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JESUS, THE SON OF GOD: BIBLICAL MEANING, MUSLIM UNDERSTANDING, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSLATION AND BIBLE LITERACY

By Matthew Carlton¹

1 Introduction

Christianity Today's (CT) February 2011 cover story² brings to light the startling fact that certain Bible translators are removing Father-Son terminology from the Bible text for Muslim audiences when those terms refer to Jesus and God the Father. What is their rationale for this? These translators, who are part of the Muslim-idiom translation (MIT) movement, claim that "Son of God" and related terms communicate wrong meaning to Muslims, and that this wrong meaning causes many to avoid even looking at a Bible. Based on this premise, the solution they propose and are implementing is to remove these terms from the Bible text. How do they justify this practice? They first treat all Father-Son terminology as merely metaphorical. Then they propose the use of certain substitute terms that they claim will acceptably communicate to Muslims the correct meaning of these "metaphors". After reading the CT article and some of the MIT movement's writings, a person could easily be led to believe that the primary key to removing barriers to the gospel among Islamic peoples is to take references to Jesus as "Son" and to God as "Father" out of the translated Bible text and replace them with these substitute terms. Is this growing trend a

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² Colin Hansen, 'The Son and the Crescent' in *Christianity Today*, February 2011. WORLD magazine's May 2011 article, 'Inside Out' by Emily Belz also discusses this issue.

valid practice? Or are these translators promoting a false idea that should be stopped in its tracks? This article sets out to show how the above MIT claims are indeed false and that the solution is *not* to change the Bible text, but rather to focus attention and ministry efforts on improving methods of teaching Bible truths to Muslims, enhanced by a clearer understanding of what they really believe and accompanied by a genuine, sacrificial love for these lost people groups.

2 Is Jesus actually the Son of God, or is that just a metaphor?³

The answer to that question can help us determine what is, and what is not, an accurate and acceptable way for Bible translators to translate Father-Son terminology when it refers to Jesus and God the Father in the New Testament.

If Jesus really is the Son of God in a way that is not metaphorical (even if we do not understand exactly how), then it is not accurate to remove Father-Son references from the Bible text and/or change them to something else, that is, *we are not free in a translation to change the facts* of who Jesus and His Father are. This means that if in certain cultures or parts of the world there are difficulties understanding these terms (or even erroneous teachings about these terms), the issue is mainly one of Bible literacy; in other words, people must be taught the truth, including the Biblical facts about what it means that Jesus Christ is "the Son of God".

³ A metaphor is an expression in which one concept is likened to another, *different* concept, usually by speaking of it *as if it were* that other. In other words, the two concepts are *not the same*, but have one or more points of similarity by which they can be compared. For example, the metaphor "the canyon was a furnace" is not intended to communicate that these two objects are actually the same, but rather that the canyon feels hot *like* a furnace. So when Jesus said to His disciples, "you *are* the branches" (John 15:5), He was telling them that they were *like* branches (that need to stay connected to the vine in order to bear fruit). In the same way, the MIT movement's labeling of the term "Son (of God)" in reference to Jesus as a metaphor means that Jesus is not actually God's Son but is only *like* a son to Him. In fact, since a metaphor *cannot* be the concept or entity that it is illustrating, it is contradictory to say that "Son" and "Father" are only metaphors if one truly believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

What is the evidence from the Bible that Jesus *is* God's Son and that God *is* His Father? Would first-century Jews have understood these terms to be just metaphors or idioms as some have claimed, or rather, as they read the inspired writings of Jesus' disciples would they have understood Jesus to be God's Son in a more real sense?

The New Testament begins with a Jewish author writing to a Jewish audience, using a Jewish genealogy to show who Jesus is. To move the genealogy forward, Jesus' disciple Matthew uses the verb "fathered" (from the Greek verb *γενναω*) forty times, so that (following the Greek text), "Abraham fathered Isaac, then Isaac fathered Jacob... David fathered Solomon..." and so forth, until the genealogy reaches its goal/peak and culminates in verse 16 with a divine passive⁴ in the sentence, "Then Jacob fathered Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom Jesus who is called Christ was fathered [by God]." It is interesting how all five times that Matthew mentions women in the genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Uriah's wife and Mary) their role is *not* communicated with a verb, but with a prepositional phrase, the same phrase "from/by..." (Greek: "*εκ*...") for each one. That pattern works together with the pattern of the fathers' role being communicated through the verb of each clause to rivet attention on the final use of the verb in the genealogy when it is suddenly a divine passive, with God as the implied Father.⁵

⁴ Bible scholars such as Leon Morris, Robert Gundry and Donald Hagner recognize that Matthew uses a divine passive here.

⁵ Matthew says in 1:17 that there are three sets of fourteen generations in his genealogy, but then only lists thirteen men in the last set. To remedy this apparent discrepancy, some Bible scholars have suggested counting one of the names in the genealogy twice (for example, some include Jeconiah as a member of both the second and third sets). However, if it is recognized that God is implied as Jesus' Father in verse 16, then Matthew's count is accurate as is and there is no discrepancy. There is also other evidence that Matthew intended to have the divine passive complete the pattern for the third set in his genealogy. For example, in order to have fourteen individuals in each set ($2 \times 7 =$ double perfection), he left out at least four ancestors in the second set (including Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah from between Joram and Uzziah in verse 8, and Jehoikim between Josiah and Jechoniah in verse 11), and he probably left out a few more in the third set (which is suggested by the fact that in Luke 3 there are twenty-one, instead of only thirteen, men listed for the same time period).

Right after the genealogy, Matthew relates a bit more about this amazing situation by revealing in verses 18 and 20 that Mary was caused to be with child "from/by" God the Holy Spirit. Then, building on that context (including verse 16), Matthew again implies in verse 23 that Jesus is God's Son when he explains that, in fulfillment of Scripture, a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son who is God ("Immanuel").⁶

So by the end of the first chapter of Matthew, the stage has been set⁷: the Jewish audience would read the rest of this Gospel in light of the fact that Jesus Christ was a descendant of Abraham and King David (as they knew had been prophesied about the Messiah) and that He was fathered by God from Mary through the action of the Holy Spirit. They would also know that Matthew was saying that Jesus is none other than God's true Son, Immanuel, "God with us".⁸ Because of the carefully constructed context that Matthew provides, none of this would be understood as "just a metaphor" by the first-century Jewish audience,⁹ regardless of their background or any

⁶ In order for a virgin to conceive and have God as her offspring, it had to be God who was the Father of that son. That is in fact what the previous context already established (1:16, 18, 20). In addition, the phrase "All this took place" (verse 22) directly connects that context with verse 23. Also see Luke 1:35 in which the angel tells Mary, a virgin, that the child which God would miraculously cause her to conceive was the Son of God.

⁷ This is similar to what an author does when he defines his terms at the beginning of his paper so that every time those terms are used in the paper they are understood correctly by his audience the way he wants them to be understood.

⁸ Just to be clear, God the Son did not come into existence at Jesus' conception, rather the Son has existed from eternity and it was God the Father working through and with God the Holy Spirit who caused Him to become a human being (Matthew 1:16, 18, 20; Luke 1:35). Further Bible study reveals that the Father-Son relationship between Jesus and His Father is indeed an eternal relationship (for example, see John 1:1–18, 34; 3:17, 8:23, 42, 57–58; 10:36, 17:5, 24; Galatians 4:4, Philippians 2:5–8, Colossians 1:13–20, Hebrews 1:2), but details about this are beyond the scope of this article. For a good overview of how the Church has always recognized this eternal, real relationship, and never understood Father-Son terminology to be merely metaphorical, see David Abernathy, "Jesus Is The Eternal Son of God", *St Francis Magazine* 6:2, April 2010.

⁹ Based on a few ancient Jewish writings that may use the term "son of God" in a metaphorical sense, it is assumed by some that the New Testament use of this term when it refers to Jesus should also be understood in this way [Rick Brown, "The

previous uses and understandings of "son (of God)"; all previous definitions and understandings are redefined in light of the historical record of the facts surrounding Jesus' conception.¹⁰

More specifically, every instance in Matthew where Jesus is referred to as God's Son or where God is referred to as His Father would be interpreted or reinterpreted by the Jewish audience in light of the foundational definitions and context that Matthew carefully developed in chapter one. In other words, all these Father-Son references would be understood to be reality, not metaphor; each time Matthew's audience heard one of these terms, they would know that Jesus, whom they were hearing about, really was God's Son (as interpreted and clarified by Matthew at the beginning of his Gospel).

Luke also identifies who Jesus is in the early sentences of his Gospel so that his audience will interpret the rest of the book in light of that knowledge. For example, in 1:35 Gabriel says to Mary,

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So [that's why]¹¹ the holy one to be born [from you] will be called the Son of God."¹²

Son of God': Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus", in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (Spring 2000), pp. 46–47]. However, as pointed out in the next footnote, Biblical authors sometimes provide their own redefinitions of terms through divine revelation. So it violates proper exegetical procedure to use these extra-biblical sources to establish the meaning of Biblical terms without consideration of whether or not those terms have been redefined by New Testament authors. Similarly, Old Testament definitions or uses of "son (of God)" should not be used to obscure the insight and further revelation given in the New Testament regarding its unique and expanded meaning as applied to Jesus.

¹⁰ It is the nature of such revelation that it redefines all previously held views and understandings, including any prior perceptions of the meaning of "the Son of God" that first-century Jews may have had. In fact, participants in the Gospel accounts who used or heard the term "the Son of God" may or may not have understood its full meaning; commentaries debate whether or not they did. But from the author-audience viewpoint, that is largely irrelevant since the author gives his audience insight that the participants didn't necessarily have. So the audience who heard or read these written accounts would have understood the full, non-metaphorical meaning of "the Son of God" in light of the context carefully set out by divine revelation through the Gospel writers, modifying any previous understandings they might have had about this term.

Luke's audience would hear something very similar to what Matthew's audience heard; they would know that Jesus' mother was Mary and that His Father was God in a miraculous way. Notice that the phrase "will be called the Son of God" implies, "because *that's who He is*". In light of that context, every reference to God as "Father" or to Jesus as "Son" in the rest of Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts would be understood as a reality, not as a metaphor.¹³

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not mention how Mary became pregnant with Jesus (though in 6:3 it is clear that she is Jesus' mother); rather he simply establishes in the first sentence of his Gospel that Jesus is "the Son of God" and expects his audience to understand the rest of the book in light of that fact. Then in verse 3 ("Prepare the way for the Lord [God]") and verse 11 ("You are My Son") he confirms and highlights that Jesus is God, which further sets the stage for the book. As an assistant to both Peter and Paul, Mark would have known the historical details about Jesus' conception. The fact that he did not recount the events of Jesus' birth and childhood probably indicates that he assumed his audience also already knew that information from other sources, including both oral and written.¹⁴ Besides that, certain details in Mark's Gospel indicate that his audience was probably mostly non-Jewish, including former adherents to pagan religions in which gods were said to have children, so the idea of God having a Son would not be foreign to them. Throughout the book, as Jesus is repeatedly and clearly

¹¹ The emphatic conjunction used here in the Greek text (*διό*) shows that the statement in this clause is an obvious, direct result inferred or caused by what was stated in the previous clause. It can also be translated as, "for this reason".

¹² Quotes from the Bible are from the New International Version 1984 unless otherwise noted.

¹³ Notice that Luke 1:35 describes God literally doing something that caused Mary to literally be pregnant with a literal son, whom she went on to literally carry and literally give birth to. There is nothing metaphorical there, rather the passage explains clearly that Jesus really is the Son of God and that God really is His Father.

¹⁴ It is not unusual for an author (whether ancient or modern) to assume that his audience knows facts which are common knowledge and that they understand the meanings of terms which have been established in previous writings by himself or others on the same topic(s).

declared to be God's Son (by God and others), they would tend to understand this term as a reality, since there would be no reason for them to think otherwise.

John wrote his books and letters a number of years after the other Gospels were written, and he clearly assumed that his audience already had the foundation and context provided by the other Gospels,¹⁵ including the history of Jesus' conception as narrated in Matthew and Luke. As a result, all of John's Father-Son references in his books and letters are to be understood in light of the historical and theological context that had already been set by the other Gospels. In other words, all John's references to Jesus as God's Son and to God as His Father are intended to be more than just metaphors and would be understood that way by his audience in light of the background given in the other Gospels.

In a similar way, everything that Paul wrote was based on the teachings of Jesus (including direct revelation) and the twelve apostles, with the assumption of the context they provided as the foundation for all other teachings. This context included the oral and written history of Jesus' conception, which clearly reveals His identity as the true Son of God. Because of this context, all the Father-Son references to God and Jesus in Paul's writings are also to be understood in light of that non-metaphorical context.¹⁶

In summary, in view of the context of the history of Jesus' conception as recounted in Matthew and Luke, all "Father" and "Son" references to God and Jesus throughout the entire New Testament must be interpreted as they were intended, not as mere metaphor

¹⁵ For example, in his Gospel, John alludes to certain major events in Jesus' life such as His birth (1:14 "the Word became flesh"), His baptism (1:32-34 "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven... and remain on Him") and the Lord's Supper (6:53-58 "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks my blood...") without providing further details of these events and leaves out other major events such as His transfiguration and ascension, all of which had already been written about in the other Gospels and which he could assume his audience would be familiar with.

¹⁶ For a few examples of Paul's use of Father-Son terminology, see Romans 1:1-4; 5:10; 8:3, 29, 32; Galatians 2:20, 4:4; Colossians 1:12-20. Paul uses these important terms in connection with other important teachings, such as resurrection, reconciliation, salvation, predestination, atonement, redemption, forgiveness, creation and God's love.

but as reality.¹⁷ In other words, God really *is* Jesus' Father and Jesus really *is* His Son in some non-metaphorical or metaphysical way. That means we are not free in a translation to change the facts of who Jesus and His Father are, and it is *not accurate* to change such Father-Son references to something else. Rather, the solution is to teach people the truth about what the Bible teaches (through various Bible literacy techniques), *not* to change¹⁸ what the Bible teaches.

3 Bible literacy

One key strategy for building Bible literacy in the receptor language audience is to provide quality footnotes in conjunction with the translated Biblical text. For example, early passages in Matthew and Luke would be good places to include footnotes that clearly explain who Jesus is. Extensive testing conducted in Africa has proven that quality footnotes are one of the most effective ways to develop Bible literacy in a society that previously did not have the Bible. That research shows that such notes outperform storying and other methods by a large margin.¹⁹ An example of a footnote at Matthew 1:18 could be:

God is a Spirit (John 4:24), so He did *not* have marital relations with Mary. Rather, in a way that we do not understand, He miraculously caused Mary to be pregnant with His Son Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. Also see Luke 1:35.

¹⁷ Once again, God's Son has existed from eternity and so the reality of the divine Father-Son relationship was also in existence before Jesus' conception as a human being. Before Jesus ascended to heaven and His disciples started spreading the gospel message, Father-Son terminology may have been understood as metaphorical by many, but as was mentioned previously, those understandings would have been corrected in light of God's revelation of the reality of Jesus' divine Sonship.

¹⁸ Placing substitutes for Father-Son terminology in the text of a translation and relegating the literal terms to footnotes (as the MIT movement promotes) implies to the audience that the literal text does not mean what it says; at every point where this is done, the meaning of the text is changed. Footnotes, glossary entries, or notes in the preface of a Bible translation that say Father-Son terminology is only metaphorical are also not accurate and promote a serious falsehood.

¹⁹ Harriet Hill, "Communicating Context in Bible Translation Among the Adioukrou of Côte d'Ivoire" (PhD dissertation, Fuller Seminary, 2003).

Subsequent notes at the accounts of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (and other places where Jesus is referred to as God's Son), could point back to the earlier notes to help teach this important Bible truth. Further information about other aspects of Jesus' Sonship, including its eternal reality and OT context, could be added to these or other strategically placed notes.

Another effective way to build Bible literacy on key issues is through radio, television and the internet, which are considered prestigious forms of media in many parts of the world. In West Africa, recognized leaders of a translation committee I worked with were sometimes interviewed on the radio to explain various key Biblical terms. The fact that the teaching was on the radio increased its authority and made it particularly effective and widespread. African Radio Ministries is a good example of a thriving radio ministry in East Africa that has spawned hundreds of house churches in Muslim areas where few Christians have been able to go. This ministry averages over 500 letters a month from listeners, including many of whom are Muslims and Muslim converts to Christianity. Most of these letters have expressed great appreciation for the Bible teaching they have heard (which includes the truth about Jesus as God's Son).

Supporting literature, especially tracts and brochures, are other valuable tools for teaching the truth about who Jesus is, as well as correcting misconceptions. Tracts tend to be very popular since they are relatively cheap and easy to carry around; for example, they can be placed in any book as a bookmark to be handy for teaching and evangelism purposes. After a number of tracts on different topics have been produced, they can be combined into Bible-teaching booklets and included as website content.

In Muslim areas, transition materials will be especially important. Such materials could begin with teachings that are similar in both the Qur'an and the Bible, or with passages in the Qur'an that encourage Muslims to study and know the Bible. Then using that shared foundation these transition materials could work towards explaining Bible truths in greater detail.

Such media and methods for systematically teaching Biblical

concepts could be more intentionally implemented as a major part of the Church's overall mission strategy (including budgeting the necessary resources) for accomplishing our evangelism and discipleship goals worldwide, especially in areas where misunderstandings and false teachings about the Bible have resulted in resistance to the gospel.

4 What do Muslims really believe about the term "the Son of God"?

When working to make disciples of Muslims, and in order to make good Bible literacy content for them, it is important to know the truth about what they believe. For example, *what is Islam's main problem with the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God?* An excerpt from a recent conversation I had with Khalil, a Muslim convert to Christianity from Pakistan, is insightful, since it mirrors the Qur'an's teachings as well as what Qur'anic commentators say:

My question to Khalil: What is the first thing that the average Muslim will think, *their very first thought*, when they hear that Jesus is the Son of God?

His answer: *Every* Muslim will consider that to be *shirk*, the unforgivable sin, because it means that Jesus is God, but there is no God but Allah to them.

My response: O.K. that's the first thought Muslims have. But does the claim that Jesus is God's Son *also* make the average Muslim think that Christians believe God had marital relationships with Mary?²⁰

His answer: Nooo... we, I mean, Muslims, don't believe that.

Notice that the average Muslim's first understanding of the Biblical truth that Jesus is the Son of God is exactly right; *it means to them that Jesus is God*—the same meaning, by the way, that the leaders of the Jews understood from Jesus' use of Father-Son terminology in John 5:17ff (more on that later).

²⁰ These questions were asked in order to investigate the MIT claim that "the Son of God" only has biological/sexual connotations in Arabic, creating an impassable stumbling block for Muslims. See later notes that address this claim.

To better understand Khalil's first answer (and what Muslims believe), it is important to understand that "the term *shirk* generally implies assigning partners or equals to God, and is considered to be the paramount sin in Islam."²¹ In the words of other Muslim writers:

One of the most important obligations [for every Muslim] is to know the meaning of *shirk*, its seriousness and its different types, so that our Tawheed (belief in the Oneness of Allaah) and our Islam may be complete, and our faith may be sound.... [*Shirk*] means ascribing to someone other than Allaah something that belongs only to Allaah, such as Lordship...divinity...and the divine names and attributes...²²

In Islam, *shirk* is the sin of idolatry or polytheism, i.e. the deification or worship of anyone or anything other than the singular God, or more literally the establishment of 'partners' placed beside God. It is the vice that is opposed to the virtue of *tawhid* (monotheism)... Within Islam, *shirk* is an unforgivable crime; God may forgive any sin except for committing *shirk*.²³

A few quotes below show how Khalil's answers simply reflect what many passages in the Qur'an and Qur'anic commentators teach about this major theological issue in Islam.

In 4:171 of the Qur'an²⁴ (which is similar to 5:72–77 and other passages), it says:

O people of the Scripture (Christians)! Do not exceed the limits (of truth) in your religion, nor say of Allah anything but the truth. The Messiah 'Isa (Jesus), son of Maryam (Mary), was (no more than) a Messenger/Apostle of Allah and His Word,²⁵ ("Be!" - and he was)

²¹ "Shirk: Meaning and Definition in Islam, Types, Information", in *Islam and Islamic Laws*, February 2, 2011.

²² Shaykh Muhammad S. Al-Munajjid, "Basic Tenets of Faith: Shirk and its different forms" in *Islam Q & A* Fatwa No. 34817, April 21, 2011. (Note that "Allaah" is a variant spelling of "Allah".)

²³ "Shirk (Islam)", Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, March 31, 2011.

²⁴ Quotes from the Qur'an are from the Arabic translator, Mohsin Khan. All parenthetical information is his.

²⁵ Notice that Muslims interpret the title "the Word" to mean that Jesus was no more than a spirit/soul created by God's decree (the same way they believe that Adam, John the Baptist and other mere human beings were miraculously

which He bestowed on Maryam (Mary) and a spirit (Ruh) created by Him; so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not: "(God is) a trinity!" Cease! (it is) better for you. For Allah is (the only) One Ilah (God), glory be to Him (Far Exalted is He) above having a son.²⁶

Muhammad Asad, a well-known Qur'anic commentator, says about the above passage: "In the verse under discussion, which stresses the purely human nature of Jesus and refutes the *belief in his divinity*, the Qur'an points out that Jesus, like all other human beings, was 'a soul created by Him'."²⁷ [emphasis added]

In 5:72, the Qur'an says:

Surely, they have disbelieved who say: "Allah is the Messiah [ʿIsa (Jesus)], son of Maryam (Mary)." But the Messiah [ʿIsa (Jesus)] said: "O Children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." <cf Mt 4:10, Lk 4:8, Jn 20:17>²⁸ Verily, whosoever sets up partners (in worship) with Allah, then Allah has forbidden Paradise to him, and the Fire will be his abode. And for the Zalimun (such polytheists and wrong-doers) there are no helpers.

Qur'an 9:30–31 says:

Christians say: Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths, resembling the saying of those who disbelieved aforetime (Jews). Allah's Curse be on them, how they are deluded away from the truth! They (Jews and Christians) took their rabbis and their monks to be their lords besides Allah (by obeying them in things which they made lawful or unlawful according to their own desires without being ordered by Allah), and (they also took as their Lord) Messiah, son of

created). This wrong understanding is particularly significant in light of suggestions made by certain Bible translators that the term "the Son" be replaced by "the Word" in translations for Islamic peoples.

²⁶ Of course, passages from the Qur'an such as this one are in direct contradiction to the Biblical truth that proclaims Jesus as the God who has always existed, who is Creator, not created (John 1:1–3). Especially important are passages such as Colossians 1:13–20 which clearly state that God's Son is the one who created all things and that He is in fact God.

²⁷ Asad, Muhammad, *The Message of the Qur'an: Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad*, p. 137, note 181.

²⁸ References within wedges are from Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, p. 159, note 88.

Maryam (Mary), while they (Jews and Christians) were commanded [in the Taurat (Torah) and the Injeel (Gospel)] to worship none but One Ilah (God - Allah) La ilaha illa Huwa (none has the right to be worshipped but He). Praise and glory be to Him (far above is He) from having the partners they associate (with Him).

In the two preceding passages from the Qur'an, the word "partners" is a reference to "shirk", the unforgivable sin of making anyone equal with God. According to Muhammad Asad:

...some of those who claimed to be followers of Jesus lifted this expression ["my Father"] from the realm of metaphor and transferred it to the realm of positive reality with reference to Jesus alone: and thus they gave currency to the idea that *Jesus was literally 'the son of God', that is, God incarnate*.²⁹ [emphasis added]

In the above quotes from the Qur'an and its commentators, it is clear that what primarily offends Muslims about calling Jesus God's Son is that they know it means that He shares God's attributes and divine nature, which is exactly the correct meaning according to the Bible.³⁰ In other words, Muslims understand well what it means for Jesus to be declared the Son of God: He is God incarnate.³¹

It is significant that this important fact of *shirk* is not clearly recognized in the writings of those who are leading the movement to remove and/or change Father-Son terminology in the Bible text for Muslims. Instead of acknowledging that Muslims' primary under-

²⁹ Asad, The Message of the Qur'an, p. 79, note 60. This Qur'anic commentator makes no mention of marital relations between God and Mary at passages like this, rather the issue for him (and other Muslims) is the Christians' claim that Jesus is God incarnate.

³⁰ As one native Arabic speaker states, "Arabs respond to 'Son of God' in the same way that Jews did, which indicates its accuracy... 'Son of God' carries the connotation of equality with God in Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic (sister languages with a common ancestor)... For Muslims, the stumbling block is Christ's deity, crucifixion, and resurrection. The sexual connotations are just a polemic against Christianity." [Pierre Houssney, February 11, 2011 comment on Trevan Wax, "Islam and Contextualization: A conversation with Colin Hansen and J.D. Greear," Kingdom People blog, <http://trevanwax.com/2011/02/10/islam-and-contextualization-a-conversation-with-collin-hansen-j-d-greear>].

³¹ However, many Muslims are afraid to accept such a truth about Jesus since, as the above quotes show, the Qur'an teaches them that they are committing an unforgivable sin and are destined for the eternal fires of hell if they do believe it.

standing of the term "the Son of God" is correct, they have made intense efforts³² to divert attention away from that through an exaggerated focus on a wrong understanding of God's relationship with Mary, an understanding that the Qur'an does not teach and which many Muslims do not share. This is related to the MIT movement's repeated explicit assertions that this issue has nothing to do with theology,³³ when it has *everything* to do with theology, including the teaching of *shirk* in Islam.

As Khalil's second answer above reflects, many Muslims do *not* think that Christians believe that God had marital relations with Mary,³⁴ so the prospect of teaching Muslims Bible literacy on this

³² Why are such intense efforts being made? Most Bible translators follow specific rules of translation. For example, they know that it is not acceptable to change any facts in a translation (such as the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and that God is His Father). But if they could be convinced that a certain fact was instead merely a metaphor, one that communicates a serious wrong meaning to the receptor audience, then they might be open to using a substitute term. Some might even feel compelled to remove it from the Bible text, especially if they could be persuaded that there are substitute terms that communicate the correct meaning better than the original terms, without causing offense. This is the strategy that the MIT movement has used. Contrast that strategy with what God teaches us in 2 Corinthians 4:2 about not using deception and not distorting the Word of God.

³³ It is actually a matter of false and heretical theology that some of the MIT leaders: 1) portray Father-Son terms as just idioms or metaphors, rather than actual realities as the New Testament authors teach and as the Church has always understood them to be; 2) claim that various substitute translations for "the Son of God" highlight the relational and divine aspects of the term's meaning when, to most Muslims, none of the suggested substitute terms includes any idea of Jesus' deity as part of its meaning, and most of the substitutes do not include in their meaning the idea of a *mutual* relationship, much less the unique type of relationship shared by a father and son, or even more importantly, the unique Father-Son relationship that Jesus and His Father share; 3) have misquoted many conservative Bible scholars in order to promote an erroneous, minority view of Jesus' Sonship as if it were a common, accepted view. David Abernathy carefully documents this serious deception tactic in "Translating 'Son of God' in Missionary Bible Translation: A Critique of *Muslim-Idiom Bible Translations: Claims and Facts*", February 2010 and in "Jesus Is the Eternal Son of God, Part Two – Supplemental section" (Unpublished manuscript, August 2010).

³⁴ It has been claimed by the MIT movement that the Arabic word for "son" (*ibn*) primarily has biological connotations [Brown, Explaining the Biblical Term, 91]. However this is simply not true. For example one scholar writes, "An examination

topic is not as bleak and difficult an issue as some³⁵ have portrayed it to be. For one thing, Muslims believe that God can do anything (a frequent theme in the Qur'an; cf 8:41), which could include causing a virgin to miraculously conceive a child. In addition, they already have their own Qur'anic version of how God caused Mary, a virgin, to conceive Jesus by divine decree (see Qur'an 4:171 above). Further, there are Muslim authors weighing in on this topic who can be cited to show people what the Qur'an actually teaches. One such author, Tiger Chan says, "The bottom line is, the Qur'an does not teach that Christians believe that Jesus is the literal biological Son of God".³⁶ All of this is important information that can be employed for the development of content for Bible literacy materials.

of Arabic literature shows that 'ibn' is used nearly identically to the Hebrew 'ben' which also speaks of both biological, non-biological, and figurative father-son relationships." He also asserts that the word "ibn" can refer to an adopted son, which has nothing to do with a biological relationship. [Benelchi, October 28, 2010 (3:52 pm) and October 29, 2010 (11:45 am), Faith Community Network forum, http://faithcommunitynetwork.com/m_5071975/mpage_1/key_0/tm.htm]. This is confirmed by Pierre Houssney: "As a native Arabic speaker, I want to join...in dispelling the myth that in classical Arabic there is no way to express 'sonship' without implying a biological (i.e. sexual) relationship. Not only is that completely untrue, but the word "ibn" (son) in Arabic is much more commonly used figuratively in Arabic than in English.... The Hebrew "ben" and Arabic "ibn" are the same root word, and are used in incredibly similar ways, culturally speaking." [Pierre Houssney, February 13, 2011 (3:20 am) comment on Stetzer, "The Son of God and Ministry to Muslims", The LifeWay Research Blog, <http://www.edstetzer.com/2011/02/the-son-of-god-and-ministry-to.html>].

³⁵ Brown, *Why Muslims Are Repelled by the Term Son of God*, 2007.

³⁶ Tiger Chan, "Son of God: Muslims' Misconception", *Answering Christianity* (October 29, 2003). In this article, Chan also points out that "beget" is a wrong translation of the Arabic verb used in Qur'an 19:88–92 (a passage sometimes cited to claim that the Qur'an says that "Son of God" means a biological begetting; for an example of this, see Brown, "Understanding the Messianic Titles", 48). As Chan explains, the true meaning of this verb is "to take (unto Himself)" as shown in Qur'an 72:6 where the same verb is used to say that God "has not *taken* either a wife or a son" ("beget" would not work here). The main point of passages like this in the Qur'an is not biological or sexual, but rather to teach that God does not have any equals or partners of any kind; He is "utterly remote" from any such relationship. This is true even for the two passages in the Qur'an that do use the actual Arabic word for "beget" in reference to God, passages that do not refer to Jesus or Christians.

A March 2011 meeting in London of Christians working in Muslim areas resulted in a consensus that confirms what the term “the Son of God” primarily means to Muslims:

The academic theologians and Bible translators who are proposing alternatives to ‘Son of God’ believe that Muslims misunderstand this title, and [that] changes are needed to make its true meaning clearer. However, the Christians meeting in London, *who interact with Muslims on a daily basis*, held a very different view: *Muslims are offended by the term ‘Son of God’ because they understand that it is implying that Jesus Christ is of the same nature as God the Father....*The reason why the alternative phrases remove offence from Muslims is that they water-down the truth....it was generally agreed that the proposal to remove ‘Son of God’ from Scripture was mistaken, disingenuous and possibly heretical.³⁷ [emphasis added]

Another evangelist living and working among Muslims responded to the claims in the Christianity Today article about what Muslims believe about “the Son of God” and how they react to it:

I have worked for many years among Muslims, most of the time overseas. I have never seen this violent reaction to the term “Son of God”. I’m sure I have shared my faith with over a thousand Muslims. You would think that I would have seen this reaction at least once. Sure there is misunderstanding, but that just takes an investment to explain the true meaning. Sure Muslims have a hard time grasping the divinity of Christ. However, I have seen many who have come to faith in the true Jesus...³⁸

This quote confirms that Bible literacy among Muslims requires effort but is not at all hopeless. In fact many believers in Christ have seen God produce much fruit among Muslims, as they faithfully serve them with sacrificial love,³⁹ showing them who Christ is

³⁷ Richard Buggs, “Don’t Tamper!” in *Evangelical Times*, April 2011.

³⁸ Patrick D., February 13, 2011 (8:55 p.m.), comment on Colin Hansen, “The Son and the Crescent” in *Christianity Today*, February 2011, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/february/soncrescent.html?allcomments=true.

³⁹ See Warrick Farah, “5 Reasons Muslims Follow Jesus: Woodberry Study 2007,” *Circumpolar* (February 27, 2011) for a report about a Fuller seminary survey of 750 Muslim converts from 30 different countries and 50 different ethnic groups. The

through their lives as well as through the teachings of the Bible. This man's testimony also demonstrates again that "the Son of God" communicates to Muslims the divinity of Christ and that it is this concept that is hard for them to accept.

5 Do “the Son of God” and “the Christ” mean the same thing?

Even though, as the first section of this article has shown, Father-Son terminology reflects a reality that should not be changed to something else in a translation, there may still be some translators of Bibles for Muslims who believe there are accurate substitute terms for "Father" and "Son" that would communicate better than the original terms. A predominant substitute for "the Son of God" that has been suggested (and used in translations) is "the Christ/Messiah", which is why it is important to investigate whether or not these two terms have the same meaning.⁴⁰

The following discussion reveals that ‘the Son of God’ and ‘the Christ’ do *not* mean the same thing, and so it is *not accurate* to substitute “the Christ/Messiah” for “the Son of God” in a translation. What is the evidence from the Bible that the Jews who listened to Jesus knew that these terms had different meanings?

First let's look at “the Christ” in isolation: In Matthew 22:42, Jesus asked the Pharisees, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" Then in verse 45 He asks, "So if David calls Him/Christ (his) Lord, how can He be his son?" No one was able to

results of this survey show that the most important factor in these Muslims coming to know Christ was observing the "lifestyle of a true Christian," especially their love for non-Christians. Other key factors included experiencing visions, healings and other supernatural acts of God, realizing the truth of Scripture through reading the Bible in their own language, and coming to understand that God is a God of love, as demonstrated in the life of Jesus. Also see "Why Many Muslims Come to Christ" in *Revival Media* (July 4, 2010) for another summary of this report.

⁴⁰ In "The Son and the Crescent", author Hansen says that "in the fall 2005 issue of the International Journal of Frontier Missions (IJFM), Brown argued that Jesus and the apostles used 'Son of God' as a synonym for 'the Christ'". [See Brown, Understanding the Messianic Titles, 45, 48, 49 for other examples of this claim.] Hansen also cites three supposed proof texts Brown uses for that idea. A review of the Biblical evidence shows that these claims of proof are not valid.

answer Jesus a word." Most Bible scholars agree that the reason the leaders of the Jews could not answer Jesus' question is that the Jews were not expecting the Christ to be God (David's Lord). In other words, Jews did not understand deity to be part of the meaning of "the Christ".

It is important to realize that, like Jews, *Muslims also see no deity in "the Christ"*. Besides that, they have a very different understanding of that title from what either Jews or Christians have, because even though the Qur'an refers to Jesus with that title a number of times, it repeatedly and emphatically teaches against every aspect of what it means in the Bible for Jesus to be the Christ, that is, God's promised, anointed, chosen Savior-King.⁴¹

By contrast, first-century Jews clearly *did* understand deity as part of the meaning of "the Son of God". For example, after watching Jesus walk on water and calm a storm, something the Jews knew that only God could do⁴² (or enable someone to do), Jesus' disciples exclaimed, "Truly you are the Son of God!" (Mat 14:33).⁴³ The disciples were recognizing Jesus' divine ability to do things

⁴¹ For example, the Qur'an teaches: (1) that there is no original sin; (2) that vicarious/substitutionary atonement is impossible; (3) that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross for anyone, but that someone else died in his place; (4) that Jesus did not rise from the dead; and (5) that Jesus never claimed any of the above things about Himself. In other words, according to the Qur'an, everything that the Bible teaches about Jesus' role as the Christ is not necessary, never happened, and is not even possible. Because of the misunderstandings resulting from these teachings, "the Christ" is another important term that will require major Bible literacy efforts to help Muslims understand its true Biblical meaning.

⁴² For example, see Psalm 89:8–9.

⁴³ By this point in Matthew 14, Jesus' disciples had already heard God say that Jesus was His Son (Matthew 3:17), demons say that Jesus was God's Son (8:29), and they had heard Jesus Himself pray to God and talk about God as His Father (11:25–27). Now they were seeing evidence that was beginning to convince them that it was actually true. As mentioned previously, participants in the Gospel accounts who used the term "the Son of God" may or may not have understood its full meaning (for example, Nathanael in John 1:49, Martha in John 11:27, the centurion in Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:39, and Peter in Matthew 16:16). However the audience who heard or read these written accounts would have understood the full meaning in light of the context carefully set out by the Gospel writers.

they knew that no human being could ever do. In other words, their response shows that deity is an integral part of this term's meaning.

This is also shown in John 5:17 where Jesus says to the leaders of the Jews, " 'My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working.' 18 For this reason [the leaders of] the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even *calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.*" Jesus responds further in verses 19 through 47 with many references to God as His "Father" and to Himself as God's "Son". Notice that the leaders of the Jews also clearly understood that this terminology includes deity as part of its meaning (verse 18).

So the terms "the Christ" and "the Son of God" were obviously *quite different in meaning* to the Jews, as exemplified by their leaders and others.⁴⁴ Now that we've seen the meaning of the two terms in isolation, we can look with better understanding at passages where the titles are used together, realizing that each term is distinct and makes its own unique contribution.⁴⁵

Based on the above Bible context which shows that these terms are distinct, the high priest's words in Matthew 26:63 are correctly understood to be an escalation of terms, not a use of synonyms, when he says to Jesus, "Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God". The high priest had certainly heard from other leaders of the Jews (his underlings) that both titles were being used for Jesus (see Matthew 22:42 and John 5:17 above), and so he uses them both here to challenge Jesus. Other texts such as Matthew 16:15–20 (discussed below) use a similar escalation of terms.

⁴⁴ Another important difference between the terms is that Jews considered it blasphemy for someone to claim to be God's Son, but no Jew would consider it blasphemy for a person to claim that he was the Christ (though they would consider it a serious lie if it weren't true).

⁴⁵ This Biblical analysis follows the exegetical principle that Scripture should be used to interpret Scripture, with the important corollary that clear Scripture passages should be used to interpret the unclear passages (and not vice-versa). Jesus exemplified this principle as the devil was trying to tempt Him (Matthew 4:7). Bible scholars and translators such as John Wycliffe, Martin Luther and others also considered this principle foundational for doing good exegesis.

Another example is in 2 John 1:3 where John says, "Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love." Again, from the examination of these terms in isolation (or even from just a casual reading of the text) it is clear that the title "Christ" is distinct in meaning from "the Father's Son". These are two different ways of referring to Jesus, of emphasizing different aspects of who He is. And certainly John did *not* say or mean "...from Jesus Christ, the Christ".

In 1 Cor 1:9, Paul teaches that God has called us "into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." Notice the focus on relationship with God's Son; that truth should be maintained in a translation. In fact, all three titles ("Son, Christ, Lord") used for Jesus in this passage are distinct and should be preserved in a translation.⁴⁶ Notice also that the last two roles ("Christ" and "our Lord") were made possible because Jesus is God's Son, not vice versa.

In 1 John 2:22, God says, "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son." In this passage, the phrase "the Father and the Son" does not define "the Christ" (the phrases are distinct, not synonyms⁴⁷), rather it shows who is behind "the Christ", that is, who made it possible for the "the Christ" to be a reality. In other words, this verse means that if anyone denies that Jesus is the Christ, he is also doing something else (something much worse!), since in the process he is also denying the Father and the Son who

⁴⁶ "The Son of Man" is another important, distinct title for Jesus, so it should be maintained as distinct from "Son" and "the Son of God" in a translation. Although this point may seem obvious, it is mentioned here because the MIT movement supports an erroneous view that Jesus used "the Son" only as a "shortened form of 'the Son of Man' title" and that "when Jesus [uses] 'Son of God', the usage seems indistinguishable from 'Son of Man'." [Brown, in Abernathy, "Jesus is the Son of God, Part Two," 4, 19, 27], even though "the Son of Man" has its own unique meaning and function and "Son" is normally used in the same context with "Father" (referring to Jesus and God His Father).

⁴⁷ If we follow the reasoning (as reported in the CT article) used to claim that Christ is a synonym and an accurate substitute for "the Son of God" in passages such as Mat 16:15–20 and Luke 4:41 (see discussion below), we would wrongly conclude here that the two phrases "the Christ" and "the Father and the Son" are synonyms.

together made "the Christ" a reality. This is part of the Biblical theme that salvation was made possible for mankind as a result of God the Father's love for His Son, and His Son's love for Him, as well as their joint love for mankind, so that God sent His Son, and His Son obeyed Him even unto death to provide salvation for the world.⁴⁸

In spite of the evidence from word studies and the wider Bible context that "the Christ" and "the Son of the living God" have distinct meanings, certain alleged proof texts have been used by the MIT movement to try to convince translators and other Christians that these terms are merely synonyms. Three of those texts (cited in CT) are discussed below:

1. Luke 4:41: "Moreover demons came out of many people, shouting, 'You are the Son of God!' But He rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew He was the Christ."

An important observation regarding this verse is that the demons clearly knew who Jesus was in His very nature: the Son of God. They also knew His mission as the Christ, the Savior of the world. The reason given for Jesus silencing the demons reflects a common theme⁴⁹ throughout the synoptic Gospels that before His death and resurrection, Jesus did not normally want it widely spread around among the Jews⁵⁰ that He was the Christ, the long-awaited Savior-King, probably because that title would be misunderstood and could prevent or deviate Him from doing His work,

⁴⁸ For example, see John 3:16, 14:31, 15:9–10; 16:27–28; 17:23–24; Romans 5:8–10, 1 John 4:7–16. In fact, the truth that God is love (1 John 4:8) implies that He has always been love, which implies the eternal Father-Son relationship of mutual love.

⁴⁹ Examples of other verses with the same theme: Mat 8:4, 12:16, 16:20; Mark 1:34, 44; 3:12, 8:30; Luke 5:14, 8:56, 9:21. As the news about Jesus spread (Luke 5:15–16), the crowds following Him became so large (some in the thousands) that He had to stay away from the populated areas because He would attract too much attention (Mark 1:45).

⁵⁰ Notice that when Jesus was in a Gentile region (where "Messiah" would not have the wrong meaning), He did not give any such prohibition (Mat 5:6ff). Instead, He instructed the man He had healed of demons to tell his family and friends (vs 19).

especially if people tried to make Him King and started a rebellion against the Romans.⁵¹ So Luke's explanatory comment, "because they knew He was the Christ" spotlights Jesus' ministry and mission, while the declaration "You are the Son of God" highlights His divine nature.

Since these two terms are so closely related by the fact that God's Son filled the role of the Christ, it is not surprising that they are often used in close proximity or if they are used in parallel constructions almost interchangeably at times, especially since that is what an author might do to emphasize the relationship between these terms or to emphasize the various aspects of Jesus' person to his audience. This is a common pedagogical strategy⁵² of the New Testament authors, using different names or descriptions for Jesus in the same verse or passage to show the relationship between these terms and to develop a well-rounded picture of who Jesus is and what His work was. Another reason an author switches back and forth between terms is to communicate the relative prominence of the concepts he wishes to focus on at each point in the text. This means that both terms are relevant and have their place in the text as determined by the author, which is all the more reason they should be translated distinctly and faithfully in a translation.⁵³

⁵¹ Many of the Jews thought Jesus was the Messiah they had been waiting for, but they misunderstood what that meant and wanted to make Him an earthly king (John 6:14–15).

⁵² For another example of this strategy, see Luke 8:39 where Jesus said to the man from whom He had cast out demons, "Return home and tell how much *God* has done for you.' So the man went away and told all over town how much *Jesus* had done for him." By putting these references in parallel constructions and in close proximity, the author is teaching his audience that Jesus is God. Also see: Mark 1:1–3 where Mark uses three different terms to refer to Jesus: "Jesus Christ", "the Son of God" and "the Lord [God]"; Titus 2:13 "the glorious appearing of our great *God* and *Savior*, Jesus *Christ*"; and Acts 9:20–22 "[Saul] began to preach...that Jesus is the *Son of God*...Yet Saul...baffled the Jews...by proving that Jesus is the *Christ*." The various titles used for Jesus in these and many other passages are distinct and are not meant to be substitutes for one another, but rather each title focuses on different aspects of Jesus' nature or work.

⁵³ In its analysis of the frequency and use of the Biblical terms that refer to Jesus (including their comparison of these terms in parallel passages), the MIT movement ignores fundamental linguistic discourse concerns such as the local and wider

2. Mat 16:15–20: “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17 Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven...” 20 Then He warned His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ.

Similar to Mat 26:63, “the Christ, the Son of the living God” is an escalation of two unique terms. Both refer to Jesus, but each term highlights different things about Him: “the Christ” focuses on His ministry as Savior and King while “the Son of the living God” spotlights the divine Father-Son relationship and the fact that Jesus has the same attributes as God Himself. Jesus’ use of “My Father” here further emphasizes His unique identity as God’s Son.⁵⁴ In addition, Jesus’ jubilant, emphatic response shows that Peter’s declaration revealed something extremely significant and far beyond human comprehension: that Jesus truly *is* the Son of God. Although Peter may not yet have realized the full meaning of what he said, it is clear (from chapter one on) that Matthew intended his audience not only to realize that Jesus was the promised Christ, but also to recognize His unique relationship and equality with God.⁵⁵

contexts of each New Testament book and the relative prominence of participants and themes at any given point in the text. They also ignore other important pragmatic concerns of how an author uses language to interact with his audience, including: what he assumes, how he defines his terms, and the basic pedagogical strategies he uses to teach key concepts and lead his audience to understand important truths. Especially important is the matter of author-audience dynamics where the author gives his audience access to his own vantage point so that they understand more than most of the participants in the text did.

⁵⁴ As in John 5:17, it is significant here that in calling God His Father, Jesus was claiming to be equal with God. This is another important reason that the term “Father” should be kept in a translation. Taking “Father” terms for God out of the Bible text (along with “Son” terms for Jesus) changes both the meaning and the focus that the author intended.

⁵⁵ The MIT movement’s analysis and interpretation of this passage is a good example of how they ignore the pragmatic-discourse principle of author-audience dynamics as it pertains to participant awareness and the author’s vantage point and intent. As a result they miss a key part of the meaning of these verses and so fail to

Jesus' warning in verse 20 highlights the thematic thread throughout the Gospels of the increasing need for Jesus to keep a low profile in order to not jeopardize His ability to fulfill His mission. Using "the Christ" alone here especially draws attention to the author's intent to give it prominence, helping the audience think through the fact that Jesus was a very different kind of Messiah than the Jews had been expecting. This is also part of the author's goal to teach his audience who Jesus is. Eliminating "Son of the living God" from the text or replacing it with a substitute would obscure these important discourse features and change the meaning intended by the author.

3. Luke 1:31–33, 35: "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David 33 and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end..... 35 The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So [that's why] the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

Because Jesus' kingship is mentioned here in the same context as "the Son of God", the MIT movement claims that this passage gives evidence for "the Christ" being a synonym and acceptable substitute term. However, this claim is not valid. Rather, it is clear from these verses that the central message being proclaimed by the angel Gabriel was that Mary's son would be "the Son of the Most High" (verse 31), that is, "the Son of God" (verse 35). Between these two prominent declarations of Jesus' identity as God's Son is the statement that God would give to His Son the throne of David and that His Son would reign forever as King.⁵⁶ In other words, the angel was telling Mary that her son would *be* God's Son and that He

see the importance of preserving that meaning in a translation. [Also see the previous note on this topic.]

⁵⁶ Other Scripture passages such as John 5:36 clearly teach this: "For the very work that the Father has given Me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent Me." The work that the Father gave to Jesus His Son was the work of the Christ, the Savior-King.

would fulfill the Messianic role of King, *not* that the child would be the Messiah and would fulfill a role as God's Son (which is backwards⁵⁷). Substituting "Christ/Messiah" here for "Son of God" would be an inaccurate translation since it would result in a significant loss and change of meaning.

6 What about the other suggested substitutes for “the Son of God”?

In spite of claims to the contrary, to a Muslim, none of the suggested substitutes mentioned in Christianity Today includes deity as part of its meaning and so none of those suggestions is an accurate translation of “the Son of God” (which has deity as a major component of meaning, and is understood correctly in that regard by both Christians and Muslims).

For example, regarding the substitute, “Beloved Son who comes from God”, former Sunni Muslim Hussein Wario of Kenya says,

If for anything, this [Christianity Today] article exposes these expert Bible translators' [lack of] knowledge of Islam and Muslims. In Islam, “the Beloved Son who comes (or originates) from God” has no divine qualities. Muslims believe all life originates from Allah. Jesus is not an exception. Please read Surah 4:171. All the Qur’an commentaries on this verse are unequivocal. “From” Allah in Islam does not come with divine qualities.⁵⁸

This is affirmed by Pierre Houssney, son of Arabic Bible translator, Georges Houssney:

“Son of God” carries the connotation of equality with God...“Beloved son who comes from God”...drastically changes this meaning, stripping

⁵⁷ For an example of this erroneous viewpoint (which inherently denies the eternal Sonship of Jesus), see Brown's statement, “Jesus is pre-eminently the Christ, the eternal Savior-King sent from God, and this is what makes him *the* Son of God” quoted in David Abernathy, “Translating ‘Son of God’ in Missionary Bible Translation”, *St Francis Magazine* 6:1, 2010, p. 181.

⁵⁸ Hussein Wario, February 17, 2011 (12:03pm), comment on Colin Hansen, “The Son and the Crescent”, *Christianity Today*, February 2011, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/february/soncrescent.html?all comments=true>.

deity out of the equation and reducing Jesus to a prophet. All prophets "come from God" in Islam.⁵⁹

Other supposed substitutes for "the Son of God" do not fare much better. For example, some translators have suggested substituting "the Word" for "the Son"⁶⁰ (and "God" for "the Father"⁶¹) in passages such as Matthew 28:19 so that it would read, "...baptizing them in the name of God and of the Word and of the Holy Spirit..." However, when Muslims hear that Jesus is "the Word", most think it means that Jesus was created by divine decree "Be!" (see Qur'an 4:171 above), which from a Muslim perspective means Jesus is purely human and has no deity.⁶² Since this is obviously the wrong Biblical understanding, "the Word" is hardly a good substitute for "the Son".

Proposed substitutes for Father-Son terminology in the Bible (in reference to Jesus and His Father) do not communicate to Muslims the truth that Jesus is God. That's why these substitutes do not offend them. Rather it is the term "the Son of God" that offends them "because they understand that it is implying that Jesus Christ is of the same nature as God the Father."⁶³ So there is no excuse for any honest discussion of this issue to not clearly address the fact that the main offense for Muslims regarding "the Son of God" is that it communicates correctly to them that Jesus shares God's divinity, which to them is *shirk*.

7 Conclusion

In 1 John 4:6, the apostle John gives guidelines for how to recognize truth and falsehood: "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us.

⁵⁹ Pierre Houssney, February 11, 2011, comment on Trevan Wax, "Islam and Contextualization," Kingdom People blog.

⁶⁰ Rick Brown, "Translating the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts," II. *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 22:4 (Winter 2005): 139–140.

⁶¹ Hansen, *The Son and the Crescent*, p. 4.

⁶² Again, because of this teaching in the Qur'an, passages such as John 1 that contain "the Word" as a reference to Jesus will require extra Bible literacy efforts so that Muslims understand those passages correctly.

⁶³ Buggs, "Don't Tamper!" in *Evangelical News* (April 2011).

This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood." John then proceeds in verses 9 through 15 to give a few examples of that truth:

This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins... And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.

God obviously considers it a serious matter for people to acknowledge that Jesus is His Son, that is, God incarnate. A translation that changes this truth or diminishes it in any way is not accurate or truthful on this foundational issue and is by God's definition in verse 6 spreading falsehood, that is, teaching a changed, inaccurate message. In fact, removing Father-Son terminology from the Bible text is a form of denying the Father and the Son, which in turn is an inherent denial that Jesus is the Christ (see 1 John 2:22 above).

With that in mind, Bible translators should faithfully maintain Father-Son terminology for Jesus and His Father in a translation; they should *not* remove it from the Bible text and/or change it, especially since there is no accurate substitute for that terminology.⁶⁴ Rather than expend so much energy in efforts to change the Bible text and its meaning, the focus should be to place more emphasis on teaching the true teachings of the Bible through quality Bible literacy strategies. In fact, multi-pronged Bible literacy efforts should be a major part of every serious translation and discipleship effort, especially in areas where false teaching or misunderstanding of any part of the gospel message has resulted in significant obstacles to faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

⁶⁴ Any published materials that change Father-Son terminology that is in the Bible text should be clearly marked as transitional material, *not* as a translation or paraphrase.

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SOME THOUGHTS ON HOUGHTON 2011: *BRIDGE THE DIVIDE*

*By Jeff Morton*¹

There is a radio talk show host I listen to whenever I have the opportunity. Dennis Prager is a wise man and one of his wise sayings has become a motto for many of his listeners. Let this adage be the outline for what I want to share about Houghton 2011, *Bridge the Divide*: State the facts and then give your opinion.

I want to cover two areas from the conference: first, some general facts and observations; and then second, a look at the report² that was issued as a result of the conference.

1 General Observations

A. Fact: Houghton 2011 was attended by about fifty professors, missionaries, mission administrators with a pastor or two thrown in, and called by a committee of about ten folks (who shall remain nameless) with the purpose to *Bridge the Divide*. BtD, as it is being “acronymed”, had many purposes, but it seemed mainly concerned with bringing together various points of view on insider movements in order to air those differences in a loving atmosphere of brotherly concern and respect. Those are my words, not the committee’s words. BtD’s words: “One of our big purposes is to help clear up misunderstandings.”

A. Opinion: Did it? To a certain degree, yes and no. What do I mean by this? I attended the Houghton knowing what people like Jay Travis, Dudley Woodberry, Kevin Higgins and Doug Parsons believed. They’ve published their views over the past decade.

What’s not to understand? Okay, I’m not perfect and I do have my blind spots; I’m not so arrogant to recognize that I can still

¹ Jeff is adjunct professor of intercultural studies at Biola University, in addition to his duties with SIM and i2 Ministries.

² The entire document is found in the appendix to this essay.

learn things. So BtD cleared up the misunderstanding that there are misunderstandings.

Yet, I also said no. Various points of view were aired—passionately by some and cordially by all—but if anything, these discussions only intensified our differences.

So my first opinion is just that: No bridge was built. The divide is wider than before. BtD intensified our passion for the truth of our convictions; it solidified our intentions to press on; it galvanized our desire to see the Church know the truth about IM, ad hoc hermeneutics, troubling translations, mangled missiology and deceptive descriptions of dicey data.

B. Fact: BtD invited more than the five CMBs (Christians from a Muslim Background) who were able to come. I applaud the organizers' attempt to have more CMBs there; it just did not work out. Their comments, insights, questions and pointed statements were a welcome relief from the *theology of nice* that generally characterizes the American worldview.

B. Opinion: Sorry, I think I let some of my opinion slip into the facts just now. My point is—and Georges Houssney said it at the conference—if the conference were made up of CMBs the very flavor and texture of the meeting would have been different. What he meant was that CMBs, especially those from the Middle East, North Africa and Iran, cannot get their minds wrapped around the propositions of insider movements. These believers know what Islam is. They know it's dark side. They have lived it. They want nothing to do with it.

My second opinion is that the BtD was not as valuable as some might think. It did not include the people who matter, rather it was a gathering of Western missionaries and professors talking in the sterility of niceness and refinement.

C. Fact: There were four main areas of discussion of which I will simply give a brief description and then my opinion.

C1. Fact: The area of ethics, especially as it pertains to publications, was the first topic.

C1. Opinion: Ethical writing free of straw man arguments and ad hominem attacks is a moral imperative.

C2. Fact: The area of translation was the second topic. The major point to be made here is that “Rick Brown said he would write an article explaining why he now thinks God’s Messiah (or Mediator) and God’s Word (or Wisdom) are inadequate translations of God’s Son in the text of Scripture, even though these have been the usual interpretations of Son in the Church’s historical tradition. In previous articles he had defended this as one of several strategies for translating the term to avoid sexual connotations, as long as a literal translation was presented in the introduction, with an explanation that in the original language the phrase did not entail sexual procreation. He now agrees that because of the importance of familial imagery in the Bible, wordings in the text should be limited to ones characteristic of paternal and filial relations, while nevertheless avoiding particular wordings in some languages that entail sexual activity on the part of God.”³

C2. Opinion: We all eagerly await Rick’s publication, but the problems of translation are not over. The Muslim-compliant translations will not stop because of Rick’s statement. Rick is not SIL nor is he the only advisor for translations. The principles that produce Muslim-compliant translations are comfortably ensconced in their SIL home. Nevertheless, I am happy and grateful Rick made the statement.

C3. Fact: Hermeneutics as it relates to a theology of religions (TR) was the third topic. We did not really discuss TR, but we certainly wrestled with hermeneutics.

The first day we were treated to the presentation of a paper by Terry Paige, professor of NT at Houghton, “Early Gentile Christianity, Conversion and Culture-Shift in the New Testament”. This was responded to by Jeff Hayes (Navigators and pro-IM) and then

³ Personal communication, July 7, 2011. I proposed a statement to Rick to summarize his own statement in the conference and this is his reply. Even though it is in the third person, it is Rick’s own statement to me in full.

Georges Houssney (Horizons Int'l and historical perspective). A lively discussion ensued.

I was part of the smaller group that directed the conference conversation about hermeneutics. It was decided by our group to offer this question to the larger group: Can a believer in Christ legitimately call Muhammad a prophet? It was assumed by most of the group that this was not controversial. Most thought it was a foregone conclusion that no one believed this to be true.

I remember thinking, "Haven't you guys read Travis, Woodberry, Higgins, Massey and the rest. Of course this is controversial!" Indeed, as the larger group discussed the question, the divide between pro-IM and the historicals was made clear. The view of many pro-IMers was expressed by one to me: "Couldn't we say Muhammad prophesied?"

C3. Opinion: This latter statement reflects the views of many pro-IMers (especially the *Jesus in the Qur'an* teaching). If we cannot say, "Muhammad was not a prophet and he did not prophesy for Yahweh", what Gospel are we preaching?

One quick word about Dr Paige's paper: it was a slam-dunk for removing the analogy of Judaism for Islam.⁴ Contrary to popular pro-IM opinion, it was the Gentiles who most closely resemble Muslims that become Christians. He concludes, and I paraphrase: it is naïve to assume Gentiles became Christians while maintaining their previous Gentile identity remained *unchanged*. Case closed.

C4. Fact: Our final topic was the vague notion of identity, specifically Muslim identity. We were presented with a two case studies that suggested Muslim identity for these insider believers was merely social.

C4. Opinion: Few, if any, at the conference believe Islam is not a socio-cultural-political-religious identity. That is not the question—in fact, this entire discussion was a non-starter for me. The real question about identity concerns our identity in Christ. Who

⁴ Cf. L. D. Waterman, "Do the Roots Affect the Fruits" *IJFM* 24(2):57-63; Timothy C. Tennant, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C5 'High Spectrum' Contextualization" *IJFM* 23(3):102-115).

are we in him? And how does this relate to our other identities? I understand Islam as a culture, but I also understand Islam as a real spiritual force for evil that must be renounced and exorcised—if I may use the term—just as for Westerners we must exorcise our idols of materialism, scientific naturalism and desire for chocolate (sorry about that last one).

2 The BtD Report

Following a prologue, the report offers these four actions:

A. “We repent of . . .”

A1. Fact: “Our careless and harmful unconfirmed words, gossip, slander, and bitterness . . .”

A1. Opinion: I know this is going to sound arrogant, but I have not done this to my knowledge. I’m sure my carelessness(es) will soon be pointed out to me, at which point I will carefully deliberate over the question of such carelessness and then repent if necessary. See above (1. C2. Fact), where I have asked Rick Brown for confirmation of his statement as an example of a “confirmed” word.

A2. Fact: “Our failures to seek to honor brethren above ourselves”

A2. Opinion. This is a good thing to repent of when one is dealing with the brethren.

A3. Fact: “Our contributing to a divisive spirit . . .”

A3. Opinion: Here I have a problem. What is a divisive spirit? I am not trying to be a sophist here, but I believe it is a legitimate question.

Suppose Pete comes to you and says he can no longer eat with the Mexican brothers because they do not keep *kashrut*. This is not the Pete you know and love. Is Pete being divisive at this point? Are you being divisive because you disagree with him? Perhaps the Mexican believers are bringing a divisive spirit because they prefer carnitas to tuna casserole? In other words, divisions occur between us all the time, and so the question is rather—and the BtD report does not address it in this manner—are we contributing to *unnecessary* divisions? Are we contributing to divisions that are legalistic in

nature, petty in perspectives or pure sophism in their handling of terms (Remember the infamous presidential statement, “It depends on what *is* is”)? I agree unnecessary and petty disagreements that divide us are wrong.

But consider the following questions. Are these petty? Divisive, yes, but petty and unnecessary?

- Is Islam a religion to leave because of its Satanic DNA?
- Is Allah a false god who acts capriciously and loves conditionally?
- Is Jesus dead or alive?
- Does the *shahada* affirm the reality of the God of the Bible?
- Does the Qur’an offer revelation that leads one to faith in Christ?

The questions could go on and on. The questions themselves are not divisive because they only speak to the issues that pro-IMers have been speaking about for the last decade or more! So who is being divisive—*unnecessarily*?

B. “We reject . . .”

B1. Fact: “the insistence that the particular ways God has worked with our community are the only or preferred ways He must work . . .”

B1. Opinion: This begs the question of whether or not pro-IMers are right that God is indeed behind the movements many of them are calling “Messianic Muslims”(Travis) or “heart and soul followers of Jesus” (Winters). The assumption is that IM is a legitimate work of God. Wasn’t that the question we came to discuss?

B2. Fact: “the practice of encouraging cross-cultural workers from a Christian background to take on a Muslim identity.”

B2. Opinion: This has occurred and it continues to take place (fact). I am glad the statement is that no one encourages it, but my question is if we aren’t encouraging it, why is it still happening? Granted, it is a very small number of missionaries doing it, but it is occurring. How could such a phenomenon become a “practice”? Sorry, perhaps I am creating a divisive spirit by asking such an obvious question.

C. “We affirm . . .”

C1. Fact: “God is moving globally in a variety of ways to draw Muslims to Christ”

C1. Opinion: This statement assumes the legitimacy of IM as one of the variety. I affirm that I reject the legitimacy of IM.

C2. Fact: “The primacy of the Word of God for all aspects of faith and practice guided by the Spirit of God for the people of God”

C2. Opinion: How could I object to this? I affirm it.

D. “We commit to . . .”

D1. Fact: “Examine the Scriptures and our own hearts diligently to renew and transform our theological, missiological and ethical understanding and practice”

D1. Opinion: Amen.

D2. Fact: “Love those in the global community lifting up the Lord among Muslims, pursuing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”

D2. Opinion: As long as love includes the necessity to correct and rebuke, and to receive correction and rebuke, agreed. If love is a romanticized version of simply being nice, I disagree.

D3. Fact: “Intentionally seek out opposing peer review for our proposed publications that attempt to characterize the views of those with whom we disagree”

D3. Opinion: Agreed; we have done exactly this for the book we will release in October. It is right, ethical and necessary, although sometimes bothersome if your “peer” docks your work so much it sinks under the rewrite. So be it.

D4. Fact: “Promote unity and understanding between new and existing expressions of the church, the body of Christ”

D4. Opinion: I have problems with the new understandings of Church. Again, as long as promoting unity means asking questions and passionately expressing one’s convictions, I agree.

3 Conclusion (Opinion)

The organizing committee of BtD has a good heart. They are to be commended for their efforts at attempting the impossible task of gathering strong-willed children in a room and getting us to play together nicely. For this my hat is off to them. They accomplished that aspect of the conference.⁵

But I have two reservations about the conference: one, the actual report issued from BtD; and two, the idea of agreement.

On the final night of the conference the leadership asked us what should come out of our meeting together. The list of items included an “agreement”. The consensus of the room moved in that direction. As the night wore on, it was clear most of us were tired after three days of intense interaction and study, but we pressed on to produce a document, the *Bridging the Divide* Consultation Report June 23, 2011. The report carries no authority, no declarative power; it is not an incipient constitution of how things must be. It is merely a report of what we discussed.

Is it a perfect document? No. Is it an effort in the right direction? I don’t know. I know some will fall on both sides of this question, but I simply do not know.

But I do firmly believe, and this brings me to my second reservation about the conference, that the height of our agreement has been reached. Whether or not there are further conferences is still unknown (unlikely in my opinion), but the level of agreement on the issues that still “stick in our craw” has reached its maximum. When we cannot even agree that Muhammad is not a prophet, well, you can see the level of disagreement that exists between us. When some of us are convinced the Qur’an is not a valuable tool for evangelism while others are equally convinced it is, the divide is

⁵ For a much less biased report on the BtD conference than mine, see Warren Larson’s blog: <http://warrenlarson.wordpress.com> (“A Historic Consultation on Contextualizing the Gospel to Muslims). My major disagreement with Dr Larson is that he calls the BtD a declaration rather than a report. A declaration carries much more weight (authority) than a simple report. The BtD report carries no authority whatsoever other than to simply state what was discussed at Houghton. Nevertheless, Warren’s report is worth reading to balance my own admittedly “tilted” version.

gelism while others are equally convinced it is, the divide is more than symbolic; the chasm is real. Therefore, I remain committed to writing and speaking my convictions so the Church has a real opportunity to see IM in the light of the Word of God so *she* can decide what must be done. The decision is for the Church, not a roomful of missionaries with unswayable convictions.

Appendix: Consultation Report, June 23, 2011

At the end of our time together we reached broad consensus on the following:

We gathered for the purpose of "Bridging the Divide" over the differences related to ministry practices in the Muslim world. Over these days we have prayed, worshiped and examined the scriptures. We have examined case studies from the field and celebrated what God is sovereignly doing to call Muslim peoples to Himself and a place in the body of Christ. We have spoken openly and honestly, showing love and respect to one another about our differences.

Although serious differences remain and ongoing interaction is needed, we have sought to listen and learn and most of all to hear what God would say to us corporately as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. We have sought to be faithful to Scripture, and by the grace of God we have found agreement on certain issues, clarified misunderstandings and identified issues for further study, reflection and dialogue.

With mutual respect and in submission to God and His Word, our authority for faith and practice, we have come to agreement on a number of points and committed ourselves to continue the process that we have begun in these days. To glorify the Lord and help to bridge the divide between us as we seek to extend the Kingdom to Muslim peoples.

We repent of

- Our careless and harmful and unconfirmed words, gossip, slan-

der, and bitterness that we may have used against each other.

- Our failures to seek to honor brethren above ourselves.
- Our contributing to a divisive spirit, since God has called us to be co-laborers in declaring His glory among the nations.

We reject

- The insistence that the particular ways God has worked with our community are the only or preferred ways He must work with others in His great harvest ingathering.
- The practice of encouraging cross-cultural workers from a Christian background to take on a Muslim identity.

We affirm

- God is moving globally in a variety of ways to draw Muslims to Christ.
- The primacy of the Word of God for all aspects of faith and practice guided by the Spirit of God for the people of God.
- Practicing fidelity in Scripture translation using terms that accurately express the familial relationship by which God has chosen to describe Himself as Father in relationship to the Son in the original languages.

We commit to

- Examine the Scriptures and our own hearts diligently to renew and transform our theological, missiological and ethical understanding and practice.
- Love those in the global community lifting up the Lord among Muslims, pursuing the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
- Intentionally seek out opposing peer review for our proposed publications that attempt to characterize the views of those with whom we disagree.
- Promote unity and understanding between new and existing expressions of the church, the body of Christ.

To the End That all may know the Gospel so that, when Jesus returns in power and great glory, as many as possible will enjoy the new heaven and new earth, for the glory of God alone. Even so come Lord Jesus!

YEAR OF THE LAB RAT

By Basil Grafas

They say that it is the Chinese year of the Rabbit. Of such things, I must plead ignorance. I prefer, however, to call 2011 the Year of the Lab Rat. Now, you must be wondering why, in a Christian publication, we are speaking of such things, of laboratories and rats. Perhaps I can help with that. You see, a few years ago I attended a great gathering of people in Southern Europe committed to reaching the Muslim world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was an inspiring sight; 600 people gathered from the entire Mediterranean basin as well as from all over the world, all gathered in one place to address the urgent work of taking Jesus to Muslims. The place was filled to the top with national church planters from many places and with Western missionaries. We did all of the usual things that gatherings such as this engender. We worshipped, heard the word and attended all sorts of workshops. We ate together, sipped tea, plotted and planned. It sounds like heaven doesn't it? I wish that it were. If this were a Garden of Eden, there lurked a serpent, too. Behind the outer show of solidarity and commitment, an elephant stood in the room unacknowledged. We all chose to ignore the beast until one brave man, a Muslim background Christian pointed it out.

This is what he said: "I know that you missionaries like to consider our countries as your laboratories, but it would be nice to consult the lab rats once in a while." You could feel the silence in the room as we Westerners absorbed the meaning of his statement—an accusation really. Earlier in the week, someone had opened a booth in the hotel advertising a "contextual," "Muslim-sensitive" Bible translation of some kind, extolling the replacement of "Son of God" with some sort of ingenious replacement. The "lab rats", the Muslim background believers, had not, in fact, gratefully received it. It so offended them that they wanted it gone; yesterday would not have been too soon. The "innovators" of this Bible meant to make the Word more accessible, communicate more clearly, but all they

managed to do was suggest that the eternal Word had been brought down to their own muddy, pedestrian level. To these non-Western eyes and minds, the words now seemed to smack of hesitation, lack of conviction and compromise. The lab rats, you see, had gone through every kind of trial, test and torture to sit at the feet of Jesus. Now they were face-to-face with a visible surrender to Muslim sensibilities. Just in case you might be prone to confusion, let me say right away that what you read here are the clear sentiments of these brothers and sisters. You do not have to believe me, but I say without any equivocation that this characterization is, if anything, an understatement.

The response of Muslim background Christians everywhere to this sort of missionary innovation is volcanic. Missionaries can cast indigenous responses in any way they please, at least if truth is not their aim. I tell you, however, that in every part of the church emerging from within the Muslim world, new believers are speaking out in increasingly strident terms against a new kind of colonialism. It's the kind where Westerners show up with ideas, methods, structures—and oh yes, money—using the latter to ease their acceptance of or, just as well, force their way into the culture. From the vantage point of the lab rats, this is a show of force, a kind of sanctified gunboat diplomacy. Out went the whips, chains, and white man's burden; in came the wizards of anthropology, priests of the doctrines of “appropriate” contextualization. No longer would the lab rats have to bus tables, nurse the Westerners' children, clean the toilets and sit at the feet of Western religion. Now we have a newer, gentler, more photogenic version. Now we have reduced these manifestations of the *imago Dei* to marketing anecdotes, fodder fit for raising donations from the ever-gullible Western church-going public by the missionary sales force. People in the “young” world become snapshots, statistics, lab reports.

If it sounds as though I am angry (not mad I assure you), it sounds that way because real believers are affected by our adventurism. I care about them and they cannot speak for themselves. We write our rose-colored missionary anecdotes about people saved through our heroic experimentation, but these people are mute. We do not hear their voices. Who do we think we are? How can we be

so blind to our own cultural predilection to violence by other means, to the violence of coercion?

I remember my introduction to this sort of missionary mugging years ago when I attended a conference in a Muslim city. Convened by a missions organization, the event was attended by a fifty-fifty mix of nationals and Western missionaries. A young, fresh American lady strode to the front. She announced, breathlessly, that she had a gift for our national brothers and sisters. What could it be? It was the Book of Mark. The discussion sounded like this:

National believer: Strange, we already have one of those.

Missionary: Ah, but this one is different. It is, after all, written with a vocabulary familiar to the majority Muslim population.

Confusion set in.

National believer: But we already have a new translation and it uses the same vocabulary.

Missionary: Not quite. We have made a few improvements you see.

National believer: Improvements? But how can we improve what God has made?

Missionary: Well, for starters, we have liberated the text from the impediments that make a Muslim's acceptance of Jesus virtually impossible.

Still more confusion.

National believer: What impediments? I came to Christ with a Bible in hand that said all sorts of things I did not accept as a Muslim, but God taught me better. No objections are beyond God's power and love. What are you talking about?

Missionary: Well, for one thing, phrases like "Son of God" make coming to Jesus impossible. So, because Muslims still need Jesus we replace the offending words with better choices that communicate the meaning God intended.

National believer: What words exactly?

Missionary: Well, we used *Isa al-Masih* for *Son of God*.

National believer: You did what? You got rid of the Words of God!

Missionary: Well, if you just understood that *Son of God* means *Messiah* . . .

National believer (interrupting): I don't care what you think it means! I don't want your opinion. I want to know what the Bible says.

Missionary: This is not really a problem. We can always footnote the original language.

National believer: Bibles do not have footnotes! If you want something footnoted, footnote your ideas, not the words of the Bible.

Another Western missionary #1: I just feel as though we need to really thank our sister here for her great work.

Still another Western missionary #2: We all need to keep in mind that we are trying many new things. We need to love one another and suspend our judgment. We have a difficult task and there are many ways to accomplish it. We just need to bless one another as we try our best.

Western missionary host: I want to thank each and every one of you for taking time to join us here. We have had a great time and I am so encouraged to see the many new and exciting ways in which God is expanding his kingdom. Let's pray.

The meeting breaks up and missionaries and national believers go home.

What did you hear? I hope you heard the sound of a great vacuum formed by the vast difference of perspective between the missionary and the national believer. In fact, on that eventful day, things truly lined up according to culture. The vast majority of Westerners in the room made supporting noises when the missionary spoke. The climate rapidly changed when the national responded. There were shouts and objections coming from all over the room from Muslim background Christians who were deeply offended by the biblical tinkering. As one Muslim background man told me (I was one of two Westerners I saw firmly opposed to the missionary), he was not at all interested in a missionary's opinion concerning the Bible. He wanted to see the real thing with his own eyes. He and his brothers were perfectly content to figure it out for

themselves. They did not need the condescending graces of the laboratory scientists. They needed to hear the Word of God in all its adornment. To them, it was not some sort of disposable form hiding a supracultural prize. It was all the Word, form and all.

I heard almost the same thing with almost the same tone in that first meeting I mentioned. Increasingly, our non-Western brothers and sisters in the faith, the lab rats, are running out of patience; and I am sorry to have to say this, but they long ago ran out of trust for the Western scientists, resplendent in their lab coat trappings of scientific method and social theory. These unhappy people have discovered a simple gospel truth and an articulate doctrine that strangely sound a lot like our Early church and Reformation ancestors. Theirs is a perspective uncluttered with the detritus of cobbled together modernistic perspectives. Rather, their view reflects the sanctified understanding of Muslims who, freed from their bondage to false religion, retained the zeal for one truth in one holy message. We are people of Madison Avenue and the West End. We surrendered long ago the evangelical flag to the encroaching demands of modernism, postmodernism and oneism. Do not let the clever spokesmen of a “better”, more effective, less confrontational Bible fool you. Please don’t; national believers are not fooled, but they have no voice. When all they have are their distant voices crying out from Indonesia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey and North Africa, your money, pouring into the coffers of the missionaries who run the laboratories, drowns out their voices.

This is an opportunity for the churches of the West. It is time to wake up and smell the burning brake pads on our evangelical car, as it continues its backward slide, away from the gospel; away from Irenaeus, Athanasius and Augustine, away from martyred reformers who litter a thousand landscapes with their burned, charred remains; away from the grand heritage of Wesley, Edwards, and Spurgeon; and away from brothers and sisters from Cote d'Ivoire to China. These latter day worthies, successors of the church fathers, know the truth and it is not in us. It is time for us to wake up because time is precious cargo; there is only so much of it. Let the year of the lab rat end!

THE EMERGENCE OF INSIDER MOVEMENTS

*By Bill Nikides*¹

1 Identifying the elephant

Getting underneath the skin of insider movements, moving beyond the anecdotes, aphorisms and hype is no easy task. Shrouded in mystery, accompanied by hushed tones, as if the very telling of its stories places real people in danger, trying to get to its roots is a bit like Rudyard Kipling's blind men trying to describe what is in fact an elephant. It seems too big, and is too diverse for anyone to gain a coherent picture. In part, I think this confusion is deliberate on the part of its formularies and missionary practitioners. Insider movements grew in the dark. Most of us in the West never even knew they existed for decades. Then, when we, the various parts of the Christian church began to enquire, we were met with missionary success stories taking place in unknown locations as recounted by people with pseudonyms. More fundamentally, questions of origin or concerns regarding doctrine are generally met with assurances that there are no real explanations worth repeating since the movement is one of the Holy Spirit, having nothing to do with Westerners exporting ideologies and methodologies East and South. Rather, Western missionaries were simply witnesses to what God had already spontaneously generated in Muslim cultures.

I disagree with these characterisations. I believe that insider movements are, despite the barriers and more than a little obfuscation, understandable. Just as architects of IM such as Charles Kraft have exhorted us to self-examination, wisely pointing out that we are just as prone to religious syncretism as anyone else, I would like to take him up on his suggestion and examine what I believe is fundamentally a Western invention. I only say "largely" rather than "entirely" because in its application, insider methodology can, in

¹ Bill is a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). He has had many years of engagement in fruitful ministry in Asia and Europe.

fact, merge with indigenous syncretism. South and East Asia; North and Sub-Saharan African Islam all contribute these. Nevertheless, I think looking at insider movements as extensions of Western, and in particular American evangelical expressions can help us understand insider movements. One recent strand of contemporary evangelicalism, the emergent church movement stands out. I believe that a good look at the emergent church will help us also understand what insider movements are about.

They say that if you wish to eat an elephant, you have to do two things. First, you have to recognise that such an enormous meal can only be consumed one bite at a time. The second thing to remember is that you need a plan. A bit of elephant anatomy helps. So it is with insider movements. Many people and many ideas shaped its thinking. More importantly, many people and many ideas shaped its thinkers. One such idea is the emergent church. Before we can talk about the connections between these two phenomena, however, we need to look at a few things that helped create both. Then we can get our arms around the emergent church before relating it to insider movements.

2 Eating the elephant

A good place to start is with a bit of prehistory. This is, to be sure, a book about missions, but we often make big mistakes in not looking outside the box of missions to understand what we have in the box. For example, Erich Kahler, a literary critic and scholar noted changes in American and European worldviews after the Second World War. His observations are worth quoting at length.

We live in an era of transition, on which age-old modes of existence, and with them old concepts and structures, are breaking up, while new ones are not as yet clearly recognisable. In such a state of flux -more rapidly moving than ever- in the incessant turmoil of novelty, of discoveries, inventions and experiments, in such a state, concepts like wholeness, like coherence, like history are widely discredited and looked upon with distrust and dislike. Not only are they felt to be encumbering the freedom of new ventures, they are considered obsolete and invalid. The repudiation of all these concepts implies a discarding of form, for they all-wholeness, coherence, history-are inherent in the

concept of form. They all mean and constitute identity. Indeed, form may be plainly understood as identity. As Richard Blackmur strikingly put it: “Form is the limiting principle by which a thing is itself.” Accordingly, losing form is equivalent to losing identity.²

He is saying that back in 1968, he noticed a growing trend among the thinkers and shapers to discard traditions, structures, and conventions for the sake of “new ventures” designed to avoid obsolescence and maximise freedom. People wanted to be free of constraint and even at the risk of losing coherence, the old ways were distrusted and then discarded. Forms were considered either unimportant or likened to prisons, dooming people to lives of meaningless repetition.

That was then and this is now. This sort of radical mistrust of history, tradition, structure, standards and constraint we now identify as postmodernism. To be postmodern is to be “post” everything that what we think modernism stands for. Interestingly enough, the list looks much the same as it did in 1968. The only thing that may have developed is the level of mistrust. Zygmunt Bauman, a highly influential sociologist has made a career of understanding postmodernism in the West and concluded that it was very much not “post” anything. Postmodernism according to Bauman is just an accelerated version of everything that was taking place within modernism, the world of the industrial West. He coined a term that he believes better explains what we are all experiencing is. He calls it “liquid modernism”. In describing the increasingly rapid rate of change, as we discard old forms for new ones, he likens the phenomenon to the difference between solids and liquids. In a liquid state, social forms and institutions cannot keep their shape for long.³ Structures and organisations become networks for example. In order to facilitate making what are believed to be necessary changes in liquid modernity,

² Erich Kahler, *The Disintegration of Form in the Arts* (New York: George Braziller, 1968) 21.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in An Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) 1ff.

A swift and thorough forgetting of outdated information and fast ageing habits can be more important for the next success than the memorisation of past moves and the building of strategies on a foundation laid by previous learning

In that brave new world of rapid change, the first “sacreds to be profaned” were traditional loyalties, custom and obligations. Bauman noted that the power to create had to be free of fences and barriers. Dense and intense social bonds had to be cleared away.⁴ This translated into any number of different directions. The sexual revolution, gender equality, marriage, segregation all came under the gun. So did institutional religion. Mainline churches were in massive decline throughout most of the Twentieth century. What filled the void was a neo-evangelicalism that both repudiated the insularity and perceived backwardness of fundamentalism; and looked forward to a happy engagement with the modern world. The seekers after truth among the new evangelical tribe rebuilt the face of Christianity in the West. Impatient with the stifling and reactionary thinking they found in denominational Christianity, movers and shakers started and colonised new parachurch organisations, capable of mobilising people and initiating mission faster than they could in any other venue.

In the early days of the nascent evangelicalism, the vast majority of evangelical leadership, the trendsetters, maintained a close watch on core doctrinal commitments. But, the engagement with the wide world outside the church doors cut both ways. It allowed believers to really engage the world on its terms.

On the other hand, it also created a bridge to thinking in the outside world that would threaten its original core commitments. He who builds a bridge cannot always determine the direction of the traffic; nor the selection of the drivers. An ever-increasing gap began to grow between different wings within evangelicalism. You could see it coming in the late 60s and 70s with movements such as the Jesus People; Christians fiercely mono-generational, experiential

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) 3-14.

and anti-historical.⁵ Gerald McDermott, in a recent article described the two main wings as the Meliorists and the Traditionalists.⁶

Reformational and “conservative” Christians align with McDermott’s traditionalists. Traditionalists are framed by their identity with “The Great Tradition”, the mainstream expression of Christianity that sees itself in continuity with the early church, its attitude toward scripture and its concern for maintaining biblical doctrine. “Forms” such as church and office are not considered culturally conditioned options, but necessary extensions of the whole history of God’s people. On the other hand, many within the emergent church and insider movement identify with his Meliorists.

Meliorists, according to McDermott, think that conservatives pay too much attention to tradition. They do so for two reasons. Either they (the conservatives) are simple-minded (Biblicists) or they are Paleo-orthodox (they cannot face the modern world). Creeds and confessions are simply culturally landlocked, man-made statements that may need a doctrinal makeover. This combines with the fact that for many, biblical inspiration means that the authors are inspired, not necessarily the words. McDermott concludes that the logic of the Meliorists leads them to proclaim Scripture’s authority while rejecting the church’s historical understanding of it, making a theologian “just another culture-bound interpreter of spiritual experience.” Out go the theologians-in come the anthropologists. He also issues one final caution. The creeds and doctrines of the past served as something other than a straight-jacket. They were the ordinary Christian’s only protection against “the ingenuity of the wise and intellectual superior”. In other words, Meliorists have created a gnostic evangelicalism, dominated not by history, tradition, or the Bible, but by cultural or methodological experts. I believe that, if the categories of Meliorism and Traditionalism are valid ways to describe the divide among evangelicals, then the emergent church represents a kind of Meliorism

⁵ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organised Religion* (Chicago: Moody, 2009) 92.

⁶ Gerald McDermott, “Evangelicals Divided” *First Things* 21.2 (April 2011) 45-50.

But how do we describe it? What are the emergent church's characteristics? Several things come to mind. John Drane has a helpful summary. The emerging church is one of two expressions:

A shorthand way of describing a genuine concern among leaders of traditional denominations to engage in a meaningful missional way with the changing culture, and as part of that engagement to ask fundamental questions about the nature of the church. Or...Christians who have become angry and disillusioned with their previous experience of church and who have established their own faith communities that-far from being accountable to any larger tradition-are fiercely independent and often highly critical of those who remain within what they regard as the spiritually bankrupt Establishment.⁷

Sam Storms has a list of emergent distinctives. These include:

1. Journey vs. Destination
2. Belonging then believing vs. believing then belonging
3. Inclusion vs. exclusion
4. Corporate vs. individual
5. Incarnational vs. attractional
6. Fluid ecclesiology vs. fixed ecclesiology⁸

The list is helpful in seeing the conceptual overlaps between emergents and insiders. Take the first distinctive. Is it not analogous to the definition of insider movements as “movements to Christ” rather than as movements in Christ? This allows for the rest of the distinctives to take place. Someone can, in the insider milieu, remain a Muslim member of the mosque because he or she is on the way to Jesus, not the church. This person is being included in the insider Muslim movement that encourages its followers to remain within their original faith systems, thereby incarnating Christ, rather than being extracted into the Church. It allows people to bypass doctrinal standards, membership accountability, and

⁷ John Drane, “What is the Emerging Church? Editorial *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6.1 (2006).

⁸ Sam Storms, “The Emerging/Emergent Church: Observations and Analysis” www.samstorms.com.

perceived institutional barriers. So it is with insiders.⁹ So it is with emergents. Emergents and insiders alike view cultures as essentially insurmountable barriers, regardless of what people like David Bosch said. He and others warn of syncretism, but both insiders and emergents seem to pay little attention. It is as though the culture is the ultimate, irreducible reality.

It is vital that these multiform people and subcultures encounter Jesus from within their own cultures and from within their own communities, for only there can they truly comprehend him. It is now critical for the sake of the gospel itself that these people experience salvation in a way that does not dislocate them from their organic groups but rather allows them to encounter Jesus in a way that is seamlessly connected with life as they have come to understand it through their own histories and experiences.¹⁰

Leonard Sweet, an emergent guru, talks about doing church in a way that is biblically absolute but culturally relative. He employs what he calls an EPIC model to describe emergent priorities. EPIC stands for Experiential, Participatory, Image-Driven (as opposed to orally driven), and Connected. In his mind, when you put all of that together, you do not have religion. Speaking for postmodern believers, he states that “Postmoderns have had it with religion. They want no part of obedience to sets of propositions and rules required by some ‘officialdom’ somewhere’.”¹¹ David Wells calls this the “disappearing trick” of postmodern Christians, the process of considering faith in Jesus as outside the historical church.¹²

Like the liquid modernity Bauman describes, emergents descry institutions such as the traditional church. They also focus almost exclusively on an understanding of incarnational theology as contextualisation. This engenders moving within the social fabric of

⁹ Rebecca Lewis, “Promoting Movements to Christ Within Natural Communities” *IJFM* 24.2 (Summer 2007).

¹⁰ Chad Richard Bresson, “The Emerging Church: What They Are Saying” II. www.clearcreekchapel.org.

¹¹ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: B&H, 2000) 112.

¹² David Wells, *The Courage to be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 10f.

culture, so as to incarnate Christ within it. Rob Bell, an emergent rock star, explains:

Jesus is supracultural. He is present within all cultures, and yet outside of all cultures. He is for all people, and yet he refuses to be co-opted or owned by any one culture.¹³ That includes the Christian culture. Any denomination. Any church. Any theological system.

The point that Bell, Brian McLaren and insiders make is that Christ is not the exclusive property of the church, so it is completely appropriate to find him embraced by Muslims, Hindus etc. Emergents tend to see the organised church as hopelessly corrupt; far better to focus the believers' energy on building the kingdom and bypassing the institutions.¹⁴ The emergent leader, Erwin McManus, in fact, stated that his goal is to "destroy Christianity as a world religion and be a recatalyst for the movement of Jesus Christ".¹⁵ That goes a long way to explaining why, if George Barna's 2006 statistics are to be believed, that while 45% of the Americans he surveyed claimed to be born again, 21% of these were unchurched.¹⁶ This must, however, go hand in hand with a minimalist view of doctrine and theology.¹⁷ Spending time scrubbing theology is considered a waste of time and wrong-headed since doctrine is really only cultural Christianity attempting to force its view on others.¹⁸

¹³ The prevailing way of understanding religion for Emergents and the insider movement is as an expression of culture.

¹⁴ DeYoung and Kluck 17. See Jonathan Bonk, "Salvation, Other Religions, and Asian Mission" *Asian Missiology* 2.1 (2008) 112. Bonk seems to believe that insider movements are the best way to preserve biblical faith, as opposed to visible churches. See Stuart Caldwell, "Jesus in Samaria: A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims" *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000) 29f for his promotion of kingdom over institutional church.

¹⁵ Quoted in Richard Bennett, "Hazards Unfolded By Emerging Church Leaders" www.bereanbeacon.org.

¹⁶ Wells 42f.

¹⁷ Wells 17.

¹⁸ David Greenlee, "New Faith, Renewed Identity: How Some Muslims are Becoming Followers of Jesus" www.edinburgh2010.org. The author examines the validity of insider "conversions" by examining the phenomena through seven different lenses (psychological, behavioural etc), none of which include a theological or doctrinal lens.

Both movements are broadly open to other religions.¹⁹ Few are exclusivists that think that Jesus must be proclaimed Lord personally and within the context of the historic church. Semir Selmanovic, pastor of Church of the Advent Hope in Manhattan, and member of the Emergent Village, notes approvingly that many emergents have eschewed the Christian identity, moving beyond it in order to live a “Christ-like life” as Hindus and Native Americans.²⁰ The irony in this is that two things are considered worthy of perpetuation and one is not. Both insiders and emergents think that Jesus is here to stay and so are the religions of the world. The only one that has to go is world Christianity. Lloyd Chia recounts a night out together, as he was doing his doctoral research on the emergent church, with four people: Eliacin, Raul, Felipe, and Brian McLaren.²¹ McLaren had been at a conference where he advocated dual-identity in religion. Felipe was perplexed. “How can I be a Christian if I can’t draw a clear line between myself and a non-Christian?” He also found it difficult to believe that he could learn anything profitable from other religions. McLaren explained that there were two typical choices. One could either set up absolute boundaries, maintaining a strong Christian identity or have no boundaries and a weak identity. McLaren then knocked over both straw men. He offered a third alternative. Felipe could maintain a deep commitment to his faith without having any insider/outsider boundaries. He then told stories of people that had come through other religions to Jesus. Eliacin recounted that he had listened to a

¹⁹ See Abdul Asad, “Rethinking the Insider movement Debate: Global Historical Insights Toward an Appropriate Transitional Model of C5” *St Francis Magazine* 5.4 (August 2009) 151. Asad, a pen name for an American missionary, proposes turning insider movements into a sect of Sufi Islam. Kevin Higgins, “Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur’an” (October 2007).

²⁰ Tyson Dauer and Cecilia Pick, “Re-Emerging Pietism: The Emerging Church as Postmodern Pietism” *Journal of Undergraduate Research* 8 (1 September 2008) 32. Compare Kevin Higgins, “Beyond Christianity: Insider Movements and the Place of the Bible and the Body of Christ in New Movements to Jesus” *Mission Frontiers* (July-August 2010).

²¹ Lloyd Chia, “Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-building, Inclusion, and the Emerging Church Movement in America” Ph.D. Dissertation (December 2010) 263ff.

minister tell him recently that the minister had been studying the Qur'an, concluding that "I think Islam is making me a better Christian." In terms of a theology of religions, one can clearly see the overlapping perspectives of insiders and Emergents.²²

Another feature of emergents relates to how they interact with other people and ideas. According to Scott Clark, both liquid modernity and the emergent Church find critique fairly unwelcome. Arguing over truth claims is considered an especially unwelcome intrusion. It is old-speak after all.²³ Lloyd Chia made a careful study of how emergents interact with ideas, both theirs and others'.²⁴ He observed how the Emergent Village blog moderator policed his site. The moderator distinguished between those interested in genuine dialogue and "trolls" who excluded themselves by being antagonistic. Rules were established that governed who was admitted to and who was excluded from conversations. Name-calling ("you are a heretic") and condemnation ("believe that and you are going to hell") got you excluded. Mutual openness got you included. Chia made an interesting observation. "Instead of an exclusion defined by identity (who you are), or positionality (what you believe), exclusion I defined by how one chooses to interact."²⁵ An emergent response to D.A. Carson's *Reclaiming the Centre* proposed establishing rules of engagement. Some of these "rules" included:

²² See Bernard Dutch, "Should Muslims Become 'Christians'?" *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000), Joseph Cumming, "Muslim Followers of Jesus?" www.christianitytoday.com. Rebecca Lewis, "The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements" *IJFM* 27.1 (Spring 2010). Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Honouring God-Given Identity and Community" *IJFM* 26.1 (Spring 2009). Kevin Higgins, "Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements" *IJFM* 23.3 (Fall 2006). John J. Travis and J. Dudley Woodberry, "When God's Kingdom Grows Like Yeast: Frequently-Asked Questions About Jesus Movements Within Muslim Communities" *Mission Frontiers* (July-August 2010) 27.

²³ R.Scott Clark, "Whosoever Will Be Saved: Emerging Church, Meet Christian Dogma" *Reforming or Conforming: Post-Conservative Evangelicals and the Emerging Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) 115.

²⁴ Lloyd Chia, 200f.

²⁵ Chia 201.

1. Respect for boundaries and difference: “You do it one way, we do it another.”
2. A commitment to dialogic engagement instead of “one-way” criticism.
3. Responsible critique that includes not perpetuating second-hand critique.
4. The necessity of personal encounters, or “get to know us.”
5. Establishing a realistic sense of “scope”: “We ask our critics to remember that we cannot be held responsible for everything said and done by people using the terms ‘emergent’ or emerging church,’ anymore than our critics would like to be held responsible for everything said or done by those claiming to be ‘evangelical’ or ‘born-again’.”²⁶

We see the same pattern of inclusion and exclusion occurring today with regard to conversations about insider movements. If you are going to interact, you will have to play by their rules. Anything else will be deemed an occasion for conflict resolution.

For emergents, as for insiders, diversity is prized far more than is unity or conformity. This may, in fact, be linked to their need to defend their own turf. Individuals within the camp can say virtually anything, hold to any idea or practice, while the movement as a whole denies that any particular point applies to them as a whole. The “all-purpose” reply to critics by emergents, is “not everyone in the movement believes like that.” Many insiders could mirror these words perfectly. The consequences are significant. Phil Johnson, for example, notes that emergents “percolate” all sorts of heresies and false doctrines, but this defence mechanism of broad diversity and plausible deniability shields them from confrontation.²⁷ It is a rope-a-dope approach that renders emergents and insiders virtually

²⁶ Chia 290ff. Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ” *IJFM* 17.1 (Spring 2000) 11, exhorts both proponents and critics of insider movements to “accept God’s diversity in drawing Muslims to Christ.” See also Kevin Higgins, “Speaking the Truth about Insider Movements” *St. Francis Magazine* 5.6 (December 2009) for an insider parallel.

²⁷ Phil Johnson, “Joyriding on the Downgrade at Breakneck Speed: The Dark Side of Diversity” *Reforming or Conforming* 213f.

immune from serious and consequential critique. Every criticism is disqualified as painted with too broad a brush.²⁸

Both emergents and insiders share intellectuals and some celebrities. On the popular side, Brian McLaren is quoted and feted by both movements. More seriously, both share some of the same influential thinkers, who, while not either insiders or emergents, shape the thinking of both. Principle among these are the missiologist David Bosch, a champion of incarnational contextualisation and the missionary historian Andrew Walls, an important architect for encouraging the development of local theology in the place of historic creeds and confessions.²⁹ Miroslav Volf, the Yale Scholar, author of *Allah: A Christian Response*, editor of *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbour*, and co-sponsor of the Yale Response to *A Common Word Between Us and You, Loving God and Neighbour Together*, along with another insider advocate, Joseph Cumming, also serve as influential shapers of both communities.

How do the emergent church and insider movements relate or overlap? There are different ways to look at it. There is the direct method. Do the two communities quote one another or hang out for example? They do on occasion. Indirectly, do they share similar ideas or philosophies? How do they reflect liquid modernity? What are their reactions to institutional Christianity as a form? If doctrines generate rules for living, how do they each react to doctrine? I believe that a careful examination of the two leaves little room for doubt. Both emergents and insider proponents have been nourished from the same spring. I just wish it had not been contaminated.

²⁸ Johnson 223.

²⁹ Kevin Ward, "It Might Be Emerging. But is it Church?" *Stimulus* 17.4 www.stimulus.org.nz (November 2009).

INSIDE/OUTSIDE: GETTING TO THE CENTER OF THE MUSLIM CONTEXTUALIZATION DEBATES

By J. S. William¹

1 Introduction

In 1998, John Travis wrote a short article seeking to describe the status of missions among Muslims as well as to promote a “myriad of approaches” to reach the Muslim world.² The article provided a spectrum of Muslim background communities that considered themselves followers of Jesus. The spectrum included communities that adopted foreign languages and forms (C1-C3 communities) as well as communities that called themselves “Muslim” but sought to live by faith in Jesus under the authority of the Old and New Testament (C5 communities).

This article lit a firestorm of controversy that has only intensified to this day. Travis and others wrote articles defending professed believers who lived under the rubric of a Muslim identity, utilized Muslim rituals, and remained tied to their socio-cultural communities.³ Others described these communities, and particularly foreign workers who promoted such an approach, as syncretistic and potentially heretical. The intensity of disagreement has little abated over the years. Indeed, the debates have expanded to a variety of issues, including the use of the Qur’an in evangelism and how to appropriately translate key terms such as “Son of God” into Muslim idiom.

Strikingly, most of those writing in the current debate come from Western, evangelical backgrounds. Missionary and researcher, Phil Bourne, points out that conservative evangelical and Reformed writers tend to be critical of the new approaches to contextualization while advocates tend to come from more charismatic back-

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² Travis (1998a).

³ Travis (1998b); Travis & Travis (2005).

grounds.⁴ But even this spectrum serves as only a generalization. According to my experience, proponents and critics both come from a variety of evangelical backgrounds. The disagreement, then, begs the question: if those disagreeing over appropriate contextualization come from largely common backgrounds, what are they disagreeing over and why do they disagree?

This paper can in no way unravel every aspect of those two questions, but by looking primarily at the articles in three evangelical missions journals, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ), *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*⁵ (IJFM), and *St Francis Magazine* (SFM), the paper will seek to outline three areas of the discussion: (1) the summary positions of those who advocate and/or defend C5 communities,⁶ (2) areas of miscommunication and misunderstanding within the debate, and (3) the areas of remaining tension that would productively serve as the focus of future discussions. In the concluding section, I will propose a set of seven affirmations that I believe advocates and critics alike should agree to in making common cause in the Muslim world.

2 Basic Positions on the Debate

As with any debate and methodology, practitioners and theoreticians vary considerably. Evaluating every missionary's methodology and theory is certainly impossible. Even the public journal discussions on the issue of Muslim contextualization are numerous, far more than anyone can reasonably keep up with. That said, a sampling from key proponents of the contextualization position ex-

⁴ Bourne (2009), p. 58.

⁵ Prior to IJFM 24:1, (Winter 2007), the journal was named *International Journal of Frontier Missions*.

⁶ Other topics tangentially related to this debate are the "Common Word" inter-faith discussions and the "Common Ground" method of evangelism (Volf, 2011, Chapter 1). This paper addresses none of the former topic and only touches on the Common Ground movement through one writer's critique of a conference they hosted (Smith, 2009). Common Ground, however, provided no articles in the journals surveyed and so its positions may or may not be reflected by the Insider advocates presented.

plained below allows us to outline some of the key positions on the debate.

In John Travis's initial article, he describes six different examples of "Christ-centered communities". One end of the scale (C1) indicates foreign-culture, foreign language expressions of Christ-centered communities. On the other end of the scale, secret believers are listed as C6 believers. C6 believers are often silent about their faith and may not gather with other believers. C2 to C5, however, represents the various ways of relating to foreign culture and religious identity. The debates have roared over the distinctions between C4 and C5 primarily, though some writers lean more heavily towards a C3 approach. C3, in short-hand, indicates a community that has a clear "Christian" identity and utilizes forms that would be seen as distinctly "Christian." C4 entails what outsiders might perceive as "Muslim" forms, but with members who self-identify not as "Muslims" but as some newly termed community, such as "Jesus followers." C5 communities, however, self-identify as "Muslims" and keep previously- practiced Muslim rituals that they do not feel violate their faithfulness to Jesus.

John Travis defines the scenario in this way:

Community of Muslims who follow Jesus yet remain culturally and officially Muslim. 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. Unsaved Muslims may see C5 believers as theologically deviant and may eventually expel them from the community of Islam. C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and think of themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.⁷

Significant aspects of Travis's C5 definition are that the believers "remain culturally and officially Muslim". They are socially connected to their Muslim community, and yet they reject or reinter-

⁷ Quoted in Richard (2009), p. 176.

pret incompatible aspects of Islamic theology. The believers meet together and also share about their faith with unbelieving family members. Finally, they can face the threat of expulsion from their community.

Travis's term "C5" has come to be used interchangeably with a second term, "Insider Movement" (IM). Some debate over this loose use of terms continues.⁸ Yet, because most articles use the terms interchangeably, I will define them both. Two definitions of this term have been published recently.

In one case, Rebecca Lewis, former professor of History and Islamics at William Carey International University, explains an "insider movement" in this way:

An insider movement is any movement to faith in Christ where the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks, and where believing families, as valid expressions of faith in Christ, remain inside their socio-religious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.⁹

Distinctive about Lewis' definition is the emphasis on the gospel's flow "through pre-existing communities and social networks." She also points out that the members retain "their identity as members of that community". Lewis has argued that an "insider movement" can actually happen anywhere along the "C-scale".¹⁰ If the community identity is retained, then one may have other identities or forms, even foreign ones, and still be called an "insider". Finally, Lewis also notes that the believers are to live "under the lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible".

A second definition of "insider movement" comes from Kevin Higgins, Executive Director of *Global Teams* and another frequent contributor on the contextualization debates. In a 2009 article on the issue he defines it this way:

⁸Insider advocates, for instance, have recently begun calling these movements "Jesus Movements" instead of "Insider Movements" (Wood, 2011:4). This paper retains the former term.

⁹ Quoted in Richard (2009), p. 176; cf. Lewis (2007).

¹⁰ Lewis (2007), p.76; cf. Richard (2009), p. 177.

A growing number of families, individuals, clans, and/or friendship-webs becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture. This faithful discipleship will express itself in culturally appropriate communities of believers who will also continue to live within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and through His people will also begin to transform His people and their culture, religious life, and world-view.¹¹

With Lewis, Higgins emphasizes social networks (“webs”) and faithful discipleship of Jesus “within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture.” He spells out further how this looks in terms of the believers’ transformation by the Spirit through the Scriptures.

All of the statements above are descriptive, not prescriptive. Yet, all of those above would also advocate for these examples to be a legitimate option for new believers in new communities of Gospel witness.

As seen in the above, different proponents of IM/C5 offer different points of emphasis. The variety of foci can often make the debates particularly difficult to follow and lead to some confused discussions. That said, they generally share these primary convictions:

- 1) Social networks are the primary focus of Gospel expansion. Efforts to avoid social extraction are important.
- 2) Believers retain a community identity as “Muslims.”
- 3) Believers talk about their faith.
- 4) Believers live in submission to Jesus as Lord and to the Old and New Testament as God’s authority over them.
- 5) Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, believers engage in the difficult process of discerning what from their past should be retained, reinterpreted, and abandoned.

The more controversial elements of Muslim contextualization, particularly the recitation of the Qur’an and the Muslim confession,

¹¹ Higgins (2009a), p. 75.

are not listed because these practices are not stated prescriptions of a C5 approach.

In addition to the above points, some IM proponents argue that Insider Movements can be encouraged by having Muslim-idiom translations of the Old and New Testament available to Muslim communities. Rick Brown and John Travis, for instance, have argued that accurate and clear translations of key terms, such as “Son of God”, need to be evaluated so that a greater number of Muslims can access the Scriptures within their communities.¹²

Critics of the above approach vary as well. In particular, they vary in experience, expertise, and conviction. That said, the level of one’s criticism does not depend on missiological training or experience in the Muslim world. Those with little experience and much can equally criticize the approach; likewise, academic credentials stack up equally on both sides of the debate. There remains a general spectrum, however, among the critics that ranges from absolute rejection to critical engagement. An example of the former, recently published in SFM, is Basil Grafas’s description of a conference held to critique the insider approach. He writes, after surveying the lecture of Roger Dixon,

If Islam is a false religion, then it is not characterized fundamentally by truth, however imperfectly, but by fallenness. That being the case, immersing people, whether they are national insiders or missionary workers, to false religion reaps terrible consequences for them. This darkness is not neutral. It has the characteristics of acid or poison, eating away and contaminating the soul. As for me, this address did more than any other to alter my own perspective of the matter. This can never be a simple matter of tactics and approaches; a matter of wisdom and personal preference with regard to missiological approaches. Rather, it is the unconscionable exposure of human beings to a world of evil.¹³

On the other hand, some writers probably agree more than disagree and yet feel the dangers of syncretism more intensely than IM

¹² Brown (2005a); Brown (2005b); Travis (2006).

¹³ Grafas (2010), p. 936.

advocates. With this, they offer cautions. Phil Parshall writes in his article, “Lifting the Fatwa”,

I do not want to end my life (now sixty-five years into it) known as a heresy hunter. Yes, I will continue (with greater sensitivity, I trust) to voice my concerns. But if I am to err toward imbalance, I want it to be on the side of love, affirmation and lifting up my colleagues as better than myself. Even at this late stage in life, I am not prepared to profess personal infallibility. As for who is right or wrong, and to what degree, let us lean heavily on the Judge of our hearts.¹⁴

In the spirit of Parshall’s gentle admonition, we turn to different aspects of the debate.

3 Points of Confusion

In the following, we will seek to outline areas in which miscommunication over central concepts are being debated. Each section is headed with the primary accusation against IM proponents. In every case, IM proponents explicitly deny the accusation.

3.1 C5 means Christian missionaries saying they are Muslims

One of the most basic confusions in the debate has persisted since Parshall’s first critique until this past year: proponents advocate Western missionaries “becoming Muslim” in order to win Muslims. Throughout Parshall’s initial article, he shows particular concern, not for transitioning believers, but for missionaries who adapt a Muslim identity and enact Muslim rituals. Dick Brogden, in 2010, similarly cites a couple he knows acting “as Muslims” and eventually abandoning their belief in Jesus’ divinity.¹⁵

These writers express imply that the C5 advocates are on a “slippery slope”. For example, missionaries relate sympathetically to Islam. They begin to adopt Muslim forms and identity in order to win Muslims. In the end, however, they abandon the distinctives of their faith in Christ. This type of process may happen, but it is not being advocated by the authors surveyed. In response to this accusation, Rebecca Lewis notes, “It is important to clarify no in-

¹⁴ Parshall (2004), p. 16.

¹⁵ Brogden (2010), p.37.

sider movement that I know of involves any Western Christians becoming Muslims, nor has ever recommended such practices.”¹⁶

Even John and Anna Travis describe themselves as using a “C4 lifestyle” to help birth a “C5 movement”.¹⁷ Put another way, they personally have used some Muslim forms but have not self-identified as Muslims.

Though this charge persists in the debates, it should be an area of common ground. Advocates and critics both agree that the truth about Jesus is miscommunicated when a Christian-background believer says he has become a Muslim. Muslims generally interpret this as a complete rejection of Christian truth claims.

Though unpublished, some practitioners have distinguished the issues of the identity and form that the missionary adopts from the identity and forms that a native community of believers adopts. Some have called the former the “W-scale”, referring to “workers.” The scale parallels the C-Scale with, for example, W-3 referring to self-identification as “Christian” and usage of foreign Christian forms, W-4 involving a new term for self-identification and W-5 referring to a foreign believer adopting a “Muslim” identity. Though some may advocate the latter, their positions are not represented in any of the literature surveyed.

3.2 C5 is about avoiding the persecution Jesus promised

Critics also charge that the insider approach and insider movements are simply a creative, but biblically unfaithful, means of avoiding persecution. This charge can take multiple forms. Insiders are accused of deception and refusal to identify with Jesus. They are accused of hiding their fundamental convictions. The general impetus of the charge is the same, however: C5 believers are one thing but they pretend to be another. They do this as an ill-advised effort at evangelism or as a way of avoiding biblically-sanctioned persecution. With reference to an insider group in Bangladesh, Edward

¹⁶ See Lewis’ running commentary in Brogden (2010), p.37.

¹⁷ Travis & Travis (2005).

Ayub judges, “The avoidance of persecution and repression is the principal logic driving this group.”¹⁸

The debate actually centers on whether or not types of persecution can and should be separated. Nik Ripkin, who works in the Muslim world and has done extensive research on persecution of believers, notes that premature persecution usually serves to prevent the Gospel from expansion. He distinguishes, then, between persecution brought onto believers because of their association with foreigners and persecution that is ascribed particularly to their faith in Jesus.¹⁹ Both happen, and the latter, according to Ripkin, is inevitable.²⁰ Though the lines are certainly fuzzy, IM proponents, apparently, wish to avoid the former kind of persecution, not the latter. Critics may argue that the two cannot be distinguished, but that is a distinct debate. No IM advocate surveyed indicated that persecution should be completely avoided nor that it was possible for a disciple of Jesus.

An example of an advocate’s perspective on the issue comes from Rick Brown’s story of a Muslim imam who put his faith in Jesus and started to preach about Christ at his mosque. The imam read from the Old and New Testament and put his faith in Jesus. He then started teaching from the Scriptures rather openly, including teachings on Jesus’ atoning death for sins and subsequent resurrection. His congregation accepted it. The imam was under local scrutiny but still accepted. He went so far as to put a cross up in his mosque. But then, one day, a guest found a book produced by a known Christian publisher in his house and denounced him. The imam was chased out of town and not allowed to return. Brown concludes,

So you see, he could preach the Bible, he could preach Christ, he could put a cross on his mosque, but he could not have a link to a traditional

¹⁸ Ayub (2009), p.28; cf. Span (2009), pp.134-135

¹⁹ Unpublished interview, 2007.

²⁰ Ripkin provides an example from Somalia. 1991, there were 150 known believers in Somalia. By 1997, after some years of war and intentional persecution, only four remained. According to Ripkin’s research, however, the believers were killed *not for sharing with others about Christ*, but because of their association with foreigners in employment, public worship, and reading materials. Ripkin himself does not make statements for or against a C5/IM approach.

Christian mission, because of all of the geopolitical things that that implies, all of the associations with ethnic and global rivalries.²¹

Insider believers describe experiences of persecution. The biography of Mazhar Mallouhi, *Pilgrim of Christ on the Muslim Road*, who describes himself as a “Muslim follower of Jesus”, details Mallouhi’s experience of severe persecution for his faith. Mazhar has not avoided all suffering by calling himself a “Muslim”. Abdul Asad, a Christian worker among Muslims, points out that as a group of believers grows in community, it becomes increasingly inevitable that they will face community opposition.²² Even a critic such as Jay Smith admits that IM proponents deny this charge of persecution avoidance.²³

Mallouhi’s example pushes this issue even further. If Mazhar Mallouhi has not avoided persecution by calling himself a “Muslim”, why does he retain this identity? His auto-biographical statements on the issue help to shed more light into an area of anthropological complexity, namely, how socio-religious identity relates to one’s own self understanding. Mallouhi writes concerning his own relationship to Islam:

I was born into a confessional home. Islam is the blanket with which my mother wrapped me up when she nursed me and sang to me and prayed over me. I imbibed aspects of Islam with my mother’s milk. I inherited Islam from my parents and it was the cradle which held me until I found Christ. Islam is my mother.²⁴

Mallouhi was not an Islamic fundamentalist, but a poet and conscripted soldier who rejected his Islamic training and found Jesus in the midst of his own drunkenness.²⁵ But Mallouhi feels Muslim, even after 40 years of following Jesus. This aspect of personal dynamic is important in distinguishing between “deception” and honest attempts to create new sociological paradigms.

²¹ Richard (2009), p. 179.

²² Asad (2009), p. 145; cf. Corwin et al. (2007), p.13.

²³ Smith (2009), p. 45.

²⁴ Mallouhi (2009), p. 8.

²⁵ Chandler (2007).

So, for instance, when Ayub accuses a group of believers in Bangladesh of hiding the fact that they have become “Isai” (the Bangali term for “Christians”), he may be referring to C6 believers (who are hiding their faith in Jesus) or he may be describing a sociological phenomenon with which he is personally uncomfortable.²⁶ In other words, these believers may truly separate in their minds and hearts faith in Jesus with social categories such as “Christian”. They do not see themselves as part of the social group of ethnic Christians in their communities (to what degree they should will be discussed in the next section).

The subtle distinction between “identity” and “allegiance” contributes to this confusion. Though all do not agree that a wedge can be driven between these two concepts, IM proponents repeatedly assert that new believers should have ultimate allegiance to Jesus as Lord. This position is clear in the definitions provided above, but also in further statements. For instance, John and Anna Travis cite Fuller Seminary professor Charles Kraft, “With respect to allegiance, we must maintain that people are saved or lost on the basis of whether or not their primary commitment is to the true God in Christ.”²⁷ Fundamentally, this argument assumes that external religious identities can be separated from fundamental heart allegiances. Kraft has advocated this distinction for decades. In this respect, a theology of “religions” is under dispute, as we will note in the next section.

3.3 Like the Emergent Church, IM waters down doctrine and/or redefines orthodoxy to the extent of subsuming orthodox Christian doctrine to orthodox Islamic doctrine

In multiple articles, critics accuse IM of borrowing from, depending on, or being influenced by the Emergent Church.²⁸ Nikides, for instance, provides a half-page quotation of Brian McLaren’s *Generous Orthodoxy* that includes McLaren’s controversial advocacy of inclusivism. He then ascribes these positions to Kevin Higgins. Higgins

²⁶ Ayub (2009), p. 27.

²⁷ Travis & Travis (2005).

²⁸ Smith (2009), p. 35; Nikides (2009), p. 95; Piper et al., (2006), p. 16; Bourne (2009), p. 69; Span (2009).

flatly rejects the association and notes he has never even read any books by McLaren.²⁹ Critiques of the emergent church in the midst of Muslim contextualization debates muddy the waters. Higgins cannot be expected to defend the ideas of Brian McLaren or Rob Bell as he tries to explain his exclusivist views on Insider Movements.³⁰ The real tie between the Emergent camp and Muslim contextualization is that both groups are trying to ask similar questions, “How do we reach a resistant sector of the global society with the Gospel? Is it perhaps our methods that are flawed?” Assuming, however, that both groups reach the same conclusion is specious logic.

The more fundamental charge, and the reason the association arises, is because insider proponents are seen as adapting the Gospel to the Muslim context, rather than appropriately contextualizing it. For instance, Roger Dixon, commenting on a blog post, accuses IM proponents of “adjust[ing] the gospel to an [irreconcilable] religious structure.”³¹

The issue of incompatible religious structures will arise again in the next section. For now, it should be noted here that Travis, Lewis, Brown, and Higgins see insider believers as submitting to Christ’s lordship in the Gospel. They are advocating a right understanding of the Gospel’s meaning within the Muslim context. Every article surveyed in this paper advocates teaching the Scriptures, discipling people away from false allegiances, and leading believers into full transformation under the lordship of Jesus. Application of these aims may differ significantly, but the charge that insider proponents accept the subordination of biblical convictions to Islamic teaching is misplaced.³²

²⁹ Higgins (2009b), p. 62.

³⁰ Higgins (2009b), p.75. Higgins explains clearly that he believes conscious faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation, an exclusivist theological position by most accounts (2009a).

³¹ Esler (2010).

³² Travis (1998b) outlines seven guidelines to avoid syncretism. Asad (2009) provides his own guidelines as well (pp. 155-156).

3.4 IM does not encourage believers to gather as a “Church”

A fourth misunderstanding seems to have its roots in linguistic confusion. In Travis’s initial description of C5 movements, he noted that some C5 believers attend the mosque. By logical extension, some presumed that the believers only went to the mosque and did not meet for specifically Christ-centered fellowship. Timothy Tennent infers, for instance, that the C5 approach is primarily individualistic without any corporate gatherings.³³ Nikides argues that C5 believers do not baptize or practice the Lord’s Supper.³⁴ Higgins flatly denies that C5 believers ignore baptism and the Lord’s Supper³⁵ and the statements at the beginning of this paper showed that gathering of believers through the local family networks was crucial to insider thinking. Some significant conflicts exist over how these new gatherings of believers should be associated with the global church and whether or not “extraction” is a fundamental part of discipleship.³⁶ Insofar as “doing church” refers to multiple believers gathering for prayer, worship, and reading of the Christian Scriptures, insider proponents clearly advocate it and see it happening.

3.5 All Muslims believe and practice the same thing, so to be an Insider is to believe and pPractice those same things.

A number of the critics of C-5 assume that identifying as a “Muslim” requires adherence to x, y, and z. Jeff Morton, adjunct professor at Biola University, implies that it means saying Mohamed is a prophet of God 17 times a day.³⁷ Nikides and Smith presume that it cannot include belief in the crucifixion.³⁸ Assumed here is that all Muslims adhere to a certain set of doctrines and universally uphold a certain set of practices. Yet anthropologists and proponents of an insider approach alike have demonstrated that there is a great diver-

³³ Tennent (2006), pp. 110–112.

³⁴ Nikides (2009), p. 97–98.

³⁵ Higgins (2009b), p.67; cf. Travis (1998b).

³⁶ See Smith (2009), pp. 25–26.

³⁷ Morton (2011).

³⁸ Nikides (2009), p. 100; Smith (2009), p. 34.

sity in Islamic thinking and aberrant views exist within “Islam.”³⁹ Indeed, some atheists continue to call themselves Muslim.⁴⁰

Dixon’s article pits Christianity and Islam in fundamental opposition to one another because he implies that it is impossible for a person calling himself “Muslim” to have an aberrant theology with respect to the rest of his community. If one understands all Muslims as having a certain set of unchangeable convictions, including a denial of Jesus’ crucifixion, then it is impossible that a true follower of Jesus could be a Muslim. But if variation is possible, especially in light of education, economic, urban or rural context, social status, and national context, then it is difficult to assign universal convictions or practices to all Muslims and by implication, all insiders.

Insiders, according to their advocates, uphold particularly Christian beliefs that the majority of Muslims do not believe, such as faith in Jesus’ deity and the crucifixion.⁴¹ Additionally, they vary in their utilization of Muslim rituals. Brother Yusuf, a self-professed Muslim follower of Jesus, says, “Some people in our movement say the *shahada* and some do not; some of them pray in mosques and some do not (and never did). This is an individual choice.”⁴² More nuance and field study is required to outline what Muslims actually do, say, and believe. Blanket statements about Muslims and insider believers fail to recognize the great variance between communities and contexts.

3.6 Only one approach is necessary.

Though some critics perceive the C-5 model is a one-size-fits-all approach to Muslim ministry,⁴³ none of the articles surveyed for this paper state this. Indeed, writers like the Travises, Higgins, Lewis, and Brown explicitly deny that C-5 is the only valid or successful

³⁹ Sufism is a prime example, Asad (2009); cf. Higgins (2009 b), pp. 72-73; Hassan (2007); Marranci (2009).

⁴⁰ Sultan (2010).

⁴¹ Higgins (2009b), pp. 72-73.

⁴² Corwin (2007), p. 13; cf. Travis & Travis (2005).

⁴³ Corwin et al. (2007).

approach in the Muslim world.⁴⁴ Travis says clearly, “If advocates of insider movements have given the impression that this is the only way to reach Muslims, this is wrong.”⁴⁵ Massey might be legitimately accused of such an opinion in his criticism of C-4 identities, but this can only be inferred from his article on the issue.⁴⁶

Anecdotally, however, I have heard practitioners express concern that IM advocates claim others’ practices are instinctively extractionsist and out-dated, thus communicating an attitude of dismissal and negation towards past methods. In private conversations, some have expressed that others negated their twenty years of ministry because they had not followed insider principles. We will address this issue further in the section on the implications of this paper.

In contrast, some of those critiquing C-5 ministries consider them outside the purview of legitimate approaches. Additionally, they point to the success of the C4 model as an indication that the syncretistic risks of C5 are unnecessary.⁴⁷ Finally, others charge that many Muslim converts do not want to remain insiders,⁴⁸ so the Western insider proponents are forcing an insider approach by financial and colonialistic pressures.⁴⁹ Rick Brown responds at length to this point,

C5 is not the only approach or even the ideal approach. In some families and communities there is tolerance of Muslims moving to C4 and C3, and that is probably an appropriate thing for them to do. For many Iranians the Messianic Muslim option is not appealing, because they are disaffected with their Muslim identity and want a different one. In many sub-Saharan countries in which the cultures are only superficially Muslim, there is little Muslim identity. There is subsequently more freedom and more acceptance of conversion, and it is reported that large numbers of “Muslims” convert each year to a Christian identity, presumably C3. And in any community there are some binary thinkers

⁴⁴ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 14; Higgins (2006), p. 121; Travis, Travis & Parshall (2008).

⁴⁵ Corwin et al. (2007), p.14.

⁴⁶ Massey (2004).

⁴⁷ Madany (2009); Tennent (2006), p. 113.

⁴⁸ Madany (2009).

⁴⁹ Ayub (2009), p.24; Phil (2009), p. 118.

for whom the C4 and C5 positions are too complicated to handle, unless there is a mature fellowship to which they can assimilate. But in communities where renunciation of one's Muslim identity leads to execution or expulsion, it is hard to see how the C4 or C3 approaches can lead to sustained church-planting movements.⁵⁰

Brown makes clear not only that multiple approaches are possible, but that multiple approaches are bearing fruit in the Muslim world.

3.7 IM advocates manipulative language in order to sneak in Muslim accommodation and undermine Christian orthodoxy

Some critics of insider principles display an underlying suspicion towards fellow believers. These accusations pertain particularly to the motives and intentions of IM advocates. John Span, for instance, provides a critique of Abdul Asad's article in the December, 2009 edition of SFM. He writes, "As much as Abdul Asad's questions seem to be innocuous, they are used strategically to disarm the reader. They are positioned to set the reader up to accept the next dogmatic statement that comes after the question."⁵¹ Ironically, Asad's article is one of the more moderate positions among those defending insider movements, largely affirming, with Timothy Tennent, that it is appropriate as a transitional, rather than long-term, model of contextualization.

Other statements indicated that insider advocates intentionally compromise biblical teaching for the sake of Muslim converts. Dixon writes concerning the translation products IM proponents sponsor,

These new translations reinterpret the person and work of Jesus in various ways so that members of other religions do not need to assent to the full meaning of the person and work of Jesus. The Trinitarian theology of Jesus as Son of God and Lord of life is minimized so that it does not become a stumbling block to people of other faiths.⁵²

⁵⁰ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 14.

⁵¹ Span (2009), p. 137.

⁵² Dixon (2009), p. 18.

If such charges were true, they would be of grievous concern. But Brown and others flatly deny that the translation projects they promote have such an intent.⁵³ Are the charges against other, unpublished proponents? The answer is not clear. It may be, for instance, that the public statements about IM are different than the private opinions of its proponents. Jay Smith indicates such suspicion in his assessment of a “Common Ground” conference in Atlanta. He describes the presenters as “moving the goalposts” by stating one thing during the conference and then moderating their statements for publication.⁵⁴ This is possible, but the charge proves difficult to assess.

4 Areas of remaining tension and discussion

Putting aside these issues, we turn now to what appear to be substantive debates on the issue of Muslim contextualization. As this article aims not to solve the debate but narrow its focus, each section will be opened with the central question being disputed. Necessarily, critics and proponents do not dispute all of these issues. Issues under greater dispute, however, have been listed towards the end.

4.1 Can meaning and form be separated from one another? Moreover, is it appropriate and necessary to translate words and forms based on “meaning units” (dynamic equivalency) rather than “word-for-word” or “form-for-form” conversion of terms?

This question mainly applies to translation, but since Kraft⁵⁵ and Walls⁵⁶ introduced the “idea of translation” to the contextualization process, it impacts one’s position on the C-scale. If one rejects the idea that meanings must be explained and lived out primarily through previously existing forms (be they language or rituals), then an insider approach to ministry will offend one’s sense of Christianity.

⁵³ Al Kalima (2009) ; Brown, Penny & Gray (2009).

⁵⁴ Smith (2009), p. 28.

⁵⁵ Kraft (2005).

⁵⁶ Walls (1996).

Edward Ayub, a Bangladeshi believer of a Muslim background, finds the insider believers in his country to be deeply offensive. He writes, “They fast, but their oaths and methods are different. They sacrifice, but with a purpose different from what Muslims suppose. Their religious activities make them look like Muslims, but in private they claim that they are different theologically.”⁵⁷ Ayub considers it deceitful to utilize other religious forms and inject them with new Christ-centered meaning. The form, in his view, cannot be separated from the locally-ascribed meaning.

Roger Dixon takes aim particularly at the “dynamic equivalent” philosophy of translation. Though Dixon leaves open the possibility that the approach is acceptable, he is concerned that it allows too much personal interpretation to creep into the text.⁵⁸ Dixon’s concerns are valid. In particular, debate over key terms like Jesus as the “Son of God” prove crucial and complex. But the principle of dynamic equivalency for translators and church-planters is largely within mainstream evangelical thinking. In his own critique of non-filial translations of the terms “Father” and “Son”, Scott Horrell, a professor of Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, recognizes this point:

Three decades of discussion follow with significant changes in translation methodology that are widely affirmed by Bible translators around the world. Two principles are embraced unanimously: 1) accuracy to the meaning of the text, rather than mere duplication of lexical equivalents, and 2) clarity of meaning or naturalness of expression within a given dialect (termed “communicativeness”). Rick Brown and Martin Parsons are well known for their work regarding the contextualized translation of Sonship passages in different Muslim idioms. Numerous other writers also address Christian and Islamic understandings of Jesus. Seeking to safeguard traditional testimony that the “Son of God” is “God the Son”, Roger Dixon, David Abernathy, and others have recently raised counter-arguments that call word-for-word translation of Son-of-God texts. Among published works, the academic weight is de-

⁵⁷ Ayub (2009), p. 26; cf. Smith (2009), pp. 36-37.

⁵⁸ Dixon (2009), p. 15.

cidedly on the side of translation specialists and current translation theory.⁵⁹

The danger is painting insider proponents and translators as being outside of the mainstream, when, on this issue, their theoretical basis is largely inside it.⁶⁰ Application of those principles, which touch more on subsequent questions, is admittedly up for debate.

Of course, “mainstream” does not mean “right”. Hence, this issue has been placed in the “disputed” section of the paper in the hopes that critics would make their case more clearly in addressing dominant translation and missiological thinking.⁶¹

4.2 Are meaning-based translations that seek alternative terms from those that have historically offended and distracted Muslim audiences able to maintain accuracy and faithfulness to the intended-meanings of the text?

Muslim contextualization is coming into the public purview over the issue of Bible translation. World Magazine, the largest evangelical bi-weekly in the United States, and Christianity Today both featured articles on the issue in the last few months.⁶² On the whole, the journalists are to be commended for accurately detailing some of the tensions. And yet, highly technical translation issues prove difficult to debate among large, uninformed audiences. One Bible translator and linguist noted to the author, “When the question is ‘Son of God’ vs. not ‘Son of God,’ the question sounds terrible and skews the complex translation process of finding appropriate terms”.⁶³

The central question is whether or not some terms leave out essential meanings in their efforts to avoid inaccuracy. Muslims largely associate sex with the biological term son, a meaning that is foreign to the New Testament’s declaration of Jesus as the “Son of

⁵⁹ Horrell (2010), pp. 640–642.

⁶⁰ Cf. Higgins (2009b), p. 84.

⁶¹ Cf. Smith (2009), p. 30. Smith likewise sees dynamic equivalency as a legitimate method, but he then accuses Muslim-idiom translators of “changing the text.” They respond to this in a subsequent article, Al Kalima (2009).

⁶² Belz (2011); Hansen (2011).

⁶³ Personal communication, May 5 2011.

God.” Translators do not want to encourage an inaccurate understanding among Muslim audiences. Moreover, Brown and others point out that “Son of God” serves primarily as a Messianic title in the Old and New Testament, though it has come to have more divine connotations for Westerners since the Nicene Creed. In light of this, he argues that translators should pursue alternative but accurate ways to communicate the original meaning of the term.⁶⁴ He does not believe that the use of an alternative term undermines orthodox evidence of Jesus’ divinity in the New Testament.⁶⁵

Critics, however, argue that non-filial translations of “son” are simply unable to carry the necessary theological weight of the original terms.⁶⁶ Non-filial terms undercut the intimate triune relationship between God the Father and God the Son and so, even if the term offends, it should be retained. No other term will do. The complexity of this debate is sure to tax theologians, exegetes, linguists, and missiologists to their utmost.

4.3 Are there significant numbers of true followers of Jesus who continue to identify themselves as Muslims? Is it important that Western outsiders verify and evaluate this?

One of the fundamental arguments for insider movements among Muslims is that they exist.⁶⁷ Their very occurrence sparks an Acts 15-kind of consultation: If God is doing this kind of work in the world, should we hinder it or encourage it? Insider advocates argue that we should learn from what God is doing in the world, search the Scriptures in light of them (as James did, Acts 15:9-21), and join with God in this mission.

Some critics, however, question the numbers and particularly whether or not they are inspired by the Holy Spirit or just Western money. Since an essential premise of the insider approach, however, is that these movements are happening and have often started apart

⁶⁴ Brown (2005a).

⁶⁵ Brown et al. (2009), pp. 92-93.

⁶⁶ Horrell (2010), pp. 666i-666j; Dixon (2007).

⁶⁷ Travis & Travis (2005); Corwin et al. (2007); Massey (2000); Massey (2004).

from foreign influence, the question is legitimate. If they are fabricated or exaggerated, then the argument for them falls apart.⁶⁸

But the situation is more complicated than just taking an accurate census. Travis, for instance, raises two issues. On the one hand, it is simply hard to get accurate information on these movements.⁶⁹ One of the reasons these movements exist at all is because they often exist in highly xenophobic societies that resist foreign interference. Gathering statistics in such a context causes significant security risks to believers. Any information gathered may not be accessible to the general public.

Travis's second point may be the more pressing one. He questions to what degree Western outsiders should be privileged to judge and critique these movements. Rebecca Lewis notes, for instance, that Westerners like to set themselves up as "watch dogs" against syncretism, but often remain blind to their own forms of it.⁷⁰ In a world of mass media, Westerners are prone to think they should be privy to all information. Hence, while some critics complain that they cannot access direct information about the movements,⁷¹ it is unlikely that the information will soon become widely available.

The nature of the situation ensures that only some people will be privileged enough to see and judge what exactly is going on in these communities. Indeed, the outsiders with access are likely to be the ones who have gained trust through their sympathy to the movements.⁷² Still, as outsiders, we need to discuss specifically who can and should evaluate these movements.

4.4 Is following Jesus a "religion"? If so or if not, what does this mean for our understanding of a religion such as "Islam"?

Most insider proponents build their understanding of insider movements on the fundamental assumption that Christianity is not first and foremost a "religion". The Travises make this explicit

⁶⁸ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 13; Smith (2009), pp. 50-51.

⁶⁹ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 24.

⁷⁰ See Lewis' running commentary in Brogden (2010), p. 36.

⁷¹ Dixon (2007), p. 7; Corwin et al. (2007), p. 13.

⁷² Corwin et al. (2007), p. 17.

within their list of ten premises about insider movements. Their first three premises are:

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 a new religion.⁷³

Though each writer has his or her own nuance to this point, each assumes that culture and religion in Muslim societies intertwine in such a way to make it nearly impossible to separate them.⁷⁴ More importantly, the gospel of Jesus Christ is intended to transform people from the inside out by means of the Holy Spirit, not primarily by the imposition of external cultural or "religious" standards.

Not all agree on this construction of the facts. Phil Bourne, for instance, accurately states the position of insider advocates by noting, "[Religion for them] is only a set of rituals/cultural activities and in practicing them one is not giving assent to another 'Lord'." But then he adds, "Put this way, such activity does not seem to square with the perspective of scripture, which is hostile to any other organized religion that denies the Lordship of YHWH alone".⁷⁵

Jeff Morton sees this as one of the more crucial issues informing one's perspective on insider movements. He diagrams two axes that tend to define the debate. One axis line has "kerygmaticism" and "pragmatism" at each pole. The former indicates total unconcern for results and singular focus on the "proclamation of the Gospel" without regard for the listener's understanding. "Pragmatism" indicates over-concern for results even at the expense of biblical faithfulness. Morton notes repeatedly that he does not expect there to be missionaries at either extreme. On the other axis, and to the point of this discussion, is "pessimism" and "optimism". Each pole

⁷³ Travis & Travis (2005).

⁷⁴ Cf. Higgins (2009a), pp. 81-88.

⁷⁵ Bourne (2009), p.61.

indicates one's perspective on other religions. Pessimists tend to see Islam as having no intrinsic value and in need of complete dismissal by the follower of Christ. Optimists see Islam, or elements of it, as redeemable or at least having elements that might point one to truth in their search for God. Morton argues that, on the whole, IM proponents tend to be more pragmatic and optimistic in their view of Muslim contextualization, while critics (whom he calls those with an "Historical Approach") tend to be more kerygmatic and pessimistic about Islam (2011; cf. Higgins, 2006, 120).⁷⁶

Morton's graph touches on the tendencies of the debate. Higgins, for instance, closes his article, "Inside What?" with the statement, "What is truly at the heart of the insider movement paradigm is the God Who is at work directly among the nations, including their religions, to make in each a people for Himself."⁷⁷ Even as Higgins affirms that conscious faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation, he holds that God uses elements of all religions to lead someone to that faith. This position resembles Don Richardson's claims in 1981 that all cultures hold redemptive-analogies which cross cultural workers should tap into in explaining the Gospel. Islam, Higgins indicates, also holds these redemptive elements.

Morton, on the other hand, admits there may be "bridgeable" elements in Islam but rejects an inferred notion that Islam may be redeemable. He writes,

The Historical practitioner understands the dark and Satanic nature of Islam; that it has a hold on its adherents; that there is a spiritual battle that must be waged in order to bring people out of Islam. And if all this is true about Islam, how can we ask new believers to "remain" in it?⁷⁸

It is not clear, however, that all IM practitioners believe Islam is "redeemable". In a comment posted in response to Morton's internet article, Rebecca Lewis notes,

⁷⁶ Morton (2011); cf. Higgins (2006), p. 120.

⁷⁷ Higgins (2009b), p. 91.

⁷⁸ Morton (2011).

Let me make clear (since you interpret my position) that I think Islam is every bit as demonic as any worldview or religion that promises salvation apart from Christ..

I take the position I do out of kerygmatic concerns, not pragmatic, and out of pessimism about Islam but a great optimism about the power of the Gospel to bring light, whether in cannibalistic tribes, Christopagan religions, the Greek pantheon, or our own mammon-steeped American culture (without having to remove believers from their families or community context).⁷⁹

Lewis criticizes false religion and insists that God redeems people and communities, not religions. With this, she emphasizes that believers should be encouraged to stay within their social networks rather than be extracted into new aggregate groups that break all previous ties.⁸⁰

This question requires significant clarification of terms. Some IM proponents likely sympathize with and appreciate Islam more than others. Is anyone claiming, however, that Islam as a religion can be redeemed? If so, what do they mean by the term “redeemed”? Is the focus solely on communities and individuals in regards to their social identity? Further discussion is needed.

4.5 What are the elements of genuine Christ-centered discipleship? What role do tradition, historical Christian confessions, foreign missionaries, and the Holy Spirit’s leading have in bringing someone into genuine conformity to Christ-likeness?

Another central debate in the insider discussion is the nature of discipleship. One might stereotype insider proponents as encouraging a “hands-off” approach to discipleship while critics are painted as imposing Western paradigms on new believers. Both may have some truth in it, but largely depend on the practitioner and his or her individual style and personality.

Indeed, paradigms are probably shattered as each individual case is examined. Higgins, for instance, says that he has used ancient creeds in his discipleship of insider believers and expects Muslims who follow Jesus to have their views of Islam, mankind, God and

⁷⁹ Morton (2011); See responses below main article.

⁸⁰ Lewis (2007).

many other topics challenged and transformed in the process.⁸¹ Lewis points out that she's met insider believers who have gone through 10 systematic biblical training sessions with outsiders.⁸²

Yet, there is a sense in the discussion that those advocating an insider approach expect the process of discipleship to be less "head-oriented" according to Western systematic categories, more gradual, and less influenced by foreigners.

Moreover, insider advocates are perhaps more comfortable with the lack of full trinitarian confessionalism among insider believers, though they expect this confession to develop eventually from within the insider paradigm.⁸³ They expect the Holy Spirit to guide the process. The Travises note that insider movements must have a "high reliance on the Spirit and the Word".⁸⁴ Higgins says simply, "I trust God to use His Word to teach and correct His people".⁸⁵

It would be wrong to caricature critics as not relying on the Spirit and the Word. Yet the two groups differ on the timeframe necessary for this process. Jay Smith, for instance, criticizes the Common Ground training for lacking specific instructions on how a believer should view Mohamed and what remaining in his family and religious context look like.⁸⁶ One suspects that insider proponents do not have a quick answer to this question. They indicate that the Spirit will lead the believer towards orthodoxy, whereas Smith implies that proper discipleship will provide a template or paradigm for the new believer to follow. In broad strokes, one group sees extraction as the greater danger to undermining God's long-range work in a community; the other sees false belief to be the greater danger. Getting to the root of how those convictions intersect requires further discussion.

⁸¹ Higgins (2009b), p. 75-77.

⁸² See Lewis' running commentary in Brogden (2010), p. 40.

⁸³ Massey (2004).

⁸⁴ Travis & Travis (2005), p. 409.

⁸⁵ Higgins (2009b), p. 68.

⁸⁶ Smith (2009).

4.6 To what extent does a follower of Jesus need to visibly relate to the global body of Christ and traditional churches in their regional area but outside of their typical community?

In the previous section, we addressed how insider proponents clearly encourage believers to gather as followers of Jesus. They encourage believers to utilize existing social networks, but in this sense they advocate the formation of “churches”.

With this clarification, however, the question lingers about the degree to which insider believers should associate with the global body of Christ and, should there be one, with the geographically proximate church. Critics suggest that for long-term maturity, this should certainly be an aim. Timothy Tennent, president of Asbury Seminary, argues, for instance, “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.”⁸⁷ As previously mentioned, Edward Ayub finds the Bangladeshi insider members to be deeply offensive and even duplicitous for not adopting a Christian identity in their pursuit of Christ.⁸⁸

Ayub’s objections, however, indicate some of the problems at stake in this question. One of the tensions throughout Christian expansion has been “ownership” of Christian tradition and identity. One can legitimately argue that this was a central issue in Acts 15 and Galatians: the judaizing believers wanted to make sure that the new Gentile believers were one of them. Ayub expresses concern that the decisions insider believers make negatively impact Christianity on a broad level:

Are the people who do these things a sect of Islam like Wahabis or Sunni’s, or are they Christians? They never clarify their position. They perform namaz at the mosques. Which surahs do they use? I certainly know that, though they are standing in the namaz with the Muslims, they secretly use different oaths, recitations and surahs... Taking an oath in the name of Christ to worship Allah, reciting surahs

⁸⁷ Tennent (2006), p. 111.

⁸⁸ Ayub (2009)

from the Bible, the Torah and most portions from Psalms, they muddy the water between Christianity and Islam.⁸⁹

Insider believers, then, face major challenges on these issues. As noted earlier, persecution can be triggered, not by professing Christ, but by association with foreigners. Xenophobia dominates portions of the Muslim world and invites accusations of foreign accommodation or greed when one's faith is mentioned. The greater the connection to foreigners, the more a believer's ability to testify first and foremost to Christ may be challenged. Moreover, they face the continual criticism from Christian-identity churches that they have an inferior faith that has failed to reach the maturity level of the other believers.

For now, critics indicate that persecution for the sake of Christ's body, including association with national church believers, might be part and parcel to persecution for Jesus' sake. Phil Bourne asks if Jesus is worth even the cost of ostracism for the believer's association with the broader church⁹⁰

In Hebrews 10, the author commends the Hebrew believers for suffering pain for their association with other believers (vv. 32-34). The text begs the question of the global church and of insider believers? How can love for one another reign in light of the Gospel's expansion and the threat of persecution for our associations?

Most likely, this debate has more to do with the question of "when" not "if". A number of writers, critics included, show a certain level of comfortability with an insider approach as a transitional model.⁹¹ As insider groups gain momentum, they will likely discern for themselves a need to connect with the global body of believers. For now the main question is whether or not this is a necessary sign of their legitimacy and maturity.

4.7 How should Insiders view and talk about Mohamed?

Views of Mohamed are probably the central debate in the insider discussions. Monolithic views of Islam, for instance, are often tied

⁸⁹ Ayub (2009), p. 26.

⁹⁰ Bourne (2009), p. 69.

⁹¹ Tennent (2006); Asad (2009); Parshall (2004); Corwin (2008).

to assumptions about a Muslim's understanding and devotion to Mohamed as God's final prophet.

The central identity marker for a Muslim is his or her recitation of the Muslim creed (*shahada*): "There is no god but Allah, and Mohamed is his prophet". As noted earlier, not all insiders say the creed and context determines whether or not a believer would be required to say it with any regularity. Brown argues, based on conversations with two insider believers, that Muslims are rarely asked to say the creed out loud.⁹² He offers four reasons why an insider believer might say the creed: (1) because he believes Mohamed is a prophet, (2) as a sign of social solidarity without any conviction, (3) as an affirmation of Mohamed's mission to turn the Arabs from idolatry, or (4) as a statement made under duress.⁹³ Brown does not suggest that any of these are optimal, but he, Higgins, and others express flexibility with insider believers sorting these issues out as the Holy Spirit works in them. An example of this process is Brother Yusuf's assessment: "What one believes about Muhammad is of little consequence. Affirming Muhammad does not in fact affirm a body of doctrine."⁹⁴

Critics find this approach deeply troubling. Waterman sympathizes with believers forced to say the creed under duress, but he expresses pastoral concern that stated allegiance to Mohamed will hinder believers from maturing in Christ.⁹⁵ Corwin expects that external participation in the Muslim prayer rituals at the mosque, even if one avoids saying the creed in the process, will communicate full adherence to Islamic doctrine to those around the believer. This leads the believer to either live a life of deceit in relationship to his community (professing belief in Islam by his actions, while not in fact believing in Islam) or syncretism (intertwining false Islamic convictions with Christian ones). In the literature, most critics express continued sympathy for new believers as they initially grow in

⁹² Brown (2007), p. 70.

⁹³ Also see Higgins (2006), p. 121.

⁹⁴ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 12.

⁹⁵ Waterman (2007), pp. 59-60.

their faith and prepare for potential ostracism.⁹⁶ The repeated concern is that Western workers would encourage new believers to repeat the creed against their conscience or fail to move believers towards a rejection of Mohamed's false teachings, particularly that God is not triune and that Jesus was not crucified (Smith, 2009, pp. 33-34).⁹⁷ These are legitimate and weighty concerns. One hopes that as these conversations continue, and particularly more qualitative research is done on insiders' views of Mohamed and the Qur'an, further understanding, clarity, and biblical faithfulness will be achieved.

5 Conclusion

These debates offer a crucial opportunity to apply the Gospel of peace in the midst of deep tension. Neither side seems likely to fully agree with the other. Some indeed may consider the other dangerously heretical. It is hoped, nevertheless, that both on the missiological level and on the local level Paul's admonition to trust another's conscience and accept each brother and sister in spite of tense disagreements would be followed.⁹⁸

On one level, then, practitioners must be prepared to lovingly accept the different approaches on the field. This does not require that everyone remain silent. Constructive debate serves the greater cause of Christ. But as Travis says,

Those called to C5 approaches should be free to carry out their ministries without interference from those called in a non-C5 direction, and those called to non-C5 approaches should enjoy the respect and support of those who are engaged in C5 ministries.⁹⁹

Insider practitioners in particular need to humbly honor the efforts of the many servants of Christ who faithfully preach Christ and yet reject C5 approaches. Even if they consider others' methodologies to be in error, they must affirm the sacrifice, effort, and

⁹⁶ Parshall (1998); Corwin (2007), p. 55; Waterman (2007).

⁹⁷ Smith (2009), pp. 33-34.

⁹⁸ Romans 14-15.

⁹⁹ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 17.

devotion to Christ that these men and women exhibit. Additionally, they must value the cultural insights of those with whom they disagree. Some efforts at mutual affirmation are happening. In January, EMQ published two articles calling for greater patience with one another in both the debate over contextualization and in our views of insider believers (Johnson; de Jong).¹⁰⁰ One can only hope that these types of articles and discussions will increase understanding and unity.

On the local level, however, foreign workers must encourage deeper communication and affirmation between groups. Judgment and criticism from a distance without heart-level fellowship will only reinforce cynicism and hatred. Higgins and Brother Yusuf both indicated that insider believers are willing to foster deeper fellowship and communion for the sake of Christ (Corwin et al., 2007, p. 8; Higgins, 2009a, p. 89).¹⁰¹ Foreign workers should encourage it.

In summary, this debate centers around different ways of assessing risk and exhibiting hope. IM critics see the risk of syncretism in the insider approaches. They feel that allowing the Qur'an and Mohamed to stay in the room, so to speak, through the believer's identification with Islam, undermines Christ's centrality and stints true discipleship. Moreover, they fear that endorsing these movements and incorporating their insights will undermine biblical orthodoxy and build a weak, compromised Church. Yet, with this fear, they remain confident that biblical teaching will bear long-term fruit, whether or not the numbers are high.

Insider proponents believe that true discipleship and allegiance to Jesus are being fostered through the movements. Within the movements and in their promotion of Muslim-idiom translations, they consider the risk of heterodoxy to be worthwhile. C5 groups allow churches to be rooted in the community itself and offer the possibility that more Muslims will have access to the Gospel. Moreover, they fear that closing down these movements and refusing to experiment will compromise their commitment to the Great

¹⁰⁰ Johnson (2011); de Jong (2011).

¹⁰¹ Corwin et al. (2007), p. 8; Higgins (2009a), p. 89.

Commission and salvation by faith alone (not religious identity). Concurrently, they remain confident that the Holy Spirit will sift out falsehood as believers grow nearer to God in Christ. Both groups sense legitimate fears and place their confidence in God. The aim of this paper is to stimulate fruitful conversations so that both fears would be unrealized and both hopes fulfilled.

In conclusion, I offer my own set of commitments that I believe each side of the debate should affirm. These commitments are intended to affirm common concerns about syncretism and extraction, and thereby lay a foundation for meaningful debate. Such a statement may be one way that different groups can focus discussions on real differences, while accepting one another in each one's pursuit of God's kingdom among Muslims.

- 1) We aim to see vibrant, Jesus-loving and Jesus-centered communities that are faithful to the Scriptures and living out their discipleship in their community.
- 2) We aim to see people meaningfully connected to their unbelieving social networks, without denying or diminishing Jesus' centrality, for the sake of the Gospel.
- 3) We aim to see strong, robust, transformed families.
- 4) We aim to live out the biblical calling of teaching, rebuking, warning, and loving new believers as Christ is formed in them.
- 5) We aim to be listeners and learners in the midst of that process; we know we bear cultural baggage and we want as much as possible for the Gospel to be implanted within the new culture and to avoid setting a foreign cultural standard.
- 6) We believe that those who are joined to Jesus will suffer in this fallen world and will suffer especially for their devotion to Jesus. Though some might look to avoid pre-mature persecution, we do not believe persecution can be completely avoided nor that it should be. "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tim 3:16).

- 7) Though our time-frames differ for accomplishing it, we aim to see Jesus-centered communities from Muslim backgrounds connected to and embraced by the global body of Christ.

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“FRAME-BUSTING” AT JACOB’S WELL: ANOTHER LOOK AT JOHN 4

*By Salaam Corniche*¹

1 Introduction

With a certain air of confidence perhaps bordering on bravado, Kevin Higgins makes a summary statement about Jesus’ ministry in Samaria by noting: “And yet Jesus’ ministry results in what I would say is certainly a C-5 movement.”²

A statement of this nature, requires careful scrutiny, and this paper proposes to examine this and similar statements about John 4 by examining the context of the Gospel of John in the canon of Scripture with its heavy dependence on Old Testament themes (e.g. temple, vine, serpent, light, water, Passover) as well as the passage at hand in the general context of the Fourth Gospel, also as it is situated in the confluence of the Samaritan, Jewish and Graeco-Roman milieu.³

One enters this arena with some trepidation. Consider that George R. Beasley-Murray describes the prologue to the Gospel of John as “a closely knit composition, constructed with consummate artistry” and another of equal erudition said that it is “splendidly constructed”.⁴ We would submit that these descriptors apply to the

¹ Salaam Corniche is an ordained minister who loves “theology on fire”; he works with his family in a predominantly Muslim country.

² Kevin Higgins, “Identity, Integrity, and Insider Movements: A Brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent’s Critique of C-5 Thinking,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 23:3 (Fall 2006), p. 122, fn. 8.

³ See Merrill C. Tenney, “The Old Testament and the Fourth Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 120 (Oct. 1963), pp. 300-308.

⁴ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*. WBC, vol. 36 (Dallas: Word, 2002), p. 4. Herman N. Ridderbos in *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 17. However, Ernst Haenchen calls this pericope “... a veritable tangle of difficulties that defies every historical, literary and theological solutions.” *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, translated by R. W. Funk, edited by R. W. Funk and U. Busse, Vol 1. (SCM/Fortress, 1984), p. 217.

rest of the book and this pericope as well. To diminish in any way this work, would be akin to defacing a Michelangelo statue by dissecting it. Add to this fact that the number of commentaries and monographs, not to mention articles on the Gospel of John is legion, and this applies to John 4 as well. Shall we pick the feminist, liturgical, sociological, Christological, pneumatological, or missiological interpretation; looking for communication techniques, samples of inter-religious dialogue, a template for racial reconciliation, or a final word on worship wars? Or shall we mix them all?⁵ To top it all off, the passage is one of the genre of narrative, which some describe as “theatre” with various players on different stages. Appropriate rules of interpretation must be used.⁶ And finally, there is the length of the passage. It is one of the longest narratives of the NT, which with the Evangelist’s attention to detail needs a very careful reading.

Thus we will examine just a few verses what Willis Salier described as the climax of the section of John 1:19-4:54 which focuses, as he proposes on the “credentials of Jesus.”⁷ That is found in vv. 39-42, with the apex being the confessional statement or the punchline of the Samaritan villagers, “...we ourselves have heard [with our own ears] and know [by means of revelation] that this is truly [of a rock-solid certainty] the [one and only] Savior of the world [including us].”⁸

Our investigation will conclude that as much as John had an evangelism and outreach agenda with his Gospel, he is vitally con-

⁵ See Peter C. Phan, “An Interfaith Encounter at Jacobs Well: A Missiological Interpretation of John 4: 4-42,” *Mission Studies*, Vol 27, N. 2, (2010), pp. 160-175.

⁶ Aaron Cicourel gives us the caution squarely: “without taking into account the background data supplied by the total context, the analysis of social interaction in a narrative will be shallow and prone to misinterpretation, even total misunderstanding” in his “The Interpretation of Communicative Contexts,” p. 294 in *Rethinking Context*, edited by Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 1992) as cited by Victor H. Matthews, “Conversation and Identity: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 40 no. 4 (Sept 2010), p. 216.

⁷ Willis Hedley Salier, *The Rhetorical Impact of the Semeia in the Gospel of John*. (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 47.

⁸ Amplified by the author.

cerned with true discipleship in view of the revelation of the Christ. He is out to answer the questions “who is the Messiah?” [the Christological], “what does he bring?” [the eschatological], “how does he achieve that?” [the soteriological] and “why does that matter? for us individually and collectively [the ecclesiastical].”⁹ This approach will caution us to not press into service this text for any agenda, albeit with elements of truth, whether that be for a pro-feminist, post-colonial, post-modern or even a pro-insider movement reading.

2 The context of the Gospel of John

Fortunately John supplied us with a purpose statement for his gospel in 20:30–31 where he states:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so ‘that you may [continue or come to] believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus’¹⁰ and that by believing you may have life in his name.

From this statement we can gather that the passage at hand, consistent with the flow of the whole book, will contain the following elements. It will inspire belief...

1. ...that of a persevering rock solid trust in Jesus as disciples, and definitely of unbelievers as a spill-over effect due the public stance taken by disciples. (cf. 12:42–43; 19:38–40).¹¹

⁹ James T. Denison Jr., “The Gospel of John: An Introduction,” *Kerux* 7/2 (September 1992), pp. 26–29.

¹⁰ D.A. Carson in his *The Gospel According to John*. (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), S. 90 defends this translation on syntactical grounds and affirms that this would have forced the early readers to questions of identity especially among Jews and Jewish proselytes.

¹¹ See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp. 1215–16 and Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles*. (New York: Crossroad, 1994), S. 267 for opinions of various commentators, some who gravitate to the “continue to believe” and some who gravitate to the “come to believe” translations. Talbert favors the former.

2. ...that Jesus is the complete fulfillment of all Jewish messianic hopes in being the one and only Christ of his new messianic community (cf 1:41; 4:25; 7:27, 31, 52; 10:24; 11:27; 12:34).

3. ... that this Messiah is Jesus, the Son of God bearing salvation that has gone global so that all might recognize that He is, in the words of Thomas the doubter, “my Lord and my God.”¹²

4. ...which results in a replacement for all things that would represent pseudo-life; whether religiosity, water or sexual fulfillment, with real life of a heavenly source “received, possessed, experienced, enjoyed, and retained” through His Person embodied in his name, both in the present and in eternity.¹³

To achieve his purpose, John marshals numerous “witnesses” to foster this belief. These include the responses of various people (12:17; 15:27) including the Samaritan woman and her fellow villagers, to the self-revelation of Jesus via His words, His “I AM” statements, His titles and His works (5:36) many which center around the cross.¹⁴ Add to that are the witness of the Scriptures (5:39), John the Baptist (1:8; 5:33-35), the Father (5:20-21), the Holy Spirit (15:26) and the disciples (15:27). For good reason, the Evangelist calls his own work a true “testimony” of a reliable “witness” (20:4) who like Jesus, speaks what he knows and bears witness to what he has seen and heard (3:11; 1 John 1:3).¹⁵ Consistent with the dualities

¹² There is a likelihood that this phrase is a polemic against the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81–96) who wished to be addressed as *dominus et deus noster*, “our Lord and God” (Suetonius, *Domitian* 13.2). It also forms an *inclusio* with the deity ascribed to Jesus in John 1:1ff.

¹³ W.H. Griffith Thomas in his, “The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” carefully unpacks what he sees as the 7 key words of the purpose statement of Jn 20:30–31, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 125: 499 (July 1968), pp. 258–262.

¹⁴ Colleen M. Conway (p. 327) mentions a study by Collins suggested that John used as many as fifteen characters who “appear to have been definitely type-cast... so that he might teach his readers about salvific faith and thereby enkindle and confirm that faith within them” in her “Speaking through ambiguity: minor characters in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Biblical Interpretation*, 10 no 3 (2002).

¹⁵ Teresa Okure (p. 170) shows that the criterion for authentic witness in the Fourth Gospel is the fact of having seen or heard. She shows that Jesus is the quintessential and “exclusive witness” to the Father citing 1:18; 3:11–13, 32; 5:36; 6:46;

in his book, a frequent division begins to emerge between those who are in the dark of unbelief or a refusal to accept as true the evidence marshaled forward (cf 16:9) and those who enter the light of belief. In a word, the response to revelation is either reception or rejection. To summarize, Alexander Whyte helpfully defines the essence of faith—and by extension belief which according to John is what this book engenders, as:

“... the reliance placed by one man on the truthfulness and power of another. You make a statement of fact to me or give me a promise and offer an assurance and faith is that state of mind in me to you, that state of mind in me which accepts your statement and relies on your promise.” [Whyte, *Sermons: 1881-82*, 68]¹⁶

3 Overview of John 4

3.1 *Frame-busting*

Sandwiched between two miraculous events in Cana of turning water into wine (Jn 2) and the healing of the official's son (Jn 4:46-54) is an excursion to Samaria. In the former story Jesus the messiah ushers in the age of “new wine” which has been saved for last, and in the later he shows himself to be the messianic giver of life. Both of these themes merge in this chapter. Teresa Okure describes these themes or “thesis of the narrative” that “Jesus the Messiah, is the sole agent of God's salvation who alone does and completes his work”.¹⁷ In obedience to his Father's directives then, Jesus goes to foreshadow the eventual universal mission of the disciples as his “expert witnesses” due to the Holy Spirit's power from “Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the world” (Acts 1:8). The passage reflects a divine obligation on the part of Jesus who “had to” (v 4) pass through Samaria (cf. 2:4; 7:30; 13:1; 14:31).

&:29:8:38) in her *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42*. (Tübingen, Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988)

¹⁶ Cited in a sermon “What is Faith?” on Genesis 25:19-34 (February 7, 1999) www.sermons.faithtacoma.org/genesis/genesis54.htm (Accessed 2011/2/15)

¹⁷ Okure, p. 168.

Space does not permit a full discussion of the mutual denigration societies that the Jews and Samaritans had between them.¹⁸ Needless to say, almost 800 years of bad blood had produced an atmosphere of prejudice, hostilities and counter-hostilities compounded by a “holier than thou” religiosity on both parts.¹⁹ The mutual mud-slinging included terms like ‘schismatics, heretics or half-breeds,’ to name a few.²⁰

In light of this historical situation Victor Matthews suggests that the purpose of this story is “frame busting”.²¹ It is to take the well-known frame, not unlike that of a work of art, which gives the all-encompassing “definition of the situation”, and explode it. Thus, he suggests, the mutual enmity of Jew and Samaritan is used to create a new and all-encompassing definition of what is actually real, namely that both communities have their ideas of religious ritual exploded and then renewed in the locus of true worship - something only reserved for deity, in Jesus Himself.

Additionally Jesus takes the frame of what is ritually pure and explodes it by proposing to eat, drink, and converse with Samaritans of either sex. Certainly this action is not unique in the life of Jesus, as he elsewhere he defies convention by spitting on the eyes of a blind man, allowing a menstruating woman to touch him, taking a corpse by the hand, touching lepers and dining with the dregs of society, namely tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, not tradition defines ritual purity.

¹⁸ We will take care not to confuse those living in the area of Samaria and those who followed the religious rituals of the Samaritans.

¹⁹ See Wayne A. Brindle, “The origin and history of the Samaritans,” *Grace Theological Journal*, 5 no 1 (Spr 1984), pp. 47-75; Ingrid Hjelm, “What do Samaritans and Jews have in common? Recent trends in Samaritan studies”, *Currents in Biblical Research*, 3 no 1 O (2004), p 9-59; H. G. M. Williamson, “Samaritans” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight, eds., (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), pp. 724-728; David G. Hansen, “Shechem: Its Archaeological and Contextual Significance,” *Bible and Spade*, 18:2 (Spring 2005).

²⁰ Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, “Samaria” in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (eds.), *Dictionary of the later New Testament and its developments*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997)

²¹ Victor H. Matthews, “Conversation and Identity: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 40 no. 4 (Sept 2010), p. 217.

The last and perhaps most important frame that gets “busted” is the fact that this story is the third of seven episodes found between chapters 2:13 and 11 in which Jesus fulfills traditional Jewish worship in whatever form. With Kerr we can affirm that this claim to be the “better”—to borrow a term from the Book of Hebrews—“all the institutions and the great figures of Judaism (feasts, Temple, scriptures/law, Moses, Abraham, Jacob and Isaiah)” and that this salvation extends to all races, would to use a modern term, seem ‘mind-blowing’ to say the least.²²

In a few words, John seems to use a delicious irony to have Jesus, the fulfillment of Judaism, go to a place associated with Jacob, and purposely, it would seem, be intent on “turning over the tables” of the injunction in the inter-testamental Jewish work called *Jubilees* (ca 153-105 B.C.) which still had an influence in Jesus’ day, not to associate with other nations. There we read:

And do thou, my son Jacob, remember my words,
And observe the commandments of Abraham, thy father:
Keep yourself separate from the nations, and do not eat with them; and
do not imitate their rituals, nor associate with them. For their works
are unclean.”²³ (22:16)

The chapter has already been foreshadowed by a template in the first chapters which roughly speaking goes as such: “Come and see....oh yes it is...I want to follow Him.” In other words, a witness points out or brings someone to Jesus. Jesus then shows Himself to be true to that person, and this results in a confession of faith and walk of obedience due to personal involvement with Jesus. In a word, there is movement from introduction to acknowledgement to commitment on the part of persons to Jesus.

²² Kerr, Alan R. *The Temple of Jesus' Body: The Temple Theme in the Gospel of John*. (London [u.a.]: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p. 187. The items of Jewish worship that Jesus fulfills include: temple sacrifices (2:13-3:21), purification rituals (3:22-4:3), temple worship on Gerizim or in Jerusalem (4:4-54), the water rituals that promise healing of the body (ch. 5), and the feasts of Passover (ch. 6), Tabernacles (chs. 7-9), or Dedication (chs. 10-11).

²³ Charles, Robert Henry (Hrsg.): *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*. (Bellingham, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004), S. 2:46

Lest we fall into the trap of seeing all of this anthropocentrically –i.e. with humans at the center, it must be stressed that the chapter also falls in the greater theocentric context of chapters 1 to 4 which stresses the self-disclosure of God through Jesus (1:18). Consequently he is the Lamb which comes from God (1:29), the source of regeneration which comes from God (1:13; 3:3-6), a teacher who comes from God (3:2) the gift of God's love (3:16, 4:10), and the enabler of true worship of God (4:24).

Both of these streams will converse in vv. 39-42 where we see the Samaritan villagers responding with “believing” and “knowing” which are responses to proper knowledge, embodied in Jesus, who is both the revealer and the revelation of God as the Son of God and Son of Man.²⁴

3.2 Identities

We recall that the purpose statement of the Gospel is to engender belief. One way that John does this is by employing titles for Christ. In chapter one vv. 35-51 we encounter a multi-faceted photo of who Jesus is on the lips of his followers. To them he is: “the Lamb of God” (v.36); “Rabbi/Teacher” (v. 38); “the Messiah/Christ” (v. 41); “him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (v.45); “the Son of God...the King of Israel” (v. 49); and in Jesus' own words, the place where the angels of God ascend or descend like the story of Jacob at Bethel, namely on “the Son of Man” (v. 51). In a nutshell these titles convey that “salvation is from the Jews” (4:22), but as we will see, it is not uniquely for them, but “for the world.”

²⁴ Cf Craig R. Koester who cites Francis J. Moloney's statement that Jesus as the Son of Man is “the incarnate Logos who is at once the revealer and revelation of God” in his *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 41.

These titles continue with the story of Nicodemus in chapter 3 and throughout the book, but notably it is a virtually faceless woman of what the Jews saw as a “mongrel breed” in chapter 4 who continues to give a more fully orbéd view of the identity of Jesus. Terms that she uses include: “Jew/Judean” (vv.9); “Sir/Lord” - as a title of respect (vv. 11, 15, 19); “greater than our father Jacob?” (v. 12); “Prophet: (v. 19); “Messiah/Christ” (vv. 25, 29); “Rabbi” (v.31) and “Savior of the World” (v. 42).²⁷ There is a notable progression in her use of titles, from the likely prejudiced and hostile statement of “Jew” to the one which she likely used with her fellow villagers, namely “Savior of the World”. It would be fair to say that in the Samaritan woman’s heart mind and soul, the lights have come on progressively. This brings us to the passage at hand.

39 Now from that city many of the Samaritans believed [or, trusted] in Him, because of the word of the woman testifying, “He told me all [things]—as many as I did.”

40 So when the Samaritans came to Him, they kept asking Him to remain with them, and He remained there two days.

41 And many more believed because of His word.

42 And so they were saying to the woman, “No longer do we believe because of your speech, for we ourselves have heard and know that this is truly the Savior of the world...”²⁸

3.3 As seen by some theologians

E.J. Wyckoff sees these verses as the climax of “conversion and discipleship” which was preceded as he sees it by the context of ministry in Samaria in (vv 4–6) followed by outreach and invitation around the motif of living water in (vv 7–15), evangelization in spirit and truth in (vv 16–26), simultaneous concerns in (vv 27–30) and formation for ministry using the motif of harvest (vv 31–38).²⁹ Others like Bailey see this periscope as a summation of the main

²⁷ Jesus uses an oblique “I am” statement in verse 26, as well.

²⁸ Gary Zeolla, *Analytical-Literal Translation of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Darkness to Light, Lulu, 2007), p.79.

²⁹ E.J. Wyckoff, “Jesus in Samaria (John 4:4–42): A Model for Cross-Cultural Ministry” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 35 no. 3 (August 2005), p. 91.

point of the chapter, namely that the conversion of Samaritans is “the first sign of the universality of salvation in Christ”.³⁰ C.H. Dodd, meanwhile, following on his description of the chapter as scenes of a play on front and back stages states that the close of the scene with the Samaritans words in verses 41-42 in similar fashion to the “concluding chorus of a Greek play, sums up the meaning of the whole”.³¹ Charles Talbert, looking backwards, observes strong parallels with chapter one where as we have observed (a) Someone bears witness to Jesus (4:39//1:35-36). (b) People come to/follow Jesus (4:40//1:39a). (c) They want to abide with Jesus and they do (4:40//1:39b). (d.) As a result, they make their confession about Jesus 4:42//1:41).³²

Finally, Griffith Thomas, perceptively picks up on the fact that the villagers are said to “believe in Him”, which he suggests is a word combination that packs a tremendous punch in that it “shows the idea of the movement of the whole being toward Christ, the outgoing of the soul toward Him (*eis*) in order to find rest in Him.”³³

3.4 As seen by a range of proponents of the Insider Movement.

Kevin Higgins, asserts that Jesus’ Samaritan ministry, “results in what I would say is certainly a C-5 movement”, and that “this episode is an example of an Insider Movement”.³⁴ Stuart Caldwell analyses the passage and observes that Jesus did not issue an order to leave Samaritan religion and thus suggests that it reasonable to conclude that we can “Expect God will raise up a believing community of true worshippers who follow the teachings of Jesus within

³⁰ As cited by Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 251 fn 100

³¹ C.D. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*. (Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 315.

³² Talbert, *Reading John*, p. 124.

³³ Thomas, “The Purpose”, p. 260. Cf John 2:11; 3:16; 4:39; 6:40; 7:5,31,39,48; 8:30; 9:36; 10:42; 11:45,48; 12:37,42.

³⁴ Kevin Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoted’s’ in Acts,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 21:4 (Winter 2004), p. 159.

Islamic society.”³⁵ More by insinuation than direct quote, Rebecca Lewis also suggests that this passage constitutes a justification for so-called followers of Jesus to remain an adherent of the religion in which one is found. She suggests that just as Samaritans could remain such, so converts in an Islamic setting can remain Muslims. In her words: “Jesus revealed both the power and the scope of the gospel by saving the Samaritan villagers, without requiring Samaritan believers to enter the Jewish religious framework [without requiring them to become proselytes]. The disciples seemed to accept this inclusion of the Samaritans into God’s kingdom, even though the Samaritans followed a “heretical” version of the Jewish religion.”³⁶ A closer examination of the passage, which has been so aptly called “a literary jewel sparkling with structural symmetry, literary symbols and theological subtlety”, will reveal whether these later statements appreciate such in the passage.³⁷

4 Two cultural settings

4.1 Hospitality.

Almost no stone has been left unturned in looking for clues in the rest of scripture as how to interpret the various images that are presented in John 4. Andrew Arterbury, for instance, finds that assertions that the text is a fulfillment in spiritual terms of other scenes of betrothal/engagement at wells in the Old Testament constitute a forced reading of the text.³⁸ He looks at each instance and finds that although there are parallels of John 4 and stories of Rebecca etc, a more dominant theme is that of hospitality in the Mediterranean context. Thus he identifies elements such as a guest asking for water, determinations of the identity of the stranger, exchange of gifts,

³⁵ Stuart Caldwell, “Jesus in Samaria: A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol.17:1 (Ja-Mr 2000), p. 28.

³⁶ Rebecca Lewis, “On Religious Identity: The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements”, *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 27:1 (Spring 2010), p. 42.

³⁷ Phan, p. 165

³⁸ Andrew E. Arterbury, “Breaking the betrothal bonds: hospitality in John 4,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 72 no 1 (Ja 2010), pp. 63-83. He examines Gen 24:10-49; 29:4-14; Exod 2:15-22 in close detail.

the well as a public and neutral place for the arrival of a visiting stranger, the injunction to ask a woman to consult with her husband regarding hospitality and remaining in one place as elements common to the this motif.

One might compare an Arabic proverb “The guest is a guest of God” to what was happening here. In the Mediterranean world the chief gods were protectors of guests, and it was honorific to extend hospitality and culturally appropriate to ask for it. Thus we read in v. 40: ‘...when the Samaritans came to Him, they kept asking Him to remain with them, and He remained there two days.’

With some vigor the Samaritans “kept asking” Jesus, who by rights should have been seen by them as a false teacher, to accept their offer of hospitality. Something is transpiring behind the scenes and it is more than just a recommendation by the woman. It might be said that similar to their fellow countrymen “they received [Him who is] the word of God” (Ac 8:14). This stands in sharp contrast to Jesus own “who did not receive Him” (Jn 1:11). The fact that Jesus, a Jew accepts their offer speaks volumes as well. In defiance of the injunction by Rabbi Eliezer who decreed, ‘He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one that eats the flesh of swine’ the Rabbi Jesus decides to stay.³⁹ His action, not unlike that of Peter or Paul and company remaining at Cornelius’ or Lydia’s houses (Acts 10:48, 16:15) likely as Okure suggests, was a way to show converts that they “really believed in the genuineness of their conversion” and, we might add, desired to have table fellowship with them.⁴⁰ However, it opened Jesus to be guilty by association with the “foolish people who dwell in Shechem” (Ecclesiasticus 50:25, 26) and it would only be a matter of time before he was called one of them (Lk 9:52, Jn 8:48), and a demonized one at that.

The word ‘remains’ recalls what occurred with the first disciples (1:38-39) who ask Jesus where he was staying, and once they knew they ‘remained’ with him, as a student would do with a Rabbi, or

³⁹ Mishna Shebiith 8:10

⁴⁰ Okure, p. 179.

like a guest's decision to stay or remain in a hospitable home.⁴¹ Schneiders also sees this term as a "quasi-technical" term for union with Jesus in John's Gospel (cf 8:31; 15:4-9) where the permanence of the relationship is stressed.⁴² Looking back to Exodus 29:45-46 as well, we see the "I AM"—a term Jesus did not hesitate to use in the Gospel—stating: "Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am YHWH their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am YHWH their God." This dwelling of God with his people finds its final climax in Rev. 21:3 and so without exaggeration, this episode can be said to be firmly situated in salvation history.

The theme of the interface between God and humans is also found in OT stories of hospitality and strangers. It was God in the form of three men who came to Abraham, who "ran to meet them" and they received his hospitality (Gen 18). Here too, God incarnate in Christ has come to the Samaritan village. As the greater Moses, the fulfillment of the law, Jesus, the ultimate guest full of grace and truth (Jn 1:17) receives hospitality on foreign soil (Ex 2:25). Jesus who is the one where the name and glory of God dwells, in a fashion like the tabernacle (cf. Jn 1:14—Gr. *eskenosen*) moves into the Samaritan village as the Tent of Meeting with God. Is it overstating the case to say that the village has been invaded by sacred space which far outstrips any of their notions of a *Taheb* or Restorer never to be the same again?⁴³ Their own confession of faith will bear this out.

Finally, the Didache, an early church manual on living the Christian life, written not long after the Gospel of John said, "Let every apostle who come to you be welcomed as the Lord. But he should not remain more than a day. If he must, he may stay one more. But

⁴¹ Cf. Arterbery, p. 68 who references Homer Od. 1.309-10; Judg 19:9; Tob 8:20; Jos. Asen. 20:8; Josephus A. J. 5.8.3 §282; Luke 10:7; 24:29; Did. 11.5; 12.2). Craig Keener, as well documents a detailed list of classical and Biblical sources on the use of hospitality and *sôtēr* in his *The Gospel of John*. (Baker Academic, 2004), pp. 627-628 fn 436-452.

⁴² Sandra Marie Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament As Sacred Scripture*. (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 193.

⁴³ Harold W. Attridge, "Temple, Tabernacle, Time, and Space in John and Hebrews," *Early Christianity*, Volume 1, Number 2, (August 2010), p. 274.

if he stays three days, he is a false prophet.”⁴⁴ Thus the early church that read the Gospel of John would have affirmed that Jesus was not a false prophet.

4.2 The Graeco-Roman context

Craig Koester in his article “The Savior of the World” made a careful study of the actions of the Samaritan villagers in welcoming Jesus and compared them to the manners in which visiting Roman rulers at that time were welcomed.⁴⁵ He found a number of uncanny parallels. This is especially interesting in light of the fact that the Samaritans had historically dabbled somewhat into emperor worship whenever it fitted in with their political interests. At one time they consented to worship Antiochus Epiphanes as a god and renamed the temple at Mount Gerizim the “Temple of Jupiter Hellenius” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.5.5 §§257-64) and on another occasion called it the temple of Zeus-the-Friend-of Strangers, which could have an ironic twist in light of our observations on hospitality.

Yet, as Koester notes, a new dynamic has been set up. The villagers go out to meet Jesus (vv. 30, 40a); they invite him into their town (v. 40b); and call him Savior (v. 42b).⁴⁶ Josephus, in his *Wars of the Jews*, observed that during the Jewish revolt when Vespasian arrived at the city of Tiberius during the Jewish revolt of AD 67, “the population opened their gates to him and went out to meet him, haling him as Savior and Benefactor” (*War* 3.9.8 §459). When this same emperor returned to Rome it was said that the *populus* (people) went to the roadsides outside the city to receive him, “haling him as Benefactor and Savior, and the only person who was worthy to be ruler of the city of Rome”. (*War* VII, 4.1. §70-71). Just as Vespasian was celebrated as a victorious warrior over his enemies, in effect the Samaritans are doing the same, perhaps without the realization that Jesus is and will be the Ultimate Victor as the divine warrior in a

⁴⁴ *Didache* 11:4-5, cf. 12:2

⁴⁵ Craig R. Koester, “The savior of the world” (John 4:42), *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 109 no 4 (Wint 1990), p 665-680.

⁴⁶ A.T. Roberston suggests that the verbal form suggests that the villagers “went out in a rush.”

battle of much more epic proportions. Likely they are declaring Jesus to be worthy to be the ruler of Shechem and beyond.

Could it be that with his customary touch of subtle irony, John is stating to his audience, that the Samaritans in effect have declared that the true Savior has arrived, and not the ones embodied by the emperors who loved to attach the title Savior to their name?² Could it be as well that John is doing some not so subtle “frame busting” by calling Jesus, someone greater than the emperor, greater than any Jewish or Samaritan messianic figure who has worldwide dominion, the Savior of the ‘schismatic, heretic and half-breed’ Samaritans.

4.3 ...and many more believed because of His word (vs 41)

This verse indicates that a great number of the village believed in Jesus, not just as a prophet or miracle worker, but as a result of His revelatory and authoritative word [Gk=*logos*]. It was this word that was operative in the first creation (John 1: 3, cf. Gen 1:3) and is operative in the new creation. In John 15.3-4 Jesus told his disciples that “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you” (cf. I Peter 1:23). There he appeals to the remaining motif, as he is well aware that pseudo-converts had been identified throughout the book as “believers” but who left as soon as His teaching or the pressures of surrounding life became hard. (John 8:31; cf Matt 13.3).⁴⁷ The Samaritans thus are contrasted to the Jews who were said by Jesus to have “no room for my word” and thus wanted to kill him (Jn 8:37) even though they had been called “believers” 6 verses earlier.

The word of Jesus is his vehicle for providing physical, social-religious and spiritual liberation to its recipients, whether the Herodian collaborator and his household (4:53), the ill man at the pool (5:8-9), the disciples (6:68; 17:8, 14) and a man born blind (9:7), to name a few. We would expect it to be equally powerful among the Samaritan villagers. To all of them, Jesus uses his word, as Cornelius Bennema points out, as the “sword” of the messianic Spirit empowered liberator, not to allow them to live the status quo or

⁴⁷ The phrase “many more believed” also occurs in 7:31; 8:30; 10:42; 11:45; 12:42

overthrow the Roman overlords, but to create a liberated community, exclusive in its allegiance to his rulership.⁴⁸ Bennema concludes, that “Jesus’ subversive programme of liberation” necessarily causes a division between those who would follow him, and those who would follow, for example, “Torah-centered mainstream Judaism,” nationalistic militants, Qumran hermits, and we would add, even Torah-centered pious Samaritans.

The Word could also be viewed as the authoritative proclamation of the authorized agent of the Father; Jesus the Son (8:28b; 12:50; 14:24). Chapter 3: 34 “the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God” picks up this sense and ties into the OT concept of a *shaliah*; someone who is sent on behalf of someone else and whose word carries the authority of the sender (Is 6:8; 61:1). Thus the Jewish maxim states: “a man’s agent [*shaliah*] is like the man himself” (m. Berakoth 5:5) or “an agent must act according to the mind of the sender” (m. Terumoth 4:4). Likewise the titles Rabbi, King, Prophet and even Shepherd used to describe Jesus all are persons of authority who employ their word to exercise their office. Thus we read “the words that I have spoken to you, they are spirit and they are life....” “Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life.” (6:63; 68).

Might a part of that authoritative declaration to the Samaritans have included the words “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news?” (Mk: 1: 15).

4.4 ...and so they were saying to the woman (vs 42)

Koestenberger affirms the ISV rendition of the first part of this verse with its translation: “They kept telling the woman” as he notes the use of the imperfect form of the verb *elegon* shows the insistent nature of what they were saying.⁴⁹ It is as if they cannot wait to tell their confession of new-found faith to the world. Likely

⁴⁸ Cornelius Bennema, “The Sword of the Messiah and the Concept of Liberation in the Fourth Gospel,” *Biblica*, 86 (2005), pp. 53, 56.

⁴⁹ Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), S. 164.

John continues to refer to the Samaritanese in a generic sense to highlight the identity of Jesus, and not as some have suggested to trivialize her vital role. Jerome Neyrey sees this vital role expressed in the words “your speech” [Gk= *lalia*] which he suggests is a backhanded complement to demonstrate that she used the very effective means of a “gossip-network” to spread the gospel.⁵⁰

4.5 No longer do we believe because of your speech, for we ourselves have heard and know

Numerous commentators have observed a progression of belief in this passage due to the words of the Samaritan villagers. At first they worshipped in ignorance, i.e. “that which they did not know” (v. 22), and then they listened and responded to the woman “testifying” (v. 39) by welcoming Jesus, and finally they make a direct response to the revelatory words that he makes in person.⁵¹ Koestenberger as well, has observed that “we have heard” (*akēkoamen*) and “we know” (*oidamen*) are both in the perfect tense in order to express “the settled state of their own convictions”.⁵²

This ‘...*we ourselves have heard*...’ is no second-hand information. It is direct contact. Godet underlines this dynamic in his rendition of the text by translating: “We have ourselves become hearers” and hence the sequel “And, as such, we know”.⁵³ Similarly, Origen quoted Heracleon who commented on this passage by saying: “People believe in the Savior first by being led by people. But whenever

⁵⁰ This is a means of conveying information through informal networks in a low-tech world, also as seen in the story of the Gerasenes’ demoniac who told about “how much Jesus had done for him” (Mk 5:19) in Jerome H. Neyrey, “What’s Wrong with This Picture? John 4, Cultural Stereotypes of Women, and Public and Private Space,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 24 no 2 (Sum 1994), p 77-91. However, Okure (p. 171, 181) doubts that one can be at all dogmatic about John’s use of *lalia* in this verse as opposed to other verbs for speech elsewhere in the Gospel and uses 8:31,43 as the basis of her argument.

⁵¹ Westcott states: “Judaism was a worship of the letter rather than spirit, while Samaritanism was a worship of falsehood rather than truth” in his *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 159.

⁵² Kostenberger, *Ibid*.

⁵³ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John. With a Critical Introduction*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), p. 131.

they read his words, they no longer believe because of human testimony alone, but because of the truth itself.”⁵⁴

Throughout the Gospel John makes frequent use of the word “hearing” and uses it to go beyond mere auditory function, but uses it to draw lines in the sand between those who will listen and obey, and those who refuse to listen, or listen in a token manner. Frequently, the hearing also implies an acceptance of the fact that Jesus has been sent from God (Jn 5:24-5; 6:45, 8:47-8; 14:24). John’s usage reflects the Hebrew Testament where listening is done by the whole person, and results in whole-hearted obedience. Although it is the *Shema* that begins with “hear Oh Israel” (Deut 6:4) now it is Samaritans who are doing the hearing. Ironically, these who are “sheep of another sheep pen” (Jn 10:16) are being brought in and as Jesus predicts, “they too will listen to my voice,” in contrast to Jesus’ own who said, “he has a demon and is insane, why listen to him?” (Jn 10:20).

‘...we believe... for we ourselves have heard and know...’ The villagers connect the dots between believing and knowing, a vital theme in the Gospel. In his study entitled “Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel”, J. Gaffney demonstrates that there are some 200 combinations of verses with one or both of these concepts.⁵⁵ He distinguishes the two as believing (Gk= *pisteuein*) which has a more volitional and knowing (Gk= *eidénai* derived from *oida* / *ginōskō*) which has a more intellectual flavor. He elaborates: “In knowing, one perceives that the signs, the works, and so forth are pointing to something beyond their superficial selves. In believing, one accepts the moral consequences, and orientates oneself in the direction to which they point.”⁵⁶

Yet the two are closely related, as we see in the fact that “to believe” is the key to eternal life in 3:16, so is “to know” in 17:3. As

⁵⁴ “Commentary on the Gospel of John”—13-353.362-63 in Thomas C. Oden ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament*. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 170.

⁵⁵ J. Gaffney, “Believing and Knowing in the Fourth Gospel,” *Theological Studies*, 26: (1965), pp. 215-41.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 240.

well, the disciples bring the two concepts together in 6:69 by saying “We believe [lit. trust completely] and know that you are the Holy One of God.” It would be fair to say that John stresses in 6:69; 8:31,32; 10:38 that faith is the basis of true knowledge. Subtly, the statement on the lips of the disciples might have been used as an indictment against those who are described throughout the Fourth Gospel as those who “do not believe” and those who “do not know.” Whereas the Samaritan woman was said “to perceive” [Gk= theorein] or roughly speaking in English, she had a theory about Jesus in verse 19, there is a consistent usage in 39, 41 and 42 to use the verb “to believe” [Gk= pisteuein].⁵⁷ As O’Grady points out, there is a movement towards a “full and active acceptance that constitutes an adequate human response to the revelation of Jesus”.⁵⁸

In the OT, as the salvation plan of God included three other foreigners, namely Jethro, a woman from Zarephath, and Naaman who had the words “I know” on their lips (Ex 18:9-11; 1KI 17:24; 2KI 5:15). A Midianite high-priest, a Sidonese woman and a Syrian government official are all cognizant of the mighty works/words of God. Now a group of Samaritan villagers join those “in the know.”

It is this response to the revelation of Jesus that caused ordinary fishermen, tax collectors and family members to leave nets (Mt 4.20/par.), boats (Mt 4:22/par.), parents (Mt 19:27-29/par.) and tax stalls (Luke 5:28) to follow Him, the Samaritan woman, to some extent follows suit. She leaves her water-jar behind (v.28) to go to tell the good news. Hendrikus Boers thus suggests that she leaves the symbol of that which she had taken refuge in, namely her “factional security” (v9), “merely human sustenance” (vv. 11-12) and partisan salvation (v. 20).⁵⁹ Winsome Munro also suggests that she leaves behind the “tangible token of her servitude” whether literally as a

⁵⁷ Liddell and Scott suggest an element of speculation in this verb, cf. Benny Thetayil, In *Spirit and Truth: An Exegetical Study of John 4:19-26 and a Theological Investigation of the Replacement Theme in the Fourth Gospel*. (Peeters, Leuven, 2007), p. 53.

⁵⁸ John F. O’Grady, *According to John*. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Paulist, 1999), pp. 39-40.

⁵⁹ Wyckoff, p. 95 citing, Schneiders, p. 192 and Hendrickus Boers, *Neither on This Mountain Nor in Jerusalem: A Study of John 4*. (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholar’s Press, 1988), p.191.

slave woman that she could have been, or figuratively as a “tangible token of the law” akin to the jars for ceremonial washing at the wedding of Cana (2:6).⁶⁰ A commentator like Carson, however is cautious not to read too much into her leaving the water-jar, but prefers to emphasize that she who had been marginalized by her own people, takes the risk to bring her witness to them.⁶¹ Perhaps, the best reading is that by James Resseguie who observes that the new “living water” cannot be contained in a clay jar, but needs one of another kind of clay: namely herself.⁶²

4.6 ...that this is truly the Savior of the world... this is...

As innocuous as these two words might sound, they show, as Neyrey has pointed out, the “uniqueness or superiority” of Jesus.⁶³ In so many words, the phrase on the lips of the Samaritans serves to distinguish Jesus from all other wannabe messiah figures, and asserts his divinity. Already in 1:34 it was said, “this is...the Son of God” and he will be described in 6.14 as “this is the Prophet who has come into the world”, or “this is the bread that has come down from heaven” (6:50,58). All of these titles of uniqueness and superiority will have their culmination in the title: “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS” (Lk 23:38) or “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19).

...truly... By means of the word *alēthōs* meaning, “corresponding to what is really so, truly, in truth, really, actually” John likely invoked in his hearers who were aware of the other Gospels, words such as “truly you are the Son of God” by the disciples (Matt 14:33)

⁶⁰ Winsome Munro, “Pharisee and Samaritan in John: Polar or Parallel,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 57 no 4 (O 1995), p. 719. Interestingly Munro is unique among commentators to see a possible allusion to Hagar in Genesis 16 with a visit by the angel of the Lord, embodying “the Lord who sees.” For other comments on the water-jar, see Morris, p. 243, Ridderbos, p. 166.

⁶¹ D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*. (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), S. 227

⁶² James L. Resseguie, *The Strange Gospel: Narrative Design and Point of View in John*. (Leiden [u.a.]: Brill, 2001), p. 80.

⁶³ Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009), p. 107. Cf. John 1:30,33,34;3:19;4:42; 6:14,50,58; Also I John 1:4;2:25;3:11,23;5:3,4,9,11; 2 John 6

and the words of another non-Jew, namely the centurion at the cross who said, “Truly this was the Son Of God” (Matt 27:54). John Lierman as well argues that the use of *alēthōs* implies “a polemic in the narrative directed at the claims made for the Roman emperor.” In a word, the Samaritans are introducing their declaration that a true rule and a true savior in distinction from an “implied pretender” i.e. the Caesar, has arrived at their town.⁶⁴

...*the...* Preceding this passage, John has made frequent use of the definite article to show that Jesus is unique; whether, for example by “the Word,” “the only Son,” “the Son of God”, or in this verse, “the Savior of the World.” John who was obviously familiar with the book of Isaiah, doubtless would have had the refrain “besides me there is none other...God the Savior...” of Isaiah 43/45/49/60 playing in his head. Now this Savior God is Incarnate and Samaritans are used to declare his uniqueness.

...*Savior of the world...* When the early church desired to concisely communicate its beliefs, it did so with the symbol of a fish. The first letter of each of the Greek words; Jesus, Christ, Son of God, Savior spelled *ichthus* or fish. Notably the last word of the group was *ḥōtēr*, meaning savior or deliverer, who typically was the stronger who rescued the weaker. Note that the first letter of the word, namely Jesus, was given to him who would “save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Mary does not hesitate to call him both God and Savior (Lk 1:47), and the angels announce him as the Savior, “Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11).

In a similar way, the Samaritans are making a statement of their faith, or a confession about the one who had delivered them.⁶⁵ They do so in a way that shows both the Jewish and Hellenistic influences in their history.

On the Jewish side of the equation was the fact that YHWH was known for his great and decisive act of deliverance [=Heb *yasha*] of the Israelites from Egypt, and so He became known as the One and only deliverer/ Savior or source of salvation (Is 43:11; 45:15, 21;

⁶⁴ John Lierman, *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John*. (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), p. 203.

⁶⁵ Other confessions in John include 1:49; 4:42; 6:69; 9:38; 11:27; 16:30; 20:16.

63:8; Ho 13:4).⁶⁶ Prior to the parting of the Red Sea the Israelites were commanded to “stand firm and see the salvation of YHWH” (Ex 14:13). The hymn that was sung at the conclusion of the Greater Hallel by the high priests, as part of the Passover remembrance reads:

From everlasting to everlasting you are God; beside you we have no king, redeemer, or savior, no liberator, deliverer, provider, one who takes pity in every time of distress and trouble; we have no king but you.

The messianic promises also point forward to such a *šōtēr* as the LXX translates some of the instances of Savior or his saving activity, and we have an example of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation [LXX-verbal form of ‘to save’]
gentle and riding on a donkey...

On the Graeco-Roman side of the equation, the Samaritans, like all of Israel were under Roman occupation at the time of Christ, but had also been subjugated by the Greeks. They had seen the gods like Zeus, referred to as saviors who were “strong to aid” and now the emperors, who thought they were incarnations of the same, use the same title. Caesar Augustus [“Augustus,” a term meaning “the one to be served with religious awe”] who was said to have delivered the world from chaos, had the title ascribed to him (c. 18-19 AD) by the Roman general Germanicus as the “true saviour and the benefactor of the entire race of men” and Hadrian (c.117-38 AD) who lived not long after the writing of John’s gospel he had the title “Savior of the world.”⁶⁷

Throughout the Fourth Gospel we see other references to the act of saving, for example in 3:17, “God did not send his Son...to judge,

⁶⁶ The examples demonstrate that the Hebrew root *yš* with its common verb and noun forms (*hoshia*, *yeshu(ah)*), is frequently rendered “deliver/deliverance” and “save/salvation.”

⁶⁷ Koester, p. 667.

but so that the world may be saved through him”; in 10:9, “If someone enters through me, he will be saved...”; and a final reference which like 3:17 and 4:42 combines the idea of saving and the world. Thus in 12:47 we read, “...I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world”.

...of the world... Of the eight or so shades of meaning of the word *kosmos* in the Fourth Gospel, George Turner notes they are dominated by the sense of “an alien influence in defiance of God”. That nuance does apply here as the salvific work will come in the context of a hostile audience, yet in this close context the word carries the neutral connotation, namely global without distinction (12:19).⁶⁸ The summation of Messianic expectations is succinctly stated by the Samaritans; Jesus was a gift to the all ethnic groups, including their own. Whereas God had gathered only the children of Israel around the well at Beer with the words, “Gather the people together and I will give them water”, (Num 21:16), now another people are gathered around a well with a new kind of water. The presence of the Samaritans affirms the truth of Psalm 22:27-8 that “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations,” and that the “nations would rally to Him” (Is 11:10). This rallying or gathering in of all nations, however would not happen due to the way of human triumph as Jewish messianic expectations had suggested, but as the sacrificial “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29;11:51-52) as he is lifted up to his throne of the cross (cf. Isa.52:13). It is at the cross, where the “Savior of the world” engages and defeats the “ruler of the world” in a battle of cosmic proportions.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ George Allen Turner, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 19:4 (Fall 1976), p. 275. Judith Kovacs refers to the dominant usage of *kosmos* as “a clearly negative, quasi- technical sense to refer to the sphere opposed to Jesus and his followers” in her “Now Shall the Ruler of this World be Driven Out: Jesus’ Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20-36,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 14/2 (1995), p. 234.

⁶⁹ Kovacs, pp. 227-247.

5 Summary

The confession of faith of the Samaritans became that of the early church, and an aging John writes his Epistles to his understudies with almost the same words, although stressing, in a very succinct way the relationship of the Father and the Son and the mission of the Savior of the world. In his customary eye-witness testimony style, John writes: "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" (I John 4:14). Lest we think this is only good theory for dusty creedal books, Polycarp the bishop of Smyrna (69-155 AD) was willing to put his life on the line for this truth. Just as he was about to be burnt at the stake, an offer to recant guaranteeing a longer and more comfortable life was put before him. He replied to the words of the proconsul who had said, "Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ"

Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?

Based on the exegesis of the passage in the context of all of Scripture, its cultural context, and its historical context we will now examine a few of the assertions made by proponents of the Insider movement. In a nutshell they seek to find justification in John 4 for followers of Jesus to remain within Islam.

Kevin Higgins:

Higgins asserts that Jesus' ministry in Samaria was a precursor to what he says "is certainly a C-5 movement." This must be challenged on a number of levels, even as we give him a certain benefit of the doubt, knowing as Benny Thettayil that Christians in an Islamic context share what he calls "the painful question" of the Gospel of John which is "how Christians could maintain their Jewish traditions especially their rich worship traditions, and maintain their new faith in Jesus."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Benny Thettayil, *In Spirit and Truth: An Exegetical Study of John 4:19-26 and a Theological Investigation of the Replacement Theme in the Fourth Gospel*. (Peeters, Leuven, 2007), p. 342. This work also has valuable sections on Jewish-Christian relations in the first and second centuries and the relationship of the synagogue to Christian worship.

a. That there is movement in this passage is a given. Jesus is on the move to Samaria, the woman goes to the villagers and they come out to see Jesus.

b. That the woman changes from being an outsider to Jesus - in so many words, "why would I have anything to do with you who are a Jew, and why would you have anything to do with me..." - as well as to her own community is a given. Her migration to an "insider status" is noted by Matthews who observed that her ability to share her "inside information" with her village in public space "transforms her status from social pariah to a valued member of the kinship body".⁷¹

c. Assuming that some of the Samaritan villagers became disciples of Jesus, they would also be known as those who were chosen "out of the world" (15:1) and as those who were not "of the world" (15:19; 17:14, 16), albeit while still living in it. This detachment in the Gospel, as Howard Meeks asserts, is "identical with their being detached from Judaism" and we might add with Samaritanism. He goes on to say that "Those figures who want to "believe" in Jesus but to remain within the Jewish community and the Jewish piety are damned with the most devastatingly dualistic epithets."⁷²

To infer rather anachronistically that this is a passage about a phenomenon of the last 30 years, namely that of retaining one's former religious identity and all that goes along with it, while calling oneself a follower of Jesus, is going far beyond the intent of the text. It is with no axe to grind that Bennema identified Jesus as a "revolutionary" who "demands an exclusive allegiance to himself and constitutes a society that operates subversively in this world." In short, Jesus is a "frame-buster". Higgins, however, seems to prefer to see him as one who lives to affirm the status quo: a frame-keeper.

⁷¹ Matthews, p, 225.

⁷² W. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91 (1972), p. 69.

One cannot help but ask if Higgins' view of religions takes seriously the fact that Islam is part and parcel of the antithesis between darkness and light, as shown in the Gospel? One cannot help but wonder, by somewhat tipping his hat to Islamic practices, if he has engaged with sufficient depth the claim of Samuel Zwemer that "with regret, it must be admitted that there is hardly an important fact concerning the life, person and work of our Saviour which is not ignored, perverted or denied by Islam."⁷³

Stuart Caldwell:

As much as Caldwell affirms, "we see no command from Jesus to leave Samaritan religion", some facts would appear to challenge his statement:

- a. The Samaritans' actions that show that they were willing to take significant cultural risks, either with housing a Jew and a Rabbi at that; as well as to declare in effect, in a Graeco-Roman context, that a true ruler with worldwide dominion had arrived. Both actions would be seen to be subversive.
- b. The action of the Samaritan woman with leaving her water-jar in the context of other calls to discipleship likely demonstrates a willingness to leave the status-quo.
- c. The Samaritan confession declares that their own messianic expectations have been exceeded and replaced by the person of Christ. They decide to leave their *Taheb* and all that was entailed on their own. This is totally consistent with the entire flow of Biblical revelation that shows that God calls a people for his own with orders to be distinct.
- d. Their declared need for a Savior put their own religiosity with its pride of antiquity in question. They see Jesus as full revelation of all that their Pentateuch pointed forward to, and in effect they allow him to "bust the frame" of their spiritual pride of hav-

⁷³ Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ: An Essay On The Life Character, And Teachings Of Jesus Christ According To The Koran And Orthodox Tradition*, (Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, Edinburgh and London, 1912), p. 4.

ing “the true, original and faultless Torah in all its sentences, pronunciations, and its style.”⁷⁴

e. Now that they realize that Jesus is the sacred place, the basis of their religious uniqueness would crumble. Jesus is now declared to be the intersection between heaven and earth, not Mt. Gerizim, and he is the true Bethel of the Samaritan “father Jacob” that is to say, Jesus is the house of God, or the place where God dwells.

In a nutshell we see a significant challenge to remaining in Samaritan culture in this passage. Caldwell’s arguments from silence simply constitute a reading an agenda into the text.

Rebecca Lewis:

In her words: “Jesus revealed both the power and the scope of the gospel by saving the Samaritan villagers.” To this we cannot agree more, but one must wonder by the following statement if Lewis believes that this All-Sufficient Savior is really all that powerful. Immediately she asserts that Christ saved them “without requiring [them] to enter the Jewish religious framework.” Yes, but this is not because he affirmed either their existing Samaritan framework--as Lewis so implies- or the Jewish framework, but actually came to “bust” them both. To say then that the “disciples seemed to accept this inclusion of the Samaritans into God’s kingdom, even though the Samaritans followed a ‘heretical’ version of the Jewish religion” is again to miss the point. The Samaritans by word and deed have demonstrated a radical change of allegiance, and have thrown their lot in with the exclusive Jesus. To find a back-handed justification to remain within Islam, as Lewis is doing with this text, once again is to force the hand of the text to her agenda.

6 Conclusion

In 2007 Kevin Higgins, himself asserted that “More missiologists need to engage in thorough exegetical work and more exegetes need to grow in the disciplines of missiology.”⁷⁵ Enough said.

⁷⁴ Brindle, p. 50.

The challenge of rightly dividing the word of truth is ever before us. The passage, as is the Gospel of John, is much more about the identity of Jesus, than it is about shopping for a reading to support a particular pre-conceived notion. The Gospel, as its purpose statement suggested, is to engender belief; not the fly-by-night sort that John had observed as an “expert eye-witness,” but a rock-solid believing and knowing that comes as a result of having one’s heart, and even a group of them like the Samaritans demonstrated, opened to the self-revelation of God through the Savior of the world. Invariably this will engender some “frame-busting”. The message is as pertinent today as it was then, and as Craig Keener noted, “John is calling his audience [which includes us as readers] to a full confession of resurrection faith: Jesus is God in the flesh, and therefore his claims cannot be compromised, for synagogue [or Mount Gerizim] or for Caesar.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Kevin Higgins, “The Jerusalem Council Applied: Acts 15 and Insider Movements Among Muslims: Questions, Process and Conclusions,” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 24:1 (Spring 2007), p. 33.

⁷⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* Vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 1216.

BOOK REVIEW:
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND THE MIDDLE EAST
BY CHARLES THORLEY BRIDGEMAN
(NEW YORK: MOREHOUSE-GORHAM, 1958)

By Duane Alexander Miller¹

This is a short volume, and one that is not very easy to find. My library in San Antonio, Texas, was able to get a copy through Inter-library Loan (ILL) from the University of the South in Sewanee, itself an Episcopal institution. In spite of the difficulty in locating a copy, the book is interesting and useful given its brevity.

Bridgeman is one of the few chroniclers of Episcopal mission in the Middle East, itself a rather recondite topic. The multifaceted efforts of the groups associated with the Church of England, like the Church Mission Society (CMS) and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) and the London Jews Society (LJS, but now know as the Church's Ministry to Jews or CMJ) have been documented extensively elsewhere by authors like Kelvin Crombie and Kenneth Cragg. The less widespread and comparatively meager contributions of the American Episcopalians has not been a topic of research by and large. Bridgeman, who in addition to this short book published articles² in the *Historical Magazine of the Episcopal Church and Anglican and Episcopal History*, was himself a missionary in the Israel-Palestine for many years. In addition to his articles in those two journals and the book being reviewed here, he authored *Jerusalem at Worship* (Jerusalem: Syrian Orphanage Press 1932) and *Ancient Christian Churches in the Near East* (New York: Near East Society 1951 or 1952) and *Religious Communities in the Christian East* (Cairo[?]: Nile Mission Press 1940[?]). He held the position of residentiary canon at St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem and was Archdeacon in Syria and the Lebanon. Thus he is

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² For example 'Mediterranean Missions of the Episcopal Church from 1828-1896' in *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* Vol 31:2, 1962, pp 95-126.

well suited to be one of the few voices, albeit not a recent one, contributing to scholarship regarding Episcopal mission in the Middle East.

As a person who lived in the diocese of Jerusalem for roughly five years and who has written both on the history and the present realities there³, one of the most striking features of this short book is the sense of how he is writing about a church in an in-between stage. The archbishop of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East was still, when he was writing, British. But the first Arab bishop, Najib Cuba'in, had recently been ordained as bishop of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Indeed, one of photos contained in the book is of Archbishop MacInnes, wearing his miter and holding a crosier, holding the hand of the newly consecrated Cuba'in in front of St George's Cathedral.⁴ Bridgeman shows us a church that is becoming indigenous, that is the process of shifting from being foreign led to being led by indigenous pastors.

The ecclesiastical structure that Bridgeman knew is also different than the present arrangement (as of 2011). Bridgeman describes to us a curious structure wherein the bishop in Jerusalem is the metropolitan or archbishop, with regional bishops serving under him in Cairo, Sudan, Iran, Cyprus and the Gulf, and Jordan-Syria-Lebanon. As of 1974, Sudan was not even part of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East, rather it became a province within the world-wide Anglican Communion. Also, the ECJME no longer has a metropolitan or archbishop. Rather, the office of presiding bishop can belong to any of the four diocesan bishops. Presently it is Dr. Mouneer Hanna Anis, the bishop of Egypt, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa who is presiding bishop. Before him it was Clive Hanford, who from 1996 to 2007 was bishop of Cyprus and the

³ For instance, 'Morning Prayer, Low Style, in the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem: Church of the Redeemer, Amman, Jordan' in *Anglican and Episcopal History*, Vol 76:3, Sep 2007, and 'The Episcopal Church in Jordan: Identity, Liturgy, and Mission' in *The Journal of Anglican Studies*, FirstView article, 30 July 2010.

⁴ For an account of the installation of the present bishop in Jerusalem, Suhail Dawani, see my article 'The Installation of a Bishop in Jerusalem: The Cathedral Church of St. George the Martyr, 15 April 2007' in *Anglican and Episcopal History* Vol 76:4, Dec, pp 549-554.

Gulf. Finally, the diocese of Jerusalem once again includes all of Israel-Palestine, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The situation is not ideal because Syria and Lebanon do not acknowledge the existence of the State of Israel. Practically speaking, the only place where all the clergy can meet together is Jordan. Members of the church with Lebanese or Syrian citizenship may well live their entire life without being able to ever visit the diocesan cathedral. Finally, if the bishop is not of Israeli citizenship, then there is always the possibility that the Israeli government will deny him the needed visa to enter Israel, and by consequence the contested area of Eastern Jerusalem where the cathedral is located.

Bridgeman was also writing well before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, which led to the decimation of the diocese of Iran to the point where it is, today, barely in existence at all. Bridgeman is able to report, correctly, that Iran, in all the Middle East of his day, was the one place where significant numbers of Muslims converted to Christianity, and we are treated to a photo of 'Iranians of Moslem and Zoroastrian background at worship in C.M.S. Church, Isfahan' (34). One's attention is immediately drawn to the several Persian carpets on the floor of the church. Indeed, the inclusion of various pictures, like All Saints' Anglican Cathedral in Cairo and Emmanuel Church in Tel Aviv, is of particular value. The cover of the book has a photo of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, but before the entire area around the church in East Jerusalem had been built up resulting in the congestion associated with that part of the city today.

The book makes no claim to be an exhaustive piece of scholarship, and Bridgeman approaches the various missionary strategies used by Anglicans and Episcopalians without much criticism. Rather, the book's purpose seems to be to acquaint the average Episcopalian with the connections between his church and the Anglicans of the Middle East. With this goal in mind he provides a short history of how the Anglican churches came into being in the Middle East, and then provides us with a tour of the different dioceses and regions as they existed in the late-50's. He mentions on several occasions the importance of the Good Friday offering, gathered on Good Friday of each year in the congregations of the Epis-

copal Church of the USA, the funds are used to support the Middle Eastern churches. He is showing people what they are getting for their money, to put it bluntly, and while he does not make a hard sell, he implies that more is needed.