

Samuel Zwemer (1867 – 1951), was the thirteenth of 15 children born in Michigan, America, to Dutch immigrant parents. His father was a pastor of the Reformed Church. Four of Samuels' five surviving brothers became missionaries, and one of his sisters was a missionary in China for 40 years.

The Power of the Printed Page

From his earliest years, Samuel preferred books to sports. Throughout his distinguished missionary career, he was to attach great importance to the distribution of the Scriptures. One of his earliest ministries was as a colporteur for the American Bible Society.

Theology, Medicine and Ministry to the Poor

At age 20, Samuel entered a Theological Seminary in New Jersey, where he simultaneously began to study medicine. He also played a full part in local Church activities and worked in the neighbourhood among the poor and disadvantaged. He attended Student Missionary Conferences and himself organised one of these conferences.

Disciplined and Dedicated to Strategic Missions

Samuel was disciplined in his devotional life, regularly setting aside the hour from 12 to 1pm as a special time for prayer and devotion. During his studies, the determination grew that he was called to take the Gospel to the followers of Muhammad. **He chose to oppose the only faith that had caused Christianity to beat a retreat. He also resolved to engage the enemy on the soil of Arabia – the birthplace of Mohammed.**

Deputation with a Difference

His plans were rejected as ill-timed by the Reformed Missions Board, so Samuel formed the American-Arabian Mission, with James Cantine. James and Samuel adopted a unique form of fundraising – Cantine went on a fund raising tour to raise funds for Zwemer and Zwemer to raise funds for Cantine! During his 4000-mile deputation tour, Samuel encountered much church lethargy and pettiness. On one occasion he was refused permission to hang up a map on the wall because it was Sunday!

Mission to the Middle East

In 1890, while travelling through London to the Middle East, Samuel bought a copy of C.M. Doughty's *"Travels in Arabia Deserta"*, which remained his constant companion, until he sold it many years later in Cairo to another Westerner destined to find fame in the Middle East, Lawrence of Arabia. Zwemer and Cantine applied themselves to the study of Arabic and settled in Basra, Iraq. Their companion, Kamil, a Christian from Syria, was poisoned and died shortly after their arrival at Basra.

Ministry and Marriage

Samuel travelled throughout the Middle East, distributing copies of the Scriptures. In 1895, he met a young missionary nurse, Amy Wilkes, and they were married the following year. They made their home in Bahrain, where with the help of his wife, he continued his study of medicine and even attained some proficiency as a dentist.

Literature Evangelism in the Ottoman Empire

At the request of the London Jewish Society, he visited Sana to distribute copies of the Hebrew Scriptures. He also took copies of the Bible in other languages and sold many of them to Turkish officers. On one occasion, some Turkish officers returned, wanting their money back, saying that a Greek bartender from Crete had told them that their Protestant Bible versions were not genuine, but false. Zwemer's response was to turn them to the passage in Titus 1:12: *"The Cretans are always liars ..."*

This amused and pleased the Turks immensely and they left happy with their purchases. The Cretan bartender then bought a Bible for himself!

Overwhelming Immensity of the Task

Samuel wrote of **the overwhelming task of such a vast area to be rescued from the grasp of such an implacable spiritual foe, with so few resources for the accomplishment of the task**

Tragedy Strikes

In 1898, his brother Peter, who was a missionary in Muscat, died, along with a number of other colleagues. In 1904, the Zwemers lost two daughters within 8 days. The smallness of the number of converts added to the burden in their grief.

A Vision of Victory

Yet, even during these dark and discouraging days, Samuel looked forward with great confidence and hope towards **the day when the Muslim world would inevitably be won to Christ**

Mobilising for World Evangelisation

In 1905, Samuel and Amy Zwemer returned to the USA. He became the Field Secretary to the Reformed Board of Foreign Missions and the travelling secretary to the Student Volunteer Movement. He soon made a great impact in arousing missionary vision for the Muslim world. He developed a reputation for aggressive fundraising and effective recruitment. His writing, travelling and speaking placed him in the forefront of authorities on Christian work amongst Muslims.

Co-ordinating from Cairo

The United Presbyterian Mission in Egypt, the Nile Mission Press and the American University of Cairo invited Zwemer to move his base of operations to Cairo. From there he began to co-ordinate missionary work throughout the entire Islamic world. He travelled on speaking tours across Britain, North America, South Africa, China and Indonesia.

Universities for Christ

He was received at the famous universities of Europe. On one visit to the USA, he delivered 151 lectures in 113 days. Some of his meetings were attended by thousands of Muslims. However, opposition was always strong and conversions were very few. In his 40 years of ministry, he was only able to personally lead 12 Muslims to Christ .

Leadership Training

In 1925, he accepted an invitation to teach at Princeton Theological Seminary as Professor of History of Religion and Christian Missions. Yet this new academic role did not slow his pace in missions. Even four months after a major operation, he was on the back of a mule in the mountains near the Tibetan border, ministering to missionaries. His wife, Amy, died in January 1937, shortly before he retired.

Prodigious Writer

A colleague who accompanied Samuel on one of his journeys, remarked on his return that he would never again travel with him. Samuel appeared unable to stay in bed for more than ½ hour at a time without putting on the light and making some notes! From 1911 on, he was the editor for 40 years of the quarterly "*The Muslim World*." He wrote hundreds of tracts and nearly 50 books.

Inspired by Raymond Lull and Henry Martyn

Samuel frequently referred to pioneer missionary, Raymond Lull, who suffered severe persecution, imprisonment and stoning as he zealously brought the Gospel to North Africa. Raymond Lull finally was stoned to death in Algiers at age 80. Samuel also frequently taught on Henry Martyn, the missionary pioneer to Persia, whose cry was: *“Let me burn out for God.”*

Strategic Focus

To the end of his life, Samuel was single-minded in his energetic concentration on storming the gates of Islam and winning Muslims to Christ. The foundations he laid have enabled other missionaries to the Muslim world to achieve greater success than he as the pioneer could enjoy. Zwemer encouraged co-operation with missionaries of all Bible believing churches and groups. The issues at stake are so vital and the urgency of the task of winning the Muslim world to Christ is so great that we must work together with other believers. ***“In essentials unity, in non essentials liberty and in all things charity,”*** was a constant emphasis of Samuel Zwemer

“But none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.” Acts 20:24