

The Jerusalem Council Applied To the Muslim I Became a Muslim?

by J. Dudley Woodberry

The Apostle Paul stated,

To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win the Jews. To those under the Law I became as one under the Law (though I myself was not under the Law) so that I might win those under the Law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. . . . I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel . . . (1 Cor. 9:19–20, 25)

If Paul were retracing his missionary journeys today, would he add, “To the Muslim I became a Muslim”? Or even more apropos to my assignment, would he and the Jerusalem Council endorse Muslims being free to follow Jesus while retaining, to the extent that this commitment allows, Muslim identity and practices, just as these Jerusalem leaders endorsed Jews being free to follow Jesus while retaining, to the extent that that commitment allowed, Judaic identity and practices?

To answer these questions, we shall look through the biblical lens of the incarnation. How was the gospel incarnated in Jesus and Paul, and how was it to be incarnated in the diverse congregations that make up Christ’s Body, the Church (Eph. 4:12–13)?

John Travis described the spectrum of Christ-centered communities of Muslim-background believers (MBBs) or Muslim believers (MBs) under six rubrics (C1 through C6) on the basis of: (1) their language of worship, (2) the cultural and religious forms they used, especially in worship, and (3) their identity, whether Muslim or Christian (1998, 407–408). C1 refers to a community that reflects the culture of foreign Christians or a minority indigenous Christian group. The continuum progresses to C4 where participants use their ethnic language or Arabic in worship, use what are considered “Muslim” forms of worship (such as ablutions and prostrations in prayer, but with Christian content), and consider themselves, and are considered to be, “Christians.”

C5 expresses a group of persons who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior but remain within the Muslim community to lead others to follow Christ in an “insider movement” (in contrast to C6 who are secret believers). Some

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C5 persons continue to worship in the mosque, but virtually all in the groups with which I am most familiar have their basic worship and Bible study in house gatherings of like-minded followers of Christ. They consider themselves, and are considered to be, “Muslims” (at least socially and legally), but of a special kind. They are those who follow Isa (the Qur’anic word for Jesus) and believe what the Bible teaches even where it differs from the Qur’an.

In actual practice the distinctions between the six categories are often not clear or consistent, and Muslims are coming to faith in Christ in all of these categories. I have been asked to evaluate C4 and C5. Elsewhere, however, I have documented that the religious vocabulary of the Qur’an and all of the so-called five pillars of Islam, except the references to Muhammad and Mecca, were used by Jews and/or Christians before Islam (Woodberry 1989, 283–312; 1996, 171–186). Furthermore, C4 contextualization is now broadly accepted in mission circles as at least legitimate. Therefore, I shall confine my remarks to C5 communities or “insider movements.”¹

For reasons of security and to honor commitments of confidentiality, very little research on “insider movements” has been made available to the general public, but there has been research on and recording of such communities and movements in various parts of Asia and Africa. Much of this has been reported in restricted contexts of expatriate and national missionaries and missiologists—some with authorization and some without. While striving not to violate confidentiality or reasonable security, I shall try in this paper to evaluate “insider movements” by applying biblical criteria to concrete situations which I have seen first-hand.

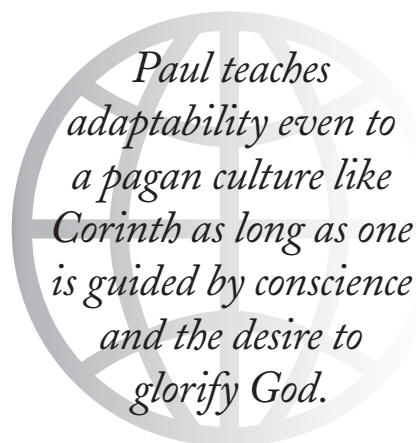
The Incarnational Models of Jesus and Paul

With Jesus we see the divine model for incarnating the gospel among people

whose worldview was similar to that of most Muslims, and with Paul we see how that model was lived out in different religio-cultural contexts.

The Model of Jesus

His incarnation is announced as “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the Father’s only Son” (Jn. 1:14). He in turn gave us that same glory: “The glory which you have given me, I have given them” (Jn. 17:22). And he gave us a similar mission: “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (Jn. 20:21).



Further, God sent his Son to be incarnated under the same Law that guided the people whom he sought to redeem: “God sent forth his Son ... born under the Law to redeem those under the Law” (Gal. 4:4–5). Therefore, as we follow Jesus we might go under a similar Law—or remain under that Law—for the redemption of those under that Law.

A number of observations appear relevant to our topic. First, Jesus observed the Mosaic Law, but rejected any traditions of the elders that conflicted with the teachings of Scripture (Mt. 15:1–9). And he internalized and deepened its meaning in the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, his incarnational model includes following and internalizing the Mosaic Law. Second, Qur’anic and Islamic Law in general draw heavily on Jewish Law with its roots in Mosaic Law (Roberts 1925; Neusner and Sonn 1999; Neusner et al 2000; Woodberry

1989, rev. 1996; Torrey 1933). The Qur’an even includes all of the Ten Commandments, although keeping the Sabbath is associated particularly with the Jews (20:8; 22:30; 7:180, 163; 17:23; 6:151; 24:2; 5:38; 4:112, 32). And Islamic Law did not develop the priestly and sacrificial functions and ritual in the same way as Judaism did. Therefore, although there are some differences, much of Islamic Law is similar to Mosaic Law and can be internalized and interpreted as fulfilled in Christ. Thirdly, the leaders of the Temple and synagogues had corrupted Judaic worship and rejected Jesus, but he and his first followers continued to identify with Judaism and to participate in temple and synagogue worship. Therefore a case may be made for Muslims who follow Jesus to continue to identify with their Muslim community and participate, to the extent their consciences allow, in its religious observance.

The Model of Paul

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth where the local religion even promoted immorality:

To the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win the Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law ... that I might win those who are under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. ... I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:20, 21).

After showing the outworking of this in specific situations, he passes the model onto us: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). The same Paul who argued in the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians against bondage to the Law also had Timothy circumcised when he was going to minister among Jews (Acts 16:3) and took converts with him into the Temple to be purified (Acts 21:26). As we have noted, Islamic Law is based on the Law of Judaism. Even if it were not, however, Paul teaches

adaptability even to a pagan culture like Corinth as long as one is guided by conscience and by the desire to glorify God and see people be saved (1 Cor. 10:23–33).

The Incarnational Model of the Jerusalem Council

In Acts 15 we see how the early church leaders dealt with a missiological problem that resulted from the gospel crossing a cultural barrier—though it was from those who followed the Law to those who did not, rather than the reverse, as in our present considerations. Nevertheless we can identify and apply the criteria they used.

1. How God is Working

Paul and Barnabas “reported the conversion of the Gentiles ... and ... all that God had done with them” (vss. 3–4), how “God who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did us, and in cleansing their hearts by faith, he made no distinction between them and us” (vss. 8–9). And they told the “signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (vs. 12). Then Simeon told “how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles” (vs. 14).

There are now case studies of insider movements in a number of regions in Asia and Africa that demonstrate how God is working, with phenomenal growth in one South Asian country that we in the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary have been studying, with repeated visits, for years. This movement and others with which we are in contact give clear evidence that God is working in them. One Protestant denomination now directs most of its ministries among Muslims to equipping members of these movements. In the spring of 2003 I was privileged to hear first-hand reports of those from each of their regions, and again it was clear that God was at work in these people.

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There are significant movements to Christ from Islam in North Africa and Central Asia that are not insider movements nor very contextualized to Islamic culture. The contexts are different. Whether or not there was a previous national church and, if so, how much rapport it had with the Muslims are significant. My assignment, however, is to evaluate the insider movements.

2. The Call of God

At the Jerusalem Council Peter rose and said, “My brothers, you know that in the early days, God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers” (vs. 7). And God through a vision showed him that, for the sake of the kingdom, he should break traditional dietary rules that kept Jews and Gentile apart (Acts 10).

In the case studies that we are following today, followers of Christ have likewise believed themselves called to break the traditional barriers between communities to incarnate the gospel in the Muslim community. In many cases God has confirmed the call by transforming lives through Christ.

3. Reason

Peter in the Council in Jerusalem asks, “Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10). The apostles and elders, with the consent of the whole church, then sent a letter to the disciples in Antioch presenting their decision with the words, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (vss. 22–23, 28). Thus they used their own reasoning along with the guidance of God’s Spirit.

When we apply reason to the present discussion we see reasons for and reasons against insider movements of disciples of Christ within the Muslim community. In most Muslim people groups, the determinants of peoplehood are drawn from a wide range of social domains, including religion, language, culture, politics, nationality, ethnicity, and family. Apostasy, then, may be viewed by the community as a renunciation of all these determinants of their peoplehood and worth. Add to this the fact that in these communities the word ‘Christian’ is conventionally used to describe Western society, with connotations of aggression and immorality, or to designate some local ethnic group that has different (and often distasteful) customs.

The question then arises as to whether Muslims may accept Jesus as Savior and Lord while remaining socially and legally Muslim. In the Qur’an itself the word *islam* just means “to submit” to God (2:112), and Jesus’ disciples bear witness that “we are Muslims” (literally, *those who submit*) (3:52; 5:111). The Qur’an also speaks of certain individuals who received the book before the Qur’an who said, “We were Muslims before it” (28: 52–53). Muslim Qur’anic commentators say that some or all of those individuals were Christians (McAuliffe 1991, 240–246). Thus there is at least some textual rationale for disciples of Christ from Muslim contexts to continue to include “Muslim” in their identity. However, because the word has developed in modern usage a more restrictive meaning, it would seem more transparent to use a designation such as “I submit to God (*aslamtu* in Arabic) through *Isa al-Masih* (the Qur’anic title meaning Jesus the Messiah).”

This approach could be seen as following the historical pattern of designating groups within the Muslim com-

munity by their founder, such as the Hanbalites (after Ahmad b. Hanbal) or the Ahmadiya (after Ghulam Ahmad), though, as in the latter example, some Muslims may reject the group as heretical or non-Muslim.

Other disciples of Jesus from Muslim contexts have adopted the designation *Hanif*, which in the Qur'an referred to the religion of Abraham that pre-Islamic monotheists like Waraqa b. Nawfal sought. He was a cousin of Muhammad's first wife Khadija and became a Christian (Guillaume 1955, 83, 99, 103). The Qur'an says that Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but a *hanif*, a *muslim* (3:67) and described him as one who submitted (*aslama*) to God (4:125). 'Umar, the second Muslim caliph, even used the term *hanif* to describe himself when he met with a Christian leader (Rubin 2002, 403a). Its value is that it is generally an acceptable term that has been used to refer to people like Ibn Nawfal, who became a Christian. Even the Apostle Paul calls those who belong to Christ "Abraham's offspring" (Gal. 3:29).

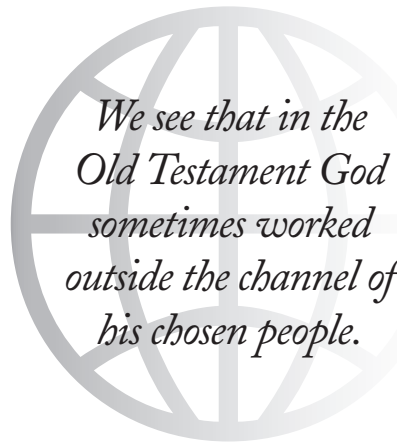
An advantage of insider movements is that they can provide an opportunity for the gospel to be incarnated into a Muslim culture with a minimum of dislocation of those elements of Muslim societies that are compatible or adaptable with the gospel. And, although they have aroused intense opposition, sometimes instigated by members of traditional churches, they have frequently allowed more opportunity and time for ordinary Muslims to hear and see the gospel lived out than when the new disciples of Christ are expelled upon conversion or join a traditional church with a different ethnic and cultural constituency that has little rapport with the Muslim majority. Likewise, insider movements allow faith and spiritual maturity to develop in a context relevant to the new disciples' background and probable ministry.

On the other hand, there can be drawbacks. There is not a clear break with non-biblical teachings of Islam.

Discipling raises greater challenges as does building bridges with traditional churches, if there are any.

4. Theology

Peter, before the Jerusalem Council, raised the theological argument that God "in cleansing their [the Gentiles'] hearts by faith made no distinction between them and us" (vs. 9) and went on, "we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (vs. 11). That is the decisive element, not whether they follow the Law or not.



Theological themes that are relevant to insider movements include that of the faithful remnant, which refers to those with a genuine relationship of faith with God (Amos 5:15). Although it originally applied to the faithful remnant of God's people Israel (Isa. 46:3), it includes those from other nations (45:20; 66:18). Additional themes include the kingdom (or kingly rule) of God, which like yeast will quietly transform individuals and groups from within (Mt. 13:33) and salt, which likewise influences its surroundings (Mt. 5:13).

The people of the kingdom who form the local churches and the universal Church are, of course, especially relevant. Even the believers who meet in houses are called churches (Rom. 16:51; 1 Cor. 16:19), and these would correspond to the groups that meet regularly in houses for worship and Bible study that are at the core of the insider movements with which I am

familiar. Expressing the universal Church becomes the great challenge for them because it is the body of Christ incarnated in the world today (1 Cor. 12:12–27).

5. Scripture

James before the Council then shows how the inclusion of the Gentiles also agreed with Scripture (Acts 15:15–17). When we look for Scripture that is relevant to insider movements, we see that in the Old Testament God sometimes worked outside the channels of his chosen people—through Melchizedek, for example. We even observe the prophet Elisha apparently condoning Naaman going into a pagan temple with the king he served and bowing with him before an idol (2 Kings 5:17–19).

In the New Testament Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount internalized and deepened the Law (which, as we have noted, was similar in many ways to Islamic Law). At the same time, he did not let it hinder his relating with those he came to save (Lk. 7:36–50). Paul, while arguing against the necessity of following the Law, nevertheless observed the Law in order to advance his ministry with the Jews as in his circumcising of Timothy (Acts 16:3), having his own hair cut when under a vow (Acts 18:18), and performing the purification rites in Jerusalem when James and the elders there encouraged him to do so because of the Jews (Acts 21:26).

On the other hand, the Epistle to the Hebrews gives some warnings to some believers who have remained under the umbrella of their original faith. The Epistle was apparently written to Jewish followers of Christ who were under persecution and were conducting themselves as a form of Judaism (perhaps because Judaism was then a recognized religion by Rome but not Christianity). They are warned of the peril of falling away (6:1–8) and are called to persevere (10:19–39; Green 1989, 233–250).

6. Guidance of the Holy Spirit

At the Jerusalem Council, Peter noted that God testified to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church by giving them the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8), and, in the joint communiqué to the church in Antioch, the apostles and elders said that “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” not to impose any further burden on the Gentiles than some essentials (vs. 28). Jesus had promised, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth” (Jn. 16:13). Many of those whom I have met in insider movements have manifested the indwelling of the Spirit of God by their spiritual fruit, wisdom, and devotion. Because of the limitation of formal training opportunities for believers in insider movements, they are highly dependent on the Bible as interpreted and applied by the Holy Spirit to them. But my questioning of numbers of them and the reports of others that I trust lead me to conclude that, although they are different from traditional Christians, they certainly evidence the guidance of the Bible and the Spirit.

7. The Essentials

When the apostles and elders in Jerusalem stated that circumcision was not necessary, they were dealing with *salvation*. When they added some “essentials” (vss. 28, 29), they were dealing with *fellowship* and *morality*. The prohibition of fornication (vss. 20, 29) obviously had to do with the low Graeco-Roman morality out of which the Gentiles came. As for food offered to idols, although Christians are free to eat it, the act might cause others to stumble (1 Cor. 8:1–13). Therefore, believers should not exercise that freedom (Acts 15:20, 29). The same is true of blood and meat that contains blood. Since the Law of Moses, which forbids the eating of blood, had been so widely preached (vs. 21), eating it might hinder table fellowship with many Jews.

How does all this apply to disciples of Christ within the Muslim com-

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munity? First, there is freedom to observe the Law or not to do so, since salvation does not come through the Law. But because relationships and fellowship are so important, the disciples of Christ should not use their freedom in a way that might unnecessarily hinder their relationships with Muslims or traditional Christians.

Acts 15 ends with Paul and Barnabas separating in their missionary work because they could not agree on whether to take John Mark (vss. 36–41). Here we see that when we cannot agree, we can nevertheless carry on God’s work in separate spheres until we can reach agreement.

Some Critical Issues

There are a number of critical issues, some of which have been treated above.

Use of the Term “Muslim”

A case has been made above for the use of the term “Muslim” by followers of Christ, but it is often best to qualify it, in some way indicating that our submission is through *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). In any event we are not to deny Jesus Christ. Further, although disciples of Christ from Muslim backgrounds may legitimately retain their Muslim legal and cultural heritage, it is far more problematic for a Christian background person to attempt this. The outsider might be helpful in suggesting biblical guidelines, but those from a Muslim background are in a better position to understand the meaning of labels and identity in their contexts, hence to answer these questions.

Attending the Mosque and Using the Qur’an

Again, insiders understand better what attending the mosque or using the Qur’an means in each context, so they are in a better position to decide what is best. One factor to consider is the motive. Our research shows that many were first attracted to Christ through the Qur’an. One North

African, who had led a number of his family members to Christ, said that no one would listen to him if he did not continue to use the Qur’an along with the Bible and attend the mosque. We do know that the early Jewish Christians, like many Messianic Jews today, continued to attend the synagogue (Acts 9:1–2; 23:2). And the Judaic establishment at the time was hostile to Christians (Acts 9:1–2; 23:2), even as many Muslims are today. If people continue in the mosque, however, they must not say or do anything against their conscience (Rom. 14:14). In studying Muslim followers of Christ over a number of years, I have found that, as they study the Bible and meet with other disciples of Jesus, these two resources become increasingly important in their spiritual growth.

Reciting the Confession of Faith

I have enquired of those in insider movements what they do with the *shahada*, the confession: “There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Apostle of God.” One answered that some say that in his polytheistic context he was like an Old Testament prophet. This reflects the ambiguity of the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy (d. 823) who responded to the Caliph al-Mahdi’s question concerning what he thought of Muhammad with the words, “He walked in the path of the prophets” (Gaudeul 1990, 34–36). Most of those I asked, however, said that they kept quiet when the part about Muhammad was recited or they quietly substituted something that was both biblically and Qur’anicly correct, like “Jesus is the Word of God.”

The Unity of the Church

In the early church, as we have seen, James, Cephas and John were chosen to go to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9). Each evangelistic thrust was relatively

homogeneous. The Jews and Gentiles could keep much of their own identity and follow Christ. But to express the universal Church, they needed to have fellowship, which was expressed by eating together. This required some additional adjustments. So with the insider movements, there is much freedom for them to retain their identity but over time some adjustments will need to be made for the sake of fellowship in the broader Church. The same Paul who argued for the freedom of the Jewish and Gentile churches to retain their own identity also argued that Christ had broken down the wall between Jew and Gentile so they might be one body, the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12:12–27). In like manner traditional Christian and Muslim Christ-centered communities should have the same freedom to retain their own identity, but must express the unity of the Body of Christ by their love one for another. This is how Christ is and will continue to be incarnated in the world today. **IJFM**

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IJFM Editor's Note

¹This article (in a revised form here) was originally delivered at the EMS meetings in the fall of 2004, but did not appear in print until two years later (see *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, EMS Series, Gailyn Van Rhee, ed., William Carey Library, 2006). Since this paper was first presented, the discussion on "insider movements" has grown, particularly within the pages of *IJFM*. Concerning such movements among Muslims, see especially *IJFM* 21:1, 21:2, and 21:4 (2004); 23:2 and 23:3 (2006); and the other articles in the current issue. The next issue of *IJFM* (24:2) will also deal with this question. Finally, *IJFM* 17:2 (Summer, 2000) on "Muslim Contextualization" contains several excellent early articles.