Ministering to Muslims

Part 1 of 2: Muslim Europe: Opportunities for Evangelism
with Darrell L. Bock and Dwight Ekholm
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Darrell Bock: Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues related to God and culture. Our topic today is "Ministry in Europe," and particularly, we'll be talking about Islam and some of the ministry that takes place from Europe into the Middle East and in Islamic countries. And my guest today is Dwight Ekholm, who has been a part of CRU. Is that right?

Dwight Ekholm: Entrust.

Darrell Bock: Entrust, okay. But you were with Crusade –

Dwight Ekholm: We were with Crusade up until '89.

Darrell Bock: Okay, all right. So see, I'm going to walk through all this. So let's start there. What do you do with Entrust?

Dwight Ekholm: Okay. We've been living – actually, I've been living in Europe since 1974. Graduated Seminary here at Dallas in '73, moved over to Vienna to work behind the Iron Curtain, and then eventually it came down. And so for the last 13 years, I've been living in Athens, Greece, and I'm primarily involved in leadership training among former Muslims from the Middle East.

There are a lot of refugees who've come through Athens. Greece is kind of a major landing point for people coming from the Middle East, from North Africa, trying to get into Western Europe. And I've been involved in Bible teaching, discipleship, and working with these young believers, and leading like an outreach breakfast to diplomats.

So we've had ambassadors and different diplomats from quite a number of countries involved in that. And then I teach once a year at the Greek Bible College, and started traveling some into the Middle East as well.

Darrell Bock: We visited when I was on sabbatical in Germany, and I came to Athens and got to attend one of those Bible studies and very, very effective ministry, and it's a pleasure to have you with us. Well let's just dive right in. You've talked about your ministry some in Greece. You've talked about the Bible studies and the ministry to the diplomats. How exactly does that work?
Okay. I'll back up a little bit historically. When we first moved to Athens, I got a call from a friend who was working at a refugee center, and he said they've got quite a number of new believers from one particular country in the Middle East. And he knew that I was a Bible teacher, knew I'd gone to Dallas Seminary, and he asked if I'd be willing to come down and teach these guys. So I went down to a place called ARC, the Athens Refugee Center, and started meeting with a group of six guys who were all fairly new believers, and taught them some novel stuff like observation, interpretation, application.

Some basic Bible study.

You know, basic things that I learned from Howard Hendricks and Harold Hoehner back at Dallas, and you know, had to make some cultural adaptations and that sort of thing, but just started studying the Bible with these guys. And then we started working through Galatians and the Gospel of John, different books of the Bible. By the time we'd finished the first course, five of the six guys had gone on to other places.

So I was down to one guy named Nadir and then we had to start all over again. So it's a little bit like trying to do something on a revolving door. People are coming and going.

Now were these guys – had they come to Christianity out of Islam?

Yeah, yeah. They had all been raised as Muslims. Some of them had met the Lord in Istanbul, some in Athens.

There's kind of refugee highway going from the Middle East through Turkey. An awful lot of refugees will get as far as Turkey, and then they'll pay a smuggler to take them across either up in Northern Greece, up across the border from Turkey into Greece; or smugglers will put them on a boat and then send them to one of the Greek Islands and kind of hop their way across – get to Greece, pay a bribe to some official at the port to let these guys off, and then they usually end up in Athens.
And there is a whole network of refugee ministry centers in Athens run by a number of different organizations, and they're providing some food, some temporary shelter, clothing, and that sort of thing; but they're involved in evangelistic outreach. So like at a place like the ARC, the Athens Refugee Center, they will have feedings several times a week, and they've got big televisions up on the wall showing the Jesus film or something of that nature. They'll have discussion groups. They offer English classes, because every refugee in the world wants to learn English, because they all want to go to California or to Vancouver, Canada. So, you know, that's a great calling card to offer English classes. And they have groups for women and children.

And basically my niche in all of this for the last dozen years has just been Bible teaching and trying to mentor some leaders. Like there have been classes down at the ARC where we've worked through different books of the Bible. We've offered a thing called the Athens Intensive Ministry School a number of years ago. It was a six-month intensive class for a group of guys that showed real ministry potential. And, you know, we've partnered with probably three or four of these different refugee organizations over the years.

But I just – basically what I am is a blue collar Bible teacher, you know. I teach these guys the Scriptures, try to teach them how to teach others. And, you know, once we really get rolling with these guys, then they go on to somewhere else.

**Darrell Bock:** So they're in Athens kind of in transit oftentimes, and they could end up anywhere basically in Europe?

**Dwight Ekholm:** Yeah, anywhere in the world. I say that Athens is sort of like a bus station or a train station, where there's all these people waiting to leave, and they're trying to get to Germany, or Norway, or Switzerland, or England, or to the US or Canada; and at any moment, they might just be gone.

**Darrell Bock:** You know, the refugee element of this is interesting, because the situation that I'm familiar with in Germany is that the German government really invited many people from the Middle East, particularly Turkey, to come in and take the jobs that many Germans didn't want to take. And so they enter in legally, and now they have a significant minority, mainly Turkish population. I think France has got a similar situation.

And so to hear the smuggling aspect of it is kind of a new twist for me, because most of my contact has been through legal means, and through really invitation to come into Europe.
Dwight Ekholm: Yeah, yeah. We lived in Germany for ten years, so I'm familiar with that, that there was a lot of Turkish. Even the word they use in German is Gastarbeiter.

Darrell Bock: That's right.

Dwight Ekholm: So they are guest workers. So they came as guests of the German government and were paid a fair wage, and provided with medical care and all this sort of thing. And I mean I've seen statistics. I mean there is a large population of Turkish workers that have stayed in Germany, you know. They've learned German, they're raising their kids there.

But Athens is much more of a transient situation. And the economy is so bad in Greece that people who had jobs as foreigners have lost their jobs. And it's just kind of this downward spiral of hopelessness. So they're all trying to get out of there.

Darrell Bock: They're at the bottom of the well, so to speak, and things in Greece are tough.

You know, part of the reason we do these broadcasts on issues related to Europe and Islam and that kind of thing is because we want people to think globally about what's going on with Christianity and the issues that are associated with culture in general and Christianity in particular. I really have two ways I can go right now in terms of what I'm going to ask you; but I think I'm going to deal with kind of the general secular questions first, and then turn to ministry, because I do want to come back and talk about what ministry to people who come out of an Islamic background is like.

But first, let's talk about the issues that Europe feels as a result of this influx of Islamic presence in a variety of countries. And I'll frame it this way. I remember from my sabbaticals in Germany numerous times having conversations with people in which I said in effect, you know, Turkey's tried to get into the European Union. And, you know, they set up the rules for Turkey to do it; and Turkey, the best part I can tell, met those rules, and it looked like everything was going fairly smoothly.
But then – and I don't know if this was just 9/11 or what – but the nervousness that many people in Europe feel about allowing Turkey in, although from a secular structural basis, there really is no reason to exclude Turkey. On the other hand, from a practical standpoint, if you let Turkey in with all the open-border situations that you have, that produces a problem. So explain kind of how Europeans view that particular potential.

I think there is kind of a general fear that, like you said, if Turkey gets into the EU, then like they do have open borders, for example, with Iran, and I think several of the other countries that border Turkey. And I think there is that fear of just, you know, we've got more refugees in Western Europe than we can handle; and if we take Turkey in, it's just going to, you know, exponentially increase the problem.

I don't sense that the average German is so worried about the religious part, but I think they're more concerned maybe about, you know, just the economic effect of more and more and more people coming in, looking for work and then having a right to the social system and that sort of thing. I mean, you know, there's a certain amount of fear of Muslim influence. But, you know, generally speaking, I think most of Western Europe, it's so secularized that it's sort of like it doesn't matter what your religion is.

Religion doesn't have any impact anyway.

Sure, yeah. So unless you want to come in and start killing people, I don't think they're overly worried about it.

But is there nervousness about the security aspects of what open borders would mean?

Oh, yeah, yeah. I think so. And I mean, you know, I think the open borders in the EU have just made it a lot easier for all kinds of people to come and go. I mean, it makes it easier for us as we travel.

Certainly does. I remember going from Germany to France, or Germany in whatever direction. You had to stop at every border crossing, et cetera; and now you just go and it's like going from one state to another in the United States. You don't even think about it.
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*Dwight Ekholm:* Right, yeah. You fly in and out, and you don't have to show your passport. You drive across – I mean when I was doing my doctorate in Basel, I was living in Germany; and every time we passed, you know, we would have to show our passport, and they wanted to know what we had in our suitcase. But for a while when we lived in Germany in the '80s, we had to have a visa to go across over into France.

*Dwight Ekholm:* Yeah, I definitely remember those days. I remember one particular conversation I had with a German theologian. We were just spending a couple of days together talking about theology, and we go onto this topic; and I had had the view that Turkey just had every right in the world to think about coming into the EU. They had met the standards and they had done what the Union had asked. And, you know, there wasn't a religious entrance requirement of any kind, so it seemed like they would get in without blinking an eye.

And he, as a German, just walked through all the social, economic, and security issues that caused many people to have pause, so that even though they met these standards – and I think there may have been a time when they offered these standards that they questioned whether or not they would ever be met. And so now, there were all these roadblocks coming into the conversation, and I saw his nervousness and it struck me.

It's one of those conversations that you have with someone who lives there where you go, "Oh, man, I haven't even thought about, you know, three-quarters of what they're thinking about and what concerns them, because I'm not that immersed in the culture."

*Dwight Ekholm:* Sure, yeah.

*Darrell Bock:* Well let's transition and let's talk about ministry. I understand also that not only have you ministered in the context of refugees coming to Athens, but you've also done some ministry in the Middle East. Is that correct?

*Dwight Ekholm:* Yeah. And the connection there is, there was a young believer from the Middle East who met the Lord in Athens a number of years ago, and I got involved in teaching and mentoring him; and, you know, basically just an incredibly gifted young evangelist. I mean in the space of about a year and a half in Athens, he led over 100 Muslims to Christ.
Darrell Bock:  Oh, wow.

Dwight Ekholm: And, you know, was leading a ministry in Athens. And eventually was able to be invited officially to Canada. Had some Canadian people who'd been involved in him coming to Christ, and they sponsored him and invited him to come to Canada. So he moved to Canada several years ago, got Canadian citizenship, and his whole goal was not to stay in Canada and watch hockey games. His goal was to get a passport so that he could travel in the Middle East. So now two years ago, he and his wife moved back to the Middle East, they're in a country not all that far from Greece, and they're settled there doing ministry to their countrymen and in the country where they're living. So I've gone and spent some time with them. And they have a strategy of trying to train leaders for these house churches that exist all over the Middle East. I mean there is a real revival going on in certain parts of the Middle East. And you've got a lot of young believers who are meeting together, their leaders have practically no training.

So this young guy that we call Matthew, which is sort of his code name, has been involved in writing materials in his language, translating other materials. And he and his wife coordinate some training sessions. About every two or three months, they'll do a two-week session, and they're bringing in different teachers. We have a colleague who taught Old Testament up at Trinity. We have a colleague who is a pastor of an international church in Budapest. And these guys will go there for a couple of weeks at a time and do some training classes. I mean his whole vision is ultimately as doors open up eventually, would be to have some kind of more of a organized training program in his home country. But right now, he's not able to do that. But people can somewhat travel. So, to me, what we're doing there feels a lot like what we used to do behind the Iron Curtain, you know. In one sense you have to be sort of careful. It's hard to know whom to trust. And there are a lot of people doing things that we really don't know exactly who's who and what they're doing. But, you know, there is a lot going on in that part of the world.

Darrell Bock: I'm curious, who's the Old Testament guy who was at Trinity?

Dwight Ekholm: His name is Frans – and let's see, it's a Dutch name. Give me a minute and I'll think.
You know, it's a small world, because I actually taught two weeks in Jordan, and we overlapped. And so we actually were roommates in the apartment together because we were teaching at Jordan.

Frans den Exter Blokland. It'll take me a minute to get his name.

There you go, yeah. We actually taught in Jordan at the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary at the same time. How about that; that's a new one. Anyway, so he's got this ministry where he's ministering to the house churches, and you've gone in – is it to help some of the time?

Yeah, yeah. I was there earlier this year and had a chance to speak at one of these home gatherings, and you know, just a delightful group. And he was able to translate it for me. Obviously, I don't speak that language. But it was exciting to see these groups – and there are groups like this all over the country.

Now when they meet in these house churches, about how large a group are we talking about?

Well, this group was, I would say, around 40 people. So it was a pretty good sized group. And there was a young man there that's leading the group who has about two or three jobs, you know. He basically pastors this church, and then he's a taxi driver at night and a house painter by day.

And a fascinating guy. He had been raised Muslim; and after he became a follower of Jesus, his brothers-in-law came up and basically beat him up, threw him out the window, and took his wife and children away, you know, took them back home. So he's lost his whole family because of the commitment he's made.

Now, you said that there's a little bit of a revival going on among Muslims. Do you have a sense of what draws them to the Gospel?
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Dwight Ekholm: Well, you know, it's obviously going to vary in different situations. But let's say like in Athens in particular, what I've heard over and over again is, “We arrived here, we didn't have anything, we had nowhere to go, and you know, none of my countrymen came out and said, ‘Here, come and stay with us,’ or, ‘We're going to feed you,’ and do that. But it was the Jesus people that said, ‘Come, we've got hot soup or we've got tea and clothes for your kids.’” And basically just to see the love of Jesus in some kind of tangible way is usually what attracts people initially.

Now, you know, in certain contexts, I suppose people are going to be a little leery of this. But I am hearing of an awful lot of people in the Middle East who are having visions where they have this vision of Jesus.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I've heard several similar stories.

Dwight Ekholm: I was talking with a couple of these church leaders and they were telling me about a man that they knew who had gone on the Hajj, and while he was there, he had a vision of Jesus and he came back as a follower of Jesus. And I mean there's quite a number of these stories.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, I've heard many, many stories like this. I've even heard some that are much simpler. We hope in one of our discussions of Islam to have a person who ministers in Turkey who I know. And his story is – what got him curious about the Gospel was Ben-Hur because he saw the crucifixion scene, and in Islam, Jesus doesn't end up really being crucified. So they don't know what to do with his death, and much less his resurrection; and so it got him curious. And so he started to ask anyone who came over from America, or a European. He would ask them a theological question about the crucifixion, and he said most of the people that he asked didn't know what to tell him. And then finally he met a couple who just gave him their Bible; and he said he went home and read it and that's how he came to the Lord. So Ben-Hur was the starting point. So it's amazing what can draw.
But I think it's interesting – I don't want to let this point pass – that's it's service ministry, if I can say it that way, that draws people. Because even in the life of Jesus, you see this juxtaposition between word and deed. Now sometimes we get thrown off I think because Jesus does ministry with miracles and that kind of thing. But the whole point of the combination of word and deed was that the message had a credibility behind it in terms of the way people were treating other people that opens up the door for taking the message more seriously. And you're seeing that in the Islamic world.

_Dwight Ekholm:_ Yeah, yeah, for sure. Yeah, yeah.

_Darrell Bock:_ Now, when you minister to people who come out of Islamic background, what are some of the issues that you face either as they're coming to becoming open to the Christian faith; or on the other end, once they've become believers and they're just starting out?

_Dwight Ekholm:_ Mmm, those are some very good questions. I'm almost drawing a blank because there's a lot of stuff. Let me back up and just think about that just a minute. Just the other day, just before I left Athens, I was doing a Bible study down at a fairly new group that's been started by a young guy that we've been mentoring for years. And he's a very intelligent young man who's about 18 years old; his English is amazing. And we talked afterwards, and he was saying that he couldn't understand why the Bible called people sheep, you know, why we like sheep have gone astray. And somehow that was offensive to him. But, you know, obviously, the whole idea of trinity is a real stumbling block to them, and the idea that Jesus could be the Son of God – you know, I think typically a Muslim is thinking, "Well, you know, did somehow God have a relationship with Mary, and that there's some kind of a physical birth here that God was the physical father," and just, you know, wrestling with the whole idea of Trinity.
Darrell Bock: Because the conception of God is very different in Islam, isn't it? I mean it's more a distant God, a God who is extremely sovereign, a God who doesn't enter into a relationship; you're just simply to respond to him. So the idea of a God who makes a covenant, and a God who seeks relationship with human beings in a relational level, that really is just a completely world view shift in many ways, isn't it?

Dwight Ekholm: Yep. And from a lot of the men that I've talked with, it was sort of just spirit of fear, you know. "I need to be afraid of God and what he's going to do to me," and the idea of God being a God of love and of grace is really revolutionary.

I would say that one of the major issues that I've encountered over and over again is, once people become believers, they're still very, very suspicious of other people. They don't know – you know, "What's somebody trying to get from me?" And I've found that a lot of the guys that I've met who are new believers are still – you know, they want to talk behind the back of somebody else or they don't trust each other, and there's a lot of divisions.

And some of these guys – you know, I mean I keep working with them to try to learn to function together. But generally, you know, they want to be friends with me and the other guy wants to be friends with me, but they don't want to be friends together. I mean there's obviously exceptions to that, but there is sort of a general suspicion.

And, you know, I've encountered too that guys who get involved in different ministries are suspicious that maybe somehow, we're using them to raise money in the West or something like that – you know, taking their pictures and putting it on websites to get people to send in money. So it's sort of like, you know, "Why are you doing this?"

Darrell Bock: So all that suspicion gets in the way of being able to build a genuine community in a lot of ways.

Dwight Ekholm: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We've just had to take the time, over time, to just show, you know, "We are committed to you as a brother in Christ and we're not just doing this because this is our job." Basically, the motto that we've had for our ministry over the years is from 1 Thessalonians 2 that I didn't just teach you the Gospel, but we shared our lives with you as well.
And the people that we've gotten to know, they're very, very relational. And they love coming to our apartment to have a meal, they love inviting us to be with them; you know, just to take time to go out for coffee together or meet, you know, very, very relational. And they're very, very loyal.

Darrell Bock: So if you can get them to turn on the trust, then they really make for good community people.

Dwight Ekholm: Yeah; oh, yeah.

Darrell Bock: Interesting. So we've talked about – that's interesting. You know, it's multiple hurdles. You've got the different view of God, in being distant versus being close; you've got the hurdle of the Trinity; you've got issues, I think, related to how the Bible is seen. Have you run into that issue in discussing the Christian faith, how Islam views the Bible?

Dwight Ekholm: Well, they seem to have a respect for the Bible and they have a respect for Jesus; and, you know, I find that when we get in and say, "This is what the Bible says," [they say], "Okay." And, you know, I find, particularly these new believers to be really, really serious about wanting to study the Bible. They don't come in with all kinds of theological preconceptions about what things mean. I mean we just get in there and we start reading, and we're looking, you know, "What does it say?" and try to figure out what does it mean and how do we apply it. And I find them to be really, really good Bible students as they start to understand things in context. Like I've met quite a number of guys who met the Lord and they started coming to different refugee centers, and they were subjected to all this kind of Bible hopscotch, you know, where the guy's up front. You know, he starting out in Galatians, then he jumps over to Ephesians, and then he's ending in Leviticus. And after a while, these guys, their heads are just spinning.

So once I was able to get them into Bible study and just work through, let's say, Philippians, and just work through from beginning to end; and it's, "Oh, Brother Dwight, we've never done this before." And, "Can we have another class tomorrow night?" Just really, really teachable, and sort of like Blue Bell Ice Cream, you know, the more you give them, the more they want. And they really recognize the difference.

Darrell Bock: So do you have a particular book that you start with?
Dwight Ekholm: You know, I would say I've generally started with Galatians, and I've used Philippians a lot. And I've found the one book that people can really relate to in that situation is the book of Ruth, you know. We go into the first chapter and we look at Ruth and her family and all this, and I said, "Now in our context today, what would we call Ruth? She's a refugee."

Darrell Bock: Oh, yeah.

Dwight Ekholm: For economic reasons, they left one situation, you know. They're down here, they've had death in the family. Can you guys relate to this situation? And I worked through the book of Acts one time with a number of these guys, and we get to Chapter 8 and say, "Well who was it that spread the Gospel?"

These were refugees, they were getting kicked out of Jerusalem, you know. They can understand a lot of the Old Testament culture and relate to it probably a lot better than the typical person in the West can because their culture is so much more similar than what ours is.

Darrell Bock: So now that's interesting. Now, is there a particular Gospel that draws?

Dwight Ekholm: You know, we've offered different Gospels, and it does seem that John is one that they really jump on.

Darrell Bock: It's just so different than what they're used to in thinking about how God is.

Dwight Ekholm: Yeah, yeah, I think so. But like particularly with some of the business people and the diplomats, I've taken things like from Mark and Luke in particular and just kind of get ahold of one of the parables or one of the situations. We've got a number of people from Lebanon who are involved in that, and they can somehow really connect with these stories.

And, you know, I would say that the guys from the Middle East do really relate to some kind of a – like in the Gospels where you've got a specific confrontation between Jesus and someone else, you know. They get into that, I would say, more than, say, Romans or whatever. They're just not accustomed to thinking that way.