appears in the Quran more than a few times – but they're miles apart in their understanding of so many of the basic questions that theology addresses.ⁱⁱ

1. For one thing, whereas Christianity claims that God is a trinity of three distinct persons: Father, Son and Spirit, Islam says that God is one. In fact, the one unforgivable sin in Islam is associating a partner with Allah, which is what Christians are doing according to them. You can't reconcile those beliefs.
2. Christianity claims that Jesus was “God in the flesh”; Islam claims that Jesus was a prophet sent by Allah but he was not divine (and should therefore not be worshipped – no knee should ever bow to Jesus).
3. Christianity teaches that the Bible is the Word of God; Islam says that the Bible was the Word of God but it got corrupted by humans, so God had to give the Quran to perfect and correct it.
4. Islam says that Jesus came to proclaim the gospel; Christianity says Jesus came to reconcile humanity to God through his death on the cross. Huge difference.

5. The Gospels say Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave; Muhammad said Jesus didn't *really* die – instead, God intervened and in a magic trick kind of way took him to Heaven before that happened.
6. Christianity teaches that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; Islam, on the other hand, says salvation is based on what you do – your good deeds, in the end, must outweigh your bad deeds. (In fact, there are two angels following every one of us around; one is writing down all the good things you do and one is writing down all the bad things you do. And one day you're going to stand and see their books).

These are not minor details. Islam basically takes the essence of Christianity – the person of Jesus – and says, “you got it wrong” ... which to Christians is saying “you got God wrong” ... which means, by definition, that Christians and Muslims are *not* worshipping the same God by different names.

The Apostle Paul once talked about this, how trusting in Christ is the same as trusting in God.

He wrote to the Galatians, he said,

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all [these people were trying to balance out their good works with their bad works in order to be acceptable to God]. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ. Galatians 1:7-9 (NIV)

And I think if Islam had been in existence at the time Paul wrote that (Islam didn't actually come along until 600 years later), that's how he would have assessed its teaching: you mean well but you're twisting the truth concerning Jesus.

And that would not have been a minor offense in his mind ...

... for he continues to the Galatians:

Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. Galatians 1:7-9 (NIV)

So, do you see what's going on here? Christianity is saying “denigrate Jesus and you're going to wind up cursed by God.” Islam is saying “exalt or worship Jesus and you're going to wind up cursed by God.”

Both of those cannot be true at the same time. They are irreconcilable.

Now, that doesn't mean there ought to be a fight. People can disagree over very important matters without fighting. But it does mean that there just isn't any way to assimilate Christianity and Islam into a religious melting pot, however desirable that might seem.

But it really isn't necessary if we can see our way to embrace option three.

Remember, we're asking the question of how to respond to the growing influence of Islam in the world. One option is to be afraid of it; another is to try and assimilate it with Christianity and Judaism. But the third option – one that I think is

much better than the first two – is to ...

Option 3. Appreciate it (and those who are *true* Muslims) for its (and their) ability to influence society for good.

That may sound surprising to you. As I was writing this, *I* was a little surprised because based on the fact that pretty much all we hear in the media about Islam has to do with the radical fringe extremism, this is not a thought that most people in the western world have. But the truth is that Islamic moral principles in many ways parallel Judeo-Christian morality. And they do because, quite frankly, they are drawn from Judeo-Christian tradition.

Whether you believe the Quran was given to Muhammad as a direct revelation from God or not (and I do not – I think he was a very wise and spiritually sensitive man who for reasons we don't have time to enumerate needed to unify the Jews and Christians in his community and so he drew from their scriptural traditions), Muhammad's goal in this was to improve on the religions of the Jews and the Christians as well as to deal with the immorality of the pagan society in which he lived ... which he did, which is why there's so much of a reflection of Christianity and Judaism in Islam, and why so many "normal" Muslims are sincere, God-fearing people.

And when I say "God fearing," I'm using a biblical term that's frequently used in the New Testament to describe people who are not Jews or Christians yet *who believe there is a Creator God to whom they are accountable* and who therefore want to live lives that are pleasing to Him.

It may surprise you to know that Jesus and the first apostles (including Paul) were very tolerant and accepting of these kinds of folks even though they didn't have the complete picture of who that one God was and had not yet "crossed over the line of faith." There are several examples of this in the NT Book of Acts but the most vivid one (in my opinion) occurs during the ministry of Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark records it for us.

"Teacher," said John, "we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

"He doesn't know who you really are. He doesn't have the right theology yet. He doesn't believe in the Trinity. He doesn't know the secret handshake."

How did Jesus respond?

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us."
Mark 9:38-40 (NIV)

Interesting – "whoever is not against us is for us." In other words, "guys, what are we trying to do here? We're trying to make the world a better place. We're trying to see people live lives according to how God wants them to live and this guy is helping us. He's not against us."

Guess what? *Islam is not against the ethical teaching and example of Jesus.* It doesn't affirm that he was God in the flesh and the savior of all who believe, as we would say, but, in terms of Jesus being a prophet and one who spoke the truth of God, Islam is on board. It's a fundamental tenet of the Muslim faith that Jesus was a prophet.

Therefore, based on what Jesus said – whoever is not against us is for us – those normal everyday Muslim friends who we see at work and school ... are on our side at least as it concerns trying to be a positive influence in our society.

In fact, this week as I was preparing for this message, I decided to do a little experiment to see if this was really true. I decided to check out some Islamic sermons online to see what those guys are preaching. It was very interesting and, quite frankly, encouraging ... so encouraging that I decided to show you parts of two of them.

Here's the first one. The music in the background is a bit distracting but the subtitles should help. Let's watch.

<END SLIDE SET 3>

Video – Happy Wife Happy Life (Muslim-style) (1.8 min)

Have you ever heard anything like that from this stage? “Happy wife happy life”? It was just over a month ago that I talked about it being the responsibility of the husband to create the environment that allows his wife and kids to grow and flourish – straight out of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Here's another Muslim teaching. It's actually not part of a sermon; it's more like one of the videos I sometimes show in messages to illustrate a point. Check it out.

Video – The Meaning of Life (Muslim-style) (1.8 min)

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 4>

And he's just getting warmed up. It goes on and it's quite impressive. But at the beginning of that, I was reminded of what Jesus said: “What point is it if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process?”

That guy is helping us not hurting us by drawing attention to the emptiness of this culture and asking the deeper questions.

“He who is not against us is for us.”

Ok, so we have three options of how to respond to the growing influence of Islam in the world:

- Be afraid of it (which is appropriate concerning the extremist variety but not in general)
- Try to assimilate it with Christianity and Judaism (which isn't possible, or at least not intellectually honest)
- Appreciate its potential to influence the world for good.

But there's one more. And I think this one is of particular application to Christians.

Option 4. Emulate it by matching the commitment of its followers.

And I don't mean the ones who blow themselves up – they're just crazy and deluded. What I do mean is that in so many cases the average Muslim is more committed to living according to the principles of their faith than the average

Christian is committed to theirs.

One of the most amazing things about the growth of Islam is that much of it is taking place outside of the Middle East. More and more westerners – people who have grown up in what used to be Christian cultures – are becoming Muslims.

And they're doing so not out of compulsion but because they see Muslims following a path out of bondage to a sin-driven culture.

For example, I read an article about a young English woman who became a convert to Islam and the experience that solidified in her mind that she had made the right decision.

"I went to a friend's 21st birthday party in a bar," she said. "I walked in, wearing my head-covering and modest clothing, and saw how everyone else had so much flesh on display. They were drunk, slurring their words and dancing provocatively."

"For the first time, I could see my former life with an outsider's eyes, and I knew I could never go back to that. I am so grateful I found my escape route. *This is the real me.* I am happy to pray five times a day and take classes at the mosque. I am no longer a slave to a broken society and its expectations."

"In the West," she continued, "we are stressed for superficial reasons, like what clothes to wear. In Islam, everyone looks to a higher goal. Everything is done to please God. It [is] a completely different value system."ⁱⁱⁱ

Wow – "everything is done to please God."

I wonder, if you're a follower of Jesus, is that your motivation? To please God with your life? Or is it to copy the world and its values? To just be like everybody else who has little regard for what God says about how to live?

I like how Catholic theologian Peter Kreeft describes the state of Christianity when compared to Islam. He writes:

Muslims ... are often more loyal to their half-Christ than we are to our whole Christ, and live more godly lives following their fallible scriptures and their fallible prophet than we do following our infallible Scriptures and our infallible Prophet.

If you compare the stability of the family and the safety of children among Muslims and among Christians in today's world; or if you compare the rate of abortion, divorce, adultery, and sodomy among Muslims and Christians in today's world; and if you dare to apply to this data the principles announced by the prophets in our own Scriptures when they say repeatedly that God blesses those who obey His law and punishes those who do not, then I think you will know why Islam is growing faster than Christianity today.^{iv}

That's a stunning statement. "Muslims are often more loyal to Muhammad than we are to Jesus."

It's stunning to me because Muhammad didn't die for the sins of his people and they will do almost anything in his name, while Jesus died for us to offer us free grace and free eternal life yet so many of us simply can't be bothered. We are so caught up in chasing the things of this world, seeking the approval and the stuff of the world, that we don't have time or the inclination to live the life He wants for us or to do the things He has asked us to do.

And I don't want to belabor the point but, if you're a Christian, don't you feel at least a little bit of shame about that? I do.

I mean, it's true that Jesus died for our failure to live up to God's standards (and I'm not saying we need to earn our salvation) but that's no excuse to continue living in ignorance or outright denial or rejection of what God has asked us to do and be in this world.

So, the final way that we can respond to Islam – especially if you're a believer in Jesus - is to emulate the commitment of his followers.

There's a lot more that could be said on this subject but that's probably enough for one day.

Let's pray together.

<Prayer>

Feature – “For All You Are”

With all my heart and soul

All my strength

Taking hold of all you are

Filthy hands/rags

All the way you gave your all completely reached me

My ransomed heart can hardly beat

You know my life and still you love relentless

Son of god you're worthy

Jesus we exalt thee holy holy holy

CLOSING COMMENTS

Endnotes

ⁱ See the following links for more info and examples:

<http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/as-war-looms-can-jews-muslims-join-in-17-tammuz-ramadan-fast-july-15-in-hum/0020212>

<http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/wahhabi-destruction/0019324>

<http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/06/18/3450055/islam-peace-movement-heritage/>

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Islam/2002/08/What-The-Quran-Really-Says-About-Violence.aspx>

ⁱⁱ <http://christianityinview.com/xncomparison.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1324039/Like-Lauren-Booth-ARE-modern-British-career-women-converting-Islam.html#ixzz37I2bMGwQ>

^{iv} http://www.peterkreeft.com/topics-more/culture-war_transcription.htm