

A story from a city near you...

Jen Barnett JensBarnett@gmail.com

“*Salamu ‘alaykum!* (Peace be upon you),” I announce, entering the kebab shop.

“*Wa ‘alaykum-us-salam* (and upon you peace),” a few patrons half-heartedly mumble in response. Some look up and seem surprised to see a white face. I make my order and sit at the counter to wait.

“Are you a Muslim or a Christian?” asks one eventually, unable to contain his curiosity any longer.

“A Christian of course – just look at me. My forefathers were European. We’ve been Christians for over 1500 years.”

“Oh, OK.” My questioner looks a little disappointed and begins to turn back to the others at his table.

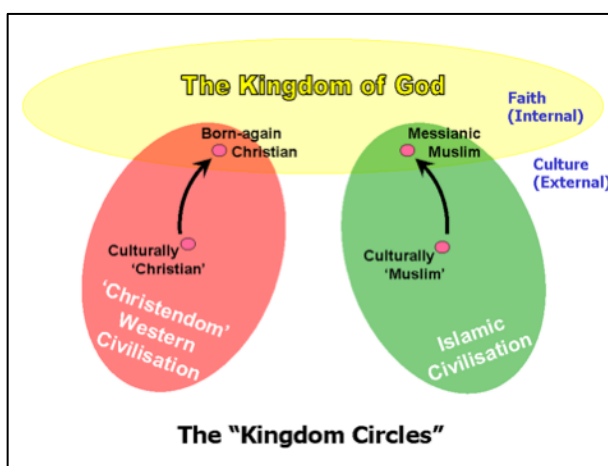
“However,” I continue, “I have made an amazing discovery...” He tilts his head slightly and raises an eyebrow. “I discovered Christendom was an imperial religion founded 300 years *after* Christ by the Roman Emperor Constantine. I’ve studied Jesus’ teachings – He never once mentions Christians or Christendom.”

The tiny restaurant is strangely quiet. I realise most are listening in on our conversation. “What?!” exclaims my questioner (who, I find out later, is called *Musa*). “What *did* Jesus teach then?”

“Jesus taught about the ‘Kingdom of God.’ He never came to start a new religion called ‘Christendom.’ His disciples never understood it like that. Look! Let me show you what else I discovered...” I borrow a pen from the counter, draw a large oval on a napkin, and label it ‘Kingdom of God.’ “This is what Jesus taught about: a kingdom of people – an *ummah* –submitted to God, with him Lord of their lives. However, to our shame, most of us born into Christendom have not entered the Kingdom of God.” I draw another oval that intersects the first by about 5% and label it ‘Christendom’.

Musa looks down at the napkin and then at me, trying to figure me out. He is not at all surprised to hear only 5% of Christendom lives a life submitted to God. He is quite unimpressed with the broken families, individualism, and immorality he observes amongst the ‘Christians’ he knows. However, Musa *is* surprised to meet a Christian who doesn’t try to defend Christendom or recruit him to their empire. He is tired of defensive usthem arguments and people urging him to join Christendom. Why should he adopt their self-centredness and shameless lifestyle? He did visit a church once, but the worldly party music and the God-is-your-buddy message convinced him that Christians have no respect for God at all. In addition, Christendom shares a brutal history of conflict with the religious empire he was born into. How shameful to betray one’s community and family by switching empires. Now *that* would be typical Christian individualism! There couldn’t be many sins worse than that...

“My daughter was born in Jordan”, I continue. “The official who made her birth certificate wrote ‘Christian’ in the box marked ‘religion’ just because I had a European face! But, do you think God recognises a man-made document? The prophet Samuel said, ‘Man looks at the outward



appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.¹ The Kingdom involves my daughter's heart much more than her inherited cultural and religious background. In fact, Jesus taught: 'The Kingdom of God is *within* you.'

I pause and look around. "Christ's teaching is not easy though. For example, the *Injil* (Gospel) says: 'No immoral, impure, or greedy person – such a man is a *mushrik* (idolater) – has any inheritance in the kingdom².' That's why I drew most of Christendom outside."

"But what about Islam?" I ask, passing Musa the pen. "How many of those born 'Muslim' would you draw inside the Kingdom of God?"

Usually, when I am open and honest about Christendom, Muslims are open and honest in return. Most draw an oval that overlaps with the Kingdom by about the same amount. However, Musa's beard, *kufi* (prayer hat), and the dark patch of skin on his forehead show he takes his religion seriously. I wonder how this "fundamentalist" will respond?

Musa hesitates, aware others are watching. Abruptly, he draws an oval that barely intersects with the "Kingdom of God."

"Isn't there more overlap than that?" I ask, surprised.

"No," replies Musa. He gestures towards the others at his table and raises his voice so all can hear. "These guys are only Muslims by birth. They pray and act piously when the community is watching, but it is just tradition and culture" He glares at the others, daring them to disagree. They hang their heads and avoid eye contact. Musa swings back and jabs his finger at my napkin. "But I want to live here," he says. "In God's Kingdom!"

"So do I," I reply, "and, you know, we have common ground here. Our main concern is not the empires of Christendom or Islam, or even being religious. We are fellow humans seeking the Kingdom of God."

My kebab is ready. Taking it, I join Musa and his colleagues at his table. We talk about politics and religion, but most of all we talk about Jesus and the Kingdom of God. They are eager to meet again soon. "Yes," I reply as we exchange phone numbers. "Let's talk more about this, but let's make it clear from the start that I won't ask you to leave your community and become a 'Christian'". Musa looks at me, surprised.

"Look," I say, pointing back to the napkin. "Why cross empires from Islam to Christendom, if only a few 'Christians' are in the Kingdom anyway? And don't you ask me to become a Muslim either, Ok? We have already agreed the Kingdom of God within is most important, and the labels 'Christian' and 'Muslim' speak more about external culture than internal faith – right?"

"Right", says Musa smiling. "So, you'll ring then?"

"Yes. *Salamu 'alaykum*"

"*Wa 'alaykum-us-salam*", comes the reply.

¹ 1 Sam 16:7

² Eph 5:4-7

Just a gimmick?

The dialogue in this parable is a typical response to the “Kingdom Circles” diagram, taken from actual conversations. However, this is not just another evangelism gimmick. Rather, it is a challenge to completely rethink what it means to follow Christ and share our faith in this multicultural world

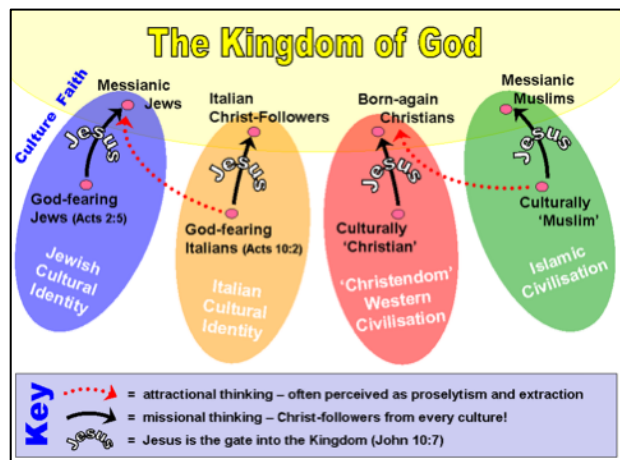
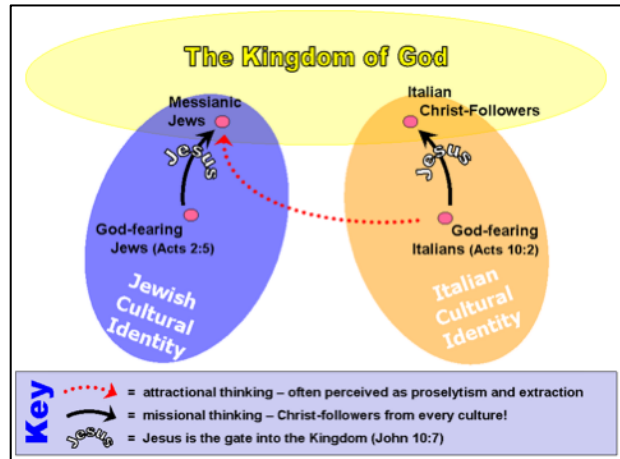
Currently, most evangelism strategy is “*attractional*”. Our outreach, community service, and “seeker courses” aim to bring people *into* the church’s orbit – into Christendom – and hopefully through that contact they “get saved” and enter the Kingdom. However, this strategy works best with those who have similar cultural roots or who find the Western empire attractive.

Conversely, the core message of Acts is cross-cultural or ‘*missional*.’ The Gospel jumps cultural barriers and entirely new movements of Christ-followers spring up.

For example, the Jewish believers assumed that Cornelius must first join them culturally before he could be ‘saved’³. It made sense really: Their attractional evangelism model in Jerusalem obviously had God’s anointing and approval. Besides, their culture was built on biblical values, while his Italian culture was full of immorality, violence, and idolatry. How could anyone follow Christ within that environment? To be saved Cornelius must become a Messianic Jew!

Yet, the Holy Spirit shatters this ethnocentric view of both “church” and of becoming a “follower of the Way”. Peter, shocked out of his religious assumptions, meets the Italians on their own cultural terms, and establishes a new fellowship of Jesusfollowers amongst them.

“Messianic Italians?” Outrageous! Unthinkable! Switching from attractional to missional thinking made many Jewish believers feel insecure back then, and it poses a similar challenge for us – even today.



³ See Acts 10-11