

Carl Medearis Friend of Muslims

Carl Medearis has spent the last 25 years loving Muslims, living twelve of those years in Beirut, Lebanon. Through his unique and strategic approach throughout the Arab world, he has taught Muslim university students, business professionals and political leaders to live their lives by the principles of Jesus. Today Carl spends much of his time working with leaders both in the West and in the Arab world with the goal of seeing a total transformation of the Arab Middle East through the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. But how did he earn a voice among Muslim leaders? And what kind of trouble has it landed him in? Carl talked with Servant about Islam, religion, and what God is up to in the Middle East.

Servant: Have you heard about Servant and Prairie Bible College?

Carl: Yes. Anybody who's in missions knows about Prairie. I've met your alumni all along the way. Some good friends of ours from Lebanon went to Prairie Bible Institute. You have a great history.

I loved your book. Most books on Islam tell me what's wrong with Muslims. You told me what God is doing among them.

Many books on Muslims breed more fear than anything else. It just seems to me like there's enough fear going around these days—finances, terrorism, Obama—and I don't really think we need another book about "Islam and the Coming Jihad."

But they sell pretty well.

They do. That's why I'm surprised at how well *this* book is selling. I didn't expect it because people love sensationalism and what makes the news are the negative stories, not "Muslims are nicer than you think." But I think it's the message the church in the west needs to hear and I believe it reflects the message of Jesus.

You've spent all this time in the Middle East. Why?

God very clearly called us to move to Beirut. We sold everything, took our kids and moved. We didn't know anyone, didn't speak Arabic, didn't really know what we were going to do. We wanted to lead people to Jesus and build communities of faith, but we didn't really know how that was going to happen. I started teaching English and Western History at a school about a year and a half after the civil war of 16 years had ended. So the country was still bombed out and a real mess. We began doing whatever was in front of us, talking to people about Jesus, building relationships, having meals with Lebanese, learning Arabic, getting used to the culture. It was a few years before we felt like we were really "living" in the country and not just residing there to do missions work. But we actually had made good friends, not just contacts. We spent more time with our Lebanese Muslim friends than with anyone else and the last six years or so we spent almost solely with Lebanese. All our kids' best friends were Lebanese; they were the only

Americans in their school. When our kids were asked about religion, they simply told their friends that they followed Jesus. And we've kind of settled on that, even today. We received so much more than we gave in Lebanon. We learned so much more than we taught.

What do Muslims think of when they hear the word “Christian”?

They might think of freedom, capitalism, liberty, democracy. But they also get it confused with other things that come out of the western world. We export Hollywood movies, pornography, and divorce. We export dysfunctional families, books and websites that spread filth around the world. Sadly, when the Muslim world looks at that they think of Christians. In Beirut there was an actual line drawn between what was called Muslim West Beirut and Christian East Beirut. So until now if you're a Muslim in the Arab world who wants to party, go to a gambling casino, do drugs, whatever, you would go to the “Christian” side of Beirut. And of course, we know they're not really Christians, but it's not what everybody else is thinking. Just as we misunderstand Muslims, they do with us and they can't figure out the real nuance of difference between the *word* Christian and a real Christian. They just lump them together.

What does a Muslim think of when he hears the word “Jesus”?

When they hear “Christian” they may think of the Crusaders, but when they hear Jesus mentioned, there's immediate respect. They may not believe he was the Son of God, but in the Qur'an Jesus is mentioned some 90 times, all of them positive. He's called the Word of God, the Messiah—although they don't really understand what that means. He did miracles, he lived a pure and sinless life, he was born of a virgin, he ascended to heaven and is alive today and will come back at the end to judge the living and the dead. It's pretty powerful stuff, a lot more than our pagan secular neighbors believe here in the west. If a Muslim says to me, I believe in Jesus; he's a great prophet, instead of saying, “Yeah, but...” I say, “That's fantastic. Let's talk about him.” Jesus doesn't come loaded with prejudice, conflict, or war. But for them, Christianity often does.

You say that amazing things are going on in the Middle East.

Reportedly hundreds of thousands of Iranian Shiite Muslims have come to faith in Christ in the last 15 to 20 years. It's the same in Iraq. I have many first hand reports of Iraqi Muslims coming to Christ. In some of the toughest places like Sudan, Iran, Iraq, God is doing the most, at least in the Middle East.

How is this happening?

A recent study of Muslims who came to faith in Jesus Christ and began following him, showed that the overwhelming majority came because of personal spiritual revelation and through miracles. Very few embraced Jesus due to the use of apologetics or doctrinal debate. Some come through dreams and visions because God is wanting these Muslims to come to himself more than we are. He'd like to use us, but if we won't go then he does whatever he pleases. At least three times Muslims told me that they had a dream about Jesus the night before and then I “happened” to stumble across their path and they're very open to receive what I

have to say. In a hotel in Basra, Iraq, I was staying back one morning while our team was out on the streets talking to people about Jesus. It sounds weird and unnatural here in the west because you don't just walk around and talk to strangers so much. But in the Arab world people are hospitable and they see you're a foreigner and they usually welcome you and invite you in for tea. In the hotel lobby one of the staff came to me and we started talking. Two of his friends joined him and one of them asked me to tell them a story. So I just told the story of the prodigal son. They loved that. The man told me that 20 years before a German man had come through Basra and given his father a cassette tape with the words of Jesus on it. He said, "We listened to it every night for about a year until it broke. The man told my dad that Jesus has a book out and if I could ever find that book I should do whatever it takes to get one." He asked me, "Does Jesus have a book?" I said, "Well, yes. And I have one." I almost tripped on the carpet going to get it, I was so excited. When I presented it to him, he looked at it, held it to his forehead, kissed it, broke down in tears and ran out with the book. Turned out that he took the book home to show to his father, then came running back, told us his father said for sure it was the real book of Jesus, and he said, "Do you have any more? We need more. We want to give it to our cousins and our relatives." And I said, "I'm so sorry, we don't have any more, but we'll come back." And we did. And that has always been my experience with Muslims.

How do I get to know some Muslims?

If you know someone at work or a neighbor who's a Muslim, be intentional about pursuing a relationship. If you don't know anyone, go to a city and visit a mosque or an Islamic center. Just call them up and tell them that you don't understand that much about Islam and you haven't really met too many Muslims so could some friends and I come over and visit? They love it when I bring Christians or local businessmen because they're very anxious to explain themselves. They know people are suspicious of them and if you have any personality at all you can build a friendship with someone quite quickly.

You say Christians need to learn to have fun.

All of the Muslims I've ever known really enjoy life, they enjoy their families and friends, they love going out. So if you don't know how to party, get help from someone who does. At the same time, know and understand your boundaries and cultural norms so you don't offend more people than you win. If you're partying with Muslims it's a clean party. There's a lot of talk, a lot of friendship, a lot of laughs. I've found that laughter and hanging out over food and friends anywhere in the world opens the hearts of people.

Is Islam a religion of peace?

I don't like to say it's a religion of peace *or* a religion of violence because some people who call themselves Muslims are peaceful and a few are violent. Look at 2000 years of Christendom. Some people who have called themselves Christians have been violent but most have been people of peace. Of the 1.4 billion Muslims obviously there are some who are evil people who commit acts of terrorism that

kill thousands of people, but the vast majority are simply trying to live their lives. They want to raise a family and they are also very embarrassed and actually horrified by the fact that there are people out there killing innocent civilians in the name of their religion.

Are you being too easy on Muslims?

I am trying to be as easy on them as Jesus would be. He was always very hard on one group of people: the religious leaders from his own sect. He wasn't hard on Samaritans or other pagan religious leaders, just the Jewish leaders. I suppose I qualify as a Christian religious leader and I'm probably a hypocrite, so I need to point the finger at myself. Jesus radically loved the obvious outsiders, the Samaritans, the prostitutes, the lepers, the social outcasts. And who is more a Samaritan or a leper than a Muslim these days? If we're seriously trying to follow Christ, I think we have to look at how he treated different groups of people. The more outside they were, the more grace-filled he was toward them.

But many know about Islam only from what we see on CNN or hear in the coffee shop. They think of terrorism.

I have lived and loved and shared and grieved with Muslims for over twenty-five years. In the few acts of violence I have encountered, I have never once seen a radical terrorist living in accordance with any higher standard of values: Muslim, Christian, or otherwise. People who kill other people in order to create fear and subservience are called one thing: evil. It is simply not accurate or fair to insist that Muslims are terrorists any more than it is to say that the cause of Communism is Russian people. The great majority of Muslims want a safe and peaceful life with their family and friends. Less than 5 percent practice extremism, or even believe in it. This includes the Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Wahhabi sect of Saudi Arabia.

What do you say if you're asked if you are religious?

I'd say absolutely not! I used to be. There's a lot of great stuff that comes out of religion, like boundaries, rules to live by. People who are religious are often good-living people. But what matters is have you actually believed? Have you seen Jesus for who he really is? Has he filled your heart and mind? Does he make you walk and talk and act differently? These aren't really religious questions although people think they are. So when I first start talking about them people will say, "Oh, you must be religious." And I'll say, "You probably haven't really read much about Jesus. We should read about Jesus together and you can tell me whether you think he's religious or not." I even ask people that if Jesus was right here standing between you and me, the religious guy—which one would he favor? And they always get it wrong. They say, "You, Carl. You're on his team." I tell them they're wrong. Jesus would likely be pointing his finger in my face saying, "Repent, you hypocrite. You travel the world teaching about me and you don't do it all yourself. And then he'd put his arm around you and give you a big hug because you think you're the big sinner." The church does exactly the opposite. We favor ourselves. We think Jesus is on our team and he dislikes sinners. It's exactly the opposite.

Some maintain that you've got it wrong, that you should be exposing Muslims, not loving them.

I have several friends who are doing ministry with Muslims who disagree with me, but they're all men of God and they love Muslims. They're convinced that the best way to go about educating the western church is by exposing Islam and the potential evils of what the Qur'an really says. Whenever there are words like "expose" or "the deep true meaning" I get suspicious. Why exactly are we doing that? Everybody has some hidden evil. You could expose me if you wanted to. What fruit does it bear when we learn that Muslims are reading a book from Satan, that they have no redemptive analogies, they're difficult to read, they're almost always on a jihad against somebody and they want to kill you? What does that motivate me to do? I think it motivates me to hide or be afraid but it sure doesn't motivate me to love them.

It might motivate you to pray.

Maybe it does for some people but not me. I tend to pray for the people I love way more than people I hate.

Some say they can't find any bridge-building opportunities within Islam.

Almost everything is a bridge-building opportunity with Muslims, more so than almost any group. I don't know how to do that with Buddhists or Hindus because I haven't spent time with them. If I had, maybe I would find opportunities to build bridges to Christ, but I haven't met many people from eastern religions. The Qur'an is packed full of stuff about Jesus. He is the most obvious and helpful bridge to build on because he's highly revered and respected. So I start with Jesus. When I begin a conversation with a Muslim I start with Jesus. I start in the gospels and then I go right and left. I would spend the first chunk of time in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and then when they need more explanation, the why of the crucifixion, why in God's sovereignty did it need to happen, I go to the Old Testament. Then the writings of Paul—actually the rest of the whole Bible explains the life, death, resurrection and ministry of Jesus. There's no book that doesn't explain some part of the story of Christ. But I don't start there. I start with Jesus and Muslims don't just put up with it, they love it. Muslims celebrate every year a huge festival where they slaughter a sheep for the atonement of their sins because Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son. What was the message? God provided a lamb that takes away the sins of the world. Does that sound like a bridge or what?

What is the greatest apologetic when talking to Muslims?

It starts with a 'J' and rhymes with Jesus. He is our apologetic, he is our proof, he is our everything. People roll their eyes and say, "Oh yeah, but what else?" And I know what they mean. They want some verses or an analogy and that's fair enough. But I stick relentlessly to Jesus. And when I do the conversation begins. You and I know that he is Lord and Savior, that he is God in the flesh, but if someone we're talking to doesn't know that yet, it feels almost presumptuous to put it that way immediately. I start with what we agree on. We agree that there was

a Palestinian Jew named Jesus of Nazareth. So let's talk about his life and decide who he was. I don't want to be following the wrong Jesus. There may be things I don't know about him and hopefully you can point this out to me and we'll grow closer to him together. I have yet to find someone who's not ready to do that here in the west or in the east. What is definitely more helpful than telling a Muslim he or she believes in the "wrong God" is to show our Muslim friends how they can believe in God more fully in and through Jesus Christ. I'm not encouraging you to be wishy-washy about your faith, but to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and go at his pace. I've tried to make it a personal goal never to argue with my Muslim friends. Whatever their objections may be, I try to nudge the discussion back to the person, works, and words of Jesus of Nazareth. We are not here to convert people to Christianity, but to turn people's hearts toward the Creator.

Many have not experienced the astounding success at leading people to Jesus that you have. Is it because you have more faith than others or because you've been in easier places?

The places I've been that this is working are "easy" places like Saudi Arabia, Syria, Beirut, Baghdad, Sudan, Egypt. I think that many missionaries have the wrong message: Christianity is better than Islam and you should switch. You should stop following the religion called Islam and being a Muslim and join the religion called Christianity and be a Christian. If that's your message, it's not going to work. I'm always so surprised how many people who are in ministry seem beaten down and beaten up and overworked and overtired. Maybe it's because they think *they* are planting churches, *they* are missionaries, *they* are taking Jesus places and they are getting very tired doing the work that he's supposed to be doing. I just hang out with people, try to make friends, and talk about Jesus all the time. I don't build friendships in order to share the gospel. I just build friendships everywhere and of course I do share the gospel because he's the most important thing in my life. I've said to Muslims, "You talk about Jesus and he's in the Qur'an but I don't see much action. What if we together really thought about following him?" And it's actually not very controversial. I've said that in Saudi Arabia in public places. I've said it to Saudi royal family members and they never say, "No, you can't do that." I've never found that Muslims are offended by this message. When I meet someone I don't start with differences. Every missionary is taught that you honor the culture that you go to and try your best to fit in. But when we talk about faith, we tend to get very quickly into things that we disagree on. What kind of a witness is that? Jesus didn't do that and neither did Paul. I think the success we've had in the Muslim world shows about how well that works.

What would you like them to remember you for?

I've never been asked that. I would like them to remember me as a man who loved Jesus. I want to be known for that.