Getting Ahead of the Spirit? The Techniques of Contemporary Mission Movements

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Abstract

The literature on contemporary mission movements under the umbrella of "Kingdom Movements" makes copious references to the person and work of the Holy Spirit. At first glance, then, movement methodologies appear to follow the Biblical mandate to be "led by the Spirit." However, this article argues that such methodologies, represented here by the CAMEL method of evangelism, for all their zeal for outreach to Muslims are, in effect, getting ahead of the Spirit.

Key Words: CAMEL Method, church planting movements, "God is doing a new thing," "led by the Spirit," Kingdom Movements

Introduction

The last 30 years of mission strategy have seen a veritable explosion of new approaches: insider movements, church planting movements (CPMs), disciple multiplication movements (DMMs), Zúme, New Generations, the Oikos method, and more. Cocanower and Mordomo suggest that all these can be subsumed under the umbrella of "Kingdom Movements" (KMs), which they define as occurring "when followers of Christ are empowered to take ownership of ministry and mission in a way that results in exponential multiplication of disciples and churches" (Cocanower and Mordomo 2020, 1).

In their analysis of KMs, Cocanower and Mordomo note that studies on KM are very much in their infancy. In their wide interaction with the subject, Cocanower and Mordomo describe both strengths and shortcomings. In the latter category, they express concern about potential works-righteousness arising from an emphasis on obedience-based discipleship (in DMMs), underreported attrition in some previously hyped CPMs, and an unwillingness among some KM proponents to take seriously the challenges to their methods raised by other practitioners (Cocanower and Mordomo 2020, 3, 6).

This article, and in keeping with the theme of this journal issue, considers one particular emphasis frequently present in KM activity: the claimed presence of the Holy Spirit in an unprecedented way (Schattner 2013, 96).

This article recognizes that CPM leaders are deeply committed to fulfilling the Great Commission and are willing to take significant risks to see it accomplished. Their zeal, dedication, and single-minded devotion to God's will are admirable. Many of them serve with integrity in difficult situations. However, the exigencies of mission work in challenging contexts can push even the best missionaries toward cutting corners or exaggerating results.

Accordingly, this article probes the question of whether some CPM leaders might have certain blind spots, especially in their appeals to the Holy Spirit when seeking to justify novel, pragmatic approaches to mission. As a case study, this discussion focuses on the development and application of the CAMEL method, designed to reach Muslims for Christ.

What Is CAMEL?

CAMEL is an acronym composed of C (chosen), A (announced by angels), M (miracles), and EL (everlasting life). The program features an evangelistic strategy suggesting that, by utilizing the Qur'anic text of Surah 3:42–55, one can prove that the Muslim Jesus is divine (for more details, see Span 2016, 2019). Kevin Greeson, a missionary of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board (IMB) and who is based in Bangladesh, claims that this method was derived in the late 1990s from observations of former Muslims using Qur'anic passages to lead their Muslim family members to Christ (Greeson 2010, loc. 320–321). David Garrison, well known for his oft-cited works *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Garrison 2004) and *A Wind in the House of Islam* (Garrison 2014), featured this method in his *Church Planting Manual* (Garrison 2004) and also edited multiple CAMEL documents (Garrison 2003a, 2003b, 2009).

CAMEL has gone through several iterations, always with a stress on finding ways and means to introduce Muslims to Christ and on avoiding a polemical or argumentative approach. This irenic posture has much to commend it, and Greeson and Garrison are certainly innovative and bold mission leaders. However, they seem to be proposing for Muslims around the world a method that appeared to have worked in the religiously syncretistic milieu of Bangladesh. Moreover, their zeal for this work may have exceeded their statistical accuracy.

The currently available CAMEL Training Workshop features a 96-page *CAMEL Rider's Journal* and an accompanying DVD (Garrison 2009). Online promotional material <u>states</u>, "This workshop can be completed in six one-hour sessions, taking a Christian from novice to experienced in sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with a Muslim. Born out of the largest modern movement of Muslims to Christ in the world today, the Camel method will teach you how to lovingly share in an intelligent and effective way with Muslims" (WorldChristian 2022).

The *CAMEL Rider's Journal* emphasizes that it is "not endorsing Islam, Muhammad or the Qur'an but rather removing obstacles that might prevent them from seeing Jesus" (Garrison 2009, 14). Its stated purpose is to "help you find a person or peace, a person in whom God's Spirit is already at work, and to share with that person the Good News of Jesus Christ" (Garrison 2009, 87). It provides testimonies from people who felt newly empowered to reach Muslims. Similarly, Greeson quotes a testimony from a "missionary in the Arab world" who declared that, after many years of hard labor and limited fruit, "in just three months of using the CAMEL I have two groups of baptized Muslim background believers that I am meeting with for discipleship" (Greeson 2010, loc. 108–113).

Based largely on the reports of CAMEL's enormous success in Bangladesh (discussed in the next section), the program's developers have had simplified versions of the material translated into multiple languages including Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, English, Farsi, German, Kazak, Russian, and Tamil (Greeson 2009). The *CAMEL Tracks* brochure quotes a participant as saying, "I have read Surah Al-Imran 3:42–55 more than 100 times. Each time, I feel the same joy that I received the first time I discovered the Truth in this passage" (Greeson 2009, 3). One implication of this quoted testimony is that truth about the biblical Jesus can be mediated through the Qur'an.

Despite the existence of Arabic and Farsi translations, I am not aware of any significant attempt to implement CAMEL in the Arab Muslim world. My own interviews in Egypt indicate that Arab Christians are very reluctant to use such a method, because Muslims in their area have a deep knowledge of the history of Islamic interpretation of CAMEL prooftexts such as Surah

3:42–55. That history of interpretation would not permit the claim embodied in CAMEL that the "clay bird" miracle of 3:49 proves the divinity of the Muslim Jesus. Former Muslim Al Fadi has expressed similar reservations about using the Qur'an as a bridge to the gospel in this way, especially as he observes that such methods suggest that the Qur'an "supports Christian doctrines, especially in the areas of Salvation and Christology" (Fadi 2018, 164-165).

The History of CAMEL in Bangladesh

The 2002 IMB report "A Historic Turning to Jesus by Muslims in Jedidistan" describes the conversion in the mid-1980s of a man variously named Sharif, Abdullah, or Shahadat (International Mission Board 2002). This man would rise to temporary fame within the IMB, even making an appearance at the 2004 Southern Baptist Convention. Shahadat became, in a sense, the Bangladeshi poster boy whose stories validated the IMB's embrace of the CAMEL method. His statistical claims were contained in the initial (2003) version of the CAMEL training manual: 250,000 people baptized from 1998 to 2003, including 87,200 in a single year from July 2002 to July 2003; 8,000 jamats (churches); and, 6,000 church planters (Garrison 2003, 5). Many took these figures to be truthful and repeated or sometimes even enlarged them (Garrison 2004; Greeson 2004; Rutz 2006; Simson 2005, 2006; Terry 2004).

In 2005, the IMB sent a second research team to Bangladesh in an attempt to verify even more incredible reports emerging from the movement there. This team, in its report called "Survey of Jedidistan," expressed concern that it was receiving scripted answers, that some facts did not seem to line up, and that certain key persons were unavailable to verify just what was happening in the two reported streams of the movement. The report's executive summary explained that the team

faced difficulties in gauging the depth and breadth of the movement with any degree of certainty. This is due to a perceptible amount of misinformation reported to many of the survey teams. Survey team members proposed a variety of explanations for the misinformation ranging from intentional false reporting to cross-cultural misunderstandings arising from a Western need for assessment in a non-Western context (International Mission Board 2005, 1).

As much as many on the survey team wanted to verify that this was a bona fide movement, and others were willing to see any anomalies as simple misunderstandings, the survey cast some doubt on the veracity of all that had been reported. Garrison dismissed the report as flawed (Garrison 2015). However, a documentary film released later by Bill Nikides, a veteran missionary who had served in Bangladesh for seven years, revealed the extent of the deception. Citing two well-placed witnesses, Nikides described Shahadat's sophisticated plan to hire fictitious staff and tell them what to say at the reporting sessions. Shahadat's fabrication was busted when one of his colleagues revealed the plot, stating, "Last year I lied, I committed sin, but this year by the leading of the Holy Spirit I want to tell the truth" (Nikides 2012).

The 2005 IMB report concluded, "One team was able to conduct on-site follow up visits and discovered that the two strongest testimonies were false reports given by actors who had misrepresented themselves during their interviews." (International Mission Board 2005, 8).

In an attempt to ascertain the reality on the ground in Bangladesh, this author collected statistics from reputable missiologists as well as interviewed a number of both veteran

missionaries and Bangladeshis who have converted from Islam to Christianity. This accumulated information affirms that the mission efforts that received much glowing praise have indeed had some impact—but nowhere near the greatly inflated numbers that appear to have originated with Shahadat. Around 2010, some sources estimated 50,000 ex-Muslims-now-in-Christ (xMnCs) (Morton 2012, 79). However, in 2015 a missionary who had been in Bangladesh for 40 years reported to this author, "To my knowledge, there are not 400 regularly functioning MBB [Muslim-background believer] fellowships in the entire country today—i.e., those meeting on a weekly basis." In the same year, another long-term worker suggested that the total number of xMnCs in Bangladesh was closer to 10,000.

Bangladesh experiences a moderate level of persecution, currently ranking 29th on the Open Doors World Watch List (Open Doors 2022), so we cannot discount the possibility that many Christian believers are meeting underground and not publicly disclosing their conversion. However, it seems clear that the most impressive claims regarding church planting in Bangladesh were based on fabrication.

Is This the Spirit at Work?

Sometimes we trust people who prove not to be trustworthy. In such cases, there is no shame in admitting our mistake in moving on. However, I have observed in KM adherents a tendency to take refuge in what I call "slam-dunk" statements that assert the Spirit's presence in their movement—and in a manner that does not permit refutation.

John Travis, for example, has asserted that "God is doing something new" through insider movements (Travis 2009). Garrison has affirmed, "God is doing something extraordinary in our day" (Garrison 2004, 16). Jerry Trousdale, a proponent of DMMs, has boldly observed, "Over the last 50 years and especially since the turn of the 21st century, the Spirit of God has been birthing a new concept in the earth. Instead of addition, the Spirit of God is calling forth multiplication" (Trousdale and Sunshine 2018, 365).

Missiologist Phil Parshall, in his review of the 2004 CAMEL training manual, stated that the movement of Muslims to Christianity in Bangladesh due to the CAMEL method was "one of the most extraordinary acts of the Holy Spirit among Muslims ever chronicled" (Parshall 2005, 384). One can understand that he, too, may have been initially trusting inflated reports that he could not personally confirm. But in a 2007 endorsement letter, quoted at length in the 2010 version of CAMEL, Parshall continued his affirmation of CAMEL, again appealing to spiritual realities, when he stated, "It would be my heartfelt desire that this controversy over CAMEL not be used by Satan to distract IMB from the new, exciting direction they have taken in Muslim outreach. This is a *kairos* moment in evangelistic opportunity" (Parshall 2007; Greeson 2010, Loc 214-2154).

In effect, all these statements sidestep normal methods of genuine evaluation by making direct appeals to God or the Holy Spirit, implying that if one questions whether this is necessarily the Holy Spirit at work, that skepticism is tantamount to quenching the Holy Spirit. If one doubts whether God is "doing a new thing" or if this is a "kairos" moment, then one is arguing with God.

As a missiologist who is called to "test the spirits" (1 Jn 4:1 KJV), I believe we must ask whether such appeals to "it works" and "this is the finger of God" are actually saying that "my

methods work" and "my finger directing this enterprise is definitely guided by the finger of God."

In the all too familiar practice of "proof-texting," one (consciously or unconsciously) approaches the Bible with a preconceived idea and then shops around in search of biblical data to fit that idea. Those who engage in such interpretive methods are actually placing themselves in front of the Word of God, co-opting select portions of the Bible in support of their agenda. This same dynamic can happen with the Holy Spirit. CAMEL's advocates make copious appeals to the Holy Spirit, and at first glance it might appear that its methodology is carried out in submission to the Holy Spirit. For example, when Kevin Greeson and David Garrison, among CAMEL's strongest proponents, use the Qur'an as an apparently approved source of spiritual revelation, their claims to broad applicability across the widely varying global set of Muslim cultures, their reliance on discredited statistical reports, and their supposedly indisputable assertions of the Holy Spirit's presence raise questions as to whether CAMEL is subtly playing the role that should be reserved uniquely for the Spirit's illuminating, inspiring, convicting, and emboldening power. It is certainly reasonable to expect that the fruit of the Spirit should be present not only in disciple making but also in statistical reporting and in openness to constructive criticism.

In Acts 16, as Paul, Timothy, and Silas embarked on their missionary journey, they presumably had prayed in earnest about their plans and strategized about the best cities to target. Even so, they needed to remain humbly submissive to divine re-direction, lest they doggedly follow their own human-engineered enterprise. In verse 6, they were forbidden from entering the province of Asia; the Greek verb $k\bar{o}l\dot{u}\bar{o}$ carries a strong sense of restraining or preventing. Then, in verse 7, the missionary team attempted to enter Bithynia, but again the Holy Spirit blocked their plans and did not allow them to enter. We do not know how the Spirit communicated these messages, but we know that the missionaries perceived that the Master Strategist was in control and submitted to having their own plans overruled.

Might some of CAMEL's zealous adherents, in their passion to launch major church-planting movements, have unwittingly slipped into leading instead of pliably following the Holy Spirit?

Possible Lessons from the CAMEL Experience

In the field of mission forensics, we investigate what went wrong so as not to repeat our mistakes. Doing so requires the spiritual fruit of meekness and humility, as we must be willing to admit honestly that some things were not what they appeared to be at first. I will close by offering lessons regarding how our mission work can best align with a robust theology of the Holy Spirit.

1. Narratives are often employed to demonstrate the effectiveness of mission movements, and at times to disarm the critical faculties of those who might ask difficult questions. However, narratives can be either positive or negative. Shahadat's narrative, intended to confirm the "effectiveness" of the CAMEL method, turned out to be a fabrication, by all accounts. On the other hand, one of Shahadat's assistants came clean and related a different narrative, even though doing so required repenting of his previous behavior. It appears that the Spirit's role of convicting people of sin (cf. John 16:8) was at work—but apparently in only one of these cases.

- 2. Confident affirmations that God is "doing a new thing" can imply that the person or mission agency in question has inside information on, or at least special insight into, God's designs. I do not wish to discourage eagerness to follow God or hopefulness in what we believe he is communicating to us. But, could such expressions also indicate a subtle form of spiritual pride that stands in direct conflict with the fruit of the Spirit, especially meekness (Gal 5:23)?
- 3. CAMEL seems to pit "doctrine" against simply giving people the Bible and letting them use inductive discovery methods to figure out its meaning. For example, Garrison has stated:

When modern-day practitioners of Church Planting Movements refuse to counsel their converts with words of wisdom or time-honored doctrines, but instead direct them to God's word, they are living out the New Testament model initiated by Jesus and transmitted through the apostles (Garrison 2003, 143-144).

CPMs and KMs have sometimes been rightly criticized for their tendency to downplay the teaching role of theologically trained servants of God in favor of inductive methods. This reductionistic emphasis assumes that initiates to the faith can teach the "whole counsel of God" and effectively discounts the offices of teaching and preaching that the ascended Christ gave to his Church via the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph 4:11).

4. There appears to be an underlying sense that if CAMEL and other CPMs using simplified presentations of the gospel create messes of false conversions, superficial or non-existent repentance, and sub-Christian doctrine, then the Holy Spirit will sort it all out. Georges Houssney, a veteran missionary in the Arabic world and chief translator of the Word of Life Arabic Bible, made these comments concerning the CAMEL "Ruhallah" (Spirit of Allah) tract:

There is no recognition of sin and rebellion against God, no plea for repentance, no call to surrender their lives to Jesus as Lord and give up everything for the sake of winning Christ. The entire tract does not speak of being born again by the Spirit of God, or say that Jesus is the Son of God (Houssney 2010).

We need to take a serious look at the effects of such a methodology on our theology. The CAMEL method's suggestion that the Muslim Jesus—only a created being according to Islamic theologians—can be equated to the divine biblical Jesus due to a so-called miracle recorded in the Qur'an borders on a revival of the Arian heresy. The *CAMEL Tracks* document goes as far as to invite people to become "Pakka Muslims"—which, in the areas where the word "Pakka" is used (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), means calling them to become solid, unadulterated, true-blue, bona fide Muslims! The document states, "I pray that your eyes will be opened and you will understand this Truth and join the Pakka Muslim movement" (Greeson 2009, 3–4). This statement is anything but Christian, whereas the work of the Holy Spirit, in opening the eyes of those blind in sin, always points us to the biblical Christ (cf. John 15:26; Acts 26:18) and calls us to join the global body of Christ where people enjoy the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:14; cf. Span 2019, 287–289).

5. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (cf. John 16:13). This includes truth in reporting statistics. To imply—especially after further information emerged—that the Holy Spirit was the motive power behind the statistical claims regarding CAMEL's work in Bangladesh would constitute lying to, or about, the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). Rather, as multiple witnesses

have attested, many of the statistics furnished by Shahadat and propagated by CAMEL proponents were human fabrications. This finding should remind us not to be too gullible about the so-called moves of the Holy Spirit reported by any movement.

- 6. We must take great precaution not to be guilty of attempting to co-opt the Spirit for our own ends. This was the sin of Simon the magician, who wanted to obtain the power of the Holy Spirit for his own purposes (Acts 8:18–24).
- 7. Being led by the Spirit, walking by the Spirit, and keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 18, 25; cf. Rom 8:14) are all *corporate* commands in the New Testament. If a so-called KM practitioner pays no attention to or belittles other members of the body of Christ who might be asking some thorny questions, that person is disobeying the "one another" corporate commands of the New Testament. More specifically, would KM practitioners from the West be willing to listen to a critique of their methodologies by Indian or Bangladeshi brothers who are weary of being exploited to meet success-driven quotas? After all, there is one, holy, universal and apostolic Church, led by the Spirit of the risen Jesus, and these indigenous believers are part of it.
- 8. In multiple passages in Acts, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit resulted in speaking the Word boldly (*parrēsiázomai* or *parrēsía*).¹ That biblical emphasis is underrepresented in CAMEL, amidst the effort to make the message acceptable to Muslim audiences. When Peter addressed the crowd in Acts 2, they were "cut to the heart" (2:37) or, as Eckhard Schnabel renders it, "stunned, pierced in their conscience" (Schnabel 2016, 161). That kind of bold, heart-piercing speaking is true apostolic preaching—in a form that may be overly deemphasized in CAMEL.
- 9. Could there be an unholy spirit at work in how CAMEL and other movement methodologies become overly celebrated and universalized? In 1 John 2:16, the aging beloved disciple warns his audience against "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life." Could the glowing statistics, commendations, and honors granted to the originators and propagators of these movements be inducing an unhealthy desire for the pleasure of adulation, the "wow" factor, and the right, as commentator I. Howard Marshall put it, to engage in "the braggadocio which exaggerates what it possesses in order to impress other people" (Marshall 1978, 145)? This is perhaps the hardest question of this article, and insofar as it could be interpreted to impugn bad motives or throw a wholesale aspersion on the men, message, and methods of such programs as CAMEL, that is not the point. The point is that, with one of North America's idols being success, even in mission circles—particularly those based or financed in North America—one is constrained to talk, walk, and write as if a particular enterprise is a glowing success. Perhaps it is time instead to soberly ask about what spirit/Spirit is at work, and even to have the idols of a mission organization's cultural base addressed by the Spirit.

Conclusion

Proverbs 18:17 states, "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him." Missionaries and mission agencies must increasingly allow themselves to be examined by the Spirit of Truth and to engage graciously with fellow Christians who also want to advance the Kingdom but may have tough questions about the methods being used to that end.

May the Holy Spirit guide our examinations, engagements, and mission strategizing, all to God's glory.

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¹ See Acts 4:29, 31; 9:27, 28; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26; 28:31.