

# Editorial: Facing Up to the Challenge

*Stephen J. Wellum*

**Stephen J. Wellum** is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

Before September 11, 2001, Islam did not receive near the attention, thought, or discussion that it does today. Even though Islam is the only major religion to emerge after Christianity, and is the second largest religion in the world (and growing rapidly), and has been in conflict with Christianity for centuries, it took the tragedy of that day to bring Islam to the forefront of our minds. In spite of all the attention given to Islam since 9/11, however, it is clear from much of the conversation about Islam, both outside and, sadly, inside the church, that we lack a basic understanding of Islam and the challenges it presents. In addition to our poverty of knowing even the basic history, theology, and practices of Islam, it seems that much of our talk about Islam is polarized in two main directions. On the one hand, Islam is viewed solely through the lens of a politically active segment of the religion and, thus, rightly viewed as a threat to the West and its democratic way of life. On the other hand, we are repeatedly told by those who tout the ideology of religious pluralism that Islam is basically similar to Christianity in its overall outlook and message—with the conclusion that Christians should be more concerned about understanding and dialoguing with Muslims than evangelizing them.

How, then, should we, as Christians, view Islam? One of the main goals of this edition of the journal is to help the church to begin thinking about Islam biblically, theologically, and apologetically. Obviously there is much more to be said. Islam is a complex and diverse religion with a long history and tradition. Thus it is

impossible, in the confines of this edition, to say all that needs to be said. However, we must begin somewhere. Islam, as a major world religion, is far too important to ignore. From the perspective of Scripture, Muslims require not only our understanding and dialogue but our fervent prayers and gospel witness. Although the religious pluralists of our day hold out the false hope that all religions are basically the same and on the same religious pilgrimage to the celestial city, Scripture is clear: outside of explicit faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ, there is no salvation in this life or in the age to come. It is for this reason alone that it is imperative for the church not only to understand Islam in its history and theology, but also to take the gospel to Muslims. With this in mind, we devote this edition of the journal to the subject of Islam.

Chad Brand begins our discussion with an introductory article about Islam. What many of us lack is a basic overview of the history and theology of Islam, and this is precisely what Brand provides. Amar Djaballah, raised within Islam and later converted to Christ, is now a professor of Christian theology. In his contribution, he helps us wrestle with the most important theological difference between Islam and Christianity, namely the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. No matter how much we attempt to understand each other, Islam and Christianity are fundamentally at odds over the identity of Jesus. For Islam, Jesus is nothing more than a great prophet who eventually is eclipsed by an even greater one—Muhammed. For Christians, Jesus is nothing less than God's Son from all eternity, who in time became incarnate,

died on a cross, and was raised for our justification. Djaballah helps us think through Islam's misunderstanding of Jesus and, in so doing, sketches out a preliminary apologetic to Islam on this central point.

The articles by Emir and Ergun Caner and James Chancellor wrestle with the important subject of violence within Islam—a subject at the center of much of the discussion today. The Caners, also raised as Muslims before converting to Christ, reflect on the theme of “holy war” in Islam. They argue that within Islam there is a strong emphasis and tradition of violence that helps explain some of the practices both in the past and present. Chancellor wrestles with the same issues and provides a nuanced treatment that helps explain why not all Islam is given to violence but also why there is a built-in tendency towards violence within Muslim theology and practice.

Norman Geisler, in a more apologetic vein, compares and contrasts Jesus with Muhammed, concluding that it is only in the Jesus of the Bible that we may find our hope and salvation. George Martin, a former missionary who has interacted with Muslims for years, wrestles with the growing phenomena of dreams within Islam. Around the world there are many reports of Muslims having dreams of Jesus Christ that have later led some to seek salvation through hearing the gospel from believers. What should we think of these phenomena? What missiological implications are there for us, if any? Martin provides some helpful biblical, theological, and missiological reflections on this very important subject. Finally, rounding out our articles is the contribution by Richard Patterson who provides a biblical theology of darkness. Scripture has much to say about “darkness” and even places false re-

ligions into this category, which would include Islam—something that reminds us of our responsibility to take the light of the gospel to the nations. In addition to these articles, our Forum contributors provide some excellent and helpful reflections on specific aspects of Islam that are crucial for us to grasp if we are going to be effective witnesses for Christ to Muslims.

As you read the various contributions, it is my prayer that we will not only better understand this world religion, but also that it will be our heart's desire to take the gospel to Muslims, both in this country and around the world. The urgency of the task could not be greater.