



Muslim Background Believers and Baptism in Cultures of Persecution and Violence *by Dr. Nik Ripken and Dr. Barry Stricker*

Introduction: Context and Parameters

In 1991 there were approximately 150 Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) in Somalia, a country classified as 99.9% Muslim. Seven years later, only four of those MBBs were alive and still in Somalia. Historically, persecution had always been severe in Somalia, but this level of persecution was something new. As civil society deteriorated, a more fundamentalist Islam emerged which led to the persecution of local believers even beyond the historical norm.

Without question, those who were martyred were followers of Jesus Christ. Even so, the timing of most of these “martyrdoms” was not directly linked to an individual’s relationship with Jesus. Typically (and tragically), the martyrdom was more closely related to the individual’s relationship with Christian workers from the west than to any focused attempt by these MBBs to be positive witnesses to their families and neighbors. In depth, on-site interviews with both believers and persecutors indicate that the “trigger” or antecedent for many of these deaths was related to secondary issues.

Several types of examples illustrate the point:

- In some cases, MBBs were murdered specifically because they worked for Christian relief agencies headquartered in the west. Mistakenly, some Muslims believed that the removal of local believers would lead to greater access to relief funds and commodities. Therefore, removing the MBB from the scene was a prerequisite to acquiring these goods, monies, and opportunities for themselves.
- In other cases, MBBs were killed for worshipping regularly (and sometimes openly) with outsiders. Simply being seen with westerners or spending significant time with westerners often invited the hostility of the host community.
- Other MBBs were persecuted when they were found in the possession of written discipleship materials, often materials written at a level significantly beyond their own ability or educational background.

- Finally, those MBBs who were employed by westerners specifically to evangelize their friends and neighbors (often in culturally inappropriate ways) found themselves subject to even more intense and immediate persecution.

There is, of course, no way to establish a direct connection between a particular event or relationship and the martyrdom of an MBB. No single event or relationship can be identified as “the cause” for martyrdom. It is clear, however, that western missionary involvement and leadership created a mission culture that inadvertently placed local believers at risk. What is perhaps most significant is that this risk was typically not the direct result of a positive witness for Jesus.

Martyrdom remains a possibility for all who follow Christ. The road to resurrection traveled through a gruesome crucifixion. God the Father has used, and continues to use, the sacrificial deaths of His children to usher in a deeper faith and to anchor the church within salvation history. As central as martyrdom is to the story, however, it is not to be sought. Persecution, and ultimately martyrdom, is simply a reality for those following the Son of God in a fallen world. The West often repeats Tertullian’s words from the third century that the “blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” Perhaps those words are sometimes spoken flippantly by people who have not yet experienced severe persecution. While God uses even persecution for His ultimate purposes, martyrdom also leaves children without fathers, spouses without a loving mate, and believing bodies temporarily void of leadership. Martyrdom is tragic wherever and however it happens. But it is especially tragic when it happens because of secondary reasons.

Looking back on the recent history of Somalia, it appears that severe persecution visited the young and emerging Somali church at a delicate time in her history. And, sadly, it appears that the persecution largely arose for reasons other than witnessing to the life and resurrection of Jesus. Of course, God’s story in Somalia is still being written. But at this point, and from a human point of view, it seems that our generation has witnessed the almost complete annihilation of a reproducible faith within the land and among the peoples of Somalia. God always uses the

blood of those who die for Christ to increase and deepen witness. Yet when the death of believers occurs more for their relationships with outsiders than their positive witness to the saving grace found in Jesus, then the positives that come from that “martyrdom” are severely reduced.

Few functions of the faith will lead to persecution more quickly than that of a believer’s baptism – especially baptism encouraged and administered by an outsider. This article will reflect on the issues surrounding the baptism of MBBs within cultures of persecution and violence. It will outline some of the unique challenges related to baptism and then suggest some missiological perspectives that could reduce the frequency of persecution for secondary reasons.

Somewhat surprisingly, the goal of this article – and the goal of the mission enterprise itself – **is not the elimination of persecution**. In fact, the only way to eliminate persecution is to eliminate conversions to Jesus. So the goal is not to bring persecution to an end. The goal is to be certain that, when persecution comes, it is grounded firmly in an individual’s walk and witness as a follower of Jesus. Being put to death because of employment practices or because of worship circumstances or because of possession of certain discipleship materials is not the same thing as being martyred for a positive, culturally sensitive witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Reflections shared in this article are based on a sixty-country pilgrimage among believers in Jesus who experience persecution as a normal and ordinary part of the Christian walk. To date, approximately six hundred interviews have been completed. The persecution was framed by atheism, communism, Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as Islam. About three hundred interviews were conducted among MBBs. The persecuted, as well as their families and colleagues, were asked to contribute to the development of a missiology of suffering that would assist the western church in discipling itself as it seeks to fulfill the Great Commission in environments defined by violence and persecution. One of the explicit goals of this research was to find ways to reduce the persecution of local seekers and believers specifically related to the presence of outsiders.

The Life and Death Lessons of Persecution

Much has been learned from the persecuted. What is perhaps most significant is the identification of the chief precursor of persecution. The primary cause of persecution globally is an individual’s acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord and Savior. In praying about persecution on behalf of Christians in other parts of the world, the western church typically prays that persecution would

be eliminated. The western church (with great compassion) prays that persecution would come to an end. But that can happen only if conversions stop happening. Obviously, the elimination of persecution, in itself, is not an appropriate goal or desire. But how, exactly, is it possible to guarantee that persecution is firmly grounded in a believer’s walk and witness?

It is instructive to consider the concerns of the persecutors. What, precisely, do the persecutors forbid or seek to control? Often, persecutors withhold from the believing community the right to handle and control its own sacred scriptures and music. If corporate worship happens to be allowed in a fixed location, the persecutors prohibit the faith community from expressing its faith in other settings (for example, within homes). In settings where the faith community owns property, buildings, and possessions, the persecutors will find a way to hold believers hostage to their own material wealth. What seems to cause the persecutors the most trouble is a home-based faith community, led by emerging and locally-trained lay leadership, and characterized by competence in oral transmission of the truth.

Insights gained regarding Islam, the chief modern-day persecutor of the church, are especially important. For example, MBBs from the Horn of Africa were mentoring new western missionaries concerning insights into faith and practices within Islamic environments. One newly arrived missionary asked the nationality of these fifteen

MBBs. Without hesitation the MBB elder stated, “We have no nationality as we have become Christians.” Prior to Christian conversion, citizenship is inseparably linked to religious identity. To be a citizen of many particular countries is to be a Muslim. Saying, “I am a Saudi and I am a Muslim” is to make the same statement twice. Within this world view, when MBBs become followers of Christ they not only lose their jobs, educational opportunities, and possibly their lives, but they also believe that they have sacrificed their national identities. A summary of the interviews suggests that MBBs new to the “Christian” faith may psychologically believe that they have taken on the nationality of the western missionary who assisted them into their new faith in Christ! Why?

According to the glossary of Islam, the word “Christian” essentially means “western.” And the word “western” essentially means “Christian.” In the eyes of most Muslims, “Christians” are part of a culture defined by abortion, drug abuse, pornography, crime – and all the ills of western society. In addition, “Christians” are responsible for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. “Christians” inevitably side with Israel. “Christians” are intent on “westernizing” the entire world. “Christians” are captive to materialism. The church would be wise to learn from

criticism (even if it comes from unlikely sources), but the church would also be wise to manage its own glossary. Even if the labels are inaccurate or confused, Islam can teach the church a great deal.

The Unique Problem of Baptism

Especially helpful is the typical Muslim understanding of conversion to Jesus. Simply stated, **Islam generally equates baptism with conversion.** From the perspective of Islam, to be baptized is to be saved. A repeated emphasis through almost three hundred interviews with MBBs was the intensification of persecution immediately following the believer's baptism. Up to that point, it was not unusual for a "seeker" to be allowed to study the Bible, listen to Christian radio programming, attend a Christian Background Believer (CBB) church, and even to meet regularly and openly with western missionaries. Obviously, in some cases, there was significant resistance to such practices. But this often low-key persecution paled in comparison to the overt and intense persecution that began to surface immediately after the MBB experienced believer's baptism.¹

Islam is convinced that it is at baptism that its sons and daughters have become separated from their former way of life. Islam identifies baptism as the time when the believer has died to the old way and embraced a new worldview. Though the image might be uncomfortable, it might even be suggested that baptism, given the worldview of Islam, is to a new believer in Christ what strapping on a belt of explosives is to a suicide bomber. For Islam, baptism is the point of no return. Though western Christians might be repelled by such an image, it seems that Islam (perhaps more than the western church itself) has truly grasped the weight and significance of baptism!

Baggage from Home

Most practitioners of the Christian faith, regardless of background, would agree at this point: baptism is critically important. Baptism is central to the expansion of the Kingdom of God and is, therefore, crucial to the mission enterprise. Baptism is extremely important in identifying the new believer with the faith community and all that it has to offer (including mutual support and nurture, accountability, creation of a new family, a setting for service, an environment for corporate worship, among many others).

When missionaries belittle or misunderstand the power and impact of a believer's baptism, defined and practiced locally, they can unintentionally hinder emerging faith. How ironic that missionaries can baptize literally hundreds of MBBs – and yet those baptisms rarely result in a church

that can survive the departure of the missionary. What the interviews suggest is that baptism is profoundly significant – but that an MBB and a western missionary will understand that significance in radically different ways. Missionaries are often captive to the doctrinal formulations of sending bodies, compelled to produce measurable results (often represented in the statistic of "baptisms"), and desperate for some kind of observable "success." Given that worldview, they would quickly agree that baptism matters. What can be easily neglected, however, is the transforming impact of baptism within a culture of persecution and violence. The MBB will agree that baptism is staggering in its importance – but for entirely different reasons.

Matters of Timing and Setting

Within Islamic cultures, missionaries will generally encourage MBBs to embrace believer's baptism approximately three to six months after an MBB professes faith in Jesus. That statistic holds true regardless of how the process of conversion occurred. When an MBB baptizes another MBB, however, baptism might follow a declaration of faith by as much as three to five years. At this point, the difference in timing is not easy to explain. Missionaries will suggest that their desire to baptize quickly is an effort to be biblically obedient. MBBs will suggest that the delay allows a stronger grounding in the faith before the crucial step of baptism. This is clearly an area the calls for ongoing and candid dialogue.

Another highlight of the interviews focused on the connection between baptism and the planting of new churches. When a missionary baptizes an MBB, persecution of that person is often swift and devastating. Despite the fact that baptism of an MBB by an outsider can be administered in the dark of night and outside of the local community (perhaps even in another country), the family and friends of the MBB will learn of the baptism almost immediately. Regardless of whatever attempts are made (and leaving for now the question of whether or not secrecy is advisable), there is simply no way to keep a baptism secret. The rapid rate of communication in an oral culture rivals the speed of the internet. The only exception to this reality happens when an MBB is extracted for baptism – and then never returns home to family and friends. The motivation behind such a choice is, of course, easy to understand. Missionaries might be compelled by genuine love and concern for their newfound brother or sister in Christ – but the implications for the birth of church planting movements are profound. Unfortunately, the way that baptism is often administered does, in fact, lead to reduced rather than increased witness.

Open or Secret?

Given the relationship of baptism and persecution, missionaries often seek to baptize MBBs in secret. Despite the good intentions, the missionary inadvertently models fear and insecurity that will hinder the new believer's faith for months and years to come. When the persecuting family or community is asked about why they treated their child or neighbor so harshly for being baptized, the reply is often, "Our son/daughter/neighbor has participated in a secret, foreign religious ritual at the hands of a foreigner. He/she has been bought with foreign money. He/she has become a westerner and has taken sides against our own people." The missiological implications are clear. Persecution becomes a socially responsible (even necessary) reaction to a "foreign ritual" or even a perceived "foreign invasion." Couched in these terms, it is impossible for the local community to so much as consider the claims of Christ or the process of faith. Protection of the community from foreign influence is the only concern; faith questions are seldom considered. The entire experience has been reduced to the inappropriate influence of an outsider and the community's response to that.

As important as baptism is – and it is utterly crucial – it becomes apparent that even baptism is a secondary matter. To be persecuted because of baptism (regardless of how or by whom it is done) is not the same thing as being persecuted for who Jesus claims to be.

If Being Baptized Once Is Good, Is Being Baptized Several Times Even Better?

The interviews also reveal that most MBBs, within five years of their declaration of faith in Christ, (regardless of whatever process they have been a part of), have been baptized and re-baptized three to five times. In countries where missionaries representing different agencies are beginning to partner and share statistics, it is clear that the number of annual baptisms of MBBs is significantly inflated as MBBs are baptized time and time again within different mission bodies. Seldom will these mission entities realize that a particular MBB has already been baptized by a sister organization. The baptism of one MBB might be counted by a number of different groups. It is not unusual to read that there are, for example, a thousand followers of Christ in a particular country – while in personal interviews it is possible to account for only two or three hundred. The difference can be explained by the fact that many MBBs have experienced repeated baptism through several different groups. What's more, each time the MBB is baptized, the potential for severe persecution escalates.

One of the motivations behind multiple baptisms is the connection of baptism to the opportunity for

employment with a mission organization. Whether implied or explicit, the step of baptism is understood to be an entry requirement for a job, and MBBs willingly submit to that expectation. Additional pressure sometimes comes from missionaries themselves. It is difficult to delay baptism when home churches and sending agencies are evaluating the number of baptisms as a measure of missional effectiveness.

Mode and Meaning

The matter is complicated further by the theological, historical, and doctrinal differences represented by various mission organizations. It is not unusual for an MBB to receive believer's baptism by immersion at the hands of a Baptist missionary who explains to the believer the symbolic nature of baptism. Yet, some time later, either because of spiritual struggle or the opportunity for a new job, the MBB may gravitate to an Assembly of God missionary, receiving another baptism along with detailed teaching about being filled with the Holy Spirit. This same MBB might then be drawn to a Lutheran relief agency or, perhaps, one supported by Presbyterians. This pilgrimage might be the result of honest seeking – or it might be motivated by a desire for employment, education, a spouse, or a chance to live in America. Whatever the motivation, this MBB (in a relatively short span of time) could have been personally baptized by immersion, sprinkling, and pouring – every mode of baptism that the Western church has practiced over its two thousand years of life.

For the MBB, generally speaking, the mode of baptism is not especially significant. The theological setting for baptism is also likely to be confused. MBBs do not come to Christ in a vacuum. In some cases, they have already been exposed to the church. In fact, in many cases, this historical church can pre-date Islam. As if by osmosis, these seekers and incipient believers have already been affected by different theologies and traditions regarding baptism. The impact on both the MBBs and their faith is deeply significant.

The Pilgrimage Illustrated

Imagine a man named Mohamed. He has experienced dreams and visions that have sent him on a spiritual pilgrimage. This season of searching lasts from three to five years. During this time, he has interacted with the Bible; he has read and studied. He has also had between twenty and thirty spiritual encounters with the gospel. The Holy Spirit, time and again, has sent someone to Mohamed. The process repeats what happened often in Scripture: Joseph was sent to Pharaoh, Ananias was sent to Saul, Philip was sent to the Ethiopian eunuch. In the same way, many different people have been sent to Mohamed.

As a result of this good and godly witness, Mohamed makes a declaration of faith in Jesus. He then receives believer's baptism.

(At this point in the story, it does not really matter who administers the baptism. Remarkably, when MBBs baptize each other, with a minimum of outside participation, the greatest influence on the mode of baptism does not come from Bible studies or even from discussions with other MBBs. What influences Mohamed and his friends the most is whether or not they have seen the Jesus Film! The most common mode of baptism comes from a movie.)

So Mohamed receives a "Jesus Film" baptism. Often, he will describe his faith pilgrimage and speak of this baptism (which has come several years after his declaration of faith) as a **symbol** of his relationship with Jesus.

If Mohamed is married, he will go home to his family. Within three to six months, Mohamed will make a proclamation to his wife: "Woman, I am now a Christian. That makes this a Christian home. Therefore, you are now a Christian."

Of course, his wife is shocked. Because of his terrible indiscretion, she can divorce him or betray him to his family. But often, her dependence on her husband and her desire to obey him is so deeply ingrained that she will accept the fact that faith has been declared for her by her more informed husband. A few months later, he will baptize her.

In the interview, Mohamed will describe his own faith and the faith of his wife in different ways. In fact, he might say that his wife is not yet a "true believer." She is married to him, however, and her baptism (he will say) represents a **sign** that one day she will believe in her own right. One day, she will become a "true believer."

Mohamed is not quite finished. His faith has not been birthed within a vacuum. The religious environment surrounding him often includes Catholic and Orthodox churches. He has been influenced by these also. He gazes with love at his threemonth- old son. He knows the difficulties that lie ahead for this child. He knows the struggle of being educated in an Islamic system. Mohamed may have many theological questions – but he is willing to take a chance that perhaps the Catholics and Orthodox are correct. So Mohamed will baptize his infant son, praying that this time baptism is actually **salvific**.

Notice that baptism has gone from symbol to sign to sacrament within one family and within a very short span of time. Perhaps Mohamed has been immersed. Perhaps his wife has had water poured over her head. Perhaps the infant son has been sprinkled. Mohamed has very little interest in the theology of baptism or in the proper mode of baptism. He has different and deeper concerns.

It is also likely that each of these baptisms has taken place with the participation of an outside community. Regardless of their level of theological or biblical understanding, Mohamed and his family experience increasing persecution with each step of the process. Quickly, they become outsiders even within their own community. If they happen to live in an environment where violence is common, missionaries will typically offer to extract them to a country of safety.² Often, the persecution that Mohamed and his family will experience will be precipitated by multiple baptisms with the involvement of outside missionaries or those within the CBB church.

Lessons to Be Learned

Perhaps Islam understands what the west has forgotten. Perhaps Islam understands the meaning of baptism more profoundly than the church does. Baptism represents dying to sin, dying to self, and dying to an old way of living in community. Baptism represents a new alignment with the Kingdom of God and a new way of relating to family and friends. Quite simply, baptism represents a new life. It is startling to realize the Jesus never extracted one person from his or her country of origin. In every case, submission to the Lordship of Jesus (and sharing in the experience of baptism) was a local experience.

There is also a growing theological corruption that surrounds baptism when an MBB receives baptism by western hands. The interviews record numerous instances where godly missionaries have faithfully witnessed, led Muslims through a process or experience of salvation, and baptized them. Rarely does this result in a church being planted, even when the missionary has performed in culturally appropriate ways and fulfilled the expectations of the sending body. Why? The interviews suggest that many MBBs have experienced serious persecution when their faith pilgrimage and baptism were traced to the ministry of the foreigner. In some settings, scores of MBBs went to jail and were severely beaten. When asked why they did not simply meet with other MBBs, evangelizing and administering the ordinances or sacraments of the church themselves, several trust issues and several theological corruptions were noted in almost every case.

MBBs will typically meet with one another – but only if the missionary is present. If the missionary is reassigned, goes on a furlough, or even takes an extended vacation, the MBBs refuse to meet together. When asked why this was so, since all of them went to jail for their association with the outsider, the reply is, "You cannot trust a person from this country." "Who do you trust," the interviews asked? "We trust the missionary." "But it was because of your relationship with the missionary that you went to jail." "Yes. That is true. But, still, we trust the missionary."

Missiologically, understanding this apparent contradiction makes cultural sense. MBBs will trust the one who brings them to Jesus. “Timothy” will trust “Paul.” And “Paul” will trust the “Timothy” that he has come to know well. He has observed “Timothy” struggle through the faith process. He has watched “Timothy” begin to endure persecution. The trust is based on shared experience. MBBs will meet as a church with those they trust. Interestingly, the greater the role that outsiders play in bringing MBBs to faith, the less trust those MBBs will have for other MBBs.

Though they experience serious persecution as a result, most MBBs will bring themselves and scores of others to the missionary in order to pray the prayer of salvation and receive believer’s baptism. Why? Why is it necessary for the missionary to be involved at this point in the process? Almost without exception, MBBs will say, “My baptism is better at the hands of a missionary who has known Jesus for years and who has such deep religious training.” John 3:22 is perhaps the most definitive reference to the possibility that Jesus Himself baptized. But John 4:1 indicates that Jesus quickly delegated this task to His disciples. There, Scripture makes it clear that “it was not Jesus who baptized, but His disciples.” The Apostle Paul addressed this issue of baptismal corruption in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. He concludes with this telling word: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.”

More damaging is the almost universal statement from MBBs that, “My salvation is better at the hands of a missionary who knows Jesus so much better than any local person.” This is a theological corruption. Unknowingly, the missionary can give credence to the development of a “first-class MBB” and a “second-class MBB” within a group of first generation believers. Such a desire to receive these blessings and functions at the hands of the missionary often leads to increased persecution. When these MBBs are arrested, the arresting authorities seldom question MBBs in regard to issues of personal faith. The persecutors demand information concerning the involvement of outsiders in the lives of local believers. They want to know from where the Bibles originated, who gave them the Jesus Film, who provided Christian witness, materials, and money. It is very common for MBBs to be arrested simply because of their relationships with outsiders. Issues of personal faith are seldom raised during the course of the persecution event.

The earthly ministry of Jesus took place within a hostile environment. Opposition from the Jewish leaders under the Roman occupation was serious. However, prior to Pentecost when thousands of believers emerged, Jesus, as a cultural insider, incarnated the Kingdom of God so effectively that not one follower was severely persecuted throughout the entire three years of his earthly ministry.

No one went to jail. No one was beaten. Not one person was martyred.

Jesus, a cultural insider in an environment framed by religious and secular violence, ministered in a way so that thousands of souls eventually had the opportunity to hear, to understand, to believe, and to be gathered into believing communities before they were visited by severe persecution.

Theological and Missiological Suggestions

Several concluding observations are in order.

First, the interviews suggest that baptism should be practiced in and among the host, believing community. Missionaries from the west seldom, if ever, make up that host, believing community. Clearly, baptism in the New Testament took place in local community. Baptism outside of a local community, if present at all, was a distinct exception to normal practice. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-39 might be cited as the classic exception to the norm. But the comments of the persecuted on this story and the cultural setting are telling. In their view, it is significant that this Ethiopian was “...an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.” They point out that he was traveling in caravan and was, therefore, surrounded by community. He was riding in a chariot driven by a servant. Others were traveling with him. And that entire community, his community was able to observe what he experienced. To people in the west, the story suggests isolation and separation. But through MBB eyes, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch was clearly within community.

The biblical norm is baptism within community. The biblical norm is a setting where an individual’s family members and friends are baptized together. In the New Testament, there is no evidence of secret baptism by outsiders in the middle of the night, certainly not in another country. John’s baptism of Jesus, the baptism of the household of Cornelius, and the baptism of the Philippian jailor are all representative. The location and setting of the believer’s baptism has great significance.

Ignored and rejected by western missionaries is the evidence that many MBBs experience psychological dysfunction after they come to Christ. This might include alcoholism, multiple marriages, sexual voyeurism, or depression. Why? Islam informs an adherent how to live life, how to exist in community, how to fill every moment of every day. It defines when to wake, when to pray, where to pray, the direction to face during prayer, and even the words to pray. It regulates life between genders. Islam touches on every aspect of daily life. Often when a young Muslim comes to Jesus, baptized by an outsider, he loses

his family, and social identity. He has indeed died to, and been thrown out of, his old culture. But he has yet to be resurrected into real New Testament community. He and his evangelizer, baptizer, and discipler live in two distinctly different worlds. This new believer has lost his life structure – but it has not yet been replaced. Without community, this MBB is “lost” – even though he has been saved!

Second, reflecting on both the interviews and the New Testament, it is suggested that an in-culture or near-culture believer should baptize MBBs. The more the baptizer is viewed as an outsider, the more likely it is that intense persecution and theological corruption will result. In the west, the baptizer is generally set apart by seminary degrees, education, title, and ordination. Right or wrong, there is a clear delineation between clergy and congregation. Within environments of persecution, however, community is formed most quickly when baptism is lovingly administered by local hands: husband to wife, father to children, neighbor to neighbor. As in-culture and near-culture believers baptize, persecution for secondary reasons is sharply reduced and old communities of faith are transformed into new communities in Christ. When persecution does arrive, it is in direct response to who Jesus is and to the kind of transformed community that He is creating. And when persecution arises, an incipient community of support has already come into existence. This is not to suggest that Islam has the right to persecute those who turn to Jesus if a western missionary happened to be involved in that conversion. What is suggested is that missionaries need to work and minister with great sensitivity and wisdom.

It is not uncommon for MBBs to plead with believers from the outside to baptize them, even outsiders temporarily passing through their country. If MBBs are evangelized, baptized, financed, and gathered together by outsiders, what is their motivation to be in community? The interviews suggest that MBBs need to be locally accountable for witness and behavior among their family, friends and neighbors.

Clearly, a sound theology of baptism is important. The church for centuries has debated and divided over whether baptism represents a symbol, sign or sacrament. The church has persecuted itself over who has the authority to perform baptism and which mode of baptism; immersion, pouring or sprinkling is biblical. These are heavy and important issues. At the same time, the issues of theology and mode, as defined by the western church, were never raised by MBBs in the almost three hundred interviews globally! MBBs will experience multiple baptisms as they pass from one western mission family to another. They will usually receive something useful from each doctrinal experience, even if they acquiesce to multiple baptisms for the sake of employment. MBBs will pass

from one agency to the next, expressing the feeling that “something is still missing.” Generally, they will be baptized again and again until they receive believer’s baptism at the hands of another MBB within their own community. Then, they will say, “I have come home. I have found true New Testament family. This is real church.”

MBBs, in environments of persecution and violence, are concerned about only one doctrinal issue regarding their baptism. The question is this: “Have I been baptized into Christ and into a local community? Will this church care for me, hold me daily accountable, and share all things common? Will this new spiritual family care for me and my family if I lose my job, if we are excluded from my extended family, or thrown into prison or martyred for our faith?” Unfortunately, that concern is not always the central issue for missionaries and their sending bodies concerning baptism in cultures of violence. Sometimes, missionaries are more consumed with counting baptisms than with making baptism count.

At the point where baptism, MBBs, and missionaries converge, the overwhelming foundational issue is the nature of local community. What is church in its essence, stripped of property, buildings, and all the possessions collected throughout the centuries? What does it mean to belong – to belong! – to the Body of Christ?

Baptism is at the heart of church planting in environments framed by violence and persecution, especially in places where faith is emerging. At its heart, baptism is the midwife to the emerging church. Suggested here is a revealing and wonderful insight: when baptism is truly New Testament and culturally sensitive, it will always leave a church behind. Baptism births the church. It may be only one family, one clan, or an Ethiopian in caravan on his way home. But church will be the result. This is especially true in environments known for their hostility to faith in Jesus.

Certainly there is a longing for the day when Muslims by the thousands can be baptized into existing churches, filled and led by local MBBs. Until that day comes, belonging to a missionary community or even a local CBB church, is no substitute for practicing baptism in a theological and missiological sound manner. Practiced that way, baptism inevitably leaves in its wake a new, New Testament MBB church.

Some may read this article as yet another request for the western missionary to vacate remaining mission fields, especially those defined by violence. One might honestly wonder that if western workers precipitate persecution and theological corruption, why stay? Why bring such hardship upon more vulnerable, local believers? Primarily, western believers must remain obedient to carry out the Great Commission given to them by Jesus Himself as part of the global body of Christ. The command to go to all the

people groups of the world stands strong. That command has neither repealed nor completed.

It is also important to hear again the hearts of the persecuted. MBBs do not want western missionaries to leave or cease from carrying the gospel into environments defined by persecution and violence. They admire and desire to mimic the call to the nations. They observe a cross-cultural witness that they seek to emulate. They see western missionaries model godly marriages and healthy parenting. MBBs thrill in discovering worship patterns that include the entire family around the throne of God. Local believers note the broad seed sowing that takes place among their people through the presence of believing westerners. This incarnation allows for thousands of spiritual conversations which occur alongside the arrival of a culturally and linguistically gifted foreign worker. These spiritual conversations are less frequent for Muslims without the presence of the western worker as there are few safe persons with whom one can converse in regard to the claims of Jesus and the shortcomings of Islam. MBBs have heard the Word of God within the words of a film or a radio broadcast. It has taken on flesh and it has incarnated Christ in their midst.

This article is not a call for the western missionary to disobey the Great Commission. It is a plea for those sent into lostness to work smarter, not harder. Could it be that the western church has forgotten what it means to be baptized into real community, into the body of Christ, the church? Having forgotten the joy and accountability of “bringing all things common,” the church in the west has reduced baptism to arguments about its mode, encased within increasingly hardened denominational positions.

Missionaries from the west, including those from diverse theological backgrounds, would be wise to model real community, church, among themselves. These missionaries should then guide and encourage new MBBs to embrace whatever form that real New Testament community, church, could be within the host culture. We can be certain that when healthy New Testament churches emerge among MBBs who are grounded in Scripture and led by the Holy Spirit, those communities will work out for themselves a theology of baptism that is both biblical and honoring of God. It may not completely match our hope or expectation, but it will be biblical nonetheless. On the other hand, missionaries can continue to superimpose a theology of baptism that emphasizes a particular perspective and a distinctly western flavor – and, yet, never leave an honest to goodness New Testament church behind. That, we would argue, would be a tragic choice.

MBBs do not ask for their persecution to end. They ask for the western church to pray that they will remain

obedient in the midst of their persecution. When persecution comes, let it be for Jesus and not for secondary issues.

¹One long-standing Somali mission agency had observed this trend for decades. They addressed the problematic connection of baptism and persecution by simply stopping the practice of baptism! Most evangelical mission agencies would find such a solution troubling.

²Within cultures where violence is prevalent, up to 70% of all MBBs will be extracted to a country of safety.

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