Turkmania

Table of Contents

Starting out

Chapter 1 Starting out

“1 If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don’t have love, I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but don’t have love, I am nothing. 3 If I dole out all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but don’t have love, it profits me nothing.”

These are the words I read as I sat on my motor scooter waiting for people to come.

I had been running a Bible distribution table for Arabs and Iranians out the waterfront in Beirut.

Things had been going well. People came by and accepted Bibles... But I was not making any relationships.

A few weeks earlier, I tried to launch a Bible study for Muslims. I made invitations. I witnessed to a lot of folks, and gave invitations to people who I thought were receptive to the Gospel. However, no one came to the meetings.

I couldn't help but think of what I must have been doing wrong. What was I missing?

It was during that time, I read through 1 Corinthians 13, and came to the sad conclusion that I was lacking love.

I looked up and saw a small Syrian boy walking by begging.

Growing up in the States, I have grown accustomed to not giving money to beggars but to give food when possible.

I said “Hi” to the boy and decided to bring food with me the next day.

The next day, I was at the same spot waiting for folks to come to the Bible table, and the boy came by again. This time he had a younger boy with him.

I gave them some bananas and asked their names.

“My name is Sheib, and he is Ahmed”, the young boy said.

As I was finishing up at the Bible distribution table and preparing to head out, the older boy asked if I could drive them home.

On the way their house, the older boy asked where my house was located . I ended up driving past and pointing it out to them.

After dropping him off, I knew something was different. I was glad that I had a new friend, even if he was quite young.

I never have been a morning person. I usually go to bed around 2 am and wake up around 10 am. Around 8 am the next morning, as I was sleeping, someone started knocking.

I answered the door, and there stood Ahmed and Sheib the two beggar boys.

It was quite a surprise to see them! I was quite sleepy and not quite sure what to do; I made some pancakes. While I was cooking I could hear them talking to each other in a language I had never before heard.

“What are you talking in?” I asked.

“We are talking in Turkmen.” They replied.

From then on they often came to the house or I would see them at the waterfront while passing out Bibles

After about a week, I went down to Neba, a suburb of Beirut. It is full of many Syrian ethnic groups, Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen.

While going down to see some folks at a ministry in Neba, I saw Ahmed and Sheib. We began to walk through Neba to the ministry. I didn't realize it but we were being followed by a group of Turkmen to the ministry.

I was able to share with the group of kids and teens. That would begin the ministry with the Turkmen.

That evening, I went to the home of one of the boys. After meeting his family they took me to meet someone called “the Chief”.

When I was at the “chief's” house, I met many of the adults and shared a brief Gospel message. and I was then invited to meet other families.

Going to the various homes was very strange and unique for me. It was not long before the families knew me.

The kids started to go to the ministry in Neba to have meetings with me where I would share basic Gospel message with them. I planned dates and times to meet with them. I would get large amounts of frut for a snack for a snack for them and share basic Gospel messages with them.

It was difficult at because I was seeing more and more that they did not know Arabic. I thought that, maybe, by teaching them to read in Arabic they would be able to communicate and understand the Gospel and be integrated into the local Church.

I started by teaching Ahmed and Sheib how to read in Arabic. It did not take too long to teach them all the letters; however, teaching them to read took much more time.

Sheib had a learning disability and would rearrange the letters in his head. At first I thought it might be a seeing problem and took him to see different eye doctors His eyesight was fine, but there was a large blood clot in his right eye.

I noticed that while he could read very slowly when we were alone, when he was with his parents he could barely read at all.

That is when it became apparent the abuse that he was suffering.

Ahmed had zero to no Arabic. He was probably about 7 at this time. I say probably, as none of the Turkmen children knew their ages.

It was a lot more difficult than I imagined! Not only did I have to teach the kids to read, but; I also had to teach them a whole language.

Arabic, is quite different when in written form. Books are written in an internationally understandable dialect. This dialect is quite different than the local dialects.

The Turkmen were all from Syria. For this reason they would leave Lebanon twice a year and return to Syria for about a month. Sometimes, when the the tribe returned some families would not return or new families would come.

After spending a year or so doing kids gatherings and meeting in houses, I realized that I was going to need to learn their language if I was going to do anything long term.

The Turkmen Language

Chapter 2: The Turkmen Language

I got a copy of some Turkish learning books and I started studying them. However, whenever I used the phrases I had learned people tended to laugh at me. At first I thought it was my bad pronunciation but then I realized that I was speaking a different language.

A few years ago, I spent some time living in Southern Turkey in Antioch. I had spent 6 months, but did not learn any of the language. During my time, I had focused my efforts on the local Arab population and spoke to people entirely in Arabic.

Now I was in Lebanon and needing to speak a Turkic language. I went for a visit to Turkey. I showed the believers I knew there, pictures of the Turkmen with whom I was dealing with. They had limited information about the Turkmen. They suggested that I learn “Osmanli” or Ottoman Turkish.

”Osmanli” was a lot closer to the Turkmen language. I was able to work through an Ottoman educational book from the late 1800's. However, it was still different than their language.

I soon came to realize was that there were 4 languages that existed. Turkish, Turkmen, Osmanli, and Turkmen although being similar are classified as different languages.

The Ottoman Language was the parent language of the Turkish and Turkmen languages. However, it wasn't so simple. The Turkmen language also contained vocabulary and grammar from the Azeri language.

Learning the language was not as simple as getting a book. The Turkmenlanguage that exists in the Middle East is quite different than the Turkmen language of Turkmenistan.

Making things more difficult was that many of the Turkmen spoke basic Arabic, but not good Arabic. Getting people to communicate with me in the Turkmen language was difficult because people would prefer to talk to me in Arabic in which I was much more efficient.

So I started out, trying to learn modern Turkish.

Then I started reading Ottoman Turkish.

By studying, I gained some knowledge but nothing that was useful in communicating.

. After completing 20 chapters in an Osmanli workbook, I grew tired of it as most grammar exercises were not usable.

Finally, I started studying Azeri. By studying the Azeri language, I gained knowledge many words (as with studying modern Turkish or Osmanli) However, again I was not able to apply the information directly to the language.

So while trying to learn one language, I had to study three other languages. The majority of my learning came from listening to people talk, and then identifying which words came from which language.

The Sunni Turkmen from Golan use words that I learned while studying Azeri.

The Aptal use words from Farsi (Persian). All of them use vocabulary from various languages. While this makes learning the language difficult, it rewards you by making it possible for you to learn other languages easier.

Origins

Chapter 3: Origins

There are many different ideas about the origin of the Turkmen, and these vary from tribe to tribe. At this time I was only seeing Turkmen of the tribe Aptal from Aleppo.

The word Aptal roughly translates as “Stupid, silly, daft, etc..” This name was not given by the people of the tribe but must have been given to them.

There were some things that set this tribe apart from other Turkmen. For one thing, many of them had cross tattoos and Christian names. Some of the names included, “Benjamin, Jacob, Issac, Michael, etc”.

These names are not common among Muslims, but are usually found only among Jews or Christians.

Another thing that struck me as strange was that they seemed to rest on Sunday's instead of Friday, which is more common among Muslims.

Most of the Turkmen of this tribe believed that Jesus was God and that He had died on the Cross.

I found these things strange. It seemed as though they had basic Christian beliefs mixed in with some strange Islamic ones.

I read online about some Turkmen villages that were Lebanese. Finally, after some pleading a friend drove me up to visit one.

The village we visited was Sunni. After talking with the local leader I started to draw conclusions.

During the Ottoman rule, the empire would frequently take prisoners from Eastern European countries. They would force their Christian children to become Janissaries. Janissaries are Christian children converts to Islam that are conscripted into the army.

This seemed to be a real possibility for the Aptal tribe which I was working with. For one thing, several of the kids were light skinned. Some of them even had natural blond hair. It was all starting to make sense.

The local tribe had no idea of history. They had no concept of what happened to them before they were born. All they could say was that they were from Iskanderun in Turkey; however, all of the tribe had lived their entire lives in Aleppo

The record of how they got there is not anything I found in written history. However, based on their name and language change I would make a guess that they were “defeated” and forced to move to Aleppo.

When this took place is hard to say. By the language change, I would say sometime before World War 1 and after the 1850's.

The various Aptal clans within Syria can differ from one another greatly. They can be different from one another in language and in culture.

Some of the tribes use more Farsi words than others. For example, I have heard some of the people from Homs use the Farsi word “Ağa” for “sir”.

The Tanji tribe, uses words that I found came from Kazakhstan, such as “dangis”, meaning ocean.

The Sunni Turkmen from Syria also differ greatly in language from area to area. Because they live without any written language or any form of media, their language changes greatly even within the same country. At times it is difficult for two Turkmen to fully understand each other even though they are from the same region.

Many Turkmen in Syria watch Turkish television which helps expand their vocabulary. However, members of Aptal still have a limited vocabulary. This makes preaching the Gospel to them difficult, as their vocabulary is limited in both Arabic and Turkmen. If you try to talk about deeper topics, their limits become quite evident.

Generally, in society they are seen as outcastes. The Aptal more than any of the other Turkmens are really looked down upon.

Once I first started doing ministry with the Turkmen kids, a man came by and attacked the kids with his large dog. When I saw the bleeding kids, I asked him what he was doing. He said that they “only knew the language of the dog.”

While walking with them, I have also been spit upon, and attacked by people just because they are racist against them.

There is another ethnic group called the Korbat.   
Once while standing with some Turkmen kiddos passing out Bibles a Korbat came by, heard their dialect and just started hitting them.

The Aptal are also called “Nawar” which translates loosely as “gypsy”. They themselves however, hate this term.

I decided to get them audio Bibles because I thought that it would be simple for them to understand. After all, since they watch Turkish television shouldn't they be able to understand scripture as well?

I found that they could generally get the gist of different chapters, especially if they were stories. Other than that, it seemed to be quite difficult / foreign for them.

The Culture

Chapter 4: The Culture

Several things within Aptal culture that set them apart from the rest of the Turkmen, and the rest of the people in the Middle East.

Within Aptal there are many differences.

The Aptal in Aleppo have their children work from age 4. However, the Aptal children from Homs do not work their children.

Other Aptal groups and Turkmen look down upon this.

The Aptal from Aleppo work their children vary from house to house. Some of the homes that work their kids do it out of need. Others do it out of laziness. While some of the families are kind to their kids, the majority make their kids work by force.

If a kid does not work he is beaten or burned.

By the time the child grows to the age of puberty they are married off.

Child marriages are not exactly happy ordeals. I have not yet seen a wedding video in which the children are both smiling. Generally they look like they are very angry or sad.

Young marriages usually do not last. They are usually not registered because you are not legally allowed to be married in Syria until you are 18. Given that many are divorced before that time, they are never recorded.

It is uncommon for girls to get pregnant during their first years of marriage. I am not sure if this is a result of any form of birth control.

Often times, after marriage the new couple will continue to live with mom and dad in their home.

Keep in mind that due to their poverty there might be as many as 3 couples sharing a room.

I have asked various people about this, they have said that things are kept clean while other people are in the house. However, it makes me wonder as I have heard some very educated, dirty remarks by very small children.

The children in general seem to be a lot more sexual than their Arab counterparts.

At age 18, most boys are enlisted into the military as there is a draft in place.

The Aptal and Tanji tribes are both Alawite, a small off shoot of Islam. The Alawites are rather secretive in their beliefs. However since these two tribes are also very ignorant, Most of their religion is based off of hearsay, which varies from family to family.

They believe that Ali, Jesus (and according to some all prophets) were God in the flesh. They also believe the same of Jesus, and some will say the same for all prophets. They hold that the Quran was changed and that it used to resemble more of the Gospel more than it does now.

I have heard that Alawites believe in reincarnation; however, I have never observed that personally myself personally. I often wonder if that is simply propaganda against them spread by Muslims.

When people die, the mourners cut themselves to show grief. .

One of the difficulties I had is that they do not have a religious book within their possession. This makes it difficult to try and argue against something that is not stated in writing. You cannot argue against someone that is constantly changing their viewpoint.

One of their religious leaders was very supportive of me. He would tell people that God had sent me to them to share the Gospel with them. That opened many doors. However, he would also tell people that the Quran (which none of them could read) said the same thing. When I would try and show that the Quran does not indeed teach those things, he would say that the Alawite have the real Quran (where?) and that it teaches differently.

With the Turkmen, a cup of tea is a pledge of alliance. When you give someone tea you are promising to defend that individual to death. When in a home and someone offers you tea, you need to realize the great significance of this.

As with the rest of the Middle Eastern cultures it, is not proper for a man to be seen talking to a woman that is not his wife or direct relative.

One of the surprises the ministry among them was that with time the families began to get more and more comfortable with me.

There were many times I would enter a house only to realize that there were no men present. I could be in a room with 20 or more women. Suddenly, a woman would start breastfeeding and then more and more women would just start breastfeeding. No blankets nothing -just out in the open. You would see women from 15 to 50 years old start breastfeeding.

One time I was visiting one of my favorite homes. The girl answered the door. She was about 12 or so. I came in and sat down.

I didn't notice right off that no one else was home. I sat down and she sat down next to me. The lights went out and I continued to sit and talk to her thinking that the family would show up at any moment.

When the mother came in, the power came on and there I was, siting with her daugher. The daugher had just reached over and was holding my hand.

The mom just looked at me and smiled, “Hi Johnny, how are you doing today?”

It was a bit awkward for me to say the least. Shortly after the rest of the family came in. I shared a few Gospel stories, ate some food and left to the next home.

Whenever someone offered me to marry their young daughters it was always a bit awkward for me and I was not able to respond probably as graciously as I should. It was always a great surprise for me when someone would offer, and I was not able to keep that surprise from reaching my face.

Nudity among the Turkmen is quite different from anything I have experienced with other groups. When a young toddler is throwing a tantrum, I have seen on multiple occasions where the family would simply strip the kid down to the nip (naked) and leave him there in his nudity to calm him down. Strangely enough, it seems to calm children down.

Children up to 10 years old, it is common to see them naked. When doing medical things, I probably get exposed to nudity more often than the average person would, but nonetheless it is very common.

When kids misbehaved I have disciplined them. When I tell the parents that I have done this, they are again thankful.

Perhaps they are thankful and are just overly trusting of my care with the children, or perhaps they just don't care.

Parents that do care for the welfare of their children stand out of the crowd very quickly because of the kind of questions they ask. Generally, you can tell by how the child behaves around his/her parents. If the child is very timid around his parents and refuses to speak in front of them, they probably have a bad situation.

One kid was named Salah. He was about 10. He seemed a bit slow on the onset; however, if you studied with him you could see that he could memorize things quite quickly.

His dad was a very caring man. He and his children all wanted to listen to the Gospel. They were one of the families that were living under a staircase with no toilet and no bathtub.

It was a big deal to accuse someone of theft or of anything of that sort. At one point, one of the children went and told the police that they were being sold by their parents as a prostitute.

This child wanted to remain in my custody.

The mother told the tribe that it was my fault that the child had put the father in jail.

For many months no one from the tribe would talk to me.

One night I was down in Neba. As I sat on my motorbike waiting for someone, one of the older Turkmen came by and greeted me. He put his hand on my shoulder and said in a loud voice as though speaking to a crowd (that was not present as I could see), “Johnny is a good man, I trust him with my children and my family.” He then walked away.

Four other men came by and said similar things. After this things began to return to normal. I could now talk to the various families on the streets and begin holding kids meetings again. The shame had been lifted.

The war

Chapter 5: The War

When the war in Syria began, it didn't just start with fighting. It started with protests. The protesters were shot at, which triggered soldiers to leave their posts and defend the protesters and then war began.

Although, some of the soildiers left their posts to defend the protesters others continued to carry out orders and shoot at the protesters.

The Aptal tribe is Alawite. That means they are pro-government. When the shooting started in Aleppo everyone was in denial. No one wanted to accept the possibility that their own government was shooting at protesters.

As fighting got more intense more and more Turkmen moved into Beirut. They all crammed into Neba.

After all the housing was filled they started moving into an area controlled by Hezbollah. They filled that area too.

Their kids were everywhere at this point. I could not travel anywhere within the country without running into them. If I went to the north, I would find kids from Beirut working and they all knew me.

It was a great time to do ministry. I was doing at least 4 house visits a night. The kids were coming over to my house day and night. I was able to preach the Gospel to many people and also started doing more and more to help medically.

The kids got hit by cars, beaten by parents, sick--you name it and I would have to deal with it. I was also helping by taking them to the dentist. As I went to the dentist, I started to watch how he did various things.

Dealing with the various psychological issues was a lot more difficult. More and more people started coming from Syria with physical wounds and mental scars. There were kids that had been raped, been victims of violence, or had lost loved ones.

Some of the Turkmen were so desperate for money that they sold their children as prostitutes. Some were forced into it by coercion.

One nine year old girl was out begging by cars when she was abducted. She was drugged and raped many times.

Her parents showed me where this girl had to get double hip replacement to undo all the damage that was done to her!

Housing costs went through the roof. There were families paying more than 200 dollars to sleep under staircases with sheets as walls.

Soon all the men gathered and a decision was made; move to Turkey.

Methods

Chapter 6: Methods

As I mentioned before, the hardest thing I was having to deal with was that nothing was written in their language. I couldn't simply read the scripture to them.

I started working on a translation for them, which I hope to finish at some point... However, with their low literacy rate, it did not seem ￹hat helpful.

When I first started doing house visits I would go into a home and give a short sermon after I was served tea. I tried this for a long time; however, it did not seem like they were getting it. Even after I was able to talk with them in their language, it did not seem like they understood the important things that I was trying to communicate to them. I needed to find a way to communicate in their language in their way.

When someone is formally schooled there are certain things that they learn besides basic information. They learn things like how to sit properly, how to interpret information, or how to learn.

An oral learner processes information different than someone who is a literal learner or someone who prefers to get information through reading. Obviously an oral learner does not just mean someone “who can't read”, as there are many people who can read, but won't.

I started researching topics like “how do you disciple an illiterate person?”

It is a strange concept to most people. In the West, often times when we lead someone to Christ we simply give them a book and tell them when discipleship time (meetings) occur.

I also began thinking about Jesus' disciples, could they all read? Most of them were fishermen. How did Jesus disciple them?

Did Jesus set up times once a week and invite the twelve to attend meetings?

He had a life with them- among them. How did he go about teaching them? Jesus taught lessons to them and to the crowds with stories.

One of the benefit to using stories, is that it can go deep or remain shallow. There are many stories which at the onset seem quite simple however when you start to think about them you can find very foundational truths.

Roughly 70% of the Bible is in story format.

So, what I wanted to do was find a way that these stories could be communicated to my new audience. I found that using pictures help keep the attention of my audience. Sometimes I would speak to crowds of 20 or more in a house of mixed ages. All ages from 6 to 60 listened more intently when I used pictures.

On the Arabs for Christ website you can find a lot of Bible story images available for free download and use.

When you have a literate man, you want to give him a Bible so that he can keep it with him. When you have someone that can't or won't read, how do you keep the Bible with him?

Trying to have oral learners memorize scripture is quite difficult. For the Turkmen it is even harder as the scriptures do not yet exist in their language.

One way I found that you can keep the scriptures with them is by having them memorize the Bible stories.

Let me give a recent example from last night I was visiting a refugee camp of mixed Korbat, Arab and Turkmen refugees from Syria. When I arrived folks came forward to see me and after I finished doing some basic first aid I broke into story.

“Is God limited?” I asked the crowd.

“No, God can do everything.” replied an older man.

“I would like to share with you all two stories, one is from the book of Daniel the prophet and the other is of Moses.”

I went through and told the story from the book of Daniel about the three who refused to bow before idols.

“Who was the man with them in the fire?”

“It was Jesus” said one who had listened to other stories I had shared before. Keep in mind these are Muslims who are hearing the Gospel.

“It was God” said another.

I replied that they were correct. I explained that God had revealed himself in flesh and was with them.

I then told the story of Moses' birth and how God spoke to him in the wilderness via a burning bush.

“Moses bowed before the bush, was he bowing to a tree?” I asked

“No, he was bowing to God!” replied someone in the crowd.

“Moses committed a sin in this story, what was it?” I asked.

“He stabbed a man.” They answered.

“All men are sinful, only God is without sin.” This is important as Muslims believe that prophets are without sin.

I then went on to explain to them that God revealed himself in a tree, but we do not worship trees. It was God showing himself to Moses in the shape of a tree. In the same way, God also was with the three in the furnace.

“Only God can save, this is why we believe that Jesus is God in flesh. We do not believe that a man became God, or that a tree became God, but that God was revealed in flesh to save us from our sins.”

The entire crowd received the teaching. I went on to give it four more times in both Turkmen and in Arabic.

Muslims do not believe in the divinity of Christ. They believe that Jesus was a man only. This teaching was to counter this belief.

Our world views are generally formed on the basis of stories. When you believe in something, and if someone asks you why, you will probably respond in the form of story. By using stories world views can be changed.

The Tanji

Chapter 7: The Tanji

Ahmed through a series of events ended up in an orphanage. I was going to visit him and share with him twice a week.

There were often other Turkmen kids that would end up there after being arrested by the police for working. Normally, kids would be there for ten days. However, if it was not the first offense they would remain for about six months.

While he was there, I met a group of kids who were Turkmen from another tribe. The tribe was called “Tanji”.

I later found a book that says that Tanji is a word that means “menders”. They were from Damascus.

The Tanji kids behaved quite a bit different than Ahmed's tribe. They were generally more polite. They also used many words that I didn't know. They had words from Farsi, Azeri and Kazakh.

After they got released I really wanted to meet with them some more and find out where their tribe was located.

I talked to the orphanage they said that the kids were from somewhere over by the beach near Dahiya.

If you look at Lebanon a big part of the country is coastline, so that was not a big help. Also, going to Dahiya and asking where Turkmen live is not exactly the easiest thing to do.

I went and visited some of my Turkmen friends from near the house. The tribe still had not left yet, except for a few families. They told me “Johnny do not go to the Tanji, they have teeth.”

There was a lot of fear of the Tanji by members of the Aptal (Ahmed's tribe).

At this time, I had a visitor from Turkey helping me with ministry. We drove around and found nothing.

On his last day we went for a final time. When we were about to give up, I stopped and said a short prayer and drove one more time along the coast.

“Johnny!” called a teenage boy. I didn't recognize him right off. He was a kid from the Cornich. I had no idea that he was Tanji. He told me that one of the kids released was his brother.

As I was talking to him, in Turkmen, more and more people started coming out of their homes until there was a crowd.

I shared a brief Gospel message and then was invited into a home. At the house, I shared more in depth.

Things were going great. Now there was a large community of Turkmen to witness to that had never before heard the Gospel.

I got to share there often. When I would arrive, I would be rushed by Turkmen kids wanting to hear and be with me.

A lot of the kids needed medical attention from time to time, so I would do things like stitches, etc. After a while the Arabs started to ask questions. To them, I must have looked like a political leader. When I would arrive there would be crowds, and then I would go from house to house.

Once I arrived with a brother named Michael. While we were there some men in SUV's suddenly showed up. They were from Hezbollah. They detained us and talked to us. In the end someone from the area who was Arab, with who I had been talking to came forward and defended us to the men. He said that he thought we were doing a good work, and were a real benefit to the community.

After an hour, one of the men bought us some juice and gave us a green light to continue our ministry under the condition that we did not photograph anything in the area as it was a “sensitive area”.

We agreed and continued to make visits. A few visits later though, when we arrived to find a woman (who we had been meeting with) with a black eye and bloody lip. She asked me to come to her house as soon as possible.   
  
As I parked my motorbike, another came out who was bleeding from his right arm. He had a stab wound. I thought at first that maybe he had cut himself. I was getting the medical supplies out when his face turned white. He got real scared and said “Johnny you need to go that man is not good.”

We were then taken by a group of armed men. They told us that they were Hezbollah (though we both knew this was not true) and that if we returned we would be shot.

After staying away a long time, I called the man that had defended me before. He invited me to come back. I went, but now all the Turkmen had gone. After the incident all the twenty or so families packed up and went to another part of town.

Later, after finding them and trying to restart the ministry, did I find that they were afraid to be seen with me. They were afraid of incurring more wrath from an angry Arab Muslims.

While the Tanji seem to be located mainly in and around Damascus, they are also spread out quite a bit and also exist in Northern Iraq, and in Jordan. They are more educated than the Aptal. They are also more integrated into society. They can speak Arabic very well and are not looked down as outcasts or gypsies as are the Aptal.

The refugee Camps

Chapter 8: The Refugee Camps

After things fell apart with the Tanji and the Aptal in Beirut moving out, I wanted to explore other areas I could start in which to minister.

It all started with finding a news article talking about a Turkmen refugee camp.

Because of the war in Syria there were refugee camps showing up all over the country. The idea of having the Turkmen all by themselves was real exciting.

I went down to the YWAM center one day and heard that one of the guys had been visiting various camps. He said he had visited the camp where the news article was talking about.

That same week while visiting some of the remaining Aptal in Beirut, I heard that one of the guys, Akram was actually planning on moving to the camps.

A few weeks later we went out to find the camp. Once we passed Tripoli, we kept going north. We began to ask people where the “gypsy camp” was located.

Finally we arrived at some arches and pulled into the camp.

When we first arrived there were a lot of people looking at us. I asked if this was the Turkmen camp and was pulled into a tent full of curious Turkmen.

Since I wasn't sure if they were Tanji, or Aptal or what, I decided to give my translated name Yahiya instead of Johnny. I wasn't sure if there would be any problems or fear from the Tanji and if they recognized my name. I wanted to start out on a clean slate with these people.

After sharing an in depth Gospel presentation someone asked if I was really Johnny. I said “yes”. He said that he had seen videos of me on his phone in Turkmen. He said that someone had recorded me at various times while I was talking and had shared it with many people from his village in Syria. He was from Homs.

The tribe was also Aptal, but they were quite a bit different culturally and linguistically than the ones in Aleppo.

This camp also included many Arabs and many thieves. The pickpocketers all seemed to be Arab.

One night after leaving the camp I noticed that my cellphone was missing. We returned to the camp. I went into the little shop. The shopkeeper said to me “Give me one hour, and I will get your cellphone back.”

When we left the camp, being hungry I suggested lets go right (instead of left). To look for food.

As we were driving we saw another camp just a little ways away from the camp we just left.

“Now, that looks like the camp in the article you read, Johnny.”

We pulled over and went in. As we went inside folks saw me and recognized me right off. Some knew who I was, others did not. Akram from Beirut (Aptal from Aleppo) came forward and introduced me to the crowd. He explained that he had known me for years (or known of me).

I then shared a brief Gospel message and we had to go back to check on my cellphone.

When I got back to the other camp, my cellphone was there and was returned to me.

We now had two camps that we would be ministering in.

One camp had Turkmen and Arabs, the other had Turkmen and Korbat.

The Korbat are quite different than the Turkmen in many ways, in other ways they are similar.

The Aptal generally despise the Korbat.

The Korbat are from India. They moved to the Middle East in 1100 AD when the Muslim Persians fought a war with India. As a result the Korbat became Muslim and moved into Iran.

Their language has many things from Hindi, Kurdish, and Farsi. They are related to the Gypsy of Europe.

Like the Turkmen, they do not have a written Bible or an established Church anywhere.

We continued to go to the two camps. We referred to the first camp as the “bad camp”, as it was full of thieves. The second camp we referred to as “good camp.”

When we would go into the camps, I would do some medical helps and then preach the Gospel in Turkmen and then again in Arabic (for Arabs and Korbat).

At the good camp, we would often be able to share without any difficulties. There were families of Turkmen in both camps that were listening to the Gospel.

About that time, I really needed a break so me and three of the guys and I went for a trip to Turkey. We were gone for about three weeks. During that time, I got to witness to a lot of people in Turkish. Although, I had not been around modern Turkish a lot – I was able to adapt quickly by having learned most of the vocabulary via videos I had seen in Turkmen homes.

When we returned, the camps were eagarly awaiting us. When I went in and saw the good camp, there was a nice surprise awaiting us. The Korbati chief had been considering the Gospel during this time and had made a decision that he wanted to follow Christ.

He talked about how he could see the difference he could see between when we were in the camp and when we weren't. He realized his own personal need of rebirth.

When he told us this news, he was speaking to me in front of a large group of people who were sitting around to hear the Gospel.

His decision caused a backlash. On the next trip the Turkmen family that I had been visiting told me that they could not see me anymore.

Lots of people came by and mocked me saying that they would not become Christians.

After being asked to leave the Turkmen home, I went a little ways away. A large crowd of children followed me. Some of them wanted prayer, others wanted medicine, and others just wanted to hold my hand.

We came to an empty area. I prayed with one and shared a story. Then a man came by with his two adult children.

They had sticks; they hit the kids and chased them off. All the kids ran away. They told me never to return to the camps.

In my mind, I quickly remembered how just that night I had shared the story of Peter's arrest. He was brought before the priests and commanded not to talk about Jesus. Peter said, “Should I listen to men or God?”

“I will be back here on Monday, as people want to listen I will come back. I have been beaten before, and will be beaten again. Christ commands me to love you and the people here.” I said.

While leaving, the Korbati chief's 9 years old son, Nehad, came over and held my hand. Even though he had just been hit, he didn't care if they saw him with me. They were still very much within range, they were only 5 feet away when the child returned. The kid walked with me all the way to the car, and then gave me a kiss on the cheek as I left.

Things were getting more difficult, but it was a result of the conversion of the chief.

A couple of weeks went by, a couple of my car windows got broken.

I shared the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and Paul. The chief realized via that story and others, such as John the Baptist, that baptism comes after faith. He announced after I finished telling the story that he too must be baptized.

A week went by and pressure was continuing to build. I thought for sure that trouble was going to happen. Then one day, during winter, we had a hot day. We went to the other camp first, and after we finished it we arrived at dusk to the “good camp”.

I wasn't at all expecting a response, but said, “if you want to get baptized, now would be a good time.”

He said yes, and we went. There was a large crowd that followed us, mostly made up of children and a few adults.

The baptism went great. Korbat and Turkmen alike were full of questions and it caused them to think about their own salvations.

The Turkmen Church

Chapter 9: The Turkmen Church

Do you think that someone who has never seen a Church before could draw a picture of what your fellowship looks like just from reading the Bible?

Try and forget all the cultural things that have evolved their way into the way we do worship. Take away all the various things that would be cultural but not scriptural.

When you imagine Paul teaching, do you imagine him gathering people together in pews twice a week and teaching for an hour and then singing a song and sending people home?

Do you imagine Jesus giving discipleship “classes”?

When you imagine all that the Church was and could yet be again what do you see?

Do you imagine a place where people come and fellowship or something much deeper?

Jesus lived with his disciples. He taught them but he lived with them.

When we read the letters Paul wrote, we see him writing to the Church of believers. We see his love and care for each one of them.

We see when Peter was released from jail in the middle of the night, he knew at which house he could find the believers praying.

The believers met together daily, from house to house. There was true community and love between the believers. They were brothers and sisters in Christ in reality. They were not distant cousins that could be apart for periods of time with no effect.

We are told “the hand cannot say to the foot I have no need of you.” We as a Church are to be united. If you sever the eye or a foot from the body for six days a week and try and put it back once a week you will not see a healthy body to say the least.

The one thing I desire to see with the future Turkmen Church is a Church focused on scripture, and love between its believers.

When I see the many denominations of the Middle East, their gatherings resemble that of Catholic Churches but with different theology.

Three songs, a sermon, another song, then everyone goes home.

All the while, the majority of the Church remains inactive when it comes to discipling others.

A book called Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from Kurdistan, a History of Mission Work, 1668-1990 discusses the various shortcomings in regards to evangelism among the Kurds.

Although the Kurds are different than the Turkmen in many ways, as a fellow minority in the “Arab World”, you can see that there are several parallels that can be made.

In short, the book outlines the various attempts from 1668 until the present to reach out to the various nominal Christian groups in their homes that by doing so, they could inspire them to reach out to the Kurds.

This has not worked until now. The more the western Church has tried to approach the various nominal Christian groups, the more western they have become and the more alien they become to the natives.

In Syria and Lebanon there are villages where there are only Catholics or Orthodox Christians. They have limited contact with the Muslim communities, and when they do they look down upon the Muslims as inferior.

In the end of the book, the lesson can be drawn that the Kurdish Church did not really begin until efforts were made to directly evangelize the Kurds. This did not really occur until the 1990's.

In the same way, it is only fitting to start by not committing the same mistakes of missionaries of the past and simply use the direct approach.

A successful Turkmen Church will be a Church that is active in reaching out to other Turkmen and to other groups without dependence on foreign aid.

The majority of the evangelical Churches in Lebanon and the Middle East are dependent on Western donations to keep them running. They are in no way financially independent. There are virtually no Evangelical Pastors in the Middle East who do not speak English in addition to Arabic.

When you step away from trying to model the Church after Western design, things become cheaper and more effective.

This is not to say that the Gospel in itself should ever be altered when preaching. There are many groups that would change the Gospel to be more acceptable to people groups. Samuel Zwemer said “... this is like going fishing but removing the hooks”.

We do not want to simply throw bait into the waters; we want to see people transformed.

Demographics

Chapter 10: Demographics

The biggest problem with gathering information on the Turkmen is that everything is based on hearsay. The governments of the Middle East are entirely Arab, and so they do not wish to lose any grip on their power.

Syria is called “The Arab Republic of Syria”. As a result, it would be against its nature to try and give importance to non-Arab groups in their country such as Turkmens, Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, or Korbats.

The information available online suggests that in Syria there are between 200,000 and 4,000,000 Turkmen in the country. That is quite a large gap!!

For myself I would have no idea of where the actual number would be, as some of the Turkmen are more embedded into society than others.

There are entire villiages in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq that are completely Turkmen. Where the Turkmen are isolated, they are more prone to maintain their culture and language.

However, Sunni Turkmen in the Middle East are more likely to marry from Arabs and Kurds. As a result, they tend to be more likely to lose their culture and language.

Alawite Turkmen tend to more to themselves. Although they might live in a very big city surrounded by Arabs they will not communicate with them. They will live with them, but not talk with them anything of importance.

The histories of the Turkmen and how various tribes ended up at different places are very contradictory. It is hard to get precise answers from anyone.

When you research Turks in Algeria you can find that there are more than a million living there. However, many of them have lost all of their cultural roots and have simply married into society.

With the start of the Syrian war, there are now many Turkmen that have moved into other areas. Egypt now hosts a large amount of Aptal and Tanji members in Cairo that have come from Syria.

A Call to Action

Chapter 11: A Call to Action

The bottom line is that for far too long this people group has been neglected from hearing the Gospel.

“The unevangelized for whom we as Christians are responsible live in this generation; and the Christians whose duty it is to present Christ to them live in this generation.” John Mott

We as a generation have a responsibility to reach this generation of souls with the Gospel. We have a responsibility to present the Gospel to every man around the globe with the Gospel message.

When we look at the disciples, they took this call seriously. They went about with urgency as they realized the dire need of salvation.

We are called to reach out to all nations. It does not mean that all will repent, but we have a responsibility to present this Gospel to all men.

There are many who would do humanitarian deeds, or would preach morals, or teach reform. These things are good, but they cannot save souls.

A beloved brother who discipled me said these words, “If a man was to think about hell seriously for twenty minutes, he would either go insane or he would go to the streets and warn people.”

How seriously do you believe in hell? Is it something you actually believe in?

The brother later went on to say “We must fear for men not of men.”

If we fear the destination of man without Christ, out of fear we will desire to preach the Gospel to them.

Christ commands us to love our enemies. How often do you hear Church gatherings where people would pray for the salvation of souls rather than death to them?

I remember myself after 9/11, so many people prayed for Osama Bin Laden to be killed. We should have been on our knees praying for his salvation!

Think of it this way, he died and hundreds of people came and replaced the place of the new “martyr”.

How much better could it have been if he had instead come to Christ?

The Turkmen and the many other various hidden groups of the Middle East need the Gospel. They need Christ.

“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin. He only could unlock the gate of Heaven and let us in.' Education could not do it. Social reform cannot do it. Our beautiful essays and ethical sermons cannot do it. It is Christ upon the Cross who discovers sin, who forgives sin, who conquerors sin.” Ikbal Ali Shah

The last hundred years saw little in the Middle East in regards to spiritual change. Neglecting or ignoring the Muslim countries does not seem to be making them go away. If we want to see change we must act.

We can only reap what we sow, nothing more, nothing less. If the Church does little in regards to preaching the Gospel in the Middle East, it will see little response.