

SURAH 61 (AL-SAFF)

FAITH: Islam | TEXT: The Holy Qur'an | VOLUME: The Meaning of the Holy Quran | AUTHOR: Rashad Khalifa

OVERVIEW

Surah 61, titled 'The Column' or 'The Ranks' (Al-Saff), presents a rigorous call to consistency between speech and action, specifically within the context of striving for God's cause. The text opens with a glorification of God and an immediate rebuke of those who profess faith but fail to act, declaring such hypocrisy 'abominable.' It establishes a martial imagery of believers fighting in 'one column' like a solid wall. The narrative invokes Moses and Jesus as predecessors who faced rejection; notably, it claims Jesus explicitly predicted a subsequent messenger named 'Ahmad' (a name derived from the same root as Muhammad). The text culminates in a soteriological proposition described as a 'trade' or bargain: believers are instructed to believe and strive with their wealth and lives in exchange for forgiveness and paradise. It concludes by calling believers to be 'God's supporters,' drawing a parallel to the disciples of Jesus, claiming historical victory for those who believed.

KEY FIGURES

GOD (Allah), Moses, Jesus, son of Mary, Ahmad (Prophesied Messenger), The Disciples (Hawariyun)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. TRANSACTIONAL SOTERIOLOGY (THE TRADE)

Assertion: Salvation from retribution is a commercial exchange requiring faith plus the expenditure of wealth and life.

"O you who believe, let Me inform you of a trade that will save you from painful retribution. Believe in GOD... and strive in the cause of GOD with your money and your lives. (61:10-11)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text explicitly uses the language of commerce ('trade,' 'deal') to describe the mechanism of salvation. In this framework, forgiveness and paradise are purchased through the currency of faith and active striving (Jihad). This stands in direct antithesis to the Evangelical understanding of justification, which asserts that salvation is a gift of grace received through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8-9), specifically excluding works so that no one may boast. While Christians are called to good works as a fruit of salvation, Surah 61 presents these works as the prerequisite condition for the 'deal' to be valid.

2. PROPHETIC SUCCESSION OF AHMAD

Assertion: Jesus's primary role was to confirm the Torah and predict the coming of Ahmad (Muhammad).

"Jesus, son of Mary, said... 'bringing good news of a messenger to come after me whose name will be even more praised (Ahmad).' (61:6)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text asserts that Jesus's ministry was preparatory for Muhammad (Ahmad). This creates a fundamental Christological conflict. In Evangelical theology, Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the teleological climax of revelation, not a forerunner. Furthermore, the biblical text identifies the 'Helper' (Paraclete) promised by Jesus in John 14:16-17 as the Holy Spirit, who dwells *in* believers, not a human prophet who comes centuries later. This doctrine in Surah 61 implies the biblical text is either incomplete or corrupted.

3. RELIGIOUS SUPERSESSIONISM

Assertion: Islam (the true religion) is designed to dominate and supersede all other religions.

"He has sent His messenger... to make it dominate all religions, in spite of the idol worshipers. (61:9)"

Evangelical Comparison: The text posits a competitive worldview where the 'true religion' must physically or socially dominate all other systems. Evangelical missiology focuses on the 'Great Commission'—making disciples of all nations through the proclamation of the Gospel—rather than the establishment of a dominant religious polity. The Kingdom of God is described by Jesus as 'not of this world' (John 18:36) in its current inauguration, whereas Surah 61 implies a tangible, victorious dominance over other faiths.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Yes

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the mechanism of redemption and the identity of the Redeemer. Surah 61 posits that human beings save themselves from retribution through a 'trade' of belief and striving. Evangelicalism posits that Christ saved humanity through His substitutionary atonement, a gift received by faith. Furthermore, the text redefines Jesus's mission entirely; instead of the Savior of the world who pays the debt of sin, He is portrayed as a local messenger to Israel whose primary function was to validate the coming of Muhammad. This negates the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement.

Shared Values:

Condemnation of hypocrisy; Belief in One God; Reverence for Jesus (as a messenger); Call to sacrifice for God

Friction Points:

1. [Critical] Sola Fide – Salvation is a 'trade' (exchange) of works/wealth for forgiveness.
2. [Critical] Sola Gratia – Forgiveness is conditional upon 'striving,' not a free gift.
3. [Critical] Sola Scriptura – Asserts words of Jesus not found in the Bible and implies biblical corruption.
4. [Critical] Christology – Reduces Jesus to a messenger pointing to Muhammad; denies His finality.
5. [Major] Kingdom of God – Equates God's Kingdom with the political/religious dominance of Islam.

Semantic Warnings:

"Believer"

In Text: One who accepts the Messenger (Muhammad), fights in the cause, and strikes the 'trade' with God.

Evangelical: One who trusts in Christ alone for salvation.

Example: *In Surah 61:14, 'believers' are those who support the Islamic cause, whereas in Acts 16:31, a believer is one who trusts in the Lord Jesus.*

"Victory/Triumph"

In Text: Dominance over other religions and enemies (61:9, 13).

Evangelical: Overcoming sin and death through Christ, often amidst worldly suffering (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Example: *The text promises 'guaranteed victory' as a reward; the Bible promises tribulation but spiritual peace (John 16:33).*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Escape from painful retribution and entry into gardens (Paradise).

How Attained: By executing a 'trade': Belief + Striving (Jihad) with wealth and life.

Basis of Assurance: Conditional upon the fulfillment of the 'trade' (striving).

Comparison to Sola Fide: Directly opposes Sola Fide. Surah 61:10-11 establishes a quid-pro-quo transaction. Romans 4:4-5 states, 'Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes... his faith is credited as righteousness.'

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Do not say what you do not do (avoid hypocrisy)
2. Fight in God's cause united in columns
3. Believe in God and His messenger
4. Strive (Jihad) with money and lives
5. Be God's supporters

Implicit Obligations:

1. Accept Muhammad (Ahmad) as the fulfillment of Jesus's prophecy
2. Reject any religious claim that denies this succession

3. Prioritize the religious cause over personal safety or wealth

Ritual Requirements:

1. Submission (Islam) as the framework for life

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. In verse 10, salvation is described as a 'trade.' If you ran out of money or health to strive, would the trade still be valid?
2. Verse 14 says Jesus's disciples 'won' against their enemies. History shows they were mostly martyred. How do you define 'winning' in a spiritual sense?
3. If Jesus predicted Ahmad, why do you think the thousands of manuscripts of the Gospel we have from before Islam don't mention that name?
4. Verse 2 asks, 'Why do you say what you do not do?' Do you ever feel the burden of that question in your own spiritual life?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The Desire for a 'Best Deal' – Humans naturally look for the best outcome for the lowest risk. The Quran offers a high-cost trade (your life/money). The Gospel offers a 'better deal'—Christ paid the cost, we receive the benefit. [Isaiah 55:1 ('Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost'); Matthew 13:45-46.]
2. Solidarity/Unity – The desire for unity is fulfilled in the Body of Christ, not through military formation, but through the Spirit. [Ephesians 2:21-22 ('In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord').]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Transactional Anxiety [Severe] – The believer must constantly wonder if they have fulfilled their side of the 'trade.' Have they strived enough? Given enough money? The transaction is never explicitly marked 'paid in full' until judgment.
2. Cognitive Dissonance [Moderate] – The believer is told Jesus predicted Muhammad, but historical evidence and the Bible contradict this. They must maintain a belief that all previous scriptures are corrupted, isolating them from the actual history of revelation.
3. Pressure to Dominate [Moderate] – The expectation that the religion must 'dominate all religions' (61:9) places a burden of political and social conquest on the believer, equating lack of worldly power with spiritual failure.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Revelation (The Quran) serves as the corrective lens for history and previous scripture.

Verification Method: Adherents verify truth by observing the 'clear proofs' (mentioned in 61:6) and the eventual victory/dominance of the religion (61:9, 61:13).

Evangelical Contrast: Biblical epistemology relies on the historical resurrection of Christ and the closed canon of Scripture (Jude 1:3). This text relies on a self-authenticating claim of a later prophet who reinterprets previous scriptures without contemporary manuscript evidence.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: 7th Century CE (Traditional Islamic dating)

Authorship: Attributed to Muhammad (Divine Revelation); Translation by Rashad Khalifa (1978)

Textual Issues: The name 'Ahmad' in verse 6 is a hapax legomenon (appears once) in the Quran. Critical scholars debate whether this was a later interpolation or a title applied to Muhammad.