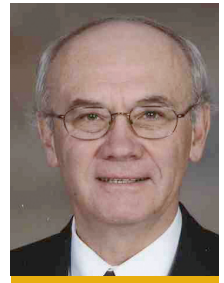


Known For Sure in Jesus

By Victor Shepherd



Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?

Perhaps we can answer the question “Do Muslims and Christians worship the same God?” by asking another one: Can we worship God without knowing God?

The apostolic Church was convinced that God bares His heart to His people; that is, God makes Himself known as He acts upon His people through Israel’s long history and brings that history to its crown and climax in Jesus Christ. Having struggled with a recalcitrant people in all that He does *for* them, God also does as much *in* them through the fire of the Holy Spirit as He “lights up” for them the meaning of His sacrificial love for the whole world and sears them with His claim on their obedience in all matters.

Simply put, God is known *for sure* in the history of Israel’s daughters and sons – and above all in Israel’s greater Son. Biblical prophets and apostles insist that worship of anything or anyone other than the Holy One of Israel is idolatry, even as that One Incarnate, Jesus Christ, gathers up preceding prophecies in Himself and fulfils them. The Muslim claim that Muhammad brought new revelation after Christ doesn’t mesh with biblical revelation but recasts it entirely. Only as God is truly known can God rightly be worshipped.

This is not to say God is at work *only* in Israel and the Church. When the Israelite people turned their assurance of truth into presumptuous arrogance, Amos thundered at them: “‘Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?’ says the Lord. ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?’ ” (Amos 9:7 ESV). Amos’s convictions are evident throughout the book that bears his name. One, God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt remains the foundation of their faith. Two, God has been at work in the Philistine and Syrian peoples as well, even as those people, like our Muslim friends today, don’t recognize the truth of Israel’s faith. Three, because Israel is God’s “chosen,” Israel knows where and how and to what end God is at work, while the other peoples do not. Four, since Israel knows God, God’s judgment begins with Israel. (For the same reason, Peter insists, “It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God [i.e., the Church]” 1 Peter 4:17.)

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Since God is known *for sure* in Jesus of Nazareth and the people whose Messiah He is, the apostles tirelessly point to Christ. In Romans 1:19-20, Paul also maintains that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” *ought* to be universally glimpsed in the creation (that is, in nature) but in fact *can’t* be since sinners “suppress the truth.” The result is that now-darkened humans behave in the degrading, disgusting ways he speaks of in Romans 1. His only point in 1:19-20 is that they are therefore “without excuse” when they bring down God’s judgment. In other words, no one – of any religious persuasion or none – can claim not to need the gospel of Christ.

Similarly, in Acts 17 where Paul tells the Athenians that God originally made humans to “feel their way toward him and find him,” his acknowledgement of their blatant idolatry as well as his insistence on the necessity of the gospel, presuppose that humans now *can’t* intuit God or find Him thanks to their depravity. To be sure, he admits that humans do worship. The Athenians, “very religious” to be sure, even publicize their worship of “An Unknown God.” Yet Paul insists that their worship remains idolatrous. Its idolatry he finds distressing (17:16). Nowhere does he hint that the “unknown” deities are God-by-another-name.

While Scripture never countenances compromising the uniqueness of the gospel, neither does Scripture condone any abuse of those who have yet to embrace it. Both gospel truth and gentleness must be rooted in our hearts whenever we gently propose that virtually nothing in our Muslim neighbours’ Qu’ran approaches Scripture’s depiction of the suffering, insult-absorbing patience of God wherein He persistently withstands the abuse of sinners – all for the sake of saving those who otherwise remain ignorant of Him. Only as they are made the beneficiaries of His saving grace do they know Him. And only as they know Him can they worship Him “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23). ■

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