

## Mecca Found and Abandoned

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My college roommate was my best friend from high school. He and I arrived at college with barely any supplies for school, two cases of beer, and ready for the college party life. My best semester in college was my first semester, which was a minor miracle since a good bit of the time I was drinking.

But by the second semester of my freshman year, dissatisfaction rooted itself in my heart. Life was empty. The routine bored me, and I yearned for more, though I didn't know what.

Having started reading '60s radicals in high school, I continued to read everything available about African and African-American history and culture. I devoured the stuff, angry that my high school education so dismissively skipped over this part of my identity and history. Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Martin R. Delaney became heroes. I wanted very much to be a Garvey or Malcolm to my own generation.

I committed myself to the Afro-centric ideal and spent those formative college years attempting to see the world from the distinct vantage point of African people, to be African-centered. Names like Molefi Asante, John S. Mbiti, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, Ivan Van Sertima, Na'im Akbar, and Wade Nobles dotted my bookshelves and shaped my thinking about African peoples and the world. As the president of a student group called the Society of African-American Culture, I had the opportunity to host many of these men and others at campus events. Through these authors and others, I tried my best to identify a "return address" and to chart a return route to an ancestral history lost to me. I had mail to deliver and hoped they had been saving family letters and heirlooms for me.

One day, several striking men appeared at a campus lecture. They were clean-shaven, well-dressed, upright. They spoke of the African-American community and the need for black men to be *men*—to clean up, to lead and care for their families, and to live devout spiritual lives.

They enthralled me. I'd never seen black men like these—confident, focused, and somehow able to channel their anger into a cause. I discovered they were Muslims, members of the Nation

of Islam, which I had read so much about as I studied Malcolm X and the history of the Civil Rights Movement. I wanted to be like them; I wanted to be manly. I wanted to fill that hole left by my own father's absence.

I ended up befriending a couple of these men, learning from them what I could. To their disappointment, I learned enough to know that the Nation of Islam was a cult and not true Islam. For the rest of my freshman year I learned as much as I could about Islam from reading and from friends.

My sophomore year in college a classmate returned from summer vacation dressed in traditional Muslim garb. While spending time with an uncle in New Jersey, he converted to a more orthodox brand of Islam. He asked us to call him Fahim, his new Muslim name, and he disavowed the rowdy life we had all lived during our freshman year.

Studying with Fahim gave me enough understanding and courage to convert to Islam. We reflected together on the pillars of Islam, prayer, and the Qur'an. For me Islam was the answer to the discipline, the brotherhood, and the longing for adult male leadership that had eluded me since age fourteen. Its promise of a simply-understood God, of a philosophy and discipline that provided for all of life's needs, and of a universal religion for all men made sense to me.

For months I met with Fahim and others studying the claims of Islam. I believed what we might call the meta-narrative of Islam. Islam maintained that it was the final and seal of all religions, that a certain progression from Judaism to Christianity to Islam could be observed in history. Accordingly, the Prophet Muhammad was the final and seal of all the prophets, bringing the most perfect revelation of all, the Qur'an. I believed the "simpler" revelation of Islam, that there is but one God, Allah, Muhammad his messenger, and Jesus merely a prophet. Islam removed the mystery of the Trinity and the wonder of a sinless God-man who died for the sins of the world. Its initial attraction was the combination of its claims to simplicity and logic and its offer of a discipline for all of life.

The night I converted to Islam was an emotional one. I sat across the dorm room bed from the young woman who would eventually become my wife. I told her with a rush of joy and resolve that I had decided to become a Muslim. She had seen it coming, but to my surprise and hers she wept in grief at the news. That night, despite her tears, I recited the Shahaddah: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.” I was Muslim.

Zealous for Islam, I spoke of it whenever and wherever I could. I introduced several fellow students to the teachings of the Qur’an and helped them to enter the faith as well. Five times a day I prayed facing Mecca. I rose early to study the Qur’an and other Islamic literature. I fasted during Ramadan, served the community, and lived a devout and faithful Muslim life to the best of my ability.

After about a year, using a book of African names, I settled on a new name: Thabiti Montsho Anyabwile. The name captured what I hoped to become. “Thabiti” is a Swahili name that comes from the Arabic root word “thabit,” meaning “upright, stern.” In the Swahili context it loosely translates “true man.” A lifelong need now bloomed into an ambition. “Montsho” means “black” and “Anyabwile” means “God has set me free.” Life was ordered, purposeful . . . and fueled by a growing anger, this time at overly patriotic (that is, patriotic at all) white Americans, and Christians who hid the truth of Allah.

I opposed the cross of Jesus Christ with all my might. I regarded the crucifixion a big myth, a hoax, a lie perpetrated against weaker-minded, less-informed, sentimental people. I rejected the Bible as a corrupted book, and insisted that Jesus was only a prophet—and a black-skinned Muslim one at that. Whenever Christian students passed out tracts or street preachers came near campus, I heckled and harassed them. I desired to overthrow the faith of anyone calling themselves “Christians.” I had found the truth in Islam and purposed that everyone else should discover it as well.

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### Babylon . . . Again

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This was my life for the remainder of undergraduate school and a year or so after graduation. But gradually, almost impercep-

tibly at first, I noticed that I was growing more and more hollow. Cold, really. The zeal once fueled by anger began to wane. Once adjusted to all the rituals and outward observances of Islam, I grew more aware of my interior life.

Awareness of the emptiness of my own heart grew crystal clear for me after a water cooler conversation with co-workers about people we admired and respected. Folks were listing the usual suspects: mothers, fathers, great leaders, and so on. But surprisingly, one co-worker said with all seriousness, “I can’t think of a more righteous person than Thabiti.” I dismissed her statement with some light response of my own. But she countered, “I’m dead serious. Of all the men I know, you are easily the most righteous. You don’t curse. You don’t drink. You treat your wife well.” And on she went.

I was taken aback, stunned really.

While I didn’t curse or drink anymore, and I tried to treat my wife Kristie well, my co-worker’s conclusion seemed ridiculous to me. What she observed was outward behavior; what she couldn’t see was my heart. But I could, and the thing was as brittle and empty as it could be. The label “righteous” fell into all of that deep emptiness, rattling occasionally as it plummeted and banged against the hull of my heart. One thing I knew: I was not righteous, not in any essential sense.

And increasingly, I grew aware that I could not be righteous. I made prayer faithfully—even developed a dark patch on my forehead from bowing onto my prayer carpet. I read the Qur’an actively. I did all I could, but no righteousness, no essential change resulted. My anger, lusts, hatred, and evil thoughts were all still with me.

During Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting and prayer, I rose from bed well before sunrise and morning prayer to read the Qur’an, studying it for solutions for my troubled conscience and heart. As I poured over the pages, however, all I found were contradictions and half truths. The Qur’an taught that Jesus was virgin born (Surah 3:45–48; 19:20ff) and that he was helped by the Holy Spirit (Surah 2:87, 253). The Qur’an and the Hadith taught that Jesus was faultless. And some eleven times the Qur’an referred to Jesus as “the Messiah.”

How could Jesus be virgin born, helped by the Holy Spirit, faultless, the Messiah, and not be the Son of God, a member of the Trinity, and the Savior that the Old Testament prophets looked for? Every Muslim believes that Jesus is a prophet, and that a prophet speaks the very words of God, and that the Torah, Psalms of David, and the Gospels were revelations from Allah. How could I consistently hold that view and reject Jesus' teachings about himself and the way to eternal life?

I couldn't. But rather than bend the knee in worship to Jesus, I threw up my hands and renounced all religion. On my best days, I was an agnostic; on my worst days, I toyed with atheism. I was empty, confused, arrogant, and lost . . . again.

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### False Hope

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I lived a lost, God-rejecting, self-seeking life for about a year. Not surprisingly, my marriage grew empty as well, and the difficulties started to appear overwhelming.

Then, my wife and I learned that we were pregnant with our first child. Our families were ecstatic. We began to feel a sense of hope and anticipation, daydreaming about a white house with a picket fence and the gentle coos of a new child. We began to build our lives on this dream.

Three months into the pregnancy, we visited the doctor's office for a regular visit. It was to be the first visit where we heard the baby's heartbeat. Our excitement made it nearly impossible to sit patiently in the waiting room. We flitted through magazines, squeezed one another's hand, and chatted incessantly about the details of baby's arrival.

Finally, we entered the examination room, where Kristie promptly readied herself for the exam. The doctor entered, mostly ignoring me, and began her work. After a few minutes, making several different attempts to find the baby's heartbeat, she spoke in the most lifeless, spiritless, barren human voice I've ever heard. "I'm sorry. There's no heartbeat. The baby is dead."

My wife wept inconsolably. I stood frozen. My feet grew roots and planted me in the floor. My brittle heart cracked, and in

flooded a message that seemed to fill my entire head. I did not expect or understand it. I “heard” simply, “Son, come home.”

### Coming Home to Calvary

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Following the miscarriage, my wife and I tried to keep moving on with life. She returned to teaching after a week or so, but I mostly sat around the house depressed. For weeks, that message rang in my head, “Son, come home.”

It was an odd, hazy time. Numbness and rawness took turns at mastering my thoughts and feelings.

Yet, on several occasions I found myself in traffic behind a car with “John 1:12” printed on the license plate. I recognized it was from the Bible, but I didn’t know the verse. I tried to put it out of my head.

One Tuesday morning, two hours late for work but casually flipping through television channels, I landed on the weekly broadcast of a church service. I couldn’t explain why I stopped to listen, but I did. Strangely, the words had life. They beckoned me. It wasn’t even a particularly evangelistic sermon. The preacher simply expounded on Paul’s words to Timothy: “Study to show yourself approved.” But those words gripped me.

For a couple of months, I taped the show and watched it with my wife. We learned that the pastor’s church was located in the Washington, D.C. area, where my wife’s sister lived. We decided to visit her sister and the church.

That Sunday morning, we were among the first to enter the church. We sat directly in front of the pulpit about five rows back. It seemed that half of the church’s twenty-two thousand members packed out this first service. But God intended every word spoken that morning from Exodus 32 especially for me. The pastor titled the sermon, “What Does It Take to Make You Angry?” Tailor-made, it was a careful and convicting look at sin and idolatry and the consequences of sin. It was a challenge to develop a righteous, godly indignation toward sin, to hate sin and to turn to God.

Every sin, every act of idolatry, every wicked attitude mentioned that morning described me. The preacher expounded the

Law, and I saw my need for a Savior, someone to rescue me from the wrath of God against sin. I sat gripped as the holiness and justice of God were unfolded from Scripture. I grew strangely remorseful and alert, awakened really, as the pastor applied the doctrine of sin to his hearers. I was convicted, guilty before this holy God who judges all unrighteousness.

Then, with plain yet beautiful speech, the preacher exalted Jesus for us to see. Here was the Lamb of God for us to behold! He made it clear that Jesus was the Son of God sent by the Father to die as a substitute for all who would turn from their sins, renouncing them, and turn toward God through faith in Jesus. Here was the Sacrifice anticipated in the Old Testament and executed in the New. Here in Jesus was redemption. The sinless Son of God had indeed come into the world to save everyone who believes—even a former Muslim who was an avowed and determined enemy of the cross!

For the first time, I longed to know God. I longed to know Jesus. I longed to be saved from the misery of sin and the life controlled by it.

“Repent and believe for the forgiveness of your sins” came the invitation. In God’s kindness, my wife and I were given the gift of repentance and faith, turning from our sins and to Jesus in faith on that day. In God’s mercy, the stranglehold of years of anger and hatred were broken literally overnight. The gospel triumphed where no other power had or could.

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### The Doctrines of Grace

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My wife and I returned to North Carolina full of wonder and joy. We were changed. The world sparkled with a newness and freshness we didn’t know was available. Everything was lovely.

As undergraduate students, we had owned and operated a bookstore specializing in African and African-American titles. We loved books. And so our instinct told us to visit a Christian bookstore and find something good to read. That Monday we visited a local bookstore and browsed the shelves. Being something of a history buff, and feeling the embarrassment of having believed

what I came to regard as a complete falsehood, I wandered back to the couple of shelves on theology and church history.

Two titles screamed at me from the shelves: *Knowing God* and *Great Doctrines of the Bible*. I didn't know J. I. Packer or D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones from Adam, but I left the store with these volumes happily tucked under my arm. I devoured the books, imbibing the great truths of Reformed Christianity unawares.

I giggle to myself when I recall my attitude and margin notes reading these books. When I hit comments on predestination, for example, I'd write, "Who is this guy? The rest of this book is basically pretty good, but this predestination stuff is crazy." I had no categories for Reformed thought, and so I reflexively defended what I had heard from so many pulpits and televangelists. Surely they could not all be incorrect; we choose God, right?

Nevertheless, Lloyd-Jones and Packer became favorite authors. I read some of their other books, all the while acquiring more understanding of Scripture. Two conversations provided the spark for connecting the dots of my theological commitments.

About three years into my new life with Christ, I asked a church leader what he thought about predestination. He was a long-time Christian worker with a large parachurch organization. I respected his opinion theologically. He sort of laughed and said, "Doctor (he called everybody "Doctor") . . . that's that Reformed theology stuff. How God's sovereignty fits with man's freedom and stuff. Man, I don't mess around in that deep stuff." With that, I was determined to play in what he called the deeper end of the theological pool.

A little while later, a dear childhood friend and I began to study Scripture together. He was an older Christian with Prosperity Gospel and charismatic commitments. Eventually, he raised questions about eternal security. He took the position that a born-again man could "lose his salvation." That made little sense to me. We corresponded by e-mail several times a week and invited other friends into the discussion. I decided I had better solve this in my own mind once and for all.

Back to the bookstore I went. I decided to read the best things I could find from both positions. The Lord lead me to Norman

Geisler's *Chosen but Free*, R. C. Sproul's *Willing to Believe* and *What Is Reformed Theology?*<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, and A. W. Pink's *The Sovereignty of God*. I read *Chosen but Free* and *What Is Reformed Theology?* By the time I finished Sproul's books and *The Sovereignty of God*, I was a convinced advocate of Reformed theology. That is to say, I was convinced that Reformed theology was a nickname for biblical theology.

Sproul's *What Is Reformed Theology?* provided the skeletal outline for a more complete understanding of the "five *solas*" and the acrostic "TULIP." Pink's *The Sovereignty of God* provided the flesh for a big understanding of the nature and work of God. After finishing these works, I was on my knees in awe of the Lord Almighty, Creator and Ruler of all things.

Now the massive glory and awesomeness of God emerged for me as I read the Bible. That God was sovereign in all things meant he was completely trustworthy in all things. That he was sovereign in electing me unto salvation meant that his love was free and my salvation secure. Election and predestination became the grounds for my confidence in God's rescue of me from sin and wrath and preservation for eternity. Christ's death accomplished the Father's purposes for me; he made atonement for my sins and made my redemption certain, not possible.

With the Scripture unveiled and God standing supreme over all things, I wondered how I could ever have believed otherwise. Surely, that angry young man would not have chosen the things of God by his own desires. That angry Muslim opposed to the cross would not have come to Christ by his own devotion and zeal. The fledgling agnostic-atheist could not reason his way to the Lord. My redemption from start to finish was and is all of God—by his grace alone, through the gift of faith alone, in the wonderful Savior Son of God, Jesus Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. And I am grateful, deeply grateful.