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A great deal has been written on contextualization in the past few years (see bibliographies of Bevans 1985, Gitari 1982, Halebian 1983, and Lind 1982). I shall not summarize this literature or trace its development. Rather, I wish to propose a model, made up of three “ideal types” in the Weberian sense, which we can use to examine the ways in which Protestant missionaries have handled the problem over the past 100 years. This is not a history of events, but an analysis of how missionaries dealt with the awareness of cultural pluralism that swept the West following the age of exploration.

I shall limit myself to the narrow question of how the missionaries responded to the traditional beliefs and practices of new converts—in other words, to the “old” culture. Missionaries do not enter cultural vacuums. The people to whom they go are members of ongoing societies and cultures. The people raise food and build houses. They marry their young and bury their dead. They pray to their gods and propitiate their spirits. How did—and how should—missionaries who bring a new gospel respond to the old one?

The data will be drawn from the Indian scene, which has a long history of debates on the subject and with which I am most familiar. I believe, however, that the model is applicable to many other parts of the world.

Early Responses to the Question

There is a long history of answers given in missions to the question of what to do with traditional cultures. The early Roman Catholic missionaries struggled with the issue when they came to India. They were impressed with the sophistication of Indian culture. In many ways it was superior to that of Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But they were sharply divided over the question of what to do with the existing culture. The Jesuits advocated accommodation and the retention of traditional Indian cultural forms. The Franciscans contended that they were selling out the gospel.

Early Protestant missionaries, too, were impressed with the Indian culture and its philosophical foundations. Many of them learned Indian languages well enough not only to produce dictionaries and to write classical literature and hymnology in them, but also to translate Indian sacred texts into German and English. This was later to play an important role in the rise of the Orientalist movement in the West. By the early nineteenth century, however, a major shift had taken place. With some notable exceptions, Protestant missionaries entered an era of noncontextualization.

The Era of Noncontextualization

Roughly from 1800 to 1950 most Protestant missionaries in India, and later in Africa, rejected the beliefs and practices of the people they served as “pagan.” John Pobee writes: “. . . to the present time all the historical churches by and large implemented the doctrine of the tabula rasa, i.e. the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up.” Consequently, the gospel was seen by the people as a foreign gospel. To become Christian one had to accept not only Christianity but also Western cultural ways.

In view of the earlier willingness to use traditional cultural forms, what had changed? Why this growing rejection of existing cultures?

Rise of Colonialism

One reason was the emergence of colonialism with its belief in the superiority of Western cultures. The expansion of the East India Trading Company in India came at a time when the Mogul and Vijayanagar empires were decadent and collapsing. By default it became not only the economic but also the political master of much of India. The process was completed in 1858 when, because of the Indian Mutiny, the British government made India its star colony.

Colonialism proved to the West its cultural superiority. Western civilization had triumphed. It was the task, therefore, of the West to bring the benefits of this civilization to the world. Old medical systems were seen as witchcraft and hocus-pocus, and had to be stamped out. Old governments were seen as feudalistic and had to be replaced by modern, national governments. The result was “direct” rule in which the British sought to replace the Indian governmental structures from the top to the bottom.

For Christians, the parallel was the superiority of the gospel. Paganism had to be rooted out. Many missionaries, in fact, equated the two. Christianity, civilization and, later, commerce (the three Cs) went hand in hand. Western civilization was spreading around the world, and it was assumed that people would become both Christian and “modern.” There was no need, therefore, to study old cultures or to take them seriously. They were on the way out.

Not all rejection of traditional cultures, however, was rooted in a naïve equation of Christianity with Western civilization, as Pobee suggests. Some missionaries developed a deep understanding of the local cultures. For example, in India, W. T. Elmore, H. Whitehead, and W. H. and C. V. Wiser wrote early ethnographies based on their lives in the villages. There they came face to face with Indian culture little changed by modernity and Christianity, and saw the burning of widows, infant sacrifice to idols, the cruelties of untouchability, and demon worship.

These missionaries were profoundly aware that in peasant and tribal societies, religion is at the center of culture and permeates most of its forms. Food, clothing, house construction, marriages, markets, farming, fishing, hunting, festivals, music, dance, and drums all had religious significance in traditional cultures. In India, even the direction in which you place your head when you sleep has theological importance. If that is the case, they argued, religion and culture, and forms and meanings cannot be arbitrarily separated. One cannot simply change the meanings of old forms in order to communicate the gospel, for the ties between them are rooted in social convention and cultural history.
The only way to avoid syncretism was to bring radical changes into the whole of the culture.

The Theory of Cultural Evolution

A second reason for the rejection of non-Western cultures was the emergence of the theory of cultural evolution. If the political solution to the awareness of cultural pluralism created by the age of exploration was colonialism, the intellectual solution was evolutionism. Westerners could ignore other cultures by labeling them “primitive,” “animistic,” and “uncivilized.” In fact, anthropologists until 1915 spoke of “culture,” not of “cultures.” They saw all cultures as different stages of development of the same thing; some were more advanced and others more primitive.

After the debates over the monogenetic versus polygenetic origins of human races that had wrecked anthropology in the last half of the nineteenth century, anthropologists united in emphasizing the commonness of all humanity. Differences, therefore, whether in race or culture, were seen as variations in the same thing, not as different things.

Christians argued with secular biologists over biological evolution, but cultural evolution was another matter. While biological evolution challenged the fundamental Christian tenet of the uniqueness and divine nature of human beings, cultural evolution was simply another updating (along with Marxism) of the Christian medieval paradigm that sought meaning in a universal history of humankind. Both sought meaning in diachronic (historical) rather than synchronic (structural) paradigms. Both saw history as directional—with an origin, a progression or regression, and a culmination in an ideal state whether through redemption or development. There was argument over the causes of historical progression, but not over the fact that history was going somewhere.

Given this historical paradigm, noncontextualization made sense. Why contextualize the gospel in other cultures when they are in the process of dying out? It is only a matter of time before all people are civilized. What is important, therefore, is to bring the gospel along with civilization.

The Triumph of Science

A third factor leading to the rejection of other cultures was the triumph of science. When William Carey went to India, he was much impressed by its cultural sophistication. Certainly in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries there was nothing in Europe comparable to the sophistication and technological advancement of the Mogul empire.

The rise of science changed all this. By the end of the nineteenth century, Western technology had conquered the world, and science had made giant strides in conquering nature. Faith in the final triumph of science was widespread. As late as 1953, in his Reith Lectures for the British Broadcasting Corporation, J. Robert Oppenheimer could say without fear of contradiction: “Science has changed the conditions of man’s life. . . . the ideas of science have changed the way men think of themselves and of the world” (Raven 1953:101). Sir Frances Smith could write in the preface of his The Neglect of Science: “The world to-day is moulded, in the last resort, by scientific discovery. . . . whether we like it or not, science is forcing the pace” (1951:iv). As C. A. Coulson points out (1955:20):

It is important to realize that . . . the influences of a scientific view . . . have passed far beyond mere technology or gadgeteering. We may begin there, because that is about as far as the man-in-the-street, or the young apprentice at his lathe, can state his beliefs. But his unrecognized convictions go much deeper. For he knows that science grows, even though he may have no personal knowledge of any of its fundamental principles; and he knows that scientific controversy nearly always issues in a universal agreement, frequently very quickly. Science becomes the cohesive force in modern society, the ground on which may be built a secure way of life for man and for communities.

F. S. C. Northrop of Yale added (1952:9): “If one wants to understand the culture of the United States, one must not look at its departments of economics, sociology or politics, important as they are, but at its universal education in the natural sciences and their skills, its agricultural colleges, technological institutes and research laboratories.”

Underlying this optimism was a positivist (or, to use Ian Barbour’s term, “naive realist”) epistemology (cf. Hiebert 1985a and 1985b). This held that a careful examination of experience can lead us to the discovery of the “laws of nature,” which upon further examination can be proved to be “true.” Scientific knowledge was seen as objective (uncontaminated by the subjectivity of the scientist), cumulative, and true in an ultimate sense. In contrast to this, the knowledge of other cultures was thought to be subjective, piecemeal, and false.

The same epistemological foundations were widespread among many conservative Christians, including most missionaries. Only here, theology replaced science, and revelation replaced experience. Carefully crafted, theology could be totally objective and absolutely true. In the light of this, other religions were seen as highly subjective and totally false. Consequently, Christians did not need to take other religions seriously, just as scientists refused to take other belief systems about nature seriously. The task of the missionary was to transmit his or her theology into new cultures unchanged.

The wedding of Christianity and science in the minds of missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is not surprising. Herbert Butterfield (1949) and A. N. Whitehead (1926) have shown convincingly that science grew up within a Christian tradition, and for many years it was in no sense distinct or separate. Robert Grosseteste, founder of the first department of science at Oxford University, was later the bishop of Lincoln. The British Royal Society counted among its members numerous bishops and ministers. And leading scientists such as Robert Boyle, John Ray (founder of systematic botany and zoology), Christopher Wren (astronomer and architect), and Isaac Newton not only professed Christian faith but participated in theological debates.

The Intellectual Consequences of “Noncontextualization”

Colonialism demonstrated the superiority of Western civilization, evolutionism legitimized this in terms of history, and science and Christianity provided the intellectual foundations on which the whole was built. It is not surprising, therefore, that the period from 1800 to 1950 was anticontextual in its approach.
This stance was essentially monocultural and monoreligious. Truth was seen as supracultural. Everything had to be seen from the perspective of Western civilization and Christianity, which had shown themselves to be technologically, historically, and intellectually superior to other cultures; and so those cultures could be discounted as “uncivilized.” The missionary’s culture was “good,” “advanced,” and “normative.” Other cultures were “bad,” “backward,” and “distorted.” Christianity was true, other religions were false.

In missions this had two consequences. First, Christianity was perceived in other cultures as a foreign religion identified with Western culture. Christian converts were expected to adopt Western ways. This cultural foreignness was a great barrier in the spread of the gospel.

The second consequence was more subtle. Old beliefs and customs did not die out. Because they were not consciously dealt with, they went underground. Young converts knew they dare not tell the missionary about their old ways lest they incur his or her anger. So these ways became part of the new Christians’ hidden culture. Public marriage ceremonies were held in the church, and then the people returned to their homes to celebrate the wedding in private. Amulets were hidden under shirts, and Christians did not admit to Christian doctors that they were also going to the village shaman. In India caste differences were denied in public, although Christians privately continued to marry their children along caste lines.

In the long run, this uneasy coexistence of public Christianity and private “paganism” has led to syncretism. Non-Christian beliefs and practices have infiltrated the church from below. In India caste is becoming public in the church and destroying it with political strife and lawsuits. In Latin America, spirituality taught by nannies to upper-class children is becoming public and respectable in Kardicism and Umbanda.

From a Christian point of view, this monocultural point of view has its good sides. First, it affirmed the oneness of humanity and of human history. Second, it took history and culture change seriously. Third, it affirmed absolutes and universals, both in human cultures and in the gospel. It was concerned with preserving the uniqueness of the gospel and avoiding the syncretism that might result from the incorporation of non-Christian beliefs and practices in the church.

But this view also had its bad sides. It was reductionist and acultural—it did not take other cultures and religions seriously. It was ethnocentric—it judged other cultures and religions by its own standards and found them wanting, while assuming that its own ways were right. And in the end it hindered the missionary task. The foreignness of the gospel was a barrier to evangelism, and syncretism was not prevented. Far too often the missionaries ended as policemen enforcing what they believed to be Christian practices on the people.

The Case for Contextualization

The picture began to change by the end of the nineteenth century. Colonial rule was expanding, but already the seeds of its destruction had been planted. These were to bear fruit in the recognition that other cultures had to be understood and appreciated in terms of their own worldviews, and in a revolution that would call into question the nature and supremacy of science itself.

Postcolonialism

By 1900 three important forces were at work that would bring about the destruction of colonialism and its intellectual founda-

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The impact of all this on anthropological theory was profound. In many circles, evolutionism with its diachronic models was replaced by British structural functionalism with its emphasis on phenomenology and synchronic analysis. The central questions were no longer ones of origin but of the structure and integration of a society and the function of its various parts. Each society had to be understood in its own terms, not in comparison with Western society.
A parallel development was the emergence in North America of descriptive linguistics. In studying tribal cultures, which for the most part had no writing, new methods for reducing to writing and learning languages had to be developed. These methods not only enabled anthropologists to learn languages, but also to analyze the structures and internal organizations of these languages as ends in themselves. They also provided anthropologists with tools for recapturing images of cultures from aged informants and for reconstructing, tribal histories.

The combination of British structural functionalism, with its emphasis on the social organization of tribes, and of the American interest in languages and cultures as cognitive maps led to the school of thought known as ethnoscientific, or new anthropology. This theory, like those from which it was derived, emphasized the differences between cultures and the ways in which they see reality. Each culture was seen as an autonomous paradigm with a worldview of its own. In the end, all three schools of thought were forced to acknowledge the cultural relativism that was the logical outcome of their theories. Obviously, if we take all cultures seriously and emphasize their differences, no one of them can be used to judge the others. Where, then, are moral and cultural absolutes?

Postmodern Science

Not only was belief in Western cultural superiority called into question, but the certainty and absolute nature of science itself was under attack. By the mid-twentieth century, the charge was led by the social scientists who began to apply their theories to analyzing science itself. Psychologists began to examine the subjective nature of all human knowledge; sociologists showed that science was a community affair, influenced by normal social dynamics; anthropologists placed science into its larger cultural and worldview context; and historians of science showed that our textbook understanding of the nature of science was misplaced. Michael Polanyi’s writings and T. S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) drew these strands together in their theory that science was not a lineal, cumulative progression of objective knowledge, but a series of subjective, competing paradigms. Old positivist science had received a mortal blow. But where would postpositivist science find its new epistemological foundations?

For phenomenologists, including many psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, and for Kuhn himself, the answer was “instrumentalism.” Since we could no longer show that one theory or paradigm or culture was better than another, we could no longer speak of absolutes or truth. At best, we could appeal to pragmatism. Any paradigm was adequate so long as it solved the problems humans faced.

Implications for Contextualization

In such an intellectual milieu, it is not surprising that missionaries and missiologists placed a great deal of emphasis on contextualization, not only of the church in local social structures, but also of the gospel and theology in local cultural forms.

First, on the positive side, this approach avoided the foreignness of a gospel dressed in Western clothes that had characterized the era of noncontextualization. The gospel message had to be communicated in ways the people understood. It avoided the ethnocentrism of a monocultural approach by taking cultural differences seriously, and by affirming the good in all cultures. And it affirmed the right of Christians in every country not only to be institutionally but also cognitively free from Western domination. The right of every church to develop its own theology began to be recognized.

Embracing an uncritical contextualization, however, had its problems. Obviously the denial of absolutes and of “truth” itself runs counter to the core Christian claims about the truth of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ. Moreover, if the gospel is contextualized, what are the checks against biblical and theological distortion? Where are the absolutes?

Second, as Mary Douglas points out (1970), the separation between form and meaning implicit in these theories blinds us to the nature of most tribal and peasant societies in which form and meaning are inextricably linked. For example, names and shadows are tied to a person’s identity, and religious rites are performances, not simply the communication of messages.

A third problem has to do with the emphasis that contextualization places on the accurate communication of meaning, often to the point of ignoring the emotive and volitional dimensions of the gospel. We are in danger of reducing the gospel to a set of disembodied beliefs that can be individually appropriated, forgetting that it has to do with discipleship, with the church as the body of Christ, and with the kingdom of God on earth. Here Charles Kraft’s call (1979) for a “dynamic-equivalent” response to the gospel message is a healthy reminder that in the Bible “to believe” is not simply to give mental assent to something; it is to act upon it in life.

A fourth area of concern is the ahistorical nature of most discussions on contextualization. Contemporary cultural contexts are taken seriously, but historical contexts are largely ignored. In each culture Christians face new questions for which they must find biblical answers. But in many things, particularly in developing their biblical and systematic theologies (and all Christians develop these implicitly or explicitly as diachronic and synchronic paradigms of Christian truth), they can learn much from church history. Exegesis and hermeneutics are not the rights of individuals but of the church as an exegetical and hermeneutical community. And that community includes not only the saints within our cultural context, and even the saints outside our culture, but also the saints down through history. To become a Christian is to become a part of a new history, and that history must be learned.

A fifth area of concern is that uncritical contextualization, at least in its more extreme forms, provides us with no means for working toward the unity of churches in different cultures. Instrumentalism is built on the belief that different cultures and paradigms are incommensurable—there is no basis for mutual understanding. Each can be understood only in its own terms. But if this is so, there can be no real communication between Christians in different cultures, no comparison between their theologies, and no common foundations of faith. At best Christianity is made up of a great many isolated churches. For any one of these to claim that its theology is normative is ethnocentric. There may be some common ground in our common human experiences, but that is limited and certainly not enough to provide the...
basis for developing a common theology. The best we can do, then, is to affirm pluralism and to forget unity.

Sixth, uncritical contextualization has a weak view of sin. It tends to affirm human social organizations and cultures as essentially good. Sin is confined largely to personal evil. But social systems and cultures are human creations and are marked by sin. This is clear in Scriptures in which more than 75 percent of the time terms such as archē and archōn (organizational power), exousia (authority), dynamis (power), and thronos (thrones) refer to human institutions (Wink 1984). There is a need, therefore, to take a stand against corporate evil as well as individual sin.

Finally, a call for contextualization without an equal call for preserving the gospel without compromise opens the door to syncretism. William Willimon points out (1986: 26): "The persistent problem is not how to keep the church from withdrawing from the world but how to keep the world from subverting the church. In each age the church succumbs to that Constantinian notion that we can get a handle on the way the world is run. There is an offense in the foreignness of the culture we bring along with the gospel, which must be eliminated. But there is the offense of the gospel itself, which we dare not weaken. The gospel must be contextualized, but it also must remain prophetic—standing in judgment on what is evil in all cultures as well as in all persons.

Critical Contextualization

Where do we go from here? We cannot go back to noncontextualization with its ethnocentrism and cultural foreignness. Nor can we stay in more extreme forms of contextualization with their relativism and syncretism. As Peter Berger points out (Berger and Luckmann 1966), cross-cultural workers must move from monoculturalism, through the river of relativism, to the firm bank of postrelativism that lies beyond. But what is this bank?

Interdependence

As the battle against colonialism is won (and the battle in more subtle forms is not yet over), we must look beyond the reactionary stance of "anticolonialism" and recognize the need to build institutions and understandings that take into account our common human context. We are rapidly becoming one world (though not one culture), and the peace, prosperity, and survival of all depends upon our thinking and working together as different cultures, peoples, and nations. As E. Stanley Jones put it, on the level of both the world and the church we must move beyond dependency and independency to interdependency.

Theoretical Complementarity

In anthropology the move is away from relativism and purely emic approaches to complementary theories and metacultural grids. Complementarity is rooted in a critical realist epistemology. In this, human knowledge is seen not as a photograph of reality but, rather, as a map or blueprint that gives us real but partial understandings of reality (Coulson 1955). Just as we need several blueprints to get a mental picture of what a house is like, so we need several complementary theories to show us the nature of reality. In anthropology there is a growing number of scholars who use more than one theory or paradigm, depending upon the questions being asked and the reality being examined. For example, emic and etic models are seen as complementing each other.

Beyond Postmodern Science

As Huston Smith points out (1982), we are moving beyond postmodern science and its instrumentalism and relativism. In his chapter on "The Death and Rebirth of Metaphysics" Smith argues that a "comprehensive vision, an overview of some sort, remains a human requirement; reflective creatures cannot retain the sense of direction life requires without it" (1982:16). The epistemological foundation now emerging is critical realism (Barbour 1974; Hiebert 1985a) that affirms both the objective and the subjective nature of knowledge. We see through a glass darkly, but we do see.

In critical realism, theories are limited in the information they convey, but that information may be shown to be true by means of reality testing. In other words, theories are not totally subjective, relative, and arbitrary. Moreover, theories, like maps, may be complementary. Consequently, contradictions between them must be taken seriously. Finally, in critical realism, theories and paradigms are not incommensurable. As Larry Laudin (1977) and D.R. Hofstadter (1980) point out, metatheoretical models can be developed to compare them and to translate meaning from one to the other.

Critical Contextualization

What does all this have to say to the question of contextualization? Specifically, what does one do with traditional cultural beliefs and practices? Here I am indebted to Jacob Loewen (1975) and the work of John Geertz, who developed a method of contextualization among the Wanana of Panama that is applicable in other cultural contexts.

Exegesis of the Culture: The first step in critical contextualization is to study the local culture phenomenologically. Here the local church leaders and the missionary lead the congregation in uncritically gathering and analyzing the traditional beliefs and customs associated with some question at hand. For example, in asking how Christians should bury their dead, the people begin by analyzing their traditional rites: first by describing each song, dance, recitation, and rite that makes up their old ceremony; and then by discussing its meaning and function within the overall ritual. The purpose here is to understand the old ways, not to judge them. If at this point the missionary shows any criticism of the customary beliefs and practices, the people will not talk about them for fear of being condemned. We shall only drive the old ways underground.

Exegesis of the Scripture and the Hermeneutical Bridge: In the second step, the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the Scriptures related to the question at hand. In the example we are considering, the leader uses the occasion to teach the Christian beliefs about death and resurrection. Here the pastor or missionary plays a major role, for this is the area of his or her expertise.

The leader must also have a metacultural framework that enables him or her to translate the biblical message into the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of another culture. This step is crucial, for if the people do not clearly grasp the
biblical message as originally intended, they will have a distorted view of the gospel. This is where the pastor or missionary, along with theology, anthropology, and linguistics, has the most to offer in an understanding of biblical truth and in making it known in other cultures. While the people must be involved in the study of Scripture so that they grow in their own abilities to discern truth, the leader must have the metacultural grids that enable him or her to move between cultures. Without this, biblical meanings will often be forced to fit the local cultural categories. The result is a distortion of the message.

Critical response: The third step is for the people corporately to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated. It is a message to which people must respond. Moreover, it is not enough that the leaders be convinced about changes that may be needed. Leaders may share their personal convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they must allow the people to make the final decision in evaluating their past customs. If the leaders make the decisions, they must enforce these decisions. In the end, the people themselves will enforce decisions arrived at corporately, and there will be little likelihood that the customs they reject will go underground.

To involve the people in evaluating their own culture in the light of new truth draws upon their strength. They know their old culture better than the missionary, and are in a better position to critique it, once they have biblical instruction. Moreover, to involve them is to help them to grow spiritually by teaching them discernment and by helping them to learn to apply scriptural teachings to their own lives. It also puts into practice the priesthood of believers within a hermeneutical community.

A congregation may respond to old beliefs and practices in several ways. Many past beliefs and practices they will keep, for these are not unbiblical. Western Christians, for example, see no problem in eating hamburgers, singing secular songs such as “Home on the Range,” wearing business suits, or driving cars. In many areas of their lives, Christians are no different from their non-Christian neighbors. In keeping these practices they reaffirm their own cultural identity and heritage.

Other customs will be explicitly rejected by the congregation as unbecoming for Christians. The reasons for such rejection may not be apparent to those outside who often see little difference between the songs and rites the people reject and those they retain. But the people know the deep, hidden meanings and associations of their old customs. On the other hand, at some points the missionary may need to raise questions that the people have overlooked, for they may fail to see clearly their own cultural assumptions.

Sometimes the people will chose to modify old practices by giving them explicit Christian meanings. For example, Charles Wesley used the melodies of popular bar songs, but gave them Christian words. Similarly, the early Christians used the style of worship found in Jewish synagogues, and modified it to fit their beliefs.

At points the Christians may substitute symbols and rites borrowed from another culture for those in their own that they reject. For example, the people may choose to adopt elements of the funeral practices of the missionary rather than to retain their own. Such functional substitutes are generally effective, for they minimize the cultural dislocation created by simply removing an old custom.

Sometimes the church may adopt rites drawn from its Christian heritage. In becoming Christians they enter into a second history. The addition of such rituals as baptism and the Lord’s Supper not only provides converts with ways to express their new faith, but also symbolizes their ties to the historical and international church.

Finally, the people may create new symbols and rituals to communicate Christian beliefs in forms that are indigenous to their own culture.

New Contextualized Practices: Having led the people to analyze their old customs in the light of biblical teaching, the pastor or missionary must help them to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will also be contextual, for the church has created it, using forms the people understand within their own culture.

Checks Against Syncretism

What checks do we have to assure us that critical contextualization will not lead us astray? We must recognize that contextualization itself is an ongoing process. On the one hand, the world in which people live is constantly changing, raising new questions that need to be addressed. On the other, our understandings of the gospel and its application to our lives is partial. Through continued study and spiritual growth, we should, however, come to a greater understanding of the truth.

First, critical contextualization takes the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life. Contextualized practices like contextualized theologies must be biblically based. This may seem obvious, but we must constantly remind ourselves that the standards against which all practices are measured is biblical revelation.

Second, this approach recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God’s leading.

Third, the church is acting as a hermeneutical community (cf. Kraus 1979). The priesthood of believers is not a license for theological lone-rangerism. We need each other to see our sins, for we more readily see the sins of others than our own. Similarly, we see the ways others misinterpret Scriptures before we see our own misinterpretations. Along the same line, we need Christians from other cultures, for they often see how our cultural biases have distorted our interpretations of the Scriptures. This corporate nature of the church as a community of interpretation extends not only to the church in every culture, but also to the church in all ages. To say that exegesis and hermeneutics are corporate processes does not (as some sociologists of knowledge, such as Karl Mannheim and Richter, suggest) reduce them to social determinism.

Fourth, there is a growing discussion among evangelical theologians from different cultures and, one hopes, a growing consensus on essential theological points. Just as one can often see the sins of others better than they do themselves, so also theologians can often detect the cultural biases of theologians from other cultures better than the latter do themselves. Out of the
exercise of the priesthood of believers within an international hermeneutical community should come a growing understanding, if not agreement, on key theological issues that can help us test the contextualization of cultural practices as well as theologies.

Critical contextualization does not operate from a monocultural perspective. Nor is it premised upon the pluralism of incommensurable cultures. It seeks to find metacultural and metatheological frameworks that enable people in one culture to understand messages and ritual practices from another culture with a minimum of distortion. It is based on a critical realist epistemology that sees all human knowledge as a combination of objective and subjective elements, and as partial but increasingly closer approximations of truth. It takes both historical and cultural contexts seriously. And it sees the relationship between form and meaning in symbols such as words and rituals, ranging all the way from an equation of the two to simply arbitrary associations between them. Finally, it sees contextualization as an ongoing process in which the church must constantly engage itself, a process that can lead us to a better understanding of what the Lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God on earth are about.

Notes

1. Peter Berger traces the impact of this Christian paradigm on both the Western concept of development and the Marxist view of revolution in *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (1974).

2. The term “metacultural” here is used as D. R. Hofstadter uses it, as a position above two or more systems of the same level (1980). David Bidney discusses three uses of the term (1967:156–82). A. Comte, E. Durkheim, and C. Levy-Brühl saw it as the “prelogical” thought that characterized tribal societies. Others such as Malinowski saw metaphysics as stepping in where science fails. Finally, Henri Bergson, P. Sorokin, F. S. C. Northrop, and D. R. Hofstadter appeal to metacultural grids as conceptual frameworks that emerge out of and stand above different cultures, allowing us to compare their beliefs and traditions between them. This position would reject Kuhn’s suggestion that paradigms are incommensurable. Such a position, in any case, falls under its own weight, for it makes intercultural understanding impossible and provides no basis for explaining cultural change. It also renders anthropology meaningless. In a sense any person who has lived in two or more cultures deeply becomes “bicultural.” By this we mean that she or he has developed the ability to stand above these cultures and compare them. This “balcony” view is, in fact, a metacultural grid.

3. For a good critique of the sociology of knowledge with regard to science, see Larry Laudin, *Progress and Its Problems* (1977: 196–225).

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Mission as Seen from Geneva: A Conversation with Eugene L. Stockwell

Eugene L. Stockwell is Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), as compared to your previous years of service with the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches in the United States?

There are two obvious differences. One is that the World Council of Churches is, by its very nature, international in character whereas the work in the National Council of Churches is basically a United States-based operation. The international nature of the work in the WCC obliges one to be in an intercultural situation constantly, and this is something I have greatly enjoyed and welcomed.

The second major difference is that the Division of Overseas Ministries of the NCC, when I was with it, included under its mandate responsibility for Church World Service, which, as the interchurch-aid arm of the National Council of Churches, dealt with the whole area of relief and development worldwide. But the work in the CWME does not directly concern that aspect of work. The demands that I have found somewhat new in comparison with the previous position are the demands to take the question of evangelization far more seriously. We always believed in the importance of evangelization, but how to go about it, how to train people for it, how to find the resources to help churches around the world engage in evangelization according to their own understanding of the meaning of that task is something that has been a very important thing and extremely challenging in Geneva.

Perhaps one other thing to say is that in the CWME we say that, in one sense, we have no program at all. That is to say, we don't develop programs out of Geneva to try to sell them across the world. What we attempt to do is to respond to the requests, needs, and desires of churches and various communities around the world that want to engage in mission and evangelism, we make every effort to support them in what they want to do. This is often not true of other agencies of the World Council that deliberately build certain kinds of programs and try to get people involved in them. Basically we are not a programmatic commission. That again is a difference from what we were doing in the National Council of Churches.

Would it be correct to say that in the CWME you have far more association with the Orthodox churches than when you were with the National Council of Churches? What difference does that make in your work?

Yes, we do have more contact with the Orthodox in the CWME, although the relations of the National Council of Churches with the Orthodox denominations are of importance as well.

We tend to say that there are three major sets of relationships we have in the CWME on behalf of the whole World Council one is with the Orthodox churches. Many Orthodox churches are members of the World Council of Churches and we have a secretariat for Orthodox studies and relations. Father Ion Brau (succeeded in 1987 by Yorgo Lempopulo), who is a key point of relationships between the World Council of Churches and the Orthodox churches around the world. We in the CWME are learning about the Orthodox concept of mission. The Orthodox, for instance, speak of the Eucharist as a missionary event. That is not a common Protestant concept. That the liturgy and the Eucharist is so central to God's mission on earth. At the same time we are trying to help the Orthodox churches understand a little more about the mission dimension of the church in terms of reaching out beyond their own community, or their own nation, or their own ethnic group. In April 1988 there will be an Orthodox mission conference organized by the CWME, in which Orthodox...
Much has been written over the past 25 years on the application of contextualization in ministry among Muslims. In 1998 I (John) wrote an article for the Evangelical Missions Quarterly in which I presented a model for comparing six different types of ekklésia or congregations (which I refer to as “Christ-centered communities”) found in the Muslim world today (Travis 1998). These six types of Christ-centered communities are differentiated in terms of three factors: language, cultural forms, and religious identity. This model, referred to as the C1-C6 spectrum (or continuum), has generated much discussion, especially around the issue of fellowships of “Muslim followers of Jesus” (the C5 position on the scale).

Parshall (1998), an advocate of contextualization, feels that C5 crosses the line and falls into dangerous syncretism. In subsequent writings many of Parshall’s concerns have been addressed (see Massey 2000, Gilliland 1998, Winter 1999, Travis 1998 and 2000). Yet in spite of concerns that some may have on this issue, the fact remains that in a number of countries today, there are groups of Muslims who have genuinely come to faith in Jesus Christ, yet have remained legally and socio-religiously within the local Muslim community.

In recent years we have had the privilege of meeting a number of C5 Muslims, and although our religious backgrounds and forms of worship are quite different, we have experienced sweet fellowship in Isa the Messiah. There is no question in our minds that these C5 Muslims are born-again members of the Kingdom of God, called to live out the Gospel inside the religious borders of their birth.

We will not be contending that C5 is the best or only thing God is doing in the Muslim world today; indeed God is bringing Muslims to Himself in a great diversity of ways, some of which we may only understand in eternity. What we will argue, however, is that one way God is moving at this point in salvation history, is by sovereignly drawing Muslims to Himself, revolutionizing them spiritually, yet calling them to remain as salt and light in the religious community of their birth.

We have attended many Muslim funerals. We grieve every time we see another Muslim friend buried, having passed into eternity without salvation in Christ. As we have seen the resistance toward

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John and Anna Travis, along with their two children, have lived in a tight-knit Asian Muslim neighborhood for nearly 20 years. They are involved in contextualized sharing of the good news, Bible translation and the ministry of prayer for inner healing. They have also helped train field workers in a number of Asian, Middle Eastern and North African countries. Both are pursuing graduate degrees, with John a Ph.D. candidate.
changing religions and the huge gap between the Muslim and Christian communities, we feel that fighting the religion-changing battle is the wrong battle. We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale.

But we do have great hope, as great as the promises of God, to believe that an “insider movement” could get off the ground – that vast numbers could discover that salvation in Isa the Messiah is waiting for every Muslim who will believe. We sense the desire of Jesus Himself to take the “yeast” of His Gospel to the inner chambers of Muslim communities, calling men, women and children to walk with Him as Lord and Savior, remaining vital members of their families and Muslim communities.

### Theoretical and Theological Issues Regarding C5 Movements

… Our intent is not to prove if C5 can happen, as case studies already indicate that it is happening. Rather, we hope to help build a framework from which to understand this phenomenon and to answer some of the questions which have arisen such as: From a Biblical perspective, can a person be truly saved and continue to be a Muslim? Doesn’t a follower of Christ need to identify himself as a Christian and officially join the Christian faith? Can a Muslim follower of Christ retain all Muslim practices, in particular praying in the mosque toward Mecca and continuing to repeat the Muslim creed? This section will be framed around ten premises [elaborated in the full version of this article].

- **Premise 1:** For Muslims, culture, politics and religion are nearly inseparable, making changing religions a total break with society.
- **Premise 2:** Salvation is by grace alone through relationship / allegiance to Jesus Christ. Changing religions is not a prerequisite for nor a guarantee of salvation.
- **Premise 3:** Jesus’ primary concern was the establishment of the Kingdom of God, not the founding of a new religion.
- **Premise 4:** The very term “Christian” is often misleading – not all called Christian are in Christ and not all in Christ are called Christian.
- **Premise 5:** Often gaps exist between what people actually believe and what their religion or group officially teaches.
- **Premise 6:** Some Islamic beliefs and practices are in keeping with the Word of God; some are not.
- **Premise 7:** Salvation involves a process. Often the exact point of transfer from the Kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light is not known.
- **Premise 8:** A follower of Christ needs to be set free by Jesus from spiritual bonds in order to thrive in his/her life with Him.
- **Premise 9:** Due to the lack of Church structure and organization, C5 movements must have exceptionally high reliance on the Spirit and the Word as their primary source of instruction.
- **Premise 10:** A contextual theology can only properly be developed through a dynamic interaction of actual ministry experience, the specific leading of the Spirit and the study of the Word of God.

### A Look Beyond the Islamic Milieu

… An amazing book has just been republished by William Carey Library – *Churchless Christianity* (Hoefner 2001). The author, while formerly teaching at a seminary in India, began hearing stories of Hindus who in fact were worshipping and following Jesus in the privacy of their own homes. Knowing that there are many Hindus who have high regard for Jesus as a teacher, he set out to determine if indeed they had accepted Him as Lord and Savior or only as an enlightened guru. His quest became the basis of a doctoral dissertation in which he interviewed 80 such Hindu and Muslim families in the area of Madras, India.

“We, the Church Emerges from the Inside”

A missionary couple working in Asia report, “In 1990 we were sent out into the field as church planters. But over the last year we have observed that when the gospel is sown on fertile soil within already established social groupings – like a circle of close neighbor friends, or the multi-generations of an extended household – the church emerges from the inside. It is not so much that we are planting a church but that we are planting the gospel, and as the gospel seed grows, the church or churches form to the shape of existing networks.”

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Hoefer found that that a large number of these families, which have never been baptized or joined churches, indeed have a true relationship with Christ and pray and study His Word fervently. Hoefer says that most want baptism, but have never seen a baptism which is not one in the same with becoming an official member of a particular church. His conclusion after a very extensive process of interviews and statistical analysis is that in Madras there are 200,000 Hindus and Muslims who worship Jesus – an amount equal to the total number of Christians in that city!

It is instructive to note that 200 years ago, William Carey referred to Hindu followers of Jesus as “Christian Hindoos.” Apparently this was due to the strong linkage in the minds of the Indians (and presumably William Carey) between being Hindu and being Indian (etymologically the word India comes from Hindia, the land of the Hindus). Rather than Hinduism being close to monotheistic faiths, it is just the opposite: adherents can worship any number of gods and goddesses. It appears that this openness allows room to exclusively worship the God of the Bible as the one true God (note the words of Joshua in Joshua 24:14-15).

In the early 1900s, Indian evangelist Sadhu Sundar Singh ran into hidden groups of Jesus followers among Hindus. As he preached the Gospel in Benares, his listeners told him of a Hindu holy man who had been preaching the same message. Singh spent the night at the man’s home and heard his claim that his Hindu order had been founded long ago by the apostle Thomas, and now had up to 40,000 members. Singh later observed their services (including worship, prayer, baptism and communion) which were held in places which looked exactly like Hindu shrines and temples, minus the idols.

“When Sundar tried to persuade them that they should openly declare themselves as Christians, they assured him that they were doing a more effective work as secret disciples, accepted as ordinary sadhus, but drawing men’s minds toward the true faith in readiness for the day when open discipleship became possible” (Davey 1950:80).

Recently, we met a man doing outreach among Buddhists, among whom there is an extremely high fusion of culture and religion. To my surprise he had taken the C1-C6 continuum and adapted it to a Buddhist context. Though it appears impossible for the Gospel to thrive inside Buddhism, might there not be millions of Buddhists who are nominal believers and who are only Buddhist due to birth and nationality? As Kraft has stated (1996:212-213), once this principle of true spiritual allegiance versus formal religion is grasped, “we begin to discover exciting possibilities for working within, say, Jewish or Islamic or Hindu or Buddhist or animistic cultures to reach people who will be culturally Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or animist to the end of their days but Christian in their faith allegiance”. (Note: in his book Kraft defines Christian with a capital “C” as follower of Christ verses christian with a small “c” referring to the religious institution).

What is all of this leading to? Is there not blatant idolatry in traditional Hinduism? Yes, but not among those Hindu followers of Christ described by Hoefer and Davey. Is there not a denial by most Muslims that Jesus died on the cross? Yes, but not by those Muslims we have known who have put their faith in Christ. Is it not true that Jews teach the Messiah is yet to come? Yes, but thousands of Jews go to Messianic
Seeking to Nurture “Gospel Movements”

The ethos of one new mission agency includes an emphasis on “insider movements” or “Gospel movements” (instead of “church-planting movements”) among unreached Muslim peoples. The founders here explain why.

• The term “Church Planting” implies inventing a new structure. No matter how contextualized the “church” may be, it is still a new structure that is foreign to the people group. Church-planting work of various levels of contextualization is necessary in some contexts. However, our primary desire is for the spontaneous spread of culturally relevant Gospel movements through pre-existing networks. We believe that the extended family unit is the primary and foremost biblical model of ecclesia.

• Our aim is to be catalytic agents in the spawning of new movements. We do not have a prescribed methodology. We focus on facilitating the inductive learning of the scriptures that will enable indigenous believers to define their own convictions in their daily living. Using the scriptures as the primary and foremost authority, we trust in the self-correcting power of God’s Word that is lived out through obedience and the work of the Holy Spirit to lead the indigenous believers.

• Catalyzing a Gospel movement should not end after one iteration. Within any growing indigenous movement, there should be apostles ready to break out into new territories and peoples. These apostles will primarily be responsible in taking the gospel to other unreached Muslims. We, as “incoming catalytic agents”, should constantly look to spot these apostles and encourage them to develop their own missiology and its corresponding structures to carry out their responsibilities most effectively. In this sense, true gospel movement does not separate “church planting” effort from “mission planting” work.

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Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa
A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations

by John Travis

For the majority of the world’s one billion Muslims, “changing religions” is never seriously contemplated. Even nominal Muslims tend to see Islam as a single fabric weaving together tradition, culture, and customs related to dress, diet, family life, morality, worship, and in some contexts, even economics and politics. Having lived in the heart of a Muslim community for the past thirteen years, my family and I have had the privilege of praying for and patiently sharing with many Muslim friends about Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah). I am convinced that many Muslims are drawn to the person of Jesus, and some long to accept him as Savior, though “changing religions” is for them unthinkable.

I personally know many Muslims who have put their faith in Jesus. Some have formally converted to Christianity and worship at local (often Westernized) denominational churches, or in small home fellowships with other Muslim background believers (MBBs). Fearing persecution, others worship underground. Still others, often called “Messianic Muslims,” follow Christ but remain within the Muslim community. These Messianic Muslims reject or modify unbiblical Islamic teachings (e.g., they insist Jesus did die on the cross), yet still see most aspects of their lives woven together by the social fabric of Islam. They are not silent about their faith in Jesus, though they are discerning about when and where to share. They strive to form groups with other like-minded Muslim followers of Jesus to study the Bible, pray for each other, and fellowship in Christ. Yet they do not view or call themselves “Christians.”

I designed a simple chart called The C1-C6 Spectrum to graphically portray these different expressions of faith by MBBs (Travis 1998; see chart on page 5 in this edition). It must be noted that each “C” on the spectrum represents a particular type of “Christ-centered community” or follower of Christ, differentiated by language, culture and religious identity. While this spectrum helps us distinguish several different kinds of MBBs, it also raises many questions, particularly about the C5 “Messianic Muslim” expression of faith. The purpose of this article is to take a closer look at C5 by examining its background and several present-day case studies. However, three points must be emphasized at the onset.

First, most of these case studies chronicle the very first penetrations for the Kingdom of God among a particular Muslim people group. Consequently, these newly emerging bodies are very much in process (see Gilliland 1990 concerning “process”). Hiebert (1994), in his theory of “bounded and centered sets,” also reminds us that the direction in which a believer or group of believers is headed is extremely crucial. For any group of Christ-followers, it needs to be asked whether or not they are becoming more or less Christ-like and Biblical over time.

Second, there are inherent limitations in how much non-Muslim outsiders like ourselves can dictate what happens in C5 fellowships. We proclaim the Gospel, lead Muslims into relationship with Jesus, and invite them to immerse themselves into the Word of God with us. How they view Islam is not prescribed by us, but left to them as they are guided by the Word and the indwelling Spirit.

Finally, Muslims are coming to faith in many different contexts worldwide all along the C1-C6 spectrum. C5 is neither the greatest nor the only thing...
God is doing in the Muslim world, but it is something about which we must know, rejoice and pray.

What is Meant by the Word “Christian”?

The term “Christian,” when coined two thousand years ago in Antioch, originally meant “those belonging to Christ” (Barker 1995). Today however, the word means different things to different groups. To American evangelicals, “Christian” is a positive word meaning one who knows or is committed to Christ. More than mere religious affiliation, this term describes one’s heart-faith and relationship with God. Therefore, it is not uncommon for evangelicals to say, “I went to church regularly as a child, but became a Christian in high school.” Here “becoming Christian” refers to the time he experienced salvation and life-changing faith in Christ. Using this understanding of the word “Christian,” some evangelicals might say the United States is not a Christian country, since the majority of the population has not experienced this life-changing faith in Christ.

Nevertheless, Johnstone indicates that over 86% of those residing in the United States consider themselves “Christian” (1993:563). In contrast to evangelical use of the term, many within this 86% define “Christian” in terms of tradition, nominal religious affiliation, ethnic heritage, or, most of all, by not belonging to another religion (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism). To those holding this definition, it sounds peculiar for one raised in the church to proclaim later in life, “I have become a Christian.”

In the Muslim context, the word “Christian” is now largely devoid of its original spiritual meaning. It now connotes Western culture, war (the Crusades), colonialism and imperialism. While some Muslims may associate Christianity with the love and selfless living of Mother Teresa and relief organizations, most tend to focus on negative aspects of present day Western culture like immodest dress, sexual promiscuity, disrespect of elders, indulgence in alcohol, Hollywood violence, narcotics and pornography. With such negative perceptions of the Church rooted in negative stereotypes of the West, it is little wonder that “joining Christianity” is often seen by Muslims as betraying one’s family and community to join the heretical camp of their enemies.

Consider, therefore, how different listeners will perceive the news, “Achmad (a Muslim) became a Christian.” Evangelicals hear a spiritual message of supernatural encounter with the living God: “Achmad is now a born-again follower of Christ!” Nominal church members hear a religious or administrative message: “Achmad has become a member of a church.” Muslims, however, hear a message of betrayal and apostasy: “Achmad has forsaken the faith of his forefathers and joined with immoral infidels.”

Because of the above semantic misunderstandings, we never speak of Muslims “becoming Christians” in our ministry. Instead, we speak of those who have “experienced life-changing faith as followers of Isa.” Still, is the problem only one of semantics, easily corrected with a change of terminology? Could the problem of old and new religious community run much deeper? In these days, for the sake of the lost, might the Holy Spirit be moving the hearts of some Muslim background believers to live out their new faith in Christ while remaining in the Muslim community?

C5 Believers and Congregations

C5 believers are Muslims who have been drawn to faith in Christ by the Spirit of God, often through reading the Bible on their own, hearing a radio broadcast, receiving a dream or vision, experiencing a miraculous healing in the name of Isa, or seeing the loving, patient, incarnational witness of a believing friend. C5 believers understand that good works and religious observance cannot remove sin; that the sacrifice of the Word made flesh, the Messiah, is God’s only provision for salvation; that the Torah, Zabur and Injil (the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament) are the Word of God; and that obedience to Christ was God’s original plan for true “Islam” (Arabic for “submission to God”). Heart attitudes, family relationships and communication with God change radically, as the indwelling Holy Spirit produces his fruit in their lives. Just as early Jewish followers of the Way enjoyed fellowship in homes and in the temple with the larger Jewish community, so many C5 believers gather in small home fellowships and in the mosque with the larger Islamic community. Just as early Jewish followers of Jesus changed few of their outward Jewish religious
forms, so too C5 believers change little in their outward Muslim religious forms—most of which, incidentally, are derived from ancient Jewish and Christian traditions (Woodberry 1989 and 1996).

**Objections and Responses**

Phil Parshall, respected missiologist and pioneer in contextualization, expressed objections related to C5 (1998). Massey (1999), Gilliland (1998), Travis (1998) and Winter (1999) responded briefly to some of Dr. Parshall’s concerns, three of which are as follows:

1) *Deception in Christians posing as Muslims to reach Muslims* (i.e., “C5 missionaries”).

2) *Danger in ongoing mosque attendance past a transitional period* for new believers since “the mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology” (Parshall 1998:409) and exalts Muhammad as a prophet.

3) *Affirming the prophethood of Muhammad by recitation of the Muslim creed (shahada):* “There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet.”

On Parshall’s first concern, I agree. C5 was never intended to be a “missionary approach,” but rather to describe how some MBBs live out their faith in Christ. I personally cannot endorse Christians claiming to be Muslims for outreach. However, I want to add a word of caution. Missionaries to Muslims are also “in process.” Although there have been some very noble and fruitful attempts at Muslim outreach in previous centuries, on the whole the Church worldwide has only recently begun a concerted effort to bring the light of the Gospel to the Muslim world. With so few Muslims responding to the Gospel, it is premature for anyone to conclude that they have arrived at the correct way to reach the Muslim world. If a believer truly feels called of God to somehow enter a certain sect or local expression of Islam, and if he can with integrity share the identity of those Muslims and maintain his witness for Christ, then I will not condemn him. Theoretically, I suppose it is possible that some types of folk or Sufi Muslim groups, or other localized forms of Islam, may be conducive to such an approach, but officially converting from Christianity to any variety of orthodox Islam involves so many complex theological and cultural hurdles that it is most unwise for the typical young, aspiring missionary who is eager to contextualize.

On point two concerning mosque attendance, I have known some C5 believers who attend prayers in the mosque, some who only attend occasionally and some who never go at all. In much of the Muslim world, there are many nominal Muslims who seldom attend the mosque anyway. Returning again to Gilliland and Hiebert’s emphasis on process and direction, mosque attendance may only be a transitional part of some C5 believers’ spiritual journey. For others, they may attend with the mindset of Naaman in 2 Ki. 5:18, where he asked Elijah’s permission to still enter the temple of Rimmon in his home country. Still other C5 believers may attend the mosque like evangelical Catholics who attend mass but no longer pray to saints or exalt Mary. On the other hand, it is not unusual for some C5 believers to avoid mosque attendance all together, especially if they did not attend prior to following Christ.

As followers of Jesus, C5 believers understand that they must never disown or deny Christ as Lord, no matter the circumstance (Mt. 10:32-33). They must also never stray from the core components of the Gospel (e.g., the atoning death of Christ, his resurrection, salvation through Jesus only, his divinity, etc.)

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and the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God). How much of orthodox Islam they can affirm is determined as they study the Word of God together and are guided by the Holy Spirit. What various C5 communities affirm in Islam will vary in different contexts. Irrespective of mosque attendance, however, most C5 believers remain acceptable members of the Muslim community by continuing to give alms, keep the fast, pray daily, wear local dress, and use their customary religious vocabulary and worship style. Affirmation of these acceptable Islamic forms not only allow MBBs to keep their place in the Muslim community, but they also build bridges for effective witness to their family and community.

Regarding Parshall’s third concern, being C5 does not insinuate that the creed (shahada) is recited. Some C5 believers I know change the creed when performing their prayers to exalt Isa rather than Muhammad, proclaiming “there is no god but God, and Isa is the Straight Path” (see case studies below). Others whisper prayers in the name of Jesus or remain silent when the shahada is recited in public worship. I have heard of some C5 MBBs who say the creed because they feel it is an important sign of solidarity with their community, and they consider Muhammad to be a sort of “prophet” or religious leader, at least inasmuch as it was his words about Jesus in the Qur’an that first stimulated them to find a Bible to learn more about Christ in the Gospels.

Some C5 believers adopt Samuel Zwemer’s approach toward Muhammad by affirming all the truth Muhammad brought and never speaking disrespectfully of him. They emphasize that Muhammad was a great statesman and religious reformer, bringing Arabs from pagan polytheism to Abrahamic monotheism. They are quick to add that Muhammad spoke of Isa the Messiah (his virgin birth, miracles and sinlessness) and acknowledged that the Torah, Zabur and Injil are God’s Word and must be obeyed. When it becomes clear that the Muslim listener is ready for more, they, like Zwemer, share Jesus as Lord and Savior. My observation is that over time, without dictating how new MBBs should view Muhammad, he becomes less and less important to them as they grow in their love and obedience to Jesus. The interaction of C5 believers with outside Christians and theologians is very limited. They rely heavily on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. We must pray for these groups and trust the Holy Spirit will give them supernatural wisdom to respond to the inherent religious and social tensions which arise in their families and communities.

The following four case studies will attempt to illustrate the principles discussed above. I have been personally involved in the first three case studies, while the final one comes from my colleague, Andrew Workman.

Case Study 1: Taufik

Taufik comes from one of the most fanatic Muslim areas of the country. Now in his early 50s, Taufik was led to Christ over ten years ago by a foreign Christian coworker. We first met soon after his profession of faith and have fellowshipped together many times since. His family, most of whom don’t yet believe, have stayed in my home. To my knowledge, he has only attended one church service, and that was while he worked abroad. He faithfully keeps the fast of Ramadan, and in his clothing, diet, and vocabulary seems outwardly like any other Muslim in the community. However, he reads God’s Word daily, especially the Zabur (Psalms) and the Injil (New Testament). For several years the desire to succeed financially—not Islam—drew him away from his walk with Christ. But in recent months he has been faithfully meeting weekly for Bible study with a foreign believer, our coworker. Taufik enfolded another Muslim man into this small Bible study group, who in turn occasionally brings his adult son. The verses Taufik shares from the Zabur and Injil with Muslims in his community are well received as a blessing from a fellow Muslim. Taufik faithfully carries out his daily prayers, experiencing the presence of the Lord as he uses a small booklet with verses from the Torah, Zabur and Injil to accompany the motions of his Muslim prayer ritual. To date neither his wife nor his two teenage children have come to faith in Christ, but Taufik continues to share his faith with them regularly. He never thinks of himself as being a “Christian,” but reads many Christian devotional books. He sees himself as being a good Muslim, called to share salvation in the Messiah with fellow Muslims.

While we must guard against syncretism, we must also be mindful that ascent to perfect theological propositions is not the apex of the coming Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.
Case Study 2: Achmad

Achmad lives several miles from my home. Unlike Taufik, who is an upper-middle class university graduate, Achmad is poor and the father of eight children. He came to Christ in 1996 through several dreams and the witness of another foreign coworker. He is now being discipled by a national MBB on our team. Achmad and most of his family were baptized with several other MBBS in 1997. Before coming to the Lord he made a living as an Islamic shaman. His economic situation has worsened since coming to faith, having left his practice of sorcery and divination. He faithfully attends a weekly C4/C5 MBB fellowship and may soon be appointed one of its first elders. Achmad frequently brings Muslim friends and relatives to the fellowship. He perceives himself as a Muslim who knows Isa, and faithfully shares Christ with fellow Muslims. Before coming to faith he rarely attended the mosque, and has not changed this pattern since his decision to follow the Messiah.

Case Study 3: Abdul

On a recent taxi ride through town, my colleague and I enjoyed a brief conversation with the driver, Abdul. Having mentioned early on that he was a Muslim, Abdul astonished us both when he asked, “Did you know that Isa can forgive sin? Look at the hair on my arms,” he said, “every time I say the name of Isa, the hairs stand up! Jesus is the King of kings!” We asked how he knew so much about Jesus, then Abdul described his search for freedom from his sins. After someone gave him a New Testament years ago, he began reading it frequently.

He now regularly shares what he reads with fellow Muslim taxi drivers, and plans to become a Christian, along with his two daughters, in five years’ time. Abdul wondered out loud, “What if I die in my sins before I become a Christian?” We asked why he wanted to wait. He explained that his two daughters, when older, could stand up against the persecution they may receive from their mother and other relatives. I responded, “Abdul, if you really believe the Injil (Gospel), and the promises of God for salvation in Christ, then you can be saved this very day.” He started weeping—while we were driving! As we neared our destination, we pulled over, stopped the car, and prayed together in the taxi. He confessed his sins and received Christ.

An MBB coworker and I visited Abdul several times since then. God is using Abdul to draw a whole group of fellow taxi drivers to Christ. One of these, a haji (a respected Muslim who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca), was moved to tears when he read portions of the Torah, Zabur and Injil (the Bible).

Abdul’s wife recently heard from an acquaintance that Abdul must be thinking about changing religions. She suddenly began opposing Abdul’s faith with great vehemence. At this time, she does not seem open to the Gospel at all. What kind of fellowship would be best for Abdul? A congregation of C5 drivers?

Case Study 4: Soleh,
(by Andrew Workman)

Soleh is a respected member of a remote village community. In order to provide income and employment for his extended family, he works as the foreman of a construction crew from his village, buys goods from local farmers to resell in the city, and raises chickens. Soleh also teaches religion at the local mosque, mostly by helping children learn the Arabic alphabet so they can eventually recite the Qur’an.

Soleh received an opportunity to construct a dormitory at a small Christian boarding school in the city. He had worked for this school before and was confident they would be good employers. So he took the contract, gathered his crew, and left the village for a few months to do this work.

During construction, Soleh and his crew interacted with the school’s students and staff. The students, mostly from poor villages, spent break times with Soleh and his crew, trading stories about village life. They brought tea to the crew, shared what little food they had, and even spent personal money to buy them cigarettes. The students also shared their testimonies, especially about answered prayer. On several occasions the students prayed in front of the crew for their families and situations. The crew felt cared for and began to bond relationally to the students. Soleh once saw how the students prayed for God to supply their need when they had no food. Miraculously, food was donated to the school. Soleh had neither experienced such faith, nor ever seen God answer prayer so dramatically. He was deeply moved. Soleh also wanted this sort of relationship with God, but kept quiet.
One day Ali, a student, sat down to talk with Soleh, unaware Soleh had been desiring such a relationship with God. Having recently studied contextualized ways to share his testimony with Muslims, Ali began asking questions and listening. Soon Soleh opened his heart and asked how he could join the students, learning to pray in faith like them. Soleh was ready to become a traditional Christian (C1). This would have almost certainly resulted in social ostracism from his village and great difficulties with his family. Soleh was willing to undergo these trials to obtain the kind of relationship with God he saw these students had. Ali explained that Soleh could have this same relationship with God by praying for forgiveness through Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah). Soleh accepted this invitation and prayed with Ali.

Ali then explained that if Soleh wished to reach his family and crew for Christ, he might consider becoming a “follower of Isa” (C5) instead of a “traditional Christian” (C1), because staying in his community as a Messianic Muslim would likely increase his ability to share his faith with them. Soleh agreed. He would remain in his Muslim community, instead of joining the C1 Christian community. The two agreed to keep this matter private until Soleh could study more about following Isa. This all took place in December, 1996.

Within a few weeks Soleh shared his new faith with his son, who worked in the same city. His son wanted to read the Gospel but was too afraid to enter the Christian bookstore to buy a Bible, since a Muslim acquaintance might see him and cause trouble. Ali arranged to get him a Bible, and now he is reading it.

Since Soleh became a follower of Jesus, he has read the Bible, met with Ali for prayer and study, and witnessed to many coworkers on his crew. In fact, many crew members and heads of households in his village have also prayed for salvation through Isa al-Masih! Of those who attend prayers at the mosque, many have changed their creed. They now proclaim, “God is great. God is great. There is no god but God and Isa is the Straight Path.” No one suggested that Soleh change the creed; he did so on his own and tells his friends. He is convinced that true prayer is only through Isa, and that before putting his faith in Christ, he had no connection to God.

Soleh and his wife recently had a baby boy, whom they named after Isa. His in-laws asked if this meant Soleh was a Christian. He denied it, but later felt uncomfortable that he had not explained things more fully. Soleh therefore invited all heads of households in his village, including elected community and religious leaders, to attend the customary ceremony for his infant son. This ceremony of thanksgiving and prayer for God’s protection on the newborn is usually officiated by the head of the mosque or a Muslim shaman. However, on this day Soleh officiated himself. And in the presence of all the leaders, Soleh announced that he was a Muslim who now followed Isa. Not only did nobody seem upset, but many people were very interested, including the village chief who also became a follower of Isa soon thereafter!

As of June 1999, twenty male heads of households have become followers of Isa. It is unknown how many women and children also believe. Recently they asked for advice regarding a village tradition of visiting ancestral graves. Their conscience was bothering them not only about ancestor worship, but also about certain animistic aspects of marriage and burial ceremonies. Like many Muslims around the world, their folk Islam condoned the continuance of many ancient rites to appease the spirit world. Now, however, many have turned to Isa to protect them from the spirit world. Furthermore, the village heads have asked the Christian students to come and pray against the plague of rats that has destroyed their crops for many years. A team gifted with faith and experience in this kind of ministry went to the village to pray. While we wait on God’s answer to these prayers, the village is growing in faith as they pray in the name of Isa al-Masih.

Concluding Observations

Some Muslims who receive Christ as Savior deliberately choose a C5 expression of faith, not for their own sake (e.g., Soleh was prepared to join a church), but for the

Let us pray for these infant, emerging C5 congregations and believers. In particular, please join us in praying for Taufik, Achmad, Abdul, Soleh and the thousands of other Messianic followers of Isa. Pray for all those whom their witness touches.
sake of the lost who would be far less likely to receive truth from outsiders (i.e., “Christians”). Others, like Taufik and Achmad, love Jesus, but simply see staying in the Muslim community as something natural.

There are surely points at which C5 believers must reject the theology of non-Messianic Muslims. Clearly, one can’t affirm two completely opposite statements as true (e.g., “Jesus died on a cross,” and “Jesus didn’t die on a cross”). Therefore, C5 believers will be found to have “aberrant” beliefs. However, when confronted by family and friends with their deviance from Islamic orthodoxy, we have seen the Holy Spirit empower C5 believers to reply with amazing answers (Col. 4:6; Mt. 10:19,20). They often present reinterpretations of particular Qur’anic verses, bringing much glory to Jesus.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the “aberrance” of C5 Messianic theology almost pales in comparison to the “aberrance” of numerous folk beliefs and shamanistic Muslim practices that saturate popular Islam in our context. Therefore, the way in which C5 believers are received by the larger Muslim community will depend on a variety of factors such as tolerated Islamic heterodoxy, country, ethnicity, local politics, size of the local mosque, and so on. C5 may be appropriate in certain milieus, but not in others. Again, we need to affirm the diversity found throughout the C1-C6 spectrum.

It is possible that C5 may only be a temporary option. Few case C5 studies have been documented, and none go back far enough to watch C5 dynamics across several generations of time. C5 may prove to only be a transitional stage, ending when believers choose, or are forced by the Muslim community, to leave Islam, thereby moving to another point on the C1-C6 spectrum. The first century Jews gathered regularly in the temple with non-Messianic Jews, and in homes with fellow Messianic Jews (Acts 2:46-47). However, in time Jewish authorities began expelling any Jew who believed Jesus was the Messiah. It is noteworthy that this separation of the two communities was not initiated by Jewish believers. Still, many Jews and Jewish leaders came to faith in the intermittent years. The same sequence of events could eventually happen to today’s Messianic Muslims. Meanwhile, MBBs like Soleh who stay in their community may be used of God to usher millions of Muslims into His Kingdom.

While we must be careful to guard against syncretism, we must also be mindful that ascent to perfect theological propositions is not the apex of the coming Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. All our work must be judged according to Scripture. So let us pray for these infant, emerging C5 congregations. In particular, please join us in praying for Taufik, Achmad, Abdul, Soleh and all the people whom their witness touches.

References


John Travis and Andrew Workman minister among Muslims in Asia.
Today, the United States has more Hindus than any other non-Asian nation in the world with an estimated population of 1-1.5 million Hindus living in the country today or 0.4% of the total population (The Pew Forum, 2008), (Wikipedia, 2014). Canada, similarly, is home to an additional 500,000 Hindus (Wikipedia, 2014). As it has often been noted, the Hindus of North America live, work, study, and worship in every major and midsized city—as well as many of the smaller ones—on the continent; tend to be employed in highly skilled and well-paying professions; and represent many of the least-reached people groups in the world. Surely no missiological consideration of people groups in North America is complete without paying careful attention to such a large, influential, and unreached religio-cultural bloc. However, we must note that while, as missiologist H.L. Richard has noted, it has become “geographically easy” for North American followers of Christ to reach out to many Hindus, the particular challenges presented by the Hindu-Christian encounter have rendered us largely ineffective in this endeavor (Richard, Good News for Hindus in the Neighborhood, 2010).

In this short article, I would like to present a summary of what I have found to be some of the most essential points related to the topic of contextualization of Christ-centered discipleship for Hindu peoples and communities. This is not intended at all to be an exhaustive treatment of all points relevant to this topic nor of the particular points that I will raise here. Rather, as I have worked reflectively as a follower of Christ seeking to make disciples among Hindus in North America for several years, I have become convinced that the proper pursuit of contextualization is indispensable for faithful disciple-making among them. For the sake of brevity, I will save a careful defense of this thesis for another time and move right in to my main points.

Working Assumptions

In addition to my statement about the essential nature of pursuing contextualization in our outreach to Hindus, there are a number of other assumptions that provide something of a point of departure for everything else I’ll be presenting here. Again, in an article of this length, it simply isn’t possible to elaborate upon or defend any of these. Nevertheless, I would like the reader to know that I am conscious of the need to defend each of these from a theological and missiological standpoint. For now, however, it will have to suffice to simply state some of these assumptions and move on.

1. A holistic definition of “discipleship” is preferred.

   It is here assumed that a Biblical definition of discipleship includes what is sometimes referred to as “pre-evangelism,” evangelism, and post-evangelistic ministry. The Lord Jesus meant all of this when He commissioned His followers to go and “make disciples” and the phrase “evangelism and discipleship” is, therefore, redundant. From this point on, when I talk about discipleship, I have a
holistic view in mind that includes (but isn’t limited to) sharing the message of the Gospel, teaching spiritual disciplines, building communities of faith and church planting, and raising up leaders who themselves make disciples.

2. **The traditional view of contextualization, greatly influenced by the C1-5 scale originally developed by John Travis for use in Muslim contexts, is fundamentally flawed.**

That is, Travis’s scale (Travis, 1998), as it is commonly interpreted, reflects the false assumption that the continued pursuit of contextualization (or rightward/upward movement on the scale) inescapably leads to syncretism while the non-pursuit of contextualization (leftward/downward movement or non-movement) is basically legitimate. This assumption is to be rejected as it is incapable of accounting for the incarnation of Jesus Christ or the incarnational methodology of Paul (discussed below). Further, debate over particular forms used or censured by Christian leaders is not the same thing as debate over the pursuit of contextualization itself. It must be understood that Christ-centered discipleship is always contextualized to human culture in human forms, that there is no such thing as “Christian” culture or “normal” Christian expression, and that the only remaining question is to what extent a given cultural group’s expression of following Jesus is contextually relevant to those it is trying to reach with the gospel.

3. **In view of the incarnation and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus and the incarnational and crucifxional missionary methodology of Paul, it is critical that followers of Jesus today pursue contextualization as an essential spiritual discipline for cross-cultural missions.**

Passages about the incarnation such as John 1, Mark 6:1-6, and the Carmen Christi of Philippians 2 demonstrate that the answer to the question, “How far did Jesus go in his pursuit of contextualization?” is an unqualified “all the way.” Further, Paul’s own missionary method (especially illustrated by his sermons in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, and Athens) appears to have been an imitation of Christ’s incarnation. His defense in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 provides us with a glimpse into the heart of a missionary who was constantly laying down his own rights and preferences for the sake of incarnating the gospel in the variety of mission fields he found himself in. The words of Paul here seem to echo his meditation on the incarnation of Christ in Philippians 2 so that we can be sure that the incarnation of the Lord greatly influenced Paul’s incarnational method. The imitation of Christ was a spiritual discipline for Paul and it should be for us as well as we venture to take the gospel across cultural barriers.

4. **Hinduism is not correctly described as a religion but rather as a civilization.**
The term “Hinduism” is actually a foreign imposition upon a rather large and heterogeneous complex of cultures, religions, ethnicities, kingdoms, and peoples. To refer to it as a world religion alongside Islam, Judaism, and Christianity is an example of the kind of shallow, orientalist thinking of the West that is both unfair to the Hindu person and unhelpful to our missionary efforts. A couple quotes are worth mentioning here:

*If we accept Judaism, Christianity and Islam as “religions” and if, compelled by intellectual honesty, we want to apply the same term to comparable phenomena, we cannot avoid concluding that there are a number of different “religions” existing side by side within “Hinduism.”* (Stietencron, 2001)

*Probably the best term for these expansive phenomena is to refer to Hinduism as a civilization. As European and Chinese civilizations span vast centuries and areas and religions and developments, so also does Hinduism, which is at least close to being a synonym for Indian civilization. . . . If Hinduism is an alternate religion to Christianity, one naturally shrinks from suggestions that the gospel of Christ should be introduced within the Hindu religion. . . . But if Hinduism is understood as a civilization, the picture is completely changed. Surely, it is obvious that the gospel of Christ must be incarnated within every civilization. So the duty of adaptation to Hindu civilization overwhelms the fear of confusion in relating to the Hindu “religion.”* (Richard, New Paradigms for Understanding Hinduism and Contextualization, 2010)

Understanding Hinduism on this level opens the door for us to consider the true richness which God has placed within that civilization that not only holds potential for advancing the kingdom of Christ among Hindus, but also offers wonderful treasures to the global Church that will undoubtedly stimulate us all to greater discipleship. It is also only on this level that the true brokenness and sinfulness sown by Satan among Hindu peoples may come into full view. Here the potential exists to discover, expose, and oppose sin from the perspective of an insider after the manner of Jesus.

**Some Essential Principles of Contextualization to Hindus**

The following represent what I consider to be broad principles and potential bridges in the pursuit of contextualization among Hindu peoples. Of course, as almost nothing is universally applicable to all Hindus everywhere, exceptions are to be expected. (Lorance, 2008)
What “Going to Church” Should Mean

In the typical Hindu worship experience, simply going to a place that is considered sacred by the worshipper is in itself an act of worship. This, of course, differs from the mindset of many modern Evangelicals who generally attribute little spiritual significance to places of worship such as church buildings. If an expression of Christ-centered worship is to be truly contextualized among Hindus, “going to church” must therefore become a spiritual experience through which a follower of Jesus can encounter God in a meaningful way. A significant obstacle to this is the fact that groups of Hindu followers of Jesus in the United States will likely be small and able only to afford to meet in private homes or in rented spaces. Thus, the challenge becomes developing a way to transform environments that are associated with common activities into sacred spaces for worship.

Worship for All the Senses

Typical Hindu worship involves all the senses. There is music, bells, chanting and singing for the ears; feasting and prasad (sacred food) for the tongue; painting, sculpture, decorations, idols and architecture for the eyes; ceremonial washings and artis (which involve worshippers feeling the warmth of lighted oil lamps) for the hands; and the fragrance of flowers and incense for the nose. Beyond this Hindus often utilize a wide variety of forms as expressions of worship. Everything from drama and ceremonial adornment to gift-giving and even flying kites has its place in their worship experience. This may be contrasted with typical Western Christian worship (which has heavily influenced the development of Christian churches in South Asia), in which the experience is comparatively less diverse both in terms of its expression and its appeal to the senses. Obviously, there are certain practices (e.g. idol worship) that are incompatible with a Biblical worldview and must therefore be excluded. Nevertheless, Followers of Jesus must experiment with a wide variety of forms indigenous to Hinduism and even create new forms if they hope to develop an expression of Christ-centered worship that is truly rich and meaningful for Hindus.

Elevating the Role of Festival in Christian Discipleship

One of the most glaring distinctions between the ways in which Western Evangelicals and Hindus typically practice their faiths lies in the importance attributed by each group to the role of festivals. For Western Christians, festivals are important but essentially peripheral to their overall experience as followers of Jesus. To Hindus, on the other hand, festivals are much more central to worship. They are, as V. Francis Vineeth explained, sacred times during which a worshipper “moves from this world to the other world and participates in the life of God” (Vineeth, 1987).
It is important to note that these festivals are not just big parties. Occurring throughout the year, the festivals are each observed in specific ways that incorporate a variety of both celebratory and somber worship expressions. Thus, a Hindu who faithfully observes at least the major festivals in the prescribed ways will experience regular periods of prayer, vigil, fasting, feasting, celebration, meditation and more. The result is a spirituality – a mode of discipleship – that is actually rather well-balanced. Therefore, elevating the role of festival in Christian worship is not only a good way of making the Christian experience more familiar to Hindu followers of Christ but it could also be a very effective means of promoting discipleship among them. Traditionally, followers of Jesus have been exhorted to practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, Bible study, Scripture memory, and meditation. Incorporating a festival system would provide both a framework for the regular exercise of such disciplines as well as a structure of accountability in that disciples would be practicing these in the context of community. Thus, the prayerful development of a spiritual festival calendar is essential to our pursuit of contextualization. And, in doing so, we must not only consider the use of traditional Christian festivals like Christmas and Easter, but also re-imagined Christocentric versions of Hindu festivals such as Deepawali, Dashain, and others as doing so would powerfully communicate a sense of cultural affinity that would challenge the centuries-old notion of Christianity as a religion essentially foreign to the Hindu civilization.

**Balancing the vertical and horizontal dimensions of discipleship**

In his article on Hindu festivals, V. Francis Vineeth explained that Hindu worship essentially has four goals: union with God, union with fellow-beings, union with nature, and union with oneself (Vineeth, 1987). Through both formal and informal interviews and observations, however, I have noticed a clear emphasis on “uniting with fellow-beings” over and above the other four goals. Anecdotally, for example, I can point to a large number of Nepali Hindus who, in the course of describing the significance of various Hindu festivals to me, could discuss at length the various details of their duties toward loved ones during the festivals. However they were almost universally unable to explain to me anything that might be considered theologically significant about those festivals. My ethnographic research among Tamilian Hindus further illustrates the importance of this horizontal (social) dimension of worship in revealing the possible pattern of single, male Hindus immigrating to the United States who initially leave off the practice of their Hindu faith and especially festival observance. The same men then pick up those practices again once they get married, have children, or make significant connections with other Hindus.

The importance of the horizontal dimension (union with others) in Hindu discipleship has significant implications for those who seek to develop a contextualized expression of Christ-centered worship. To put it bluntly, any effort of contextualization for Hindu followers of Jesus must find a way to incorporate the horizontal dimension into the worship experience. This, of course, must be done in a way that accents rather than overshadows the true, vertical (union with God) experience that only the Lord Jesus
provides. It may be pointed out that the balance between horizontal and vertical dimensions in Christian discipleship is actually mandated in Scripture; “for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20b).

The Gospel as “Good News”

We must recognize that different cultures understand the “bad news” of the human condition in different ways. If the gospel is to be understood by its hearers as “good news” it must speak to the “bad news” as people already understand and experience it. One of the key tasks of a missionary is to identify exactly where, in a given cultural context, sin has taken hold of individuals, families, and the society at large. It is precisely at this point – where the gospel may be readily understood as truly good news – that it must be most vigorously proclaimed.

In the Hindu context, the “bad news” is often understood in terms of shame and honor as well as fear, power, and oppression. This gets into issues related to collectivism, caste, and the spirit world that are beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the pursuit of contextualization among Hindus will require a fresh reading of Scripture, a re-theologizing about our faith, and new emphases in our message. In short, we must be Gospel-bearers who listen first to our Hindu friends as they talk about the “bad news” as they understand it. As we listen carefully, we must consider whether or not the Lord Jesus and his incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension have anything at all to say about that.

Contextualization and Relationships: Parallel Pursuits

Sacrificial relationship-building is indispensable for maintaining the kind of dialogue that is necessary for true disciple-making. That is to say that the pursuit of contextualization must greatly influence the way we engage in relationships. Contextualization is essential for the initiating, deepening, and maintaining of these relationships. To some extent, in order for Jesus to become “owned” by the Hindu, the messenger of Jesus also must become “owned.” A cognitive distinction must be gradually made in the minds of our Hindu friends between the cross-cultural worker and “most Americans” or even “most Christians.” The missionary must, for his/her part painfully accept the increasing dissonance between him/herself and other non-Hindus as the necessary cost for becoming more embedded and therefore more faithful as an incarnation of Christ among Hindus.

Related to this, and a subject that deserves much more treatment, is the importance of cultivating reciprocity and, consequently, indigenous ownership of the Christ-centered faith in our ministry to Hindus. In word, deed, and relationship, we cannot do without reciprocity. Missionaries among Hindus must not only speak but listen, not only give but receive, not only love but be loved. I realize that this sounds like a somewhat trite thing
to say. However, I am fully convinced that there can be no sustainable progress of our missionary endeavors among Hindus without all three. If Hindus really feel that they are heard by me, if they feel they can give to me, and if they truly and deeply love me, then I am theirs – an insider to their community. This in turn means that I follow Jesus as one of them rather than as a foreigner. So, Jesus too belongs to them. Such sparks of reciprocity and ownership must be fanned into flame if disciple-making is to be sustained.

My prayer and hope is that God will raise up large numbers of Christ-followers who are equipped to incarnate Christ among Hindus and that, as a result, efforts to reach Hindus with the message of Jesus Christ will be multiplied across North America and the world. If I can be a resource to help you in this, please contact me:

For Further Research and Reflection

There is a small group of reflective practitioners who are regularly producing resources on the topic of contextualization and missionary work among Hindus. As this article is only a very limited introduction, I strongly encourage you to explore the following:

- The Ramblings (Blog) by Cody Lorance – look for tabs with articles dedicated to the subjects of “contextualization” and “Hinduism”. [http://codylorance.blogspot.com](http://codylorance.blogspot.com)
- Adhyathma Vatika (website) – with lots of resources produced by Hindus who are followers of the Lord Jesus. [http://www.adhyathmavatika.com](http://www.adhyathmavatika.com)
- Go Network Online (website) – subscription-based website with many resources dedicated to building Christ-centered communities of Hindus. [http://gonetworkonline.org](http://gonetworkonline.org)
- Voice of Bhakti (Journal archives) – the archives of a missiological journal with a focus on Nepal, Hindus and contextualization. [http://www.bhaktivani.com](http://www.bhaktivani.com)
- The Rethinking Forum (Organization) – subscription-based website but the RF also produces print publications focused on Hindus and contextualization that can be found via online booksellers. [http://www.rethinkingforum.com](http://www.rethinkingforum.com)
Works Cited


Biblical Foundations

Biblical Precedent: Decision of the Jerusalem Council

It is clear in New Testament era mission history that the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 was a great turning point. The decision of that council was to leave Gentiles in their culture. They did not have to become Jews culturally in order to enter into the new covenant.

The Council had the open-mindedness to believe the report of Barnabas and Paul that the faith of the Gentile converts was genuine and firm. They had the courage to trust that the Holy Spirit could do something new and different that was still authentic (Acts 15:28). They were persuaded that the Gentiles could live within their traditional cultures and still practice the faith in a God-pleasing manner. They could organize and worship and witness and theologize in the way that made sense to them—and to their Gentile neighbors.

As a consequence, the church spread in the Gentile world. The church was firmly rooted in Gentile soil. It’s hard to imagine that the great mission expansion in the Gentile world could have happened if they had tried to impose a Jewish-style faith on Gentile believers.

When Paul visited the synagogues on his missionary journeys, the “God fearers” (Acts 10:2, 13:26, 50, 16:14, 17:4, 17) were a major focus of his ministry. These Gentiles understood and accepted the messianic hope of the Jewish prophets. They did not want to convert to Judaism, even though they accepted the faith and participated in the worship of Yahweh. It would have meant seriously alienating themselves from their Greek/Roman cultures:

- Hellenistic culture idolized the perfection of the human body. Male converts to Judaism would repulse their friends and family by mutilating their bodies through circumcision.
- They would have to remove themselves from eating with friends and family because none of the meat served would follow the laws of kosher.
- They would leave their social obligations completely for one day every week when observing the Sabbath.
- They weren’t ethnic Jews, so they really didn’t fit in there either.
The alienations would go on and on. Very few were willing to make that sacrifice of their family responsibilities and social network. They were unwilling to be uprooted. The Christian message of St. Paul enabled them to remain rooted and still be faithful. The “God fearers” jumped at the opportunity to enter into the covenant through the common cultural practice of baptism instead of through the foreign custom of circumcision. Millions of their neighbors soon followed.

Temptation of “Mother Church”
However, this movement to a culturally rooted Gentile church did not develop unopposed. St. Paul and his followers continually had to fight against the influence of the “Judaizers.” These were well-intentioned believers who were sincerely concerned that these new Christians would fall back into their pagan habits. They were concerned that the Gentile believers were going to be syncretistic if they did not draw firm and clear lines between themselves and their pagan environment.

In addition, the churches of the Judaizers were the “mother church.” They were the ones with the long, proven history of the People of God. They simply wanted to share the truths of their heritage and enable these new believers to become rooted in the authentic biblical tradition. Then they would stand firm in the faith, grow in holiness, and be a true “light in the darkness” as God intended.

As it turned out, the impetus of the Jerusalem Council enabled a movement to develop that eventually overwhelmed the Judaizers. The Jewish-style church has revived in recent years among the “Messianic Jews.” However, the dominant form of church throughout the world—whether Western or Eastern—is rooted in cultures far different from that of the Old Testament.

Nonetheless, the problem of Judaistic tendencies in mission work did not end with the demise of Jewish Christianity. Pride and control are not a peculiar sin of only the first-century “mother church.” All through mission history the well-intentioned desire to root new believers in new soil has been a pervasive and destructive temptation.

In order to address this issue adequately, we must place it in a broad theological context. Much of the problem over the ages of mission history has come from distinguishing between culture and religion. In most societies, religion is an integral part of culture. How does a convert reject his past religion but not his past culture? Which practices of the culture are actually religious? How does one make a clear witness to Jesus Christ while still participating in the culture?

Biblical View of God

**God’s Valuing of Culture**

The simplistic answer to these questions is that we are called to have the same attitude toward culture as God does. What is His attitude?

As we look to Holy Scripture, we see how God respects and values cultures of His world. Most of the biblical passages referring to culture are expressions of God the Father. Since the creative activity of God is typically associated with God the Father, one would expect this Person of the Trinity to be the major referent. Some examples would be: Gen 18:18, Ps 22:27-28, 47:8, 67:2, 96:5-13, Is 2:1-4, 56:7, 60:3, 66:18, Jer 1:5, Acts 17:26, Rev 15:4, 21:24, 22:2.

God is the creator and redeemer of the “nations.” What must be noted is that the Hebrew and Greek words that are typically translated “nations” actually mean ethnic groups. During those times, there were only ethnic groups and empires. Nations as we now understand them did not exist. What tied people together over the centuries was their ethnic identity.

This identity is what the passages refer to. The ethnic groups, or cultures, of the world are what God the Father values and heals and brings to Himself purified and redeemed. All “the ethnic groups of the world will come and worship Him” (Rev. 15:4)

Likewise, it is to these ethnic groups (Gk: ta ethne) that Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, called us to go in His Great Commission. We are to “make disciples of all ethnic groups ...” (Mt 28:19) Then, in the Final Judgment, these are the ones of “every nation, tribe, people, and language who will stand before throne and in front of the Lamb.” (Rev 7:9) The cultures of the world will be represented and celebrated for all eternity. Thus, Scripture also portrays the Second Person of the Trinity as One who values and respects the cultures of the world. (See also: Ps 72:17, Dan 7:14, Phil 2:11.)

It is clear from Scripture, then, that God eternally values and respects the varied cultures of His world. They are varied dimensions of the potential He created in Man. They are part of the creative calling that God gave Man in His “image.” Just as an earthly parent loves and values each of her/his children, though they be very different, so the Heavenly Father loves and values each of the cultures that have blossomed as from the seeds He planted.

**God’s Redeeming of Culture**

Secondly, it is clear that all cultures are as sin-ridden as the humans that have created them. Just as humankind is in need of redemption and reform, so are all the cultures of the world. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rages” (Is 64:6), including all of our cultures. Just
as each human has her/his particular weaknesses and faults of character, so does each culture. So do we all have our particular strengths. We need each other to help us with our faults and to share with us our strengths.

Scripture makes it clear that the cultures of the world will also be part of the redeemed riches of heaven. That is why even now we are called to respect and honor, to preserve and cultivate the cultures of the world. We know what God’s eternal will is, so we strive even now to carry it forward, that His “will may be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10).

**Theological Principles**

Certain theological operating principles have been drawn from this biblical record. We will look at some of them now in relation to the necessity of contextualization for faithful, God-pleasing mission outreach.

**Orders of Creation**

One theological principle has traditionally been termed the “orders of creation.” These are the universal structures of society such as marriage, family, government, court, etc. These structures take many different forms, but they are to be found at the core of every society. These are the structures that guide and uphold the dynamics of the society, especially in the spheres of the greatest danger to harmony and stability. These structures recognize the original sinfulness of human nature and the need to bring these personal drives of sex and greed and power under social control. Without the orders of creation controlling us we are doomed to self-destruction.

These orders have taken many different forms in the varied cultures of the world. In most societies marriages are arranged by parents or elders. In some societies people are free and responsible to make their own arrangements. However, in all societies there are mores and laws to govern this crucial element of social life. Similarly, there are many forms of family, but there is some way responsibly to raise children, whether by parents or grandparents or elders or wider society. Government leaderships may be elected or hereditary. It may be authoritarian or democratic. Courts may be adjudicated by elected officials or elders or religious leaders. These forms will always be there, and there are strengths and weaknesses inherent in any form.

What is critical for us in our cross-cultural mission work is that these structures are honored and preserved. We are not called to change the workings of the orders of creation—unless they are clearly against the Word of God, as we shall see. We are called to preach the Gospel and enable the working of the Holy Spirit for the redemption/sanctification of all sin-ridden people and their sin-ridden cultures. We do not uproot people from the comfort of their cultures and the stability of their orders of creation.

**Adiaphora Principle**

A second, related theological principle is the “adiaphora principle.” This term means “things that do not matter.” It arose at the time of the Reformation, particularly in Lutheran circles, to identify what elements of the Roman Catholic Church needed to be discarded and what simply reformed. The idea was to maintain the unity and continuity of the church as much as possible. For example, in the liturgy, Martin Luther saw the need only to discard the canon, the portion of the liturgy around the Words of Consecration that spoke of the Eucharist as a sacrifice generating merit. Everything else was simply “adiaphora,” things that could be changed or not.

Luther followed the same principle in the “iconoclastic controversy.” When more radical reformers were knocking down the statues of saints in the cathedrals because they were “graven images” and forms of idol worship, Luther objected. He said that these statues were “adiaphora.” They could be properly understood simply as inspiring recollections of great examples of the faith. Of course, people of the Reformation would no longer pray to or through them, but it was a matter of reform not of rejection.

In fact, Luther preached that there is a great danger in attacking the statues, for people could begin to minimize the call of the Reformation to a change in architecture instead of a change of heart. He said there is only one idol that needs to be removed, and that is the one in the human hearts. Once that idol is removed, we will see and use these statues in a God-pleasing way. If that inner idol remains untouched, no change in church architecture will be God-pleasing.

Luther applied the same principle to church governance. Even the papacy could be reformed. Just removing the papacy would not be a true, God-pleasing Reformation.

In relation to contextualization, the same principle applies. We strive to change only that which is clearly against the Gospel, that which cannot be reformed. Otherwise, we strive to maintain stability and continuity in the society. In applying this principle, we will most likely find, as Luther did, that only a very small percentage needs to be rejected.

As in any sin-ridden society, the vast majority of structures simply needs on-going reform. We do best to keep everything intact as much as possible. Let the Gospel permeate the society, and let the people gradually sort out what needs to be changed.
Two Kingdoms Distinction
A third theological principle in our approach to contextualization is that of the “Two Kingdoms.” This is the theological recognition that God works through more than the church to accomplish His will. This principle distinguishes between God’s work with His “right hand” and His work with His “left hand.” With both hands, God is battling the forces of Satan. With His right hand, God is working to cure evil through the Word and Sacraments of His church. With His left hand, God is working to prevent the spread of evil through government, courts, social mores, orders of creation, etc.

This principle recognizes that both of these spheres are arenas in which God works. Both are instituted by God for His purposes of love and grace toward His fallen children. Both are to be respected, upheld, and served as God’s faithful people. We “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Lk 20:25). Even further, we recognize that nothing is truly secular, for all things of society are potential tools of God. When His People and church go astray, God may even need to use His left hand to set them right, as He did with the Babylonian Empire in Old Testament times.

Syncretism
A fourth guiding principle is the concern to avoid syncretism. Syncretism is any doctrine or practice that violates a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, particularly the doctrine of salvation. In the Hindu context, for example, it would be syncretistic to accept that all of the Hindu gods and goddesses are just as valid revelations of God as Jesus. Therefore, Christians avoid participating in the worship features of Hindu holidays.

However, it is not syncretistic to participate in the social events of these holidays. Likewise, it is not syncretistic to adopt some of the forms of traditional Hindu religious organization and worship, as long as it is clear Who alone is being worshipped and fol-

lowed. I will give further details on this phenomenon in India at the conclusion of this article.

Basically, the discernment of syncretism is an application of the adiaphora principle: Is this matter of practice or this framing of doctrine an area of Christian freedom and relevancy? Or does it render unclear the fundamental Christian witness to God’s saving work in Christ? Another example: In the Japanese context, may Christians participate in and conduct the traditional tea ceremony? Just because it has been associated with Shintoism in the past, is it an essential expression and practice of Shintoism? Or is it simply a part of traditional Japanese culture that Christians should value and respect as a beautiful, creative work of God?

In the USA and the great cities of the world, business enterprise is a central part of the urban culture. This business culture easily slips over into wasteful consumerism, self-centered greed, and social oppression. Should Christians, then, avoid participating in business ventures, or is there a way to conduct business that does not compromise Christian witness?

The examples go on and on around the world in all the varied contexts in which Christians live and work. We are called to discernment: Is this facet of our culture redeemable, or must it be firmly and publicly rejected?

Giving Offense
Another biblical principle that is brought to bear on this topic of contextualization is the giving of offense. Often Christians caution others to be careful not to offend brothers and sisters in the fellowship with their efforts at contextualization. For example, one’s use of particular instruments or dance in worship or vocabulary in witness or participation in public events may upset fellow Christians. They may be requested to cease those practices because it is causing offense to others in the faith.

However, we must be very clear about the way in which Scripture cautions us in this regard. The term for “offense” is “skandalon” in Greek. It means a “stumbling block,” something that causes others to fall in their walk of faith (cf. Rom 14:12-23, I Cor 8:9-13, Mk 9:43). Therefore, it is not simply that one Christian dislikes or disagrees with something that another Christian individual or group is doing. They are saying that these actions are dangerously close to causing this fellow Christian to lose her/his faith.

When someone calls someone to cease participating in the tea ceremony or using this musical instrument in worship or participating in this public event because it is “causing offense,” they are saying that they are so weak in the faith that they may fall away from Christ if this practice is continued. In fact, it is highly unlikely that efforts at contextualization will cause offense in this sense. People may not like and they may disagree, but it would be a rare occasion that such an action will cause them to lose their faith.

On the other hand, our use of Western forms and practices may well cause people who are beginning to look at the faith to turn away. Our unbiblical judgmental attitudes toward culture may lead to the impression that the “Christian God” doesn’t like or want them. These seekers are the truly weak ones in faith against which we in the traditional church may be causing real offense in the biblical sense.

“In the World but not of the World”
Finally, there is the biblical principle of being “in the world but not of the
One of the tragic facts of mission history has been that we have lost the thousand by the way we have won the one.

He demonstrates how most of the categories of thought are very similar between African cultures and biblical witness. In contrast, most views of the secular West are quite contrary to the biblical views, and to a great extent Western Christians share that secularist view and not the biblical view.

For example, in one table on pp. 135-36, Dr. Loewen lists phenomena such as communicating with ancestors and spirits communicating with us and souls of people being stolen. Dr. Loewen records how all of these phenomena are documented in the biblical record; yet, Western Christians are quite skeptical and hesitant about accepting this view of reality. In contrast, for Africans, this is precisely how they see the world.

Most cultures and religions see reality as filled with many—even innumerable—levels of existence. We in this visible world live in only one of them. Traditional cultures speak of these different levels of existence in remarkably similar ways whether as leprechauns, jinn, angels/demons, ancestors, or by many other names. Is our purpose in evangelism to contradict and change these worldviews? Do we dismiss them as superstition?

Or is it possible that we in the West are the ones who have a very limited and closed view of the full Reality? Do we want to keep reality under our control and therefore deny anything that is beyond our ken? Should we be learning from these traditional worldviews so that our worldview might become more biblical?

Symbols

Cultures have many different symbols that they use to convey meaning and identity. Can we and should we use these symbols in our doing and practice of theology? Certainly these symbols often have their origins and meanings
in other religions. Are they redeemable for Christian witness and identity? This process has happened over the centuries in Western Christendom. We all know the non-Christian origins of customs that are now integral to Western Christianity, from the date of Christmas to the Christmas tree to the name of “Easter” to the Easter egg and on and on. These non-Christian symbols have become infused with Christian meaning.

Can we encourage the same process in our missiological approach to other cultures? We don’t want to violate and expropriate the sacred symbols of other religions. But we can respect them and show how these symbols can also carry Christ-centered meanings, whether these are public festivals like Kwanza in Africa or religious artifacts like oil lamps and symbols like the lotus flower in India.

We typically see the American flag in Christian churches in the USA. It is a symbol of our Christian vocation to be responsible, active participants in the Kingdom of the Left. Why not have the national flag in churches around the world, even where religious freedom is restricted and Christians are persecuted? Especially where the national loyalty of Christians is doubted, it might be a very important symbol to convey Christian commitment to the good of the land.

Styles of Communication
What is open, honest communication in one culture is highly offensive in another. What is frank confrontation in one culture is a total breach of propriety in another. What is never getting to the point in one culture is tactful persuasion in another. What is persuasively alluding in one culture is pointlessly eluding in another culture. What is effective teaching through inductive, participative pedagogics in one culture is embarrassing and offensive confrontation in another culture.

I have so many examples of these differences causing miscommunication and breach of trust. Let me just share one. A senior Indian Christian told me this story of how his close relation with a previous Western missionary was totally and irrevocably broken. He was traveling with the missionary in his car. The missionary decided to practice Matthew 18, as he understood it. He informed the friend that he had heard he said something critical and untrue about the missionary in a meeting. The Indian Christian was shocked and replied, “If you could even think that I would do such a thing, we are no longer friends.”

How Matthew 18 is to be carried out in one culture will be different in another culture. How Christian unity is maintained in the bond of truth and love differs from culture to culture. How we communicate and clarify matters in Christian love and fellowship is culturally determined.

The Arts
Which arts are appropriate in Christian worship? Can we use artistic forms that are common in the culture, even based in non-Christian worship? Are certain musical instruments and styles of music secular while others are sacred? Can any cultural form potentially be redeemed and used for the glory of God in Christ? Are there forms of art that communicate more effectively with the non-Christian world?

One of the major movements among First Nations Christians today is the recovery of their art forms. They relate how their traditional dance, for example, was rejected by Western missionaries and banned from church practice. It had been used for demonic and violent purposes. The movement now is to recover those forms, fill them with Christian content, and use them for Christian worship and witness.

The First Nations people testify that they finally feel that God is at home in their culture. (See videos The Promise and Call to the Nations produced by Don Mapes for Whole World Network in 2002 and 2003.) They finally feel they are worshipping God from the depth of their own being. Their faith is now rooted in the culture of the land, and it feels right and strong. These Christian forms of expression now appear as part of the traditional culture, not as a Western import and imposition. The message to their non-Christian neighbors is that one can indeed be a true national and a true Christian.

Sources of Authority
In Western theology, the Bible is the norm for all doctrine and practice. However, it is obvious that for non-Christians the Bible does not carry any of this authority. When we seek to convey biblical truths, it means very little to them that we quote from the Bible.

We need to discern how people address spiritual questions within their own cultural framework. In some cultures, it may be the wisdom of the elders passed down from generation to generation. With others, spiritual questions may be addressed authoritatively in their proverbs. When we can cite the wisdom of the elders or a relevant proverb, we find them nodding in approval of our biblical truth.

The Promise
In an interview in 2002 and 2003, the First Nations people testified that they finally feel that God is at home in their culture. (See videos The Promise and Call to the Nations produced by Don Mapes for Whole World Network in 2002 and 2003.) They finally feel that God is at home in their culture.

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ship of other religions, but does that mean they cannot be used in Christian worship? Might these gestures even be encouraged among new believers?

We know of congregations of Muslim converts who express their submission to God in Christ through traditional Muslim bowing and lifting of hands. We know of Christian speakers among high caste Hindus in India who sit and speak in the traditional pattern of Hindu gurus. We know of Buddhist converts who use sitting meditation. We know of male converts from popular Hinduism who come for their baptism bare-chested and then raise their hands over their head at the time of baptism, as their expressions of devotion and humility.

System of Education
How is the faith to be nurtured? What are the sources of authority for deepening and guiding the faith in practice? Our Western form has been trained clergy, organized classes, printed materials, lectures, etc. It’s really the model of the school and the university.

However, in other cultures, other forms are prevalent and authoritative. It may not be an academic degree or ecclesiastical appointment that brings authority but seniority in the community or spiritual charisma. If the appointed clergy lacks community status or spiritual magnetism, his word may mean very little in those societies.

In addition, how one learns is culturally determined. Some cultures teach through stories, others through dance, others through recitations, others through mystical experiences. A new movement now in Native American cultures is to use the traditional “Vision Quest” as part of adult Confirmation.

Terminology
We need to be thoughtful also in how we use theological terminology. Biblical metaphors may not only fail to communicate; they may miscommunicate. The term “Son of God” has deep and meaningful roots in the Old Testament. For Hindus, however, the term is quickly understood in terms of their gods and goddesses having divine offspring. For Muslims, it is understood the way the Qur’an portrays Christians’ understanding of the Second Person of the Trinity as the offspring of a relationship between God and Mary. It is an honored biblical term, but it totally miscommunicates.

Likewise, there are many biblical terms that are steeped in Old Testament and first century history, but which mean nothing to people of a different cultural heritage. Think of terms such as “Son of Man,” “Messiah/Christ,” “Lord,” “Lamb of God,” “atonement,” “justified,” “adoption,” “shepherd,” “Father,” “king.” Also the forms of literature in the Bible such as parables and apocalyptic literature and allegories. Do we need to educate people on history and literature from another culture before we can communicate to them the Gospel? Are there terms within the culture that we can use to convey these same concepts?

Social Order
Societies are organized differently. They all implement the orders of creation, but in different ways. Some use tribes, some use castes, some use hereditary rulers, some use matriarchy, some use patriarchy. All of these forms have their strengths and weaknesses, as do our traditional Western forms. All are redeemable.

Clearly, there is a great variety of cultural expressions and structures in God’s world. We are to respect and follow them as much as we possibly can. We do this not only so people feel comfortable and at home in the church, but also because we want to honor what God honors. It is not just a pragmatic and even manipulative attitude. It is a theological conviction and necessity.

Example of Jesu Bhaktas in India
Finally, let me share with you one development of the faith that is intentionally attempting to remain rooted in traditional culture. Twenty-five years ago, I did research among the hundreds of thousands of what I then termed “non-baptized believers in Christ.” (USA edition: Churchless Christianity, William Carey Library, 2001) A number of us have been trying to encourage this culturally rooted form of Christian faith in India (see www.rethinkingforum.org).

Their forms are basically drawn from Hindu religious practices. They see themselves as part of the culture, and converts are not seen as alienated or separate from their families and society. Here are some of the features that have been unfolding:

- They have named themselves. They call themselves “Jesu bhaktas,” “devotees of Jesus.”
- They are public about their faith in Christ, but they keep themselves separate from the organized church.
- They participate in the social dimensions of Hindu festivals, but separate themselves from the religious aspects.
- Many came to faith through miracles, visions, and answered prayers in Jesus’ Name.
- They use the traditional “bhajan” (an antiphonal response between leader and congregation) for their worship, with the traditional handbell to keep rhythm.
- They have started “ashrams” (retreat centers) in sacred places and around charismatic figures.
- They sit on the floor with the leader seated similarly on a slightly elevated platform.
- They have no organization or central leaders, only the spiritual individuals whom they respect.
- Pilgrimage places have spontaneously developed in locations...
where prayers to Jesus have been found to be powerful.

- Christian “sanyassis” (wandering holy men) have taken the traditional vows of poverty and celibacy of the Hindu guru and traveled around the land wearing the saffron robe, teaching disciples.

- They use the Bible as their authority for the faith, but they also reference Hindu philosophy and mythology.

- Baptisms are carried out as a family and community celebration in the home.

- They access church facilities and occasions such as roadside shrines, open sanctuaries (usually Roman Catholic), mass rallies, correspondence courses, radio/TV programs.

- They welcome pious Christian pastors into their home for prayer and instruction.

- They hold their own prayer and praise times, sometimes with a local pastor or Bible woman and sometimes without.

- They emphasize personal experience of God and communion with Christ.

- They encourage the Jesu bhaktas to remain in their families and communities as a witness.

- They are not registered on church rosters as Christians in the country, but remain legally as Hindus.

- They consider “Hinduism” (which is a way of life followed by those of many different religious beliefs in India) to be their culture, not their religion, and people accept them as part of the “Hindu” community.

- They are proud of their cultural identity and seek to promote and protect it.

We know the vast majority of India will never join the church, for it is primarily of one caste group and of foreign character. Is this Jesu bhakta phenomenon a way that can enable people to remain rooted both in their culture/society and in Jesus Christ? Might this expression of the faith be one that can permeate the land? Are there similar movements in other societies that need to be encouraged and guided? I know of one in Hawaii (www.alohakeakua.org). Clearly, only such movements that are properly grounded and effectively rooted in the soil will bear much fruit.
Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques:
A Closer Examination of C-5 “High Spectrum” Contextualization

by Timothy C. Tennent

Introduction

There has been considerable discussion in recent years concerning various proposals which might help the church to more effectively communicate the gospel to Muslims who continue to be the most resistant groups to the Christian message. The growing emphasis on “insider movements” often linked with “C-5” strategy calls for continued discussion and reflection among mission leaders today. The purpose of this article is to provide a more detailed analysis and assessment of the growing emphasis on encouraging ‘insider movements’ from within the Muslim world. The focal point of this article will be on Muslim followers of Jesus (Isa) who may continue attending the Islamic Mosque and who retain their religious identity as Muslims. How do these followers of Jesus relate to the rest of the global church? Can someone say ‘yes’ to Jesus and ‘no’ to the visible church? Are the Biblical and theological arguments made in support of this movement valid? These are some of the questions which this article seeks to answer.

C-1 to C-6 Spectrum

The most well known summary of the spectrum of Muslim background believers (known as MBBs) found in the Islamic world was published by John Travis in 1988 and has become the standard reference point for discussing contextualization in the Islamic context. The spectrum is known as the C1 to C6 Spectrum. Significantly, the “C” stands for Christ-centered communities. The various numbers reflect differences based on three main areas: the language of worship, the cultural and/or religious forms which are used in both their public life and in their worship and, finally, their self-identity as a ‘Muslim’ or a ‘Christian’. None of these designations represents a precise point along a line, but rather a general shorthand to help classify a range of more nuanced views. C-1 refers to a “traditional church using outsider language.” Outsider language refers to a language other than that used by the Muslim population. This would be a church which, for example, worships in English,
Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques

sits on pews and follows a Western liturgy. It could also refer to MBBS who have joined one of the many ancient churches in the Islamic world which predate the rise of Islam, use Latin or Greek, and follow an ancient liturgical rite. These believers all call themselves Christians.

C-2 refers to a “traditional church using insider language.” This refers to a church which worships in the language of the Muslim population, such as Arabic or Turkish, but otherwise is the same as a C-1 church. Travis argues that the majority of churches in the Islamic world are either C-1 or C-2, but only a fraction of MBBS have united with churches of either type.³

C-3 refers to “contextualized Christ-centered communities using insider language and religiously neutral cultural forms.” These churches adopt not only the language of the surrounding Islamic community, but they also embrace non-religious cultural forms such as folk music, dress and artwork. Nevertheless, a C-3 church would intentionally seek to filter out any religious forms which were specifically associated with Islam, such as keeping the fast of Ramadan or praying with raised hands, and so forth. Although members of C-3 churches continue to call themselves Christians, the majority of the membership is made up of MBBS.

C-4 refers to “contextualized Christ-centered communities using insider language and Biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms.” These churches are like C-3, except that Islamic cultural and religious forms are adapted as long as they are not explicitly forbidden in Scripture. For example, using Islamic terms for God (Allah), prayer (salat) and the gospels (injil) would all be accepted in a C-4 context. Likewise, a C-4 church would embrace outward practices normally associated as symbols of Islamic faithfulness such as avoiding pork, abstaining from alcohol, removing shoes when coming to worship or fasting during Ramadan. C-4 believers would normally not identify themselves with the term ‘Christian’ but would refer to themselves as ‘followers of Isa al-Masih’ (Jesus the Messiah) or members of the Isaya Unma (Community of Jesus) or other similar expressions.⁴ Despite the intentional contextualization, these followers of Isa are not regarded by those in the Islamic community as being Muslims.

C-5 refers to “Christ-centered communities of ‘Messianic Muslims’ who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.” These followers of Isa remain legally and socially within the community of Islam, referring to themselves as Muslims and they are, in fact, regarded by the Muslim community as Muslims. Features of Islamic theology which are clearly incompatible with Biblical faith are rejected or cleverly reinterpreted if possible.

Approximately half of these C-5 believers continue to attend the mosque, even if they also attend small gatherings of other C-5 believers.⁵ Sometimes these believers meet in mosques which are led by followers of Jesus, but are attended by the broader Muslim community. These are sometimes referred to as “Jesus Mosques.”⁶ Furthermore, the presence of these Christ-loving Muslims who remain fully embedded in the Islamic community and continue to attend the Mosque are often referred to as being part of an “insider movement.”⁷ These ‘insider movements’ have generated considerable discussion in missiological circles in recent years and articles have even begun to appear in non-mission journals and popular magazines.⁸ C-5, as with all the other designations, does not represent a precise point, but a range along a spectrum of practices. There are a wide variety of practices which are called C-5 and some which are called C-5 which actually fall more precisely on one of the other categories. As we will develop more later, the crucial and defining feature of C-5 is that of one’s religious identity.

C-6 refers to “small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/underground Believers.” This category refers to believers who are living under the threat of extremely hostile persecution and retaliation from the government or from their family or community if they were to reveal that they were followers of Jesus. Therefore, they worship Christ secretly. If discovered, C-6 believers would almost certainly face “a life of suffering, imprisonment, or martyrdom.”⁹ The C-6 category should be understood as an exceptional circumstance which is one of the tragic challenges to Christian faith in many parts of the world where public confession of Christ is tantamount to imprisonment or martyrdom. Any and all C-6 believers should be the subject of our prayers, not our analysis, so it will not be a part of this discussion, especially since all parties in the contextualization debate are in total agreement that C-6 is a regrettable state and we look for the day when open and free dialogue about religious affiliation in the Islamic world will make C-6 a thing of the past.¹⁰

The following chart (Chart A) will help to visually place C-1 through C-5 in relation to Christianity and Islam.
Use of the Word “Contextualization”

Before I offer an evaluation of the C-1 to C-5 spectrum, I need to clarify how the word ‘contextualization’ is being used in this discussion. The C-1 to C-5 ‘spectrum’ is often spoken of as moving from “low” contextualization at the C-1 end of the scale to “high” contextualization at the C-5 end of the scale. This particular use of the word ‘contextualization’ is rather broad, referring to various ways groups have rejected or accommodated or embraced the particularities of a local context. In this general usage one could have “good” contextualization and “bad” contextualization. However, the word contextualization is also used more narrowly to refer to the goal of a process whereby the universal good news of Jesus Christ is authentically experienced in the particularities of a local context. Thus, what is called “low” contextualization may, in fact, not be contextualization at all, but an expression of ethnocentric extractionism. Further, what is called “high” contextualization may not be contextualization at all, but an expression of syncretism. In this definition of the word, contextualization is the positive goal. In the evaluation which follows, therefore, we are simultaneously discussing various models of contextualization while, at the same time, searching to discover whether all, or some, or any of these models properly captures contextualization in the Islamic context. Phil Parshall seeks to accommodate the various uses of the term by creating a chart which allows for a “range” of appropriate contextualization to be found, but also acknowledges a point where it potentially crosses over into syncretism (see Chart B).

The advantage of the chart is that it demonstrates that even though contextualization is the ‘goal’ there may be various points along a spectrum whereby in a particular context the ‘goal’ of contextualization is achieved. MBBs from an urban, secular sub-culture in Iran might achieve legitimate contextualization at a point quite different from, say, an ultra-orthodox Wahhabi from Saudi Arabia. The shortcoming of Parshall’s chart is that it fails to graphically show that just as “high” spectrum contextualization risks the possibility of syncretism, so “low” spectrum contextualization risks the possibility of extractionism. Parshall does note in his article that all must be “constantly cross-referenced and subordinated to biblical truth” but doesn’t show on the chart what would happen if a particular example of “low” spectrum contextualization was proved unbiblical. Thus, the following chart will, I think, better help us to conceptualize a framework for evaluating the C-1 to C-6 spectrum (see Chart C).

Evaluation of C-1 to C-4

Generally speaking, C-1 and C-2 churches are considered to be overly biased towards foreign cultural and religious forms of Christianity. These churches, while serving the long standing historic Christians in the region, have not been successful at reaching Muslims with the gospel. It would be naive to expect these churches to make any significant breakthroughs among Muslims. The reason is that these churches are, by definition, extractionistic in their attitude towards Islamic cultural forms. In contrast, C-3 and C-4 churches are clearly more effectively positioned to reach Muslims in culturally appropriate ways such that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not overly tainted by foreign associations. Indeed, both C-3 and C-4 church planting strategies enjoy wide support throughout the missionary community and are regarded as both contextually sensitive as well as Biblically sound. In my view, most C-3 and C-4 churches would fall within the acceptable parameter of contextualization as depicted in the chart below. Nevertheless, there are some who find it troubling that C-4 followers do not use the term ‘Christian’ and wonder if this movement is actually but the beginning of creeping syncretism and, therefore, should be avoided. However, several points about C-4 will normally allay these concerns. First, avoidance of the word ‘Christian’ by C-4 MBBs should not be construed as a denial of their Christian identity per se, since they continue to clearly and publicly identify themselves as followers of Jesus. Second, although MBBs find the term ‘Christian’ offensive, published case studies about MBBs demonstrate that they acknowledge the common faith they share with all those who follow Jesus, even those who may follow Jesus in less contextually sensitive ways. Their unwillingness to use the term Christian, therefore, is not meant to distance themselves from either Jesus Christ or others who follow Jesus Christ, but is simply an acknowledgement that the word ‘Christian’ carries connotations which are offensive in their context and would actually obscure, rather than illuminate, their identity as a follower of Jesus. Finally, we should remember that the label Christian...
is not used for the followers of Jesus until the emergence of the first predominantly Gentile church in Antioch (Acts 11:26). In fact, it is probably originally a term given by opponents of the church since the term only appears twice in Acts and both times it is a title given to them by others. In fact, there is not a single instance of the Apostle Paul using the term “Christian” to describe the followers of Christ. The earliest believers preferred to identify themselves as belonging to “the Way” (Acts 9:2, 19:23; 24:14). Thus, there is simply no scriptural mandate which insists that those who follow Jesus must be called by a particular or common communal name.

### Evaluation of C-5

Our case study in ecclesiology in the non-western world focuses on C-5. Thus, a more detailed analysis and evaluation will follow. A survey of the published literature concerning C-5 ministries in the Islamic world reveals two things of interest. First, most of the argumentation in favor of C-5 is decidedly ad hoc and is developed as a reaction against criticism which has been posed, rather than an independent case which biblically, theologically, historically and contextually sets forth the necessary arguments. There is currently no single source where a reader can find a complete case for C-5 which sets forth all of the evidence which is found in the literature. Second, when one closely examines the extensive argumentation in favor of C-5, the vast majority of the arguments are actually brilliant defenses of C-4 ministries and do not really get to the heart of what is required if one is to properly defend C-5 practice. For example, all of the evidence regarding the problems with using the word ‘Christian’ or the effective use of Islamic cultural and religious forms has already, by definition, been accepted by C-4 practitioners. Sometimes, even the case-studies provided as empirical evidence to support C-5 are actually case studies of C-4 ministries.

The crucial difference which separates C-4 and C-5 is that of **identity**. All of the major proponents of C-5 agree on this point. For example, Joshua Massey, one of the leading advocates of C-5 practice writes, “Who could have predicted 20 years ago that God would raise up still another group of missionaries who believe that God wants to take them beyond C-4? C-4 surely paved the way for C-5, whose major difference is one of identity.” There are, of course, two sides to the question of identity. There is how others (in this case, Muslims) identify you and then there is your own **self-identity**. Admittedly, there is considerable contextual ambiguity about how Muslims may identify followers of Jesus in the Muslim world. A C-1 Christian, for example, may be identified as an idolatrous fornicator. We have only limited control over how people from other religious communities may or may not identify us. The point is, all of the “foreign-type Christians,” (C-1 and C-2), the “contextually sensitive Christians” (C-3) and the “followers of Isa” (C-4) which form the spectrum from C-1 to C-4 are identified by Muslims as **not** part of their religious community. I am intentionally stating this in the negative because the fact that Muslims identify C-1 to C-4 believers as **not** part of their religious community, does not necessarily imply the positive corollary that they will always identify them as being part of some kind of Christian community. For example, if a Muslim has only been exposed to C-1 type Christianity and never actually met a MBB from a C-4 context, it is likely that even though he recognizes that they are not a part of his religious community, there is still no ready category to place the person in. That, of course, is one of the strategic advantages of C-4, according to the advocates of C-4 ministries. This is also why some of what is casually called C-5 in missionary practice is actually C-4. The crucial issue at stake is **self-identity**. C-5 believers are fully embedded in the cultural and religious life of Islam. That is why their presence in the Mosque is referred to as an “insider movement”, because they really are insiders. It is even inaccurate to refer to them (as they often are) as MBBS, because, for them, Islam is not in their **background**, it remains as their primary **identity**. Therefore, they should be called simply Muslim Believers (MBBs), not Muslim Background Believers (MBBs). Some insist that they simply be called Muslims with no further descriptor. Therefore, the real “bottom-line” question before us is whether or not there is a solid case to be made for encouraging a C-5 “Muslim” to continue to identify himself or herself as a Muslim, fully part and parcel of the religious and cultural life of Islam, even after they have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

### The Key Arguments for C-5 evaluated

All of the evidence offered in missiological literature which actually focuses on C-5 (not just C-4 argumentation embedded in C-5 literature) falls into three general categories. First, there are **Biblical and exegetical** arguments which are offered to provide scriptural support for C-5. Second, there are **theological considerations** which are vital to the very nature of what it means to even be called a follower of Jesus Christ as well as the theological implications inherent in the issue of identity which are directly and indirectly present in the C-5 literature. Finally, there are important **ethical** issues which are often addressed in the C-5 writings. I will systematically explore each of these three categories to determine whether or not the growing
interest in developing C-5 strategies should be encouraged.\textsuperscript{21}

**Biblical/exegetical arguments**

The Biblical texts most frequently cited in support of C-5 strategy are as follows: Acts 15:19, I Corinthians 7:20, I Corinthians 9:19-22 and II Kings 5:18, 19. In addition to these specific texts, supporters of C-5 frequently make reference to the role Judaizers played in opposing the first century gospel which is recorded in various texts of the New Testament.\textsuperscript{22}

As noted above, while several of these texts do seem to provide compelling support for C-4, the question before us is whether or not they provide support for C-5 and the issue of one's identity as a Muslim in continuity with the religious and cultural context of Islam.

**Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council**

The Jerusalem Council is a relevant text for consideration since it involves the first formal church discussion regarding the relationship between these two distinct cultural communities, Jewish and Gentile, who, quite surprisingly, were finding a common, new identity in Jesus Christ. Many of the Jewish leaders harbored deep suspicions and even prejudice against Gentiles, and found it quite scandalizing that they might now be welcomed by God as full and equal participants in the People of God on their own cultural terms. The Jerusalem Council was called to discuss this problem, which is best summarized by the opening verse which captures the heart of the complaint against these new Gentile believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Before examining the decision of the Jerusalem Council, it is crucial to understand that long before the advent of the New Testament there was already in place an accepted method through which a Gentile could become a full (if not always ‘equal’) participant with a Jew in God’s redemptive plan. The Old Testament contains many verses which reveal God’s heart for the Gentiles.\textsuperscript{23}

Supporters of C-5 frequently make reference to the role Judaizers played in opposing the first century gospel.

In response to this, there developed an accepted protocol for how a Gentile could be accepted in Israel. A Gentile could become a Jewish “proselyte” by separating from his own culture, becoming circumcised, accepting all of the dietary restrictions of Judaism and fully accepting the covenantal obligations of the Torah. As Andrew Walls has noted, “to become a proselyte involves the sacrifice of national and social affiliations. It involves a form of naturalization, incorporation into another milieu.”\textsuperscript{24} Since this was the established procedure, it should not surprise us that these Judean believers were very angry when Paul and others were welcoming Gentiles who continued to live as full participants in their own culture, including diet and even remaining uncircumcised. The Jerusalem Council met to discuss whether any or all of these new practices which had started in Antioch and were later replicated by Paul should be accommodated, or if the whole thing should be rejected.

The Jerusalem Council opens with a statement almost identical to the one which opens the entire chapter. Acts 15:5 records that

\begin{quote}

some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.’
\end{quote}

After a heated discussion, Peter, Paul and Barnabas offer a series of testimonies which made it clear that God, through His giving of the Holy Spirit, was sovereignly accepting and saving the Gentiles (Acts 15:6-12) without their following the proselyte model and becoming dislocated from their own culture. James added further weight by quoting Scriptural support from the Prophet Amos. It is at this juncture in the Council that James makes the crucial statement which is frequently cited in support of C-5. James says, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). The application which is made by C-5 advocates is that asking a Muslim to separate from their Muslim identity is creating an unnecessary and “difficult” barrier. Indeed, to insist that a Muslim become a ‘Christian’ is to follow the old proselyte model. On the other hand, they argue, to allow a Muslim to stay fully connected and integrated with their existing Islamic identity is consistent with the new model posed by the post-Jerusalem Council.

It seems evident that Acts 15 does provide powerful and compelling support for C-4 strategy in the Muslim world since the Gentiles were not asked to sacrifice their social and national identity. However, in order for this text to be used as a basis for C-5, one must also argue that the Gentiles were not asked to abandon their religious identity. In my view, this is a difficult task. James goes on to recommend a list of four things which the Gentiles should be asked to avoid: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. The Council accepted these guidelines. However, it is important to note that they did not accept these four prohibitions as some kind of “add-ons” to Gentiles’ faith, so that they were saved by faith plus a short list of duties which serves as a kind of Jewish-law-in-miniature. No! The Gentiles were being saved by grace through faith, without compromise or qualification. The prohibitions serve to visibly separate the Gentiles from their former religious identity as pagans, since all four of these prohibitions are linked to common pagan practices of the time. This, in turn, would enable the Jews and Gentiles to live out their common faith with a new identity which, remarkably, is linked to neither the Law (the Judean...
Christians continued to worship in Jerusalem as Gentiles hoped to join. Indeed, this explains why the earliest Gentiles were sought out to determine any reason for a Jew to forsake their monotheistic religious identity. The person and work of Christ fulfilled their own prophetic expectations, and the Acts 15 conclusion is that the mainstream Jewish community was not going to accept the view that Jesus was the Lord and Messiah of their own scriptural, prophetic expectations, then it became clear that they had to form a new religious identity; namely, the church, which would properly celebrate their identity in Jesus Christ.

Scenario #1

If, hypothetically speaking, Judaism had accepted Jesus Christ as the true fulfillment of their own prophetic expectations in sufficient numbers so that faith in the deity and dignity, the person and work, of Christ became fully identified with Jewish religious identity, then there would be no reason whatsoever for a Jew to separate from their religious identity with the synagogue and Temple. Indeed, this explains why the earliest Christians continued to worship in the Temple for some time. They were there in the hope that their fellow Jews would see Christ as the proper fulfillment of their own Scriptural texts, as He truly was. After all, they had found Jesus within Jewish religious identity. However, once they realized that the mainstream Jewish community was not going to accept the view that Jesus was the Lord and Messiah of their own scriptural, prophetic expectations, then it became clear that they had to form a new religious identity; namely, the church, which would properly celebrate their identity in Jesus Christ.

Would the Jerusalem Council have insisted that Muslims forsake their monotheistic religious identity?

How does this apply to our discussion concerning the religious identity of C-5 Muslims believers? It should be noted at the outset that it is difficult to fully compare the situation of Jews (who have the “Old” Testament) hearing the gospel with Muslims (who have the Qur’an) hearing the gospel because of the more profound continuity between Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, continuing with our hypothetical scenario, if the vast majority of Muslims were to miraculously recognize the true deity and dignity, the person and work of Jesus Christ, such that the Mosque became a place where Jesus was truly worshipped, then there would be no reason for a Muslim believer to seek a new religious identity, because the very religious identity of Islam would have changed. However, since this did not occur then there must inevitably be a separation at the level of religious identity, which is precisely what happened with the early Jewish believers.

It should be noted that encouraging a separate religious identity (contra C-5) does not mean that there are not points of continuity between one’s former religious identity and their new religious identity. Indeed, the transference of religious identity does not necessitate a complete disruption or dislocation with the prior religious identity. The point is simply that the unique person of Jesus creates a new identity.

Scenario #2

The second hypothetical scenario seeks to discover if some minimalistic list of prohibitions could be agreed upon which would allow a Muslim to retain his or her religious identity with Islam, along with some qualifications such that they could retain their status as a Muslim, but be viewed as a rather strange Muslim. The challenge is that the prohibitions would have to be strong enough to allow a Muslim follower of Jesus to be faithful to Christ and the gospel even within his Islamic religious identity, yet generous enough to allow a Muslim follower of Jesus to maintain his religious identity without falling into a life of constant lying and deception. In this hypothetical scenario, which I will call the Cairo Council, Gentile followers of Jesus (who are now the insiders!) met and after a heated discussion decided not to make it too difficult for these new believers within Islam, but to set forth the following three prohibitions which were sent to key leading Muslim followers of Jesus in the Arab world:

1. During the daily salat, refrain from saying the Shahadah unless you omit the second phrase, “and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah” and, instead insert “and Isa is the Eternal Word of Allah” or “and Isa is the Sovereign Lord.”

2. Acknowledge that only the Bible is the Word of God and that the Qur’an, while containing beautiful Arabic and important insights into Arab culture, has no authority over the Bible.

3. When you are reciting the 99 beautiful names of Allah with a shubha, add the following three: (1) God and
Slavery and marriage, clearly relate to social status and could not reasonably be held to apply to a religious context.

Christian assemblies and, instead, only attending the Jewish synagogue worship. The writer of Hebrews does not encourage those early Christians to "stay in the synagogue", rather, he emphasizes the priority of their new Christian identity, even though they were ethnic Jews.

The text in I Corinthians 7:20 is most likely referring to Gentile believers who were wondering if they should follow the old "proselyte model" discussed earlier and be circumcised to gain full acceptance into the Kingdom. Their problem was actually just the opposite of that which is posed by C-5. These Gentiles who were showing interest in becoming circumcised are more like those cultural reactionaries who want to completely leave their cultural background and unite with a C-1 or C-2 church! Paul tells them that such a drastic change is not necessary. Once again, this provides possible support for C-4, but it is unlikely that this text, when quoted in its context, can actually be cited to confidently support C-5 strategy.

I Corinthians 9:19-22
A second text from I Corinthians is often cited in support of C-5 ministries. It is the text in I Corinthians 9:19-22 where Paul boldly declares his willingness to submit to and enter into the context of those whom he is seeking to reach:

"To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the Law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

I think missiologists are in broad agreement that this text provides...
support for those who are engaged in incarnational, rather than extrac- tionistic, ministries. The first job of missionaries is to enter into the experience and life-view of those they are seeking to reach; the incarnation of our Lord is the greatest example of this. This text does appear to provide further support for C-4 ministries. Indeed, we must fully enter the socio-political and cultural world of those we are seeking to reach for Christ. However, does this text also teach that we should take on the religious identity of a Jew or Gentile—and, by extension, a Muslim in reaching them for Jesus Christ? It seems inconceivable to me that this could be presented as a reliable exegesis of this text. The very fact that Paul could become like a Jew in one context and like a Gentile in another clearly demonstrates that he is not becoming self-identified as a Jew or Gentile in the way that is required for C-5 advocates to quote this text to support C-5. Indeed, through the use of the two qualifiers, Paul clearly shows in the text that he is not fully identifying with them in this way. When he is with the Jew he lives as a Law keeper, but then he qualifies it by reminding the reader that in his actual identity in Christ he is not under the law. Likewise, when he is with a Gentile he lives like one without the law, but then he qualifies it by reminding them that our identity with Christ does not give us a license for antino- mianism, a message the Corinthians certainly needed to remember!

In recent years this text has become even less relevant to this discussion since both of the leading advocates of C-5 contextualization, John Travis and Joshua Massey, have restricted C-5 to those who were brought up in Islam and become followers of Christ, rather than a prescriptive missionary strategy for outsiders seeking to win Muslims for Christ. In other words, even the leading advocates of C-5 are not encouraging outsiders to “become Muslims” in order to reach Muslims. For example, in *Messianic Muslim Followers of Jesus*, John Travis says, “I personally cannot endorse Christians claiming to be Muslims for outreach.”

This is a vital point to keep in mind as more and more mission organizations and large churches are discussing how C-5 may or may not be utilized in the development of mission strategy and policy decisions.

II Kings 5:18, 19

The final text to be considered in this survey of the key passages which are quoted by supporters of C-5 is found in the Old Testament. The text, found in II Kings 5:18, 19, is about a request made to the prophet Elisha by the mighty soldier Naaman just as he is about to return home to Aram.

Namaan says, “But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also—when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this.” In reply, Elisha declares, “go in peace.”

Because Elisha did not sharply rebuke Naaman, this passage has been seized as an example of God’s grace for Muslims who continue to perform *salat* in the Mosque, but in their heart they are actually worshipping Jesus, thus providing legitimacy for the C-5.

It is difficult to fully evaluate the application of II Kings 5:18, 19 to a C-5 situation because of several contextual ambiguities in the text. We do not know, for example, precisely why Naaman’s master would be leaning on his arm as they enter the temple. Is it because of the frailty of the master and so the master physically could not bow down before Rimmon without the assistance of his trusted commander? If so, then it is out of pure compassion for his master that he is assisting him in the Temple of Rimmon. Thus, we could perhaps make a case for a MBB who does not normally attend the mosque being forgiven if he, as an act of honoring his father, helps his ailing and feeble father into the mosque every Friday.

We also do not know if Naaman raised this issue before Elisha because he feared for his life if he did not accompany his master and bow down beside him in the Temple. Would his master have instantly executed him if he did not bow? If so, then this text could actually provide some encouragement for a C-6 believer who remains silent about his faith because of a very real threat of torture, imprisonment or martyrdom. The point is, there are sufficient ambiguities about the text to make it difficult to use in any proper exegetical way to contribute substantially to this discussion. The one thing we do know is that the context of the passage is about Naaman asking for forgiveness for doing something which they both knew was wrong, not the Prophet’s blessing for promoting any activity or strategy or self-identity of Naaman as a follower of Rimmon who actually worships Yahweh in order to draw other worshippers of Rimmon to the true knowledge of Yahweh.

It seems clear that Naaman sees his bowing as a barrier to his effective witness rather than a stepping stone to a more effective witness.

We will conclude this Biblical section by reflecting on the frequent parallels which are drawn between the first century Judaizers who opposed Paul and the 21st century Christians who oppose the C-5 advocates. The Judaizers were Pharisees who came to Christ and maintained that no non-Jew could be saved without being circumcised and observing the law of Moses. In short, the Christian faith was seen to be a sub-set of Judaism, lacking the cultural translatability which proved so decisive in the gospel’s powerful penetration of the Hellenistic world. In our current discussion, the
Judaizers become symbolic of those who are skeptical and defensive about Muslims finding Christ on their own cultural terms rather than first converting to some "foreign" religion known as “Christianity.” Many of the writers who are promoting C-5 “contextualization” make use of this comparison, but none quite as extensively as Joshua Massey who adopts it as a major part of his important article, “God’s Amazing Diversity.” Massey writes,

C-5 practitioners insist that even as Paul argued tirelessly with Judaizers that Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus, Muslims do not have to convert to “Christianity” to follow Jesus. C-4 practitioners already agree that a Muslim does not have to convert to “Christianity” (read, Western forms of Christianity) to follow Jesus. As noted earlier, the most striking feature of pro-C-5 literature is that the vast majority of what is argued is actually reinforcing the good missiology of C-4 and remains largely silent about the actual religious identity question which is the central difference between C-4 and C-5. So, it would be a Judaizing tendency to try to pressure a new believer in the Muslim world to adopt all of our cultural accoutrements. But this does not provide much help in resolving the issue of Islamic religious identity. Because, from Paul’s perspective it was about neither “staying in” Judaism nor “staying in” paganism, but the recognition that both Jew and Gentile must together identify themselves as sinners in need of grace and together finding their new identity in Jesus Christ. The Judaizers were wrong, not so much because they saw the paganism in the Gentile world, but because they failed to see the wickedness in their own. The only hope is to find a new identity together as the redeemed people of God, made up of both Jew and Gentile.

In conclusion, this survey demonstrates that the key texts and the commentaries/expositions about these texts in C-5 literature fall into two general categories: 1. Texts and commentary which actually support C-4 and are not germane to the C-5 discussion. 2. A wide-spread use of proof-texting whereby a pre-determined conclusion has already been reached and then texts are found which provide some kind of vague support for the idea.

This study has tried to remedy this by focusing squarely on the key issue of one’s self-identity and then to honestly engage with the most often cited texts to determine if their original meaning could be used to support more aggressive methods of contextualization. My conclusion is that several of these texts do seem to provide strong support for C-4 but I remain unconvinced that they have provided any substantial support to the proponents of C-5. However, there are several important theological and ethical matters which have not yet been addressed, and it is to them that we now turn.

Theological Considerations

Until recently, no published research has appeared on the theology of Muslim Believers (MBs) who follow Jesus (Isa) and yet retain their identity as Muslims. However, in 1998 well known author Phil Parshall published a study performed by 25 teams who interviewed 72 key leaders from 66 villages who are all C-5 believers and are believed to represent 4,500 C-5 believers. There were several very encouraging things which were revealed in the survey. For example, many of these leaders (76%) were quietly meeting with other C-5 believers for worship, Bible study and fellowship. A surprising 97% said that “Jesus is the only savior,” indicating that the exclusivity which is characteristic of mainstream Islam has been carried over into their faith as Muslim Believers in Jesus. Another encouraging sign is that there did seem to be a growing recognition of the limitations of Muhammad as compared with Jesus Christ. For example, 97% said that “they are not saved because of Muhammad’s prayers.”

Despite this good news, there was also some very disturbing news which the survey revealed. For example, 96% still believed that the Qur’an was one of four holy books from heaven, along with the Torah (Law), the Zabur (Prophets) and the Injil (Gospel). 66% even said that the Qur’an was the greatest of the four. A full 45% do not even affirm that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Trinity). This is particularly disturbing since this represents the leadership of the movement which one should assume has the highest level of knowledge about the Christian faith. More research is needed to remedy this.
needed to determine if other acceptable ways of describing the Trinity might find a wider acceptance among these believers.

Phil Parshall is concerned enough about these findings to question whether Muslim believers in Christ who retain their Islamic identity can reasonably be expected to flourish as the church of Jesus Christ. Joshua Massey, among others, downplays these theological problems by insisting that this is just another example of imposing what he calls “Greco-Roman Gentile categories of orthodoxy.” Instead, he argues that we should focus on their personal faith experience with Jesus. He argues that C-5 advocates should be “more concerned about true Christ-centeredness than with conformity to Gentile Christian traditions and doctrinal codifications developed centuries after the apostolic era.”

Rick Brown also seems to downplay the importance of clear doctrinal affirmations which have given the church its shared identity when he asserts that “there is no verse that says one must understand the divinity of Jesus to be saved.” He goes on to say,

These doctrines about the deity of Jesus and his substitutionary punishment are wonderful parts of the Good News, and it is worthwhile discussing them with seekers, as Paul demonstrated in Romans. But the overwhelming Biblical witness is that although these doctrines are important for the disciple to understand, an understanding of them is not required for salvation.

Brown does not expressly set out to demean the importance of the core doctrines of the faith, although the tone of his writing may initially strike the reader in that manner. Rather, his purpose is to make a distinction between what may be important to know in the long run as opposed to what is absolutely necessary to know in order to be justified by faith in Christ.

There are other mission organizations working among Muslims that disagree strongly with this and insist on certain basic theological understandings which must accompany faith from the outset. Some, for example, insist on belief in the authority of the Bible and the Trinity. Others focus specifically on theological propositions which are related to the person of Christ, such as faith in his deity and his Resurrection. Who is right? This is obviously a crucial question for all evangelists and missionaries, but it seems particularly important for those contemplating a ministry among Muslims where certain unorthodox views about Christ (He is a Prophet, not God) and the Bible (It has been distorted and is inferior to the Qur’an) are already present in the “DNA” of Islam.

An evaluation of this problem must begin by acknowledging that this is a long-standing issue in the church, which cannot be resolved easily. The issue is complex and fraught with several potential misunderstandings. Nevertheless, three crucial points of clarification must be made before any further light can be shed on this complex issue.

First, popular Protestant theology has tended to equate the doctrine of ‘salvation’ with the doctrine of ‘justification’. Biblically, the doctrine of salvation does include justification, but also includes the doctrines of sanctification and our final glorification. This is why the Scripture speaks of salvation in all three tenses: I was saved (justification), I am being saved (sanctification) and I will be saved (glorification). This theological reductionism which equates salvation with justification is so common in popular Protestant writings that we often fail to recognize the far reaching implications this has on our discussions related to soteriology. The most important implication is that it gives rise to a general minimalistic emphasis in this discussion. In other words, the question becomes what is the absolute bottom-line minimum an individual needs to know in order to be justified? Of course, when the question is put in these terms then the answer is almost self-evident—very, very little, indeed. How much theology did the thief on the cross know? What about the Philippian jailer or Lydia and her household? I think everyone can agree, as Dean Gilliland has correctly pointed out, that the Holy Spirit can still be active “in poorly informed, sometimes misguided believers.” So, the issue needs to be re-framed, at least in part, by a broader, and more biblically informed understanding of the word ‘salvation.’

Second, popular Protestant theology has also tended to emphasize the faith of the individual rather than the collective faith of the community of believers. We are much more comfortable speaking about the faith of individuals than we are about the faith of the church. When Jude says “I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3) both of the words, ‘you’ and ‘saint’ are in the plural. Paul, in that great chapter on the resurrection in I Corinthians declares, “this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.” Paul saw his preaching in continuity with the apostolic preaching (we preach) and he declares this to the church (you, plural). It is important to recognize that Paul says “this is what you believed,” even though the very context of the passage reveals that there were individuals in the church who did not, at least on this point, believe along with the church. So, once again, how the question is framed tends to produce a particular answer. If you ask, “What is the minimal core confession of the church regarding salvation?”, then the bar is raised and we find the church far more articulate about the core of salvific faith. The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicean Creed are examples of the early church’s attempt to put down into a short list the most basic theological propositions which unite the church in
a common faith. The church did this even though they also must surely have realized, as we do today, that there are many 'justified' individuals who neither understand, nor fully believe, every single article of faith in these documents. This, after all, is why they are confessed week after week in the churches: to reinforce the faith of the church on all those individuals who claim to be followers of Christ. So, a technical re-wording of Rick Brown's article, "What Must One Believe about Jesus for Salvation?" is actually, "What must an individual believe about Jesus for justification?", for that is what his article actually addresses.

Third, this debate tends to slip into the modern trap of putting the "personal" and the "propositional" at odds with one another. For example, some writers want to emphasize that a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is all that matters; others want to make sure that certain historic propositions are affirmed. One side is accused of placing too much emphasis on defending the written words of Scripture and certain doctrinal formulations (rather than Jesus Christ). They argue, "What is the value of confessing a mountain of creeds and doctrinal formulations if, at root, we do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?" The other side insists that the only way we know anything about God which is distinctively and properly called Christian is because God has spoken to humanity in a free act of self-disclosure. In obedience to this revelation, God's servants have faithfully recorded these words in the Bible. Without the Bible, they argue, how can we distinguish between the personal faith of a Muslim and the personal faith of a Christian?

Thus, we are put in the unenviable position of being forced to choose between God revealing Himself, or God revealing truths about Himself. A close examination of the articles related to C-5 reveals that this dichotomy is present in much of the discussion, although it is never acknowledged.

Hopefully the reader is now beginning to realize how important the relationship is between soteriology and ecclesiology. On the one hand, the farther the doctrine of salvation is allowed to drift away from the church and closer to individualism the more likely a group will downplay the particulars of specific doctrinal formulations, because the focus is on the individual's personal relationship with Christ. Also, it is far more likely that this group would tend to equate the doctrine of salvation with the doctrine of justification. On the other hand, the closer the doctrine of salvation is tethered to the life of the church through time (history) and space (around the world), then the more likely a group will emphasize our common faith and the importance of even a brand new believer realizing the 'faith' he or she is being united with. A new convert not only has faith, he or she is brought into a common faith. This group will have more of a long-term view of salvation, even if they still emphasize the importance of a particular point of conversion. They will also tend to emphasize that even if a particular MBB is the only Christian in a particular region or village, they should be made to understand from the outset their connection to other Christians or followers of Jesus who share a common faith. This understanding explains why para-church organizations that focus on "evangelism" often have very different views on this issue compared to "church planting" organizations. This is clearly seen, for example, in the article by David Garrison entitled "Church Planting Movements vs. Insider Movements", which points out the need to connect the evangelistic energy of para-church sodalities with new dynamic models of church planting.

In conclusion, an examination of the current evidence of the theological content of C-5 believers in Jesus as well as the general theological framework of the advocates of C-5 reveals the following. First, C-5 writings tend towards theological reductionism by tacitly embracing a narrow, minimalistic view of salvation. If these new believers are not encouraged to unite their fledgling faith with the faith of the church, then it is unlikely that these new believers will be able to properly reproduce the faith, which is the whole reason the C-5 strategy exists; namely, to reduce every possible barrier so that the gospel can more easily reproduce among Muslims. Second, the theological framework and analysis present in C-5 writings has been overly influenced by Western individualism and the privatization of faith which tends to keep the doctrines of soteriology and ecclesiology at arms length. Joshua Massey concedes this point when he observes that C-5 nomenclature was quickly adopted by those whose theology of mission is more Christ-centered than church-centered.

While Massey is quite correct in criticizing an ecclesiology which merely extends a Western, structural form of Christianity into the Muslim world, we must not forget that we cannot have a Christ-centered theology of mission which does not place the church at the center of Christ's redemptive plan. Rejecting this old "proselyte-model" does not and should not necessitate a rejection of a proper ecclesiology. Indeed, as Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out, true conversion involves both a new creation from above... [and] also a relationship with the existing community of believers.

To encourage Muslim believers to retain their self-identity as Muslims and to not find practical ways to identify themselves with the larger community of those who worship Jesus Christ reveals a view of the church that is clearly sub-Christian. Finally, the separation of the 'personal' from the 'propositional' in the Muslim world can only lead to a dangerous separation of the person of Christ from the church's proclamation about Christ. This separation...
fails to attend to the proper connection between our personal testimony (however thrilling and exciting) and the Apostolic proclamation of the gospel. This is not just a hypothetical concern, as this dichotomy has already begun to emerge in such articles as, “Proclaiming a ‘Theologyless Christ’” by Herbert Hoefner, a leading proponent of ‘high spectrum’ contextualization. Hoefner writes,

Can we look upon the church as a house with many doors? It doesn’t matter which door you use to enter. As you explore the house, you will come to the fullness of truth. The key to each door in the house is the acceptance of Jesus as Lord of one’s life. How one explains that is a matter of freedom and creativity, in consultation with the others in the house. The unintended result of this view is that personal experience can be used to ignore the specifics of the Apostolic proclamation. Or to put it in the popular terminology of post-modernism, the Apostolic ‘meta-narrative’ takes a back seat to the personal narratives of those who come to Christ. However, our personal faith in Christ must be brought into resonance with the Apostolic proclamation about Christ. Undoubtedly, millions of people come to Christ every year with a deficient theology. But it is central to the task of discipleship to help new believers conform their faith to the faith of the church. Pragmatism and cultural accommodations can never be allowed to trump the theological integrity of the gospel message. This is not to raise questions about the justification of any of these new believers, but rather it is a commitment to make sure that from the very beginning we are committed to raising up believers whose personal faith resonates with the “faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3).

Ethical issues

This analysis of C-5 strategy began with an examination of the four main texts which are used to support C-5, along with an analysis of the usefulness of the Judaizer analogy which appears so frequently in the literature. Second, we examined a number of theological issues such as the way the word ‘salvation’ is used, how one’s personal relationship with Christ relates to the historic faith of the church, and the way the doctrines of soteriology and ecclesiology relate to one another. The third and final area necessary to completing this analysis of C-5 is in the area of ethics.

Several writers and field missionaries have raised questions about the ethics of the C-5 strategy. Is it ethical, they ask, to encourage followers of Jesus to remain embedded within Islamic community while still retaining their Muslim self-identity? In reply, it should be noted that all of the leading advocates of C-5 are in broad agreement that it is both unwise and unethical for a person with a non-Islamic background to enter into a Muslim community and pretend to be a Muslim. As I understand it, C-5 is about someone retaining their identity, not someone taking on that identity. The real question is if it is ethical for a Muslim follower of Jesus Christ to retain their identity as Muslims even after they have become devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Joshua Massey argues that the negative associations with ‘Christianity’ are so strong that these new believers identify more with ‘Islam’ than they do with ‘Christianity.’ He points out that,

when C-5 believers compare themselves to C1–C2 Christians they say, ‘I don’t pray like a Christian, unwashed in a pew with my shoes on; I pray like a Muslim. I don’t dress like a Christian, with Western pants and collared shirts; I dress like a Muslim. I don’t talk like a Christian with all their strange terms to describe God and his prophets; I talk like a Muslim. I don’t eat like a Christian... eating haram meats... I don’t have a Christian name, like John, Tom or Paul; I have a Muslim name.’ Thus, C-5 believers are being entirely honest when they identify themselves as ‘Muslim’ followers of Jesus.

In response, it is not entirely clear how this actually addresses the ethical point under consideration since the C-4 contextualized witness would answer all of the above concerns. This would be an excellent defense against C-1 or C-2 Christians who were insisting that MBBs identify with some non-contextualized expression of Christianity. The real point which must be defended is the ethics of retaining Islamic religious identity, not just Islamic cultural identity. We must not lose sight of the fact that what distinguishes C-5 from C-4 is the religious self-identity as a Muslim, not the cultural identification which is at the heart of C-4.

The retaining of one’s religious identity within Islam after becoming a follower of Christ is, in my view, unethical. As Phil Parshall has pointed out, “The Mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology. There, Muhammad is affirmed as a prophet of God and the divinity of Christ is consistently denied.” Parshall goes on to point out the sacramental nature of the ritual prayers (salat). Lesslie Newbigin once wrote the following in response to a similar movement of churchless Christians in India, but which powerfully applies to the Muslim background believers as well:

The acceptance of Jesus Christ as central and decisive creates some kind of solidarity among those who have this acceptance in common. If it did not do so, it would mean nothing. The question is, what is the nature of this solidarity? It has always been understood to include the practice of meeting together to celebrate with words, songs and formal actions the common faith in Jesus...a man who is religiously, culturally and socially part of the Hindu community is a Hindu.
In short, one’s religious identity with Jesus Christ creates a necessary rupture with one’s Islamic identity or our identity in Jesus Christ would mean nothing. It is unethical to pretend this discontinuity does not exist or to act as if it is merely a matter of cultural forms. Rather, as I have often been told by missionaries who work in the Islamic world, it is more like a ‘fifth column’ inside Islam which, when discovered by Muslims creates such a strong negative reaction that it inadvertently damages the credibility of Christians and feeds further distrust towards those who follow Christ. A more open witness in a straightforward, but contextually sensitive way seems to hold the greatest promise for effective and ethical Christian penetration into the Muslim world.

Reformation in Reverse?
This article has focused on a major debate in missions circles about the acceptability of the ecclesiology as espoused by the supporters of C-5. This article has put forth a range of objections to the proponents of a C-5 ecclesiology. I have highlighted several Biblical, exegetical, theological and ethical problems which must be addressed if this new ecclesiology which encourages a Muslim follower of Jesus to publicly retain their Islamic religious identity is to be embraced as a prescriptive strategy in the Islamic world. Nevertheless, no one can deny that, descriptively speaking, there are Muslims coming to Christ in some dramatic ways today. How should we respond to the genuine movement to Christ among these Muslims, many of whom have encountered Christ in dreams and visions?

I think that the best approach is to see C-5 as a temporary, transitional bridge by which some Muslims are crossing over into explicit Christian faith. C-5, on the other hand, does not have a long track record and there is, as yet, no empirical evidence to confirm or to deny that it will emerge as an independent movement in its own right, or if it will serve as a temporary, transitional bridge to explicit Christian faith and identity. Could this be an example of the “Reformation in Reverse”? In other words, our own Reformation history is the story of a people who saw themselves as Christians because they belonged to the formal, ecclesiastical “structure” of Christianity, i.e. they were members of Christendom. The Reformation was, among other things, the gradual recognition over several hundred years by “Christians” that they were, in fact, not Christians at all and needed to become Christians even though they were baptized Christians in the public, formal sense. In the Islamic context in which we have been considering, could the exact opposite be taking place—a kind of Reformation in reverse? Could there be tens of thousands of people who belong to Islam in a public, formal sense who gradually over many years realize that they are no longer Muslims, but Christians? Could we see thousands of Muslim followers of Jesus who currently are wrongly trying to maintain their Islamic identity but who gradually come to see that their truest identity is with the people of God throughout space and time who also know, serve and follow Jesus Christ as Lord. In the New Testament, despite decades of hostility and suspicion, Jew and Gentile find that in Jesus Christ the “dividing wall of hostility” has been destroyed (Ephesians 2:14). There are not two bodies of Christ, one Jew and one Gentile, or one “Western” and one “Eastern”. There is one Body of Christ throughout the world, culturally diverse, and yet the one church of Jesus Christ, against whom, the powers of hell itself cannot prevail.

Endnotes
2 Phil Parshall refers to the “C” as to “Cross-Cultural Church-Planting Spectrums.” However, it is important in my later analysis of this spectrum to note that John Travis in both the text of his explanation as well as the article heading indicates that the “C” stands for “Christ-centered communities.” This is confirmed in the numerous citations of the Travis scale throughout the literature.
3 Travis, 407.
4 Isa is the Arabic word for Jesus. Umma is the Arabic word for the global community of Muslims, although it is unclear how the Isaya Umma practically express their global catholicity with other Christians.
6 See for example, Erich Bridges, “Of Jesus Mosques” and Muslim Christians” Mission Frontiers (July–October 1997) 19.
7 See, for example, Mission Frontiers (September–October 2005, vol. 27:5) which devoted the entire issue to insider movements. Also, the 2005 Conference of the International Society for Frontier Missiology was dedicated to the theme: Insider Movements: Doing Church Where There is No Church.
9 Travis, John 1998 “The C1 to C6 Spectrum,” Evangelical Missions Quarterly, vol. 34:4 (October 1998) 407-408. All of the headings are from the Travis spectrum and my summary of each of the headings largely follows the main ideas of his description.
It should also be noted that C-6 should not be viewed as a continued "extension" along the contextualization scale, since if allowed to express their faith these believers could, quite possibly, choose to worship anywhere along the C-1 to C-5 spectrum. See, for example, Mark S. Williams, “Aspects of High-Spectrum Contextualization in Ministries to Muslims,” *Journal of Asian Mission*, vol. 5:1 (2003) 75–91.


Joshua Massey has offered a M-1–M-9 spectrum showing the attitudes of various Muslims towards Islam, ranging from nominal Muslims to Ultra-Orthodox. See Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, vol. 17:1 (Spring 2000), 12.

Joshua Massey argues that there are a number of Iranian MBBs who are so disillusioned with Islam that they strongly object to any cultural or religious forms associated with their past and actually prefer C-1 or C-2 churches. However, rather than simply present C1–C-6 as all equally legitimate options as Massey does, we should recognize the vital catechesis needed to help these “disillusioned Muslims” to reject the religion of Islam, but not to reject their cultural and ethnic heritage. After all, extractionism occurs when either the missionary insists that a person leave their culture or when new believers on their own accord leave their culture because they think it is inherently evil and cannot sustain Christian faith. See Joshua Massey, “His Ways are Not Our Ways,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, vol. 35:2, (April 1999), 191, emphasis mine. This is also clear in the original publication of Travis’ scale where he notes that C-5 believers “are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow I`sa the Messiah.” (Evangelical Missions Quarterly, vol. 34:4, “The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum,” 408).

I am quite intentional about using the word “should.” There is no doubt that, descriptively speaking, there will probably always be Muslims who follow Christ in the Mosque. The concern of this chapter is whether or not this should be advocated prescriptively as a part of an overall mission strategy, as is common in the literature.

I am intentionally omitting the extensive Biblical case given by Joshua Massey which cites repeated examples throughout the Bible where God does things which are “unexpected” and go against our conventional expectations. While it is true that “God’s ways are not our ways” and that God may, indeed, be doing a sovereign work through C-5 which will surprise us, it could as easily be a movement which ultimately proves fruitless. The point is, it is a classic case of an argument from silence and cannot be offered as proper evidence. Such a line of reasoning could have been used, for example, to support the new, emergent Arianism of the fourth century.


This is frequently true of missionary writings which are driven by field-based realities which often do not afford the time or "luxury" of in-depth writing. This is why it is said, “missions at sunrise, missiology at sunset.” Those who are doing missions often do not have the time to do the necessary missiological reflection. Typically, missiological reflection concerning an issue arises about ten to twenty years after the field missionaries first start encountering the problem.

A classic example of this is found in John Travis’ case study about a MBB who “faithfully attends a weekly C-4/C-5 fellowship and may soon be appointed one of its first elders.” Clearly, attending a distinct fellowship which appoints elders is illustrative of an MBB in a C-4, not a C-5 context.

John Travis, “His Ways are Not Our Ways,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, vol. 35:2, (April 1999), 191, emphasis mine. This is also clear in the original publication of Travis’ scale where he notes that C-5 believers “are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow I`sa the Messiah.” (Evangelical Missions Quarterly, vol. 34:4, “The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum,” 408).

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It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the role of pagan practices in folk Islam around the world which further complicates the C-5 case, so—in the spirit of charity—we will focus on Islam at its best. It is difficult to fully imagine how the wide acceptance of Jesus would have changed the legal and ritual practices of faithful Judaism.

Surah 4:171 extends the honorific title “Word” (of Allah) to Jesus, providing a contextual bridge to John 1:1. Phil Parshall rightly points out that “if one affirms the ‘prophet’ of the creed, doesn’t it follow that one must therefore believe his prophecy? And that prophecy, being the Qur’an, presents us with a major problem. . . . I cannot affirm the Qur’an as the Word of God.” See Phil Parshall, “Lifting the Fatwa,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, (Vol. 40, #3), 291. (288–293)

It is true that the Qur’an is not nearly as offensive to Christian doctrine as is sometimes supposed. However, the only way MBBs have successfully been able to retain the Qur’an (or some portions of the Quran) is if the Bible is used as the hermeneutic to constantly re-direct, re-interpret and clarify various texts in the Qur’an. For more on this see chapter seven of my, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 169–194.

A *shuhda* is a set of rosary-like prayer beads which are commonly used by Muslims to recite the 99 beautiful names of Allah. Since most Muslims use a *shuhda* with only 33 beads, which they will cycle through three times, it was also practical to only add “three” names to the 99. It meant, practically speaking, adding only one extra bead. Although it should be noted that even when Islam and Christianity agree on a certain attribute of God, such as “power” (al-Muqtadir, one of the 99 Names of Allah), there may be striking differences on how it is understood. For example, Christians see God’s greatest power over Satan exhibited at sunset. Muslims would not understand God’s greatest power in such terms. Thus, all of the 99 names would require adjustments as they are conformed to the Biblical witness.

Christology. Massey, for example, does not.


23. This is mainly due to important security issues, as well as the limited access outsiders have to these insider movements.

24. For a full examination of the results of this survey. See Phil Parshall, “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization,” Evangelical Missions Quarterly, vol. 34:4 (October 1998) 404-410. All of the findings mentioned in this section of the chapter are from this study.

25. Although the Qur'an does not teach the efficacy of Muhammad’s prayers, the Hadith does. Therefore, it is a widely held belief among some groups of Muslims.

26. Phil Parshall, “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization,” Evangelical Missions Quarterly, vol. 34:4 (October 1998) 406. It gives me little comfort to hear someone quote statistics on the declining faith in mainstream, liberal Protestants where the content of faith might be even less than some of these C-5 MBBs. These liberal Protestants are living in disobedience to their own tradition which, despite their defiance and unbeliefl, fully affirms the historic creeds of the faith. These statistics represent the only published statistics I have found on the content of belief in C-5 movements. Clearly, these percentages would rise or fall based on which groups were being interviewed.


28. Joshua Massey, "Misunderstanding C-5: His Ways are not Our Orthodoxy," Evangelical Missions Quarterly, vol. 40:3, (July 2004) 297. In the full-text on-line version of this article, Massey clearly distances himself from historic Christian views of Christology. Massey, for example, does not affirm the eternal pre-existence of Christ. For Massey, Christ is pre-existent only "in the mind, plan and intentions of God, before the foundations of the earth." He is supportive of those theologians who, in his words, "describe the incarnation not as the human birth of an eternally pre-existent Son within the Godhead, but as the self-revelation of God in Christ", (p. 4, on-line edition). Like the Arians of old, Massey affirms that Jesus is “far greater than any prophet, judge or former ‘representative of God’” but Massey does not believe that Jesus shares the same essence with the Father. Massey provides a detailed survey of most of the major Biblical texts related to Christology and consistently demonstrates that he favors an Arian, rather than Chalcedonian explanation. Indeed, Massey regards Chalcedonian Christology as an expression of Greek arrogance rather than a careful study of the Biblical evidence concerning Christ. (See on-line version, http://bgc.gospelcom.net/emis/pdfs/Misunderstanding_C5.pdf) However, the precision of the Chalcedonian formula was necessary to defend against the Arians who denied his true and full deity and the Apollinarians who denied his true and full humanity. Massey has forgotten that the Arians were very good at quoting Scripture, but, in the long run, the church has not accepted the Arian position as the best answer for all of the Biblical data. However, to respond precisely to various proposals such as Monophysitism, Nestorianism and Arianism it was necessary to use the most precise language that was available to them. See Jaroslav Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 249.

29. Ibid., 300.


31. Ibid., 13.

32. Louis Berkhof, for example, states that “God does not impart the fullness of His salvation to the sinner in a single act.” It is only by distinguishing between God’s “judicial” acts and his “recreative” acts that we can properly discuss the fullness of God’s plan of salvation for us. Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 416.


34. Joshua Massey, “His Ways are not Our Orthodoxy,” 300.


36. There is an inherent contradiction in the fact that all of the “Cs” in the C-1 to C-6 scale stand for Christ-centered community and yet as long as the believer retains their self-identity as a Muslim, they remain in an Allah-centered community. (The term “Allah” in this context refers not to the generic term for God as used by Arabic speaking Christians, but in its usage by Muslims as a name for the God as revealed in the Qur’an who, by definition, is non-Trinitarian and does not have a “Son” to send into the world as redeemer).


38. See C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, (New York: Collier Books, Macmillan Publishing, 1952), 135, 136. Lewis makes the helpful analogy comparing a ‘map’ of the shoreline with a person who has actually experienced the shoreline. Lewis points out that although the person who walks along the shore has a more immediate experience, it should not take away from us the importance of the map based on previous and accumulated knowledge. The Apostolic tradition is an essential guide to our own individual experience.

39. Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ,” 9. The word ‘baram’ is defined by Massey as “meat not butchered in the ‘kosher’ way”.


41. The same challenge is present for messianic Jews who remain in traditional Jewish Temples. It is essential that they find practical ways to demonstrate their identity not only with Christ, but with others who follow Christ, even if they continue to identify culturally with their Jewish community in all other respects.

42. I am indebted to Jonathan Bonk, director of the OMSC in New Haven, CT for this insight.
Responses

Four Responses to Timothy C. Tennent’s *Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C5 “High Spectrum” Contextualization*

Response One (by John Travis)

Timothy Tennent, a seminary professor whose experience is in Hindu ministry, has written a comprehensive article critiquing C5 movements (on the C1-C6 scale). This is a type of church-planting movement in which Muslims accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, yet remain socio-religiously within the Muslim community. I commend this article for its comprehensiveness and even asked Dr. Tennent if I could use it for a graduate level class I will soon be teaching on contextualization. I feel the strength of the article is that Tennent, as a professor not involved in day-to-day ministry with Muslims, brings a fresh set of eyes to the issues under discussion by evaluating the literature available on the topic. He points out that much, maybe most, of the articles written to date are *ad hoc*, having been produced by busy missionaries on the field who are witnessing C5 movements but only occasionally writing an article. Tennent’s article, therefore, serves as a challenge for those who believe in C5 as a valid expression of the body of Christ, to reflect Biblically, theologically and strategically on the issues he has raised. As a professor, I am sure one of Tennent’s motives in writing this article was to make his students think deeply, and that is good. Yet in spite of strengths, this article also has at least four weaknesses, as I see it.

The first weakness (which Tennent does not try to hide) is that his paper is *only* based on things he has read that others have written, often in an *ad hoc* fashion; there is no original research, data or first hand field experience mentioned. In that sense, the paper is largely theoretical. We need to be aware that the “validity” of a religious movement such as C5 can only rightly be understood through the interaction of Biblical/theological reflection and first hand experience of what God is doing today in the Muslim world. This is what the leaders of the early church did when they met in Jerusalem to determine issues of contextualization surrounding the Gentile congregations (Acts 15). It is highly instructive to note that as they came together to decide a theological matter (is circumcision required?), they did not first go the Scriptures; rather they went first to case studies of what God had been doing among the Gentiles. In Acts 15:3-4 and 6-14, Paul, Barnabas and Peter relate their experiences in Gentile ministry. It was only after very extensive review of what God was doing among Gentiles that the leader, James, turned to the Word, interpreting the text in light of what the Holy Spirit had been doing through the apostles.

The following types of questions can help us evaluate what God is doing among Muslims:

1. Are the new believers trusting God through Christ alone for their salvation?
2. Are they becoming more Christ-like, being shaped by the Word of God, both as individuals and as Christ-centered communities?
3. Are they able to grow in spite of being part of a larger community that rejects some Biblical truths?
4. Are they able to continue their witness in their community so that the Gospel spreads?
5. Are they reproducing themselves by spawning new fellowships and house churches?

The second weakness, related to the first, is that Tennent has gone too far in making sweeping judgments, dismissing C5 based on short phrases in popular articles. This especially comes out in his section entitled “Theological Considerations.” Bits and pieces of various articles are tied together as if a well-researched evaluation of C5 was being made. The one piece of field data he uses comes from a study supposedly published by Phil Parshall. In fact, this research was conducted by others and has never been published. Parshall simply refers to it in his article and includes his personal interpretation on certain aspects of the study. Such articles do not provide the type of data required to back up Tennent's statements.

In footnote 20 Tennent draws the incorrect conclusion that if a fellowship has elders, it must not be a C5 fellowship. Scores of C5 fellowships with which I am acquainted have elders. (Tennent saw that in one article I mention a “C4/C5 fellowship,” and concluded it actually must be a C4 fellowship. In fact, this particular fellowship contains both kinds of believers.) On what basis does Tennent mention long-standing evidence of the effectiveness of C3 and C4, as opposed to no such evidence for C5? In fact at this early stage in Muslim ministry, there are not enough case studies published to definitively show that one approach is always better than another. When the Gospel has barely entered the Muslim world, it is far too early to dismiss particular efforts to reach Muslims. We need to allow a variety of approaches. From a missiological point of few, these are all new movements still in their infancy. If they are seen by outsiders as deficient, let the observers pray and give them more time. The C5 movements with which I am personally familiar are all based
on the bedrock of inductive Bible study. I believe that as they continue to come together in Christ around his Word, they will become more or more like Jesus and more mature in their faith (as we all should!). It is premature to say that this will or should lead them to become C4 or C3 fellowships.

The third area of weakness concerns Tennent’s comments that C5 is unethical. He implies that if a Muslim follows Jesus and does not renounce Islam, he is unethical. That is an extremely biased statement, spoken by an outsider. The Muslims I know who have accepted Christ are not hiding, are not lying, deceiving or being unethical. They say to Christian and Muslim alike, “We follow Christ and uphold the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament as the Word of God.” The question of whether or not this is “ethical” can really only be answered by Muslims who claim to follow Christ. Only they can say whether or not their conscience is violated.

The fourth area of weakness is that the article does not take into account the changing world we are living in. Most of the Tennent’s critique is based on his evaluation of four Scripture passages which have been mentioned by supporters of C5 movements and on church history, where it appears to Tennent that nothing like this has ever happened before. Yet C5 communities can be found in a variety of cultures. In the past four decades tens of thousands of Jews have accepted Jesus as their Messiah yet remain socio-religiously Jewish. This has not been seen for hundreds of years. What Paul did in accepting uncircumcised Gentiles into the community of faith was a new thing. Martin Luther, a great reformer, did a new thing. In many ways the charismatic / Pentecostal movement of this century has been a new thing. Messianic Jews, the ministry of Paul, the work of Martin Luther, and the charismatic movement of today, have been criticized by many, yet God does new things to expand his body in new ways. Before we are too quick to judge a very new part of the body of Christ, let us make sure we are not in fact working against God as he does a new thing to lead many to himself.

Response Two (by Phil Parshall)

Thorough, thoughtful and respectful. Dr. Tennent has done a masterful job of incisively dissecting the major issues that differentiate the C’s. Of all the writings on the subject, this is the work that goes deeper and broader in setting forth the problems many are experiencing with C5 or as it is also known, the “Insider Movement.”

I so appreciated the theological focus. It is interesting how both C4 and C5 utilize the same Scriptures to bolster their positions. The exception is I Cor. 7:20, which I have never understood as a C5 apologetic. These verses are clearly on another track.

Tennent more than adequately discounts the comparison of First Century Jewish converts to Christianity being aligned with 21st Century C5 “Insiders.” The differences loom too large to ignore.

I would also agree that “Muslim Believer” would be a more appropriate term for C5 believers than “Muslim Background Believer.” However, some C5ers advocate only the identity of “Muslim” with no qualifier.

One of my frustrations has been that the Insider Movement uses the same arguments to bolster their position as C4 folk do, and then make it sound like it originated with them. We C4 missionaries, for 30 years, have been an Insider Movement—have always advocated MBBs remaining in their culture, job, family, and sociological circle. Our strong position is to avoid what we consider to be theological and/or ethical compromise. I do recognize that we come out on different sides of the fence as to what comprises compromise!

YES to C5 as a starting point, but always with a laser beam focus on going down the scale to C4 within an appropriate timeframe.

Response Three (by Herbert Hoefer)

I am involved most intimately with C-5 phenomena among caste Hindus in India. In Hindu society, it is quite acceptable to have differing religious beliefs and practices, as long as one carries out “dharma” (social
duties) faithfully. It is a society of orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. It is no problem to have one’s identity as a Hindu culturally but as a follower of Jesus spiritually.

In addition, the Hindu society approaches its spiritual activity primarily in the family context, occasionally in individual temple worship, and only at festivals in a corporate fashion. Therefore, it is quite possible for people to be known as devout followers of Jesus and still be accepted wholeheartedly in the society. There are aspects of these Hindu cultural activities that are religious, and the “Jesu bhaktas” (“devotees of Jesus”) simply abstain from participating.

In general, I would concur with Dr. Tennent’s closing remark that “the best approach is to see C-5 as a temporary, transitional bridge by which some Muslims are crossing over into explicit Christian faith, hopefully to one of a C-3 or C-4 character.” In fact, that approach is what I intended in the quote provided from my “Theologyless Christ” article. Even at that, the organization of church may well differ from culture to culture, as I’ve tried to develop in a forthcoming EMQ article “Church in Context.”

In mission work, we are constantly trying to keep up with the movement of the Spirit. He does not conform to our established rules and structures. We frustrate Him badly when we try to box Him and His People in. We want to maintain the doctrinal integrity of any developing Christian community, but we are open to the many different ways that truth can be framed, expressed, and lived culturally.

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Response Four (by Rebecca Lewis)

What is the relationship between contextualization and syncretism? Unfortunately, it is not a simple relationship whereby avoiding extreme contextualization one can avoid syncretism as charts B and C on page 103 might imply. Examples of Christian or “Christian” movements can be found in each of these quadrants:

A. High Syncretism/low contextualization: pre-Christian beliefs mixed with acceptable “Christian” foreign forms (e.g., folk Catholicism)

B. High Syncretism/high contextualization: pre-Christian “insider” forms + pre-Christian beliefs (e.g., cargo cults)

C. High contextualization/low syncretism: pre-Christian “insider” forms + orthodox beliefs (e.g., Messianic synagogues)

D. Low contextualization/low syncretism: foreign “Christian” forms + orthodox beliefs (e.g., evangelical churches in India)

Notice, one would think that quadrant C would be the ideal basis for an effective “insider” movement, where orthodox beliefs in culturally familiar forms could spread rapidly within a pre-existing socio-religious network. However, the example of “Messianic synagogues” shows that setting up completely contextualized but new structures does not necessarily lead to acceptance. In fact, those Jews who join Messianic synagogues today are rejected by other Jews and even the State of Israel as traitors to the Jewish people, and are thus “extracted” from Judaism into Messianic Judaism. So while Chart C on page 103 could be understood to suggest that “extraction” only happens when non-contextualized forms are used, “extraction” can happen in any of the four quadrants below.

Rebecca Lewis grew up in Guatemala. After receiving her BS in History from the California Institute of Technology in 1977, she and her husband Tim helped found Frontiers and led a team of 40 adults to reach Berbers of North Africa.
An Evaluation of Emerging Churches on the Basis of the Contextualization Spectrum (C1-C6)

Gregg Allison

The purpose of this paper is threefold: (1) introduce participants to the Contextualization Spectrum (C1—C6), a helpful missiological tool for describing Christ-centered communities in the Muslim world; (2) modify this tool so as to render it useful in assessing the emerging church phenomenon; and (3) apply this modified contextualization spectrum to assess some representative samples of actual emerging churches. At the heart of my proposal is the conviction that the emerging church phenomenon is, in part, a contemporary attempt at contextualizing the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ in a changing (postmodern) world. If this is the case, then the emerging church phenomenon (1) bears some similarities with contextualization efforts carried out in the past, and (2) manifests a spectrum of embodiments that are contextualized from a lesser to a greater degree.

This paper has a very narrow purpose and so I offer the following limitations: (1) I will not make a distinction in nomenclature between “emergent” and “emerging” as applied to churches and proponents; for the purposes of this paper, I will lump these together under the rubric of “the emerging church phenomenon.” (2) Regarding this rubric, it is simply a placeholder for the ill-defined yet real phenomenon of which everyone listening to this presentation has (at least) an intuitive awareness. My purpose is not to write a definition but to do an assessment of a phenomenon. (3) One may agree or disagree with my placement of a specific church along the modified contextualization spectrum. Despite agreement or disagreement on the specifics, I will establish that the emerging church phenomenon manifests a spectrum of embodiments from a lesser to a greater degree of contextualization. (4) I will not consider the house church phenomenon per se. Though it is the case that some embodiments of the emerging church phenomenon are house churches, I will treat those as emerging church house churches and not as part of the house church phenomenon; such treatment would take me far a field from my purpose. (5) I also will not consider the phenomenon of individual Christians who purposely do not belong to any church, opting to pursue interaction with others through on-line venues or occasional gatherings of friends. A more fundamental question—"Do such connections constitute a ‘church?’”—needs to be raised first, but this is not my purpose.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CONTEXTUALIZATION SPECTRUM (C1—C6)

In *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4) in October, 1998, John Travis (a pseudonym) contributed an important article entitled “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-centered Communities’ (‘C’) Found in the Muslim Context.” Travis described his spectrum and its utility:

The C1 – C6 Spectrum compares and contrasts types of “Christ-centered communities” (groups of believers in Christ) found in the Muslim world. The six types in the spectrum are differentiated by language, culture, worship forms, degree of freedom to worship with others, and religious identity. All worship Jesus as Lord and core elements of the gospel are the same from group to group. The spectrum attempts to address the enormous diversity
which exists throughout the Muslim world in terms of ethnicity, history, traditions, language, culture, and, in some cases, theology. This diversity means that myriad approaches are needed to successfully share the gospel and plant Christ-centered communities among the world’s one billion followers of Islam. The purpose of the spectrum is to assist church planters and Muslim background believers to ascertain which type of Christ-centered communities may draw the most people from the target group to Christ and best fit in a given context. All of these six types are presently found in some part of the Muslim world.  

Travis outlined the distinctive characteristics of each of the six Christ-centered communities (these have been abbreviated somewhat):

**C1: Traditional Church Using Outsider Language**
Many reflect Western culture. A huge cultural chasm often exists between the church and the surrounding Muslim community. Some Muslim background believers may be found in C1 churches. C1 believers call themselves “Christians.”

**C2: Traditional Church Using Insider Language**
Essentially the same as C1 except for language. Though insider language is used, religious vocabulary is probably non-Islamic (distinctively “Christian”). The cultural gap between Muslims and C2 is still large. Often more Muslim background believers are found in C2 than C1. C2 believers call themselves “Christians.”

**C3: Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms**
Religiously neutral forms may include folk music, ethnic dress, artwork, etc. Islamic elements (where present) are “filtered out” so as to use purely “cultural” forms. The aim is to reduce foreignness of the gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms. May meet in a church building or more religiously neutral location. C3 congregations are comprised of a majority of Muslim background believers. C3 believers call themselves “Christians.”

**C4: Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms**
Similar to C3, however, biblically permissible Islamic forms and practices are also utilized (e.g., praying with raised hands, keeping the fast, avoiding pork, alcohol, and dogs as pets, using Islamic terms, dress, etc.). C1 and C2 forms avoided. Meetings not held in church buildings. C4 communities comprised almost entirely of Muslim background believers. C4 believers identify themselves as “followers of Isa the Messiah” (or something similar).

**C5: Christ-centered Communities of “Messianic Muslims” Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior**
C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. Somewhat similar to the Messianic Jewish movement. Aspects of Islamic theology which are incompatible with the Bible are rejected, or reinterpreted if possible. Participation in corporate Islamic worship varies from person to person and group to group. C5 believers meet regularly with other C5 believers and share their faith with unsaved Muslims. Where entire villages accept Christ, C5 may result in “Messianic mosques.” C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.
C6: Small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers
Similar to persecuted believers suffering under totalitarian regimes. Due to fear, isolation, or threat of extreme governmental/community legal action or retaliation (including capital punishment), C6 believers worship Christ secretly (individually or perhaps infrequently in small clusters). C6 (as opposed to C5) believers are usually silent about their faith. C6 believers are perceived as Muslims by the Muslim community and identify themselves as Muslims.

I believe that this helpful missiological tool for describing Christ-centered communities in the Muslim world can be modified so as to render it useful in assessing the emergent church phenomenon.

MODIFICATION OF THE C1-C6 SPECTRUM TO THE NORTH AMERICAN & BRITISH CONTEXTS

I have made a simple modification of the C1 – C6 Spectrum so as to define six types of Christ-centered communities found in the North American and British cultural context. In this case, it is not Islamic religion and culture that form the context for contextualization, resulting in these six types of Christ-centered communities. Rather, it is a culture that is increasingly changing or becoming postmodernized that forms the context for contextualization, resulting in a different six types of Christ-centered communities. “Cm” stands for “(Allison-)modified Christ-centered communities.”

Cm1: Traditional Churches Using Outsider Language
These churches are very traditional and reflect traditional Christian culture, liturgy, activities, etc. A huge cultural chasm, especially because of (but not confined to) linguistic distance, exists between these churches and the surrounding community.

Three types: (1) A traditional English-language church in an area in which English is not the mother tongue (e.g., a historic church that continues English language services in a predominately or exclusively Hispanic-language area). (2) A traditional non-English-language church that targets an ethnic group for which that non-English-language is the mother tongue (e.g., a Vietnamese church that holds Vietnamese language services in a predominately English-language area). (3) A traditional, particular English-language church in an area in which English is the mother tongue, but the church attracts an English-language group that is distinct from the general English-language population (a Southern Baptist church in Portland, Oregon, that attracts southern English-language Southern Baptists from the South).

Cm2: Traditional Churches Using Insider Language
These churches are essentially the same as Cm1 except for language.

Four types: (1) A traditional English-language church in an area in which English is not the mother tongue and that offers translation or has a parallel service in the non-English language (e.g., a historic church that continues English language services in a predominately or exclusively Hispanic-language area and that offers simultaneous translation or has a parallel Hispanic service). (2) A traditional non-English-language church that targets an ethnic group for which that non-English-language is the mother tongue but whose second-generation members’ primary language is English (e.g., a Chinese church that holds both Mandarin and Cantonese language services in a predominately English-language area and offers English-language services for its second-generation Chinese members). (3) A traditional, particular English-language church in an area in which English is the mother tongue and that has learned to attract people from the general English-
language population (a Southern Baptist church in Portland, Oregon, that has learned to attract the general Portland population). (4) A traditional church that eschews—mostly by conviction, perhaps by traditional structuring or isolationism—most if not all of what has become associated with the church growth movement, the megachurch movement, the “seeker sensitive” ethos, the “purpose driven” ethos, etc. I will group together these phenomena that targeted certain audiences at the turn of the third millennium, and I will refer to them as the “pre-emerging movements.”

**Cm3: Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Secular Forms**

These churches incorporate some biblically permissible cultural and secular forms and practices often originally contextualized by the pre-emerging movements, with “compromised” elements (where present) “filtered out.” The aim is to reduce foreignness of the gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permitted forms and practices.

Three types: (1) An established church that has been moderately influenced by pre-emerging movements. It still draws heavily from older generation Christians, but it also includes some newer generation Christians who have been raised in the church or are attracted to it because of its more historic church patterns. The church has incorporated some biblically permissible aspects originally contextualized by the pre-emerging movements (e.g., blended worship with both hymns and choruses, choir and praise band; adoption of mission and vision statements) so a type of contextualization has been carried out. (2) A newer church that has been planted by an established church and that carries with it the historic church patterns with moderate adaptation. This newer church may target a different audience than the established church from which it was born, and it may feature more incorporation of biblically permissible aspects of the pre-emerging movements. Thus, the newer church engages in a type of contextualization, but it still largely reflects the historic church patterns with moderate adaptation present in the established church from which it arose. (3) An emerging church that engages in moderate-level contextualization.

**Cm4: Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Cultural and Secular Forms**

Similar to Cm3, these churches incorporate many biblically permissible cultural and secular forms and practices often originally contextualized by the pre-emerging movements. The difference is that they additionally incorporate religiously neutral forms, with less “filtering out.” Again, the aim is to reduce foreignness of the gospel and the church by contextualizing to religiously neutral cultural forms. Cm1 and Cm2 forms avoided.

Three types: (1) A church that has been strongly influenced by the pre-emerging movements such that many biblically permissible cultural and secular forms are incorporated. In addition, religiously neutral cultural and secular forms and practices are accepted and utilized. These patterns and activities include widespread use of media (power point, movie clips, sketches), contemporary music styles (rock, hip-hop), corporate business strategies and CEO leadership structures, midweek church and weekend ministry, etc. (2) A multiple-venue or multi-site church in which certain worship elements (e.g., singing, praying, giving, baptizing) and community times are produced live on-site while the sermon is reproduced via satellite and video technology. Each venue/site is a contextualized experience targeted at a particular audience (the target groups may differ according to geography, generation, ethnicity, etc.); each venue/site may differ from a lesser to a greater degree from the other venues/sites. A variety of types of contextualization occurs. (3) An emerging church that engages in mid-level contextualization.
**Cm5: Christ-centered Communities Strongly Adapting to a Changing (Postmodern) Cultural Situation**

Two types: (1) A church that is strongly marked by the pre-emerging movements but now senses that its surrounding culture is undergoing a significant (postmodernism) shift. It concludes that a new contextualization is necessary, yet the church also recognizes that it must maintain its current identity, at least to a significant degree. Thus, while the originally contextualized community remains, a newly contextualized dimension is added on. This additional element can take the form of a new, distinct service (e.g., a “Gen X” service on Saturday nights) or it may be blended into the already existing reality (e.g., the sermon is followed by an “open mike” time for community interaction). (2) An emerging church that engages in high-level contextualization strongly targeted toward a shifting (postmodern) cultural situation.

**Cm6: Christ-centered Communities of Protest-Driven Followers**

Due to extremely bad experiences with Cm1 – Cm5 communities (leading to disdain for most things “Christian”), Cm6 communities eschew many/most of the activities, attitudes, traditions, even doctrines, of the Cm1–Cm5 communities.

**APPLICATION OF THE C1-C6 SPECTRUM TO THE EMERGING CHURCH PHENOMENON**

I will now attempt to apply this modified contextualization spectrum to assess some representative samples of actual emerging churches. Before I do so, however, I want to offer a brief discussion of contextualization and look at one recent attempt to do something similar to what I’m trying to do.

No one definition of contextualization exists; indeed, numerous (and, at times) competing definitions can be readily found. For the sake of this paper, I will use the definition formulated by Dean Gilliland in his article “Contextualization” in A. Scott Moreau’s *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 225-227.

Gilliland first defines contextualization in terms of its task:

> The goal of contextualization perhaps best defines what it is. That goal is to enable, insofar as it is humanly possible, an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ, the Word, is authentically experienced in each and every human situation. Contextualization means that the Word must dwell among all families of humankind today as truly as Jesus lived among his own kin. The gospel is Good News when it provides answers for a particular people living in a particular place at a particular time. This means the worldview of that people provides a framework for communication, the questions and needs of that people are a guide to the emphasis of the message, and the cultural gifts of that people become the medium of expression.

Gilliland continues with a discussion of contextualization in the context of church mission:

> Contextualization in mission is the effort made by a particular church to experience the gospel for its own life in light of the Word of God. In the process of contextualization the church, through the Holy Spirit, continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the culture in order to bring them under the lordship of Christ.

Because the context in which contextualization occurs consists of far more than just theology, Gilliland adds that
...it is proper to speak of contextualization in a variety of ways encompassing all the dimensions of religious life. For example, church architecture, worship, preaching, systems of church governance, symbols, and rituals are all areas where the contextualization principle applies. Context, on which the word is based, is not narrowly understood as the artifacts and customs of culture only, but embraces the differences of human realities and experiences. In this sense contextualization applies as much to the church "at home," with all its variations, as it does to the church "overseas."

One can debate the merits of Gilliland’s discussion of contextualization, but what he describes is certainly part of what is going on with the emerging church phenomenon: It is, in part, a contemporary attempt at contextualizing the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ in a changing (postmodern) world. (On a personal note, I can recall that when I first began reading books about the emerging church phenomenon, I had the distinct impression that contextualization of the gospel and the church was at the heart of these efforts. As a missionary for seven years in Italy and Switzerland, I wrestled with many of the issues with which emerging churches are grappling. This impression was confirmed by further investigation, and it lies at the core of this paper.)

In his article, Gilliland briefly draws attention to the fact that some people are fearful of contextualization because, when taken too far, it results in syncretism, the substitution or dilution of biblical truth and practice by means of the incorporation of unbiblical accretions. This fear has been expressed by some who have interacted with the C1—C6 spectrum. Phil Parshall, a leader in cross-cultural church planting and contextualization, in an article entitled “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4) October, 1998, made a helpful distinction between contextualization and syncretism and applied his discussion to the C1—C6 reality in the Muslim world. This resulted in a map of the spectrum in relation to contextualization and syncretism:

```
Low___________________________High
contextualization
C1   C2   C3   C4   C5.........................C5

High___________________________Low
syncretism
```

Modifying Parshall’s spectrum so as to include C6, remove C1 and C2 out from the contextualization category and into a class (I will call it “traditionalism”) by themselves, and move C5 under his contextualization category (so as to give a broader spectrum for classifying emerging churches), I propose the following spectrum:

```
Low___________________________High
[traditionalism]  contextualization
Cm1   Cm2   Cm3   Cm4   Cm5

High___________________________Low
syncretism
Cm6.........................Cm6
```

I am not alone in attempting to analyze the emerging church phenomenon in terms of a spectrum from lesser to greater contextualization (with the added dimension of syncretism). Ed Stetzer, research team director and missiologist with the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, authored a brief article entitled “Understanding the Emergent Church” in which he classified emergent (emerging) churches into three broad categories that dovetail somewhat with my discussion of contextualization:

*Relevants:* Churches "that really are just trying to make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture....They are often deeply..."
committed to biblical preaching, male pastoral leadership and other values common in conservative evangelical churches. They are simply trying to explain the message of Christ in a way their generation can understand….If we find biblical preaching and God-centered worship in a more culturally relevant setting, I rejoice just as I would for international missionaries using tribal cultural forms in Africa.”

*Reconstructionists:* These churches “think that the current form of church is frequently irrelevant and the structure is unhelpful. Yet, they typically hold to a more orthodox view of the gospel and Scripture. Therefore, we see an increase in models of church that reject certain organizational models, embracing what are often called ‘incarnational’ or ‘house’ models.”

*Revisionists:* We significantly differ from them regarding what the Bible is, what it teaches and how we should live it in our churches….Revisionists are questioning (and in some cases denying) issues like the nature of the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the complementarian nature of gender, and the nature of the gospel itself.”

If we insert Stetzer’s three broad categories into my above diagram, something like the following results:

```
Low___________________High     Low___________________High
[traditionalism]  contextualization  syncretism
Cm1    Cm2    Cm3    Cm4    Cm5    Cm6............................Cm6
relevants                      reconstructionists
                               revisionists
```

I turn now to some representative samples of actual emerging churches and their placement into my modified C1—C6 contextualization spectrum.

**Cm3: Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Secular Form**

*Mars Hill (Seattle; words of Mark Driscoll)*

“We had the crazy dream of making a difference in one of the nation’s least-churched cities [Seattle], where only 8 percent of the population is evangelical Christian and 86 percent does not attend a worship service of any religion during an average week….We started a church to fill what I saw as the gap of eighteen to thirty-five-year-olds who were missing from the churches in our region…..The Holy Spirit burdened me to start a church for the people who had fallen into that dropout hole….The Christian church has a new world of opportunity to explore, among cities, young people, and cultural progressives….These cultural centers are marked by such things as airports that provide mobility, vital arts communities, tech-friendly lifestyles, colleges and universities, and blue politics (Democrats)….”


“Missions once solely meant sending American Christians into foreign lands and cultures to live among the people there and to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to them in a relevant way. But reformission also seeks to determine
how Christians and their churches can most effectively be missionaries to their own local cultures. Reformission begins with a simple return to Jesus, who, by grace saves us and sends us into reformission. Jesus has called us to (1) the gospel (loving our Lord), (2) the culture (loving our neighbor), and (3) the church (loving our Christian brothers and sisters). One of the causes for the lack of reformission in the American church is that various Christian traditions are prone to faithfulness on only one or two of these counts. Consequently, when we fail to love the Lord, our culture, and our church simultaneously, reformission ceases, leaving one of three holes: the para-church, liberalism, and fundamentalism. Through repentance, Christians and churches are empowered by the Holy Spirit to simultaneously love the Lord, love their neighbor, and love their Christian brothers and sisters.

Gospel + Culture + Church = Reformission

Reformission combines the best of each of these types of Christianity: living in tension of being culturally liberal yet theologically conservative Christians and churches who are absolutely driven by the gospel of grace to live their Lord, their neighbor, and their fellow Christians” (pp. 14-16).

“The era of Christendom was dominated by the traditional and institutional church….The end of Christendom and the transition to a post-Christian culture is currently dominated by the contemporary and evangelical church…. A third incarnation of the church is arising, the emerging and missional church….Mars Hill...is an emerging and missional church because that is the most effective church form for reaching the city of Seattle, to which God has called us....The point is not that one of these church forms is good and the others are bad. Rather, one is more likely more effective for reaching the people in your local culture than the other forms are” (pp. 17-21).

“I decided that being cool, having good music, understanding postmodern epistemology, and welcoming all kinds of strange people into the church is essentially worthless if at the bedrock of the church anything other than a rigorous Jesus-centered biblical theology guides the mission of the church....So I taught through the book of Romans on Sunday nights, which helped to clarify our doctrinal convictions as a church and cemented us as a church with a reformed view of God and salvation” (pp. 78, 85).

Apostles Church (New York City; words from the website)

Apostles Church exists to embrace and extend the Gospel of Jesus Christ in hopes of experiencing renewal in our lives and in our city. We will do this by: proclaiming Jesus, in relevant words and merciful deeds; assimilating believers, into transformational biblical communities; developing leaders, to oversee effective ministry; renewing the city, by applying our faith to our public lives and by serving the marginalized; planting churches, in our city and around the world in partnership with others.

Worship arts: The content of our worship is the story of God creating and becoming involved in the created order through his presence in Israel, in Jesus, and now in the church to bring history to its completion. In this way, we recognize that worship is the Missio Dei (Mission of God) presented, enacted, celebrated, and thankfully praised to his glory. In worship, we allow
the beautiful story of God's grace in history to tell us who we are and to posture us toward transformation as we interact and communicate with his Spirit.

Lectionary: Apostles Church honors the ancient tradition of the Lectionary. For each day, there is a Psalm reading (or two or three), an Old Testament reading, an epistle reading, and a Gospel reading. What is so beautiful about the lectionary is that it pulls us towards a fuller understanding of the grace and mercy of God displayed through ancient Israel, Jesus Christ, and his continuing work by the Spirit and through his Church. The lectionary allows us to unite in daily readings of scripture as community across the city, participating as one body in the study of and meditation on the word of God. Taken from the website: apostlesnyc.com.

**Cm4: Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Cultural and Secular Forms**

Late Late Service (London, U.K.; words of Andy Thornton):

"Our ages were twenty-five to forty, and we related to a certain element of culture. Our congregational premise was that we represented a segment of society, not a geographical one but a geographically mobile group able to find one another in the urban setting. We were a church for a certain kind of taste, yet we networked with an all-age church....We were extremely experimental and pushed boundaries. After a year, we lost our novelty. Fifty people joined our community. Membership meant broadly, ‘I stand with you as an intentional community.’ We sought to achieve fairly similar aims and to commune with God. We were orthodox Christians rooted in the orthodoxy of church trying to reembody faith in creative ways with the gifts given us. We identified ourselves as both orthodox and freedom loving. We wanted three-dimensional worship: upward, inward, and outward. We sought to assimilate different traditions and forms into a coherent Christian expression. We had four meetings a month. One night was education night, where we covered a biblical theme. Another night was a quiet service in which we met in small groups. One night was personal growth night, where we took what we had learned that month and applied it. The final meeting was a celebration with dance music, video loops, and teams of people involved."


"We put our worship together with ritual arts and a strong narrative. We wanted those who came to experience freedom within the rituals. In our services, we might sing together, introduce a theme, make some sort of a response with stations, light candles, and offer unspoken responses. At the end of the day, you didn’t just listen. You were asked to move physically within the worship space” (p. 184).

Vintage Faith Church (Santa Cruz; words from the website): explains that the “church is unique and different” because it:

- uses a philosophy of ministry that reflects the ancient roots of Christianity.
- is a church of “people,” not a place you go to.
- is a multi generational church comprised of individuals and families of all ages.

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www.theresurgence.com
• is a holistically designed family based church.
• has the arts and creativity in our blood.
• has a heart to clear up misconceptions about Christianity.
• is missional.

Taken from the website: vintagechurch.org.

Cm5: Christ-centered Communities Strongly Adapting to a Changing (Postmodern) Cultural Situation
Sanctus1 (Manchester, U.K.; words of Ben Edson)

“We have been meeting for public worship once a month. Services have grown in popularity and reputation, with numbers varying from fifteen to sixty. The group that forms the backbone of Sanctus1 meets weekly on Wednesday night....The format varies: We discuss issues, read the Bible, and engage theologically with film and music. We also have services, social events, and other activities. The Wednesday night gatherings are based around discussion and adult learning techniques. Both Wednesday groups meet together once a month for a shared Eucharist. The majority of people who attend are between twenty-five and forty ....A large proportion is involved with the creative arts. For example, there are musicians, visual artists, arts development workers, graphic designers, and architects. We are also attracting a number of people from the gay community. This is simply due to the inclusive attitude that is fundamental to the ethos of Sanctus1. The growth of Sanctus1 over the past year has been organic. People have shared what Sanctus1 is about with their network of friends and contacts. We have not had evangelistic missions or events, but we are a mission-focused church. Growth and mission are part of the DNA of the church rather than an add-on annual event. We are reaching the dechurched rather than the nonchurched: people who have stopped attending church become of boredom, hurts, changes in circumstance, or a number of other reasons. Our next challenge is to attract more nonchurched people to Sanctus1. We are now running a club night in a bar in the city center that is a place for natural evangelism to take place.”


“We had a guy from the Manchester Buddhist center come to Sanctus1 a couple weeks ago and talk about Buddhist approaches to prayer. We didn’t talk about the differences between our faiths. We didn’t try to convert him. He was welcomed and fully included and was really pleased to have been invited. We gave him a positive experience of a Christian community, which is in itself an important act of mission” (p. 133).

ReIMAGINE (San Francisco; words from the website):

Lately people have been asking us to describe what’s going on with ReIMAGINE, JESUS DOJO, EMMAUS ROAD, and common life retreats. We are a local and regional network of people, connected through relationships, who are taking vows together to obey the teachings of Jesus in every dimension of life through common rhythms and practices. Together we are asking the question, “What are the practices and rhythms we share that help us make a
life in the way of Jesus?” We are experimenting with and improvising a common way of life and the cultivation of a local culture. Our monastic practices are descriptive rather than prescriptive.

Many of us have met each other through hospitality and conversation around our passions. We try to keep the spirit of this alive by offering hospitality and conversation to others through Emmaus Road. Through EMMAUS ROAD we invite curious people to connect through conversation and friendship.

We sense the need for a more intentional and systematic approach being formed as people in the way of Jesus. We’ve invited people to join us in experiences, projects, and initiatives to help one another align our lives with the energy of the kingdom of God. We call this process the JESUS DOJO.

Through our experiences together we’ve come to recognize the importance of making vows of obedience to God with one another. We are in the process of articulating our commitments to certain values, rhythms and practices. We describe this process as the development of a common life. Through a common life we invite people to vow to follow the example and teachings of Jesus in every dimension of life. We’ve also come to recognize that we need close proximity, solidarity, and critical mass to be effective in vows we’ve made to obey Jesus through various rhythms and practices. Some of us are interested in setting up intentional communities where we can live in close proximity and offer hospitality and service to others. Through intentional communities we invite people to come and dwell together to become what we were made to be. Taken from the website: reimagine.org.

Cm6: Christ-centered Communities of Protest-Driven Followers

Monkfish Abbey (Seattle): offers three options as to “who we are:”

Option A: At Monkfish Abbey, we are in the process of growing a soul-care community. We think it’s important to be connected to God, attentive to our souls, and present and loving to the people in our lives. We meet in the warm red dining room in the Fremont/Wallingford district of Seattle. There are sometimes five of us and sometimes fifteen of us. We are mostly in our 20s and 30s, mostly married, and a few of us have young ones running around. Most of us are Christians, or were Christians, or at least dig Jesus – but not everyone would hang their hats on any of these etymological pegs and that’s okay too. We are seekers, searchers, explorers, experimenters...you get the drift. We like art and music and we make a lot of that stuff. We talk a lot and eat a lot. In fact eating dinner together is the only thing we always do at a gathering (everything else changes from week to week, whim to whim, need to need.) We pool our money to help people out. We practice a set of practices and celebrate certain seasons. We have two simple reasons for being together 1) to stay connected to the Divine. 2) To stay connected to others. Oh yeah, and number three, 3) we like each other.

We are a group of friends and acquaintances. We are people who help each other move. We paint each other’s bathrooms. We make birthday cakes. We are people who want to recognize that time is not a renewable resource, it matters how you spend it. We want to know the new lady with the little girl who moved in next door. The guy in the next cubical. The dreadlock barista at the coffee shop. The yoga teacher with the cool chimes. The plumber at our
worksite. The outrageous waiter with the t-shirt that says, “I’m Gay... Don’t Tell Anyone.” We are people who like life. We are artists. We are computer programmers. We are parents. We are beer lovers. We are people who fight, who laugh, get bored, get inspired. We make music; we make soup. We laze around in the sun; we play scrabble in the rain. We listen to loud music; we go with each other to get tattoos. We read good novels; we learn about wine and cheese. We are explorers. We are people who want to worship God, and talk to God, and listen to God. We are people who readily admit we are not entirely sure what that means. We are people who learn not from a leader, but from one another. We blow dust off of old books, we reform old beliefs. We uncover ancient practices and make them our own. We say, “I was wrong.” We look twice at something that catches our eye. We seek.

Option B: We are a trippy little spiritual growth group with Judeo-Christian roots and yen for ancient and future practices. The concept of “shalom” is central to us, and we try to find ways to move our lives and the lives of others into a place of increased wholeness.

Option C: We are a neomonastic incarnational community. (This is the kind of answer postmodern/emerging church planters like, so if that description fits, this one is just for you!). Neomonastic: 1) a new form of monastic living. 2) Being somewhat like a monastery—only without the chastity, poverty, or living in one building together. What’s left?

- Regularly celebrating a common meal, conversation and communion.
- Paying attention to the people in our parish (neighborhood) and learning to extend and receive love from them.
- Practicing contemplative practices so we can be present to God and the world around us. (Our contemplative practices usually involve some sort of art, because many of us are artists.)
- Celebrating religious holidays and seasonal events.

_Incarnational:_ We believe the thumbprint of the divine is present in all things and in all people. We try to live as though God, present in us, is actually available to us. (Because we believe that it’s true!) We’re learning to live in ways that offers that divine source of love to those around us. Some of us are Jesus-y people. For those of us who are Jesus-y we usually describe this incarnational reality as Jesus being present in us, existing mysteriously in our souls. Others of us think more in terms of a divine presence or a higher power—a sort of “Namaste” concept—the divine in me greets the divine in you, the light in me reaches out to the light in you. We are learning to make space for each other as we explore this mysterious reality.

_Community:_ To us, this means a collection of people who belong to each other in varying ways. Some of us see each other often throughout the week. Some of us connect only on the night of our weekly gatherings. Some are long-term friends who now rarely see each other, but who treasure a joint history. Some are just beginning to form new friendships. For some the Abbey is their main religious home (i.e. “church”), but for others it is a complimentary spiritual stop in the course of their week. One way or another, we find belonging here. Taken from the website: www.monkfish-abbey.org
ikon (Belfast) describes its community as *iconic, apocalyptic, heretical, emerging, and failing*. It describes itself as heretical in the following way:

We acknowledge our heretical stance in relation to the larger Christian community. Unlike the terms “unbeliever” and “infidel,” which traditionally referred to those from a different religious tradition, a heretic is one who comes from the same tradition by who reads it in a very different way. Not only do we acknowledge and celebrate the multiplicity of ways that one can read Christianity, we actively employ these diverse readings in order to help ensure that no single understanding is taken as the only true understanding. By doing this we also endeavor to be a place of refuge for those on the edges, or outside, the traditional church system, yet who desire God. While this can often place us in tension with more established forms of religion, we view this as a creative force that allows for a critical, two-way interaction with the larger church, challenging while being challenged. Taken from the website: wikj.ikon.org.uk

St. John’s College, Nottingham; St. Mary’s Church, Luton; “liquid worship:”


maji (Birmingham, U.K.;; words of Pip Piper):

“My view on interfaith stuff is simply that Christianity has to stand up in the wider marketplace, and that means more gatherings and events that bring together those faiths. We share a lot together, and art and film can help that link and help people explore and express their distinct faith journeys without having to feel under attack or undermined in any way. Each is stronger for the encounter. Evangelism or mission for me is no longer about persuading people to believe what I believe, no matter how edgy or creative I get. It is more about shared experiences and encounters. It is about walking the journey of life and faith together, each distinct to his or her own tradition and culture but with the possibility of encountering God and truth from one another.” Cited in Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 130-131.

**APPENDIX A: Evidence that the Emerging Church Phenomenon is Contextualization-Driven**

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*: “Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures” (p. 44); “[emerging churches] take culture, specifically
postmodern culture, seriously” (p. 43); “emerging churches are missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time (p. 28).


John Hammett, in paper entitled “An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church Movement,” presented last year at this ETS study group, noted:

D. A. Carson compares the emerging church movement with the Protestant Reformation and notes a major difference. The Reformation developed around concerns that the Catholic Church of that time had departed from Scripture in a number of significant ways; thus, the changes advocated by the Reformers were attempts to reform the church on the basis of Scripture. By contrast, the emerging church advocates the changes it does largely on the grounds of changes in the culture, and the corresponding need to adapt to those changes. It is true that some in the emerging church, on a number of points, claim to be recovering biblical emphases, and calls to authenticity, community, and a focus on the mission of the church are deeply rooted in the New Testament. Moreover, key leaders of the emerging church affirm that they “love, have confidence in, seek to obey, and strive accurately to teach the sacred Scriptures.” I see no reason to doubt the sincerity of these leaders, nor the reality of their commitment to Scripture. But in reading their material in books, websites and articles, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the concern to respond to postmodernism is what is really driving the movement.


“Emergent church” does not parachute a set model of church on to people; it is church from below. It starts not with a preconceived notion of church, but with the desire to express church in the culture of the group involved. It is church shaped by the context, not by “This is how we have always done it” (p. 11).

I think that the Christians of our generation (the “Boomers”) tried hard to fit into the culture of our parents, including the culture of church, while may of our contemporaries went off in a different direction. We then brought up our children in a culturally-disjunctured church, and this became “normal” for us (p. 19).

The church is not the only organization having to adapt. Organizations throughout the advanced world are reinventing themselves as torrents of change sweep down the “Oh Oh” decade. At the cutting edge are three themes. Experimentation.... Personalization.... New forms of scale....Emerging church raises similar issues. How can the church promote experiments? How can it be “personalized” to different cultural groups. How can churches cooperate to produce new forms of scale that support a contextualized approach? Fresh expressions of church make sense because they reflect a “social quake” that is forcing organizations into new shapes. Like the rest of the world, the church cannot stand still—and survive (pp. 93-95).

contextualization by emergent churches: “God, in the person of Jesus, decided to become like culture. He became like the people he wants to find....” (p. 17).


We believe that there are better days ahead for the church of Jesus Christ in all its forms...if we are willing to adapt our forms to seize the opportunities these new conditions present to us....Cautious critics will counter that there are huge risks associated with engaging postmodern culture. To mention but one: There is the danger of syncretism—mixing, adulterating, or diluting the gospel with foreign elements that weaken, damage, or distort its integrity (p. 23).

Putting faith and culture together is a missiological problem (p. 25).

Modern Western Christians tend to forget that they are living an enculturated gospel.... God’s people across the storyline of Scripture lived, worshiped, trusted, and obeyed in many cultural settings....To be biblical means to live in a culture, including modern or postmodern, and seek to be an agent of Jesus Christ there. Of course, to be Christ’s agents in a culture will make us in many ways countercultural. But even so, we are still living out an interpretation of the gospel, as Newbigin said, in “some cultural form.” Those ministering in postmodern contexts need a heightened sensitivity to issues of gospel and culture (p. 84).

Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2001):

If we accept the premise that the church is an organism, then we know that the church has the capacity for environmental adaptation. A part of the design of the church is to be able to make positive change while keeping her essence at the core. Over the past forty years, the communities around many churches have changed dramatically, yet the church has stayed the same. Somewhere in the community’s transformation, the church disconnected. And since the transition began incrementally, the local congregation was either unaware or unconcerned. The church must acclimate to a changing world, or she will destine herself to irrelevance or even extinction. What this means for the pastor as spiritual environmentalist is that he must understand the changing environment in which his church has been called to serve. One of those dramatic changes in our environment is the shift from words to images. To do church in a way that is entirely text-driven is the kiss of death. People simple do not read; they observe. We have a culture raised on watching. Beyond the emergence of a post-literate society, we have a culture raised on entertainment. We need to adapt to capturing images that communicate truth and to move from static to dynamic communication systems. Our culture is not only multi-sensory; it is multilayered. We receive information not only through all of our senses, but also through multiple senses at one time. That’s why for us worship many times encompasses not only the teaching of the word and worship through song, but also the use of sculpture, painting, dance, aromas, and film (pp. 16-17).
McManus treats less the postmodern reality and the church’s need to adapt to that as he does globalization. Specifically, the globalization issues he treats are: radical migration, urbanization, population explosion, technological revolution, information explosion, the global mosaic, and hypermodernism. One of McManus’ key theses is: “Jesus deconstructed the religion of Israel and ushered in the religion of God. Why would anyone be surprised that the core of the New Testament church is radical change? From the very beginning, the church was born out of radical change” (p. 85). He finds support for this thesis in the change from Saturday Sabbath observance to Christian worship on Sunday, and Acts 15. “The church must be grounded in a proper theology of change, not simply to address the radically different world in which we live, but to advance the cause of Christ in a world that cannot produce the real change that has to take place” (pp. 90).


To a certain extent, this identity [of the emerging church] is reactive and critical—an alternative to the resource-heavy, needs-based programs of many contemporary churches. But much of the emerging church’s identity is creatively generative. It desperately seeks to embody God’s agenda in a changing, post-Christian environment where the aging theological constructs and methodologies of a once-dominant religious institution no longer connect as cohesively as they once did (p. 25).

This transition [in the existing church] is both inevitable and necessary. For the church to thrive in the emerging culture of the present and future, it must embark on this journey. The church will increasingly find that some of its theological conceptions are founded on philosophical premises and cultural conditions that will be deeply marginalized in the future—if they exist at all. As a result, some of the traditional divisions of the church, modes of theological communication, and ministry forms will wane in significance and impact. This doesn’t mean an end to our traditions....But it does mean change lies ahead. For the church to maintain its voice in the emerging culture, transition is necessary (p. 32).

I believe we need to be sensitive to inappropriate cultural intrusion in our method and message. We must ask whether our use of cultural material is prejudicial or hypocritical (arbitrarily favoring some cultural material over others). But we need to recognize that the message and practice of the church has never been—nor will it ever be—culture-free ....The message of the gospel has always been shaped by the interests, worldview, prejudices, and communicational mediums of the culture in which it is being communicated....While we must be wary of the ways the message can be reduced or distorted by cultural intrusion, changing cultural realities also offer tremendous opportunity for new and deepened understandings to emerge (p. 53).

We need to learn skills of cultural exegesis that allow for the necessity of a culturally sensitive gospel while avoiding the distractions of inappropriate cultural infatuations. By *cultural exegesis*, I mean a passionate and wary study of our surrounding culture....Our culture provides the framework and perspective we need in order to dialogue with, pray to, and wrestle with God. Yet we must also query our culture warily because it can certainly obscure the gospel (p. 54).
Notes:

1 Support for this thesis from the burgeoning literature on the emerging church phenomenon is sizeable. See Appendix A for a sampling.

2 Generally speaking, “emergent” refers to Emergent Village, directed by Tony Jones and involves such notables as Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, Chris Seay, and others. “Emerging” is a broader term that (to use the definition proposed by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger) refers to churches that are “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.” Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 44.

The notion that the church must become like the world to win the world has taken evangelicalism by storm. Virtually every modern worldly attraction has a “Christian” counterpart. We have Christian motorcycle gangs, Christian bodybuilding teams, Christian dance clubs, Christian amusement parks, and I even read about a Christian nudist colony.

Where did Christians ever get the idea we could win the world by imitating it? Is there a shred of biblical justification for that kind of thinking? Many church marketing specialists affirm that there is, and they have convinced a myriad of pastors. Ironically, they usually cite the apostle Paul as someone who advocated adapting the gospel to the tastes of the audience. One has written, “Paul provided what I feel is perhaps the single most insightful perspective on marketing communications, the principle we call contextualization (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). Paul … was willing to shape his communications according to their needs in order to receive the response he sought.” “The first marketeer was Paul,” another echoes.

After all, the apostle did write, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it” (1 Cor. 9:22, 23). Is that a mandate for pragmatism in ministry? Was the apostle Paul suggesting that the gospel message can be made to appeal to people by accommodating their relish for certain amusements or by pampering their pet vices? How far do you suppose he would have been willing to go with the principle of “contextualization”?

The Great Non-Negotiable

This much is very clear: the apostle Paul was no people-pleaser. He wrote, “Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). Paul did not amend or abridge his message to make people happy. He was utterly unwilling to try to remove the offense from the gospel (Gal. 5:11). He did not use methodology that catered to the lusts of his listeners. He certainly did not follow the pragmatic philosophy of modern market-driven ministers.
What made Paul effective was not marketing savvy, but a stubborn devotion to the truth. He was Christ’s ambassador, not His press secretary. Truth was something to be declared, not negotiated. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16). He willingly suffered for the truth’s sake (2 Cor. 11:23–28). He did not back down in the face of opposition or rejection. He did not compromise with unbelievers or make friends with the enemies of God.

Paul’s message was always non-negotiable. In the same chapter where he spoke of becoming all things to all men, Paul wrote, “I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16). His ministry was in response to a divine mandate. God had called him and commissioned him. Paul preached the gospel exactly as he had received it directly from the Lord, and he always delivered that message “as of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3). He was not a salesman or marketer, but a divine emissary. He certainly was not “willing to shape his communications” to accommodate his listeners or produce a desirable response. The fact that he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19), beaten, imprisoned, and finally killed for the truth’s sake ought to demonstrate that he didn’t adapt the message to make it pleasing to his hearers! And the personal suffering he bore because of his ministry did not indicate that something was wrong with his approach, but that everything had been right!

So what did Paul mean when he wrote, “I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel”? As always, the context makes his meaning clear. We’ll be taking a look at what Paul really meant over the course of the next several days. I hope you stick around.
One of the most frequently quoted passages church marketing specialists use to justify “contextualizing” the gospel is Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 9, he summarizes his gospel strategy by claiming he became all things to all men. But look again at what Paul is actually saying in these verses:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it (1 Cor. 9:19–23).

The first sentence in that brief excerpt shows clearly what Paul was talking about. He was describing not his willingness to sacrifice the message, but his willingness to sacrifice himself to preach the message. He would give up everything—even become “a slave to all”—if that would promote the spread of the unadulterated gospel. His desire to win souls is the heart of this text, and he repeats it several times: “that I might win the more”; “that I might win Jews”; “that I might win those who are under the Law”; “that I might win those who are without law”; “that I might win the weak”; and “that I may by all means save some.” So winning people to Christ was his one objective. In order to do that, Paul was willing to give up all his rights and privileges, his position, his rank, his livelihood, his freedom—ultimately even his life. If it would further the spread of the gospel, Paul would claim no rights, make no demands, insist on no privileges.

And that is precisely how Paul lived and ministered. Not that he would modify the message to suit the world, but that he would behave so that he personally would never be an obstacle to anyone’s hearing and understanding the message of Christ. He was describing an attitude of personal sacrifice, not compromise. He would never alter the clear and confrontive call to repentance and faith.

Paul was making the point that Christian liberty must be circumscribed by love. That is the whole theme of the eighth through the tenth chapters of 1 Corinthians. It is the context in which these verses
are found. The Corinthians were evidently debating about the nature and extent of Christian freedom. Some wanted to use their liberty to do whatever they desired. Others leaned toward legalism, begrudging those who enjoyed their liberty in Christ. Paul was reminding both groups that Christian freedom is to be used to glorify God and serve others, not for selfish reasons.

Here’s an example of how that principle applies. Some of the Corinthians apparently had asked Paul whether they were free to eat meat offered to idols (8:1). Such meat often was collected from the pagan temples and sold in the marketplace at bargain prices. Paul told them it is not inherently wrong to eat such food, but if doing so places a stumbling block in someone else’s way, such an offense against another person is wrong. Paul summarized his reply with these words: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved” (10:31-33).

How did Paul use his own liberty in Christ? “Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more” (9:19). He saw his personal liberty and human rights as something to be used for God’s glory, not his own enjoyment. If he could trade his own liberty for an opportunity to proclaim the gospel and thus liberate others, he would do it gladly.
It is crucial that you understand the nature of Christian liberty. As a Christian, you are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). Freedom from the law certainly does not mean that the principles of righteousness revealed in the Old Testament law are now nullified. It does not mean that the Ten Commandments have no application to your present life. It does not mean that you can subjugate God’s holy standards to personal preference. It obviously does not mean you are free from any moral requirements.

What does it mean? It means that Christians are not bound to observe Old Testament ritual. We don’t have to sacrifice animals, observe the laws of ceremonial cleanness, and celebrate all the new moons and feasts and sacrifices. We don’t have to follow the dietary laws given to Israel through Moses. We are free from all that.

Likewise, obviously, we are free from all Gentile religious ceremony and superstition. Whatever our religious background or heritage, in Christ we are free from all the trappings of it. We now live by God’s grace, which has the principle of true righteousness built in.

In other words, our spiritual lives are governed not merely by an external code, but by God’s grace, which operates in us to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (Rom. 8:4). Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires, and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly (Titus 2:12). And grace empowers us to live holy lives.

This tremendous liberty is one of the most remarkable aspects of the Christian life. We have no need to yield to custom or ceremony or human opinion. There are no earthly priests to intercede between us and God: “There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). We don’t need to make a pilgrimage to a temple somewhere to worship; our very bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). We can worship God in spirit and in truth anytime, anyplace (John 4:23, 24). Whatever we ask in Jesus’ name He will do (John 14:13, 14). The Holy Spirit is given to us as our advocate and comforter (vv. 16, 26). All things belong to us, and we are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s (1 Cor. 3:21–23).
“All things belong to us, and we are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.” Paul made that tremendous, seemingly unqualified promise to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:21–23). Christians are free. Yet there is a paradox that balances that truth. Though free, all Christians are slaves. It is a new kind of bondage: we are “servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). As willing slaves, we must voluntarily restrict our own liberty for others’ sakes. Isn’t that what Jesus Himself taught? “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Paul applied the principle of voluntary servitude to evangelism. He made himself a slave to all—including the roughest, most contemptible, loathsome pagan. Being free, he nevertheless joyfully entered into slavery for the gospel’s sake.

This principle of voluntary slavery was pictured graphically in the Old Testament law. Exodus 21:5, 6 describes the process by which one could choose to make himself another’s servant: “If the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.” The Israelites were permitted to keep fellow Jews as slaves only for six years. On the seventh year they were to be set free. But if one voluntarily chose to continue serving as a slave, his master would literally put his ear against the doorpost, take an awl, and drive it through the ear. The hole in the slave’s ear was a sign to all that he was serving out of love, not because he had to. Paul was saying he had voluntarily relinquished his freedom in order to serve all men. In a spiritual sense, Paul had perforated his ear on behalf of the unsaved. “Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more” (1 Cor. 9:19).

The word translated “made … a slave” is the Greek verb doulo, “to enslave.” This is a strong expression. It is the same word used in 1 Corinthians 7:15 in relation to the marriage bond. And the same word is used in Romans 6:18, 22 to speak of our union with Christ. It describes an exceedingly secure bond. Paul had denied himself in the truest sense by placing himself under such a bond to everyone else.

The phrase “that I might win the more” is not talking about winning earthly or heavenly rewards. Paul was speaking of winning the lost to Christ. Such was Paul's concern for lost souls that, though he was
free in Christ, he was willing to enslave himself to people if it would give him an opportunity to proclaim the gospel. He expressed a similar commitment in 2 Timothy 2:10: “I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.”

Consider all that Paul suffered for the gospel’s sake. He became a prisoner. He went to jail. He was beaten, whipped, shipwrecked, and stoned. He continually set his own life aside. Ultimately he was killed for the testimony of the gospel. He would have gone even further if it were possible. To the church at Rome Paul wrote these shocking words: “I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:23, 24). In other words, he felt as if he would have given up his own salvation if he could, so that his Jewish brethren could be saved.

In contrast, the Corinthians were demanding their rights. They were misusing their freedom at others’ expense. Weaker brothers were stumbling, and it is very likely that unbelievers were repelled by the selfishness and strife that dominated the Corinthian fellowship, so carefully chronicled in Paul’s first letter to them.

Instead Paul wanted them to follow his example. “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). And what was his example? Go back one verse, to the end of 1 Corinthians 10: “Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved.” So the only sense in which we as believers are to be men-pleasers is in looking “not only to [our] own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4, niv).

That’s the point Paul was making here. He was not advocating a marketing plan. He was not making a plea for “contextualization.” He was not suggesting that the message be made more acceptable, or that the role of preaching be replaced by psychology, skits, and worldly entertainment. He was calling for self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of proclaiming the unadulterated truth to those who do not know Christ.

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As we noted in the last post, Paul was not advocating “contextualization” when he wrote to the Corinthians, “I have become all things to all men, that I may be all means save some.” He was calling for self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of reaching unbelievers with the gospel.

How did Paul apply that principle? In 1 Corinthians 9:20 he describes the practical outworking of self-denial: “To the Jews I became as a Jew … to those who are under the Law, as under the Law.” This describes a selfless sacrifice of Paul’s personal liberty: “though not being … under the Law,” Paul willingly subjected himself to the law’s ritual requirements in order to win those who were under the law. In other words, he adopted their customs. Whatever their ceremonial law dictated, he was willing to do. If it was important to them to abstain from eating pork, he abstained. If their sensibilities demanded that a certain feast be observed, he observed it. Why? Not to appease their pride or affirm their religion, but in order to open a door of opportunity for him to preach the uncompromised truth, so that he might win them to Jesus Christ.

Paul would stoop to no compromise of the truth. He simply sacrificed personal freedoms and preferences, removing any unnecessary diversion or excuse that would thwart the opportunity to declare the powerful, saving gospel plainly to them.

Paul was not suggesting that the gospel can be made more powerful by adapting it to a certain cultural context. He was not speaking about accommodating the message. He was simply saying he would not jeopardize his ability to preach the message by unnecessarily offending people. If the message was an offense, so be it: “We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23). But Paul would not make himself a stumbling block to unbelievers: “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God” (10:32).

Several illustrations of this may be adduced from the New Testament. In the fifteenth chapter of Acts the Jerusalem Council, the first church council, met to determine how they should assimilate the Gentile converts. Many of the Jewish believers were so steeped in Jewish tradition that they were skeptical about the Gentiles who were turning to Christ. Then some men came down from Judea and began teaching the Christians, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1). In other words, they were claiming the Gentiles couldn’t become Christians
unless they became Jewish first. The church was thrown into confusion.

The Jerusalem Council was assembled to discuss the issue. Scripture says there was much debate (v. 7). At one point Peter testified that he had been present when Gentiles first received the Holy Spirit, and all the evidence demonstrated that God was in it (vv. 7–12). Finally, James, the leader, handed down this ruling: “It is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles” (v. 19).

That settled the question. The church would accept Gentiles as they were, without placing them under the Jewish ceremonial law.

But then notice the next verse. James went on to add this: “We [will] write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.” He listed four things the Gentiles were to stay away from.

**First, “things contaminated by idols” meant food offered to idols.** That was precisely the issue that troubled the Corinthians. Eating food offered to pagan idols was grossly offensive to Jewish people. They despised pagan idolatry. But as Paul suggested, there is nothing inherently wrong with eating food that had been offered to idols. What is an idol, anyway? “We know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4). Nevertheless, the Jerusalem Council added this warning to stay away from things contaminated by idols, so as not to needlessly offend the Jews.

**Second, the Gentiles were to stay away from fornication.** This does not mean simply that they were not to *commit* fornication. That is obvious. It is not a gray area. There was much in the apostolic teaching that prohibited every form of fornication, or sexual sin. So “abstain … from fornication” is much more than a command against acts of fornication. Since the Gentile religions revolved around sex rites, temple prostitutes, and orgiastic ritual, James was saying the Gentile believers should have nothing to do with their former ways of worship. They should not attend any ceremonies where these things were going on. They were to sever the tie completely with pagan styles of worship so repulsive to Jews.

**Third, they were to abstain from the meat of strangled animals; and fourth, they were to stay away from blood.** Strangled meat retains a lot of blood. Jewish law demanded that any animals to be eaten must have the blood completely drained from them. To the Jews, the eating of blood was one of the most offensive of all Gentile practices. And some pagan religious rites involved the drinking of pure animal blood. The Jerusalem Council therefore commanded Gentile believers to abstain from all such practices.
Understand the significance of this. The Jerusalem Council’s decision was an explicit condemnation of legalism. The Council refused to put the Gentiles under the Mosaic law. So why did they lay these four prohibitions on them? The reason is made clear in Acts 15:21: “For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

In other words, they were to abstain from those four things so they would not offend the Jewish unbelievers. If Christians practiced these most offensive of all Gentile rituals, unbelieving Jews might turn away from the gospel before hearing it.

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For the Jews I Became Jewish, Part 2
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: B110912

by John MacArthur

When Paul wrote, “To the Jews I became as a Jew … to those who are under the Law, as under the Law” (1 Corinthians 9:20), he was not talking about accommodating the message. He was simply saying he would not jeopardize his ability to preach the message by unnecessarily offending people.

Several illustrations of that principle appear in the New Testament. In our last post, we looked at the example of the Jerusalem Council. Out of love and concern for Jewish unbelievers, the council asked new Gentile converts to abstain from engaging in cultural practices that the Jews found offensive. That was in Acts chapter fifteen.

Acts chapter sixteen includes a similar illustration. It is the first time in Scripture we meet Timothy. Luke records that he was “the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek” (v. 1). Jews would have considered him a Gentile, because his father was a Gentile. Moreover, Timothy’s mother would have been considered a virtual traitor for marrying a Gentile.

Yet Timothy “was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him” (vv. 2, 3).

Wait a minute. Why did he do that? Paul certainly didn’t believe Gentiles needed be circumcised to be saved. In fact, Paul refused to have Titus circumcised when the Jerusalem legalists demanded it (Gal. 2:1-5). Furthermore, Paul once opposed Peter to his face because Peter had compromised with the legalists (Gal. 2:11–14). He asked Peter, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (v. 14). So why did Paul have Timothy circumcised? Was he compromising the issue, demonstrating inconsistency?

No. Timothy wasn’t doing it for salvation. He obviously had not undergone circumcision when he was saved. And he wasn’t doing it to make hardened legalists happy or to tone down the offense of the gospel. He simply wanted to identify with the Jews so he might have an entrance to preach the gospel to them. Paul and Timothy were not hoping to pacify pseudo-Christian legalists, act the part of hypocrites, or mitigate the gospel in any way. They simply wanted to keep open lines of communication to the Jews they were going to preach to. This was not an act of compromise or men-pleasing. It was loving—and physically very painful—self-sacrifice for the sake of the lost.
Wherever he could acknowledge the strong religious tradition of a people and not offend their sensitivities, Paul was glad to do so—when it did not violate God’s Word or impinge on the gospel. But the apostle never adapted his ministry to pander to worldly lusts or sinful selfishness.

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For the Gentiles I Became a Gentile
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
Code: B110914

by John MacArthur

As long as it did not violate God’s Word or compromise the gospel, Paul was willing to accommodate himself to his audience. As we noted in the last post, that was certainly true of his Jewish audience. But Paul didn’t stop with the Jews. He demonstrated the same heart of sacrifice toward the Gentiles—all for the sake of the gospel.

Going back to the ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians, you read in verse 21, “To those who are without law, [I become] as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law.” “Those who are without law” are the Gentiles. Note the qualifier Paul inserted. He specifically stated that he is “not … without the law of God but under the law of Christ.” He clearly was not saying he became morally lawless to please despisers of true righteousness.

Though he became as “without law” in the ritual or ceremonial sense, he was not living licentiously or behaving unrighteously. He would have no sympathy with antinomians—people who believe all law is abolished for Christians. “Without law” is not a reference to the moral law. Paul is not implying that he lived it up just to make the Gentiles admire him. He did not encourage people to think they could become Christians and hang on to a worldly lifestyle. Again, he was talking about the Old Testament ceremonial law. When he ministered to Gentiles, he dropped all his non-moral Jewish traditions.

When Paul was with the Gentiles he followed Gentile customs and culture insofar as it did not conflict with the law of Christ. He avoided needlessly offending the Gentiles.

When Paul was in Jerusalem, for example, he followed Jewish religious customs. He observed the feasts and Sabbaths, and he followed Jewish dietary laws. When he went to Antioch, however, he ate with the Gentiles, even though that violated his own tradition and upbringing. Peter came to Antioch and also ate with the Gentiles, until some Judaizers showed up. Then Peter and some others withdrew and held themselves aloof (Gal. 2:12). Paul says, “Even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy” (v. 13). That was when Paul rebuked Peter to his face in front of others.

Notice why Paul confronted Peter: “I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel” (v. 14). Paul’s reason for becoming all things to all men was not so he could slip the gospel in covertly. On the contrary, it was so he could without hindrance proclaim the truth of the gospel more
straightforwardly than ever. He wanted to remove any personal offense, so the offense of the gospel would be the only one. Paul saw Peter’s compromise as something that undermined the clarity and the force of the gospel, and that is why he confronted him.

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In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul models self-sacrificing love toward unbelievers. He explains his willingness to forfeit personal liberties and accommodate himself for the sake of the gospel. He’s already mentioned two groups of people in the first section of this chapter—Jews and Gentiles. Paul was willing to forego his apostolic freedoms in order to reach both races. But racial application was only the beginning.

In verse 22, Paul mentions a third group: “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.” Who are the weak? In Pauline theology this expression refers to overscrupulous Christians—immature believers who don’t understand their liberty. In the Jewish community, for example, some new Christians still wanted to observe the Sabbaths, attend the synagogues, follow the dietary laws, and maintain all the feasts and ceremonies of the Old Testament law. Some in the Christian community had weak consciences and still felt such things were obligatory. They were just emerging out of Judaism and still holding on, feeling the pangs of conscience to do those things that had become habit and were associated with the true God and the Old Testament Scriptures.

Among the Gentiles, on the other hand, there were those saved out of idolatry who now feared having anything to do with meat offered to idols. Perhaps some clung to old superstitions and feared demonic idols or simply wanted nothing to do with anything reminiscent of the former lifestyle.

Paul, of course, was free from such fears and superstitions. And he was free from the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. The law of Christ governed him. Although he felt free to do things that other people’s consciences wouldn’t allow them to do, when Paul was with weaker brethren he was careful not to violate their sensibilities. He adapted his behavior so as not to offend them. He yielded in love rather than offend a weaker brother.

How did he do that? At one point he took a Nazirite vow to quell a false rumor among the believing Jews in Jerusalem that he was preaching against Moses and urging Jewish people not to circumcise their children (Acts 21:17–26). Ironically, it was the carrying out of that vow that ultimately led to his arrest and imprisonment. The unbelieving Jews hated the message of the gospel, so they undertook to destroy the messenger. But they had no legitimate complaint against Paul personally, for he had gone out of his way to be a Jew for the Jews, a Gentile for the Gentiles, and a weak brother for the weak brethren.
Again the question comes, why did Paul subject himself to all that? First Corinthians 9:22, 23 says: “That I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel.” “By all means” may sound at first like an echo of pragmatism, but don’t forget, Paul is speaking here of condescension, not compromise. What is the difference? To condescend is to remove needless offenses to people’s religious consciences by setting aside some personal, optional liberty. To compromise is to set aside an essential truth and thereby alter or weaken the gospel message.

Paul set himself in contrast with the compromisers and marketeers in 2 Corinthians 2:17: “We are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.” The compromiser sells a cheap gospel and tries to make it appealing by stripping away the offense of Christ. Paul simply wanted to keep himself from being an obstacle or a stumbling block to people’s consciences so that the unadulterated message could penetrate hearts and do its work. If people were offended by the message, Paul did not try to remove the offense of the gospel or abolish the stumbling block of the cross, and he would not tolerate those who tried (Gal. 5:11). But he was willing to practice self-denial and deference if that opened opportunities for him to preach.

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It should be clear that modern church marketers cannot look to the apostle Paul for approval of their methodology or claim him as the father of their philosophy. Although he ministered to the vilest pagans throughout the Roman world, Paul never adapted the church to secular society’s tastes. He would not think of altering either the message or the nature of the church. Each of the churches he founded had its own unique personality and set of problems, but Paul’s teaching, his strategy, and above all his message remained the same throughout his ministry. His means of ministry was always preaching—the straightforward proclamation of biblical truth.

By contrast, the “contextualization” of the gospel today has infected the church with the spirit of the age. It has opened the church’s doors wide for worldliness, shallowness, and in some cases a crass, party atmosphere. The world now sets the agenda for the church.

This is demonstrated clearly in a book by James Davison Hunter, a sociology professor at the University of Virginia. Hunter surveyed students in evangelical colleges and seminaries, and concluded that evangelical Christianity has changed dramatically in the past three decades. He found that young evangelicals have become significantly more tolerant of activities once viewed as worldly or immoral—including smoking, using marijuana, attending R-rated movies, and premarital sex. Hunter wrote,

The symbolic boundaries which previously defined moral propriety for conservative Protestantism have lost a measure of clarity. Many of the distinctions separating Christian conduct from “worldly conduct” have been challenged if not altogether undermined. Even the words worldly and worldliness have, within a generation, lost most of their traditional meaning…. The traditional meaning of worldliness has indeed lost its relevance for the coming generation of Evangelicals. (Hunter, Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation, 63)

What Hunter noted among evangelical students is a reflection of what has happened to the entire evangelical church. Many professing Christians appear to care far more about the world’s opinion than about God’s. Churches are so engrossed in trying to please non-Christians that many have forgotten their first duty is to please God (2 Cor. 5:9). The church has been so over-contextualized that it has become corrupted by the world.
Paul’s one aim in making himself the slave of all was so that they might be saved. He was not trying to win a popularity contest. He was not seeking to make himself or the gospel appealing to them. His whole purpose was evangelistic. C. H. Spurgeon, preaching on 1 Corinthians 9, said,

I fear there are some who preach with the view of amusing men, and as long as people can be gathered in crowds, and their ears can be tickled, and they can retire pleased with what they have heard, the orator is content, and folds his hands, and goes back self-satisfied. But Paul did not lay himself out to please the public and collect the crowd. If he did not save them he felt that it was of no avail to interest them. Unless the truth had pierced their hearts, affected their lives, and made new men of them, Paul would have gone home crying, “Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” …

Now observe, brethren, if I, or you, or any of us, or all of us, shall have spent our lives merely in amusing men, or educating men, or moralizing men, when we shall come to give our account at the last great day we shall be in a very sorry condition, and we shall have but a very sorry record to render; for of what avail will it be to a man to be educated when he comes to be damned? Of what service will it be to him to have been amused when the trumpet sounds, and heaven and earth are shaking, and the pit opens wide her jaws of fire and swallows up the soul unsaved? Of what avail even to have moralized a man if still he is on the left hand of the judge, and if still, “Depart, ye cursed,” shall be his portion? (Spurgeon, “Soul Saving Our One Business,” The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 25, 674-676)

That is precisely my concern about today’s pragmatic church-growth strategies. The design is to attract the unchurched. For what? To entertain them? To get them to attend church meetings regularly? Merely “churching” the unchurched accomplishes nothing of eternal value. Too often, however, that is where the strategy stalls. Or else it is combined with a watered-down gospel that wrongly assures sinners a positive “decision” for Christ is as good as true conversion. Multitudes who are not authentic Christians now identify themselves with the church. The church has thus been invaded with the world’s values, the world’s interests, and the world’s citizens.
By all means we are to seek the salvation of the lost. We must be servants to all, deferential to every kind of person. For Jews we should become Jewish; for Gentiles we should be like Gentiles; for children we should be childlike; and so on for every facet of humanity. But the primary means of evangelism we dare not overlook: the straightforward, Christ-centered proclamation of the unadulterated Word of God. Those who trade the Word for amusements or gimmicks will find they have no effective means to reach people with the truth of Christ.

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