

**Bill Nikides**

**21 January 2006**

## ***Evaluating “Insider Movements”: C5 (Messianic Muslims)***

### **General Description:**

The following is a brief summary of the contextualization scale developed by John Travis to describe models of contextualization.

C1- Traditional church using non-indigenous language. Christian churches in Muslim countries entirely removed from the culture. Christians exist as an ethnic/religious minority.

C2- Traditional church using indigenous language. The cultural forms are still far removed from the broader Islamic culture.

C3- Contextualized Christ-centred communities using Muslims’ language and non-religiously indigenous cultural forms. Style of worship, dress, etc., are loosely from the indigenous culture. Local rituals and traditions, if used are purged of religious elements. May meet in a church or a more religiously neutral location. The majority of the congregation is of Muslim background and call themselves Christians.

C4- Contextualized Christ-centred communities using Muslims’ language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms. Similar to C3 except believers worship looks like Muslim worship, they keep the fast, avoid pork and alcohol, use Islamic terms and dress. Community is almost entirely of Muslim background. Though highly contextualized, believers are not seen as Muslims by the Muslim community. Believers call themselves “followers of Isa Al-Masih, Jesus the Messiah.

C5- Christ-centred communities of “Messianic Muslims” who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Believers remain legally and socially within the Islamic community. Aspects of Islam incompatible with the Bible are rejected or if possible, reinterpreted. Believers may remain active in the mosque. Unsaved Muslims may view C5 believers as deviant and may expel them from the Islamic community. If sufficient numbers permit, a C5 mosque may be established.

C6- Small Christ-centred communities of secret/underground believers. These can be individuals or small groups isolated by extreme hostility. Openly sharing faith is typically not attempted.<sup>1</sup>

C5 describes the closest accommodation to Islam that is possible and still encourages the Lordship of Christ. C5 describes a community of Messianic Muslims who have accepted

---

<sup>1</sup> Jim Leffel, “Contextualization: Building Bridges to the Muslim Community” Xenos Christian Fellowship. Leffel adapts a chart provided by Phil Parshall. Interestingly, see also, Saraji Umm Zaid, “Secret War: Protecting yourself, your Family, and your Communities From Missionaries” [www.modernmuslima.com](http://www.modernmuslima.com). The C-scale is a popular tool for attempting to discriminate between contextual approaches to Islam. It however is an inadequate device for several reasons. Like all taxonomies, it can only be an approximation. Local examples often can not be placed within the categories stated. Muslims do not all look alike or dress the same for example. Worship may fuse together elements reflective of Islam with those more like church. Other expressions are difficult to categorize such as house churches. Our use of the C scale reflects more its use as a handy way of addressing some differences. It does not imply that these categories are the best way to understand differences within Muslim outreach.

Jesus as Lord and savior. They remain legally and socially within the ummah. They call themselves Muslims without any reference to their relationship to Christ. Believers are free to remain active in the mosque, although actual practice varies. They perform the salat like any other Muslim; though the content of their prayers may vary. They affirm the shahada (creed), underlining the prophethood of Muhammad and may go on Hajj. They may participate in their own communities for worship. In certain C5 communities, evangelical Christians can legally convert to Islam and join the mosque community.<sup>2</sup> They seem to gather justification for their ideas by drawing parallels between what they do in a Muslim context and the early co-existence of churches and synagogues in the first century, focusing on the apparent lack of coercion concerning Samaritan or Gentile conversions. Joshua Massey, an apologist for Insider movements, goes so far as to posit Paul's "apparent ban on 'religious conversions'"<sup>3</sup> The hope, of course, is that Messianic Muslims will rethink and redefine Islam according to the Bible and interestingly by correcting folk Islam's misinterpretations of the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup>

There appears to be some variation among missiologists concerning what Insider movements and C5 represent. For example, Ralph Winter, in a discussion with Gary Corwin, claims, "No one I know is saying people are to remain in the religion of their birth but merely in the language and culture of their birth."<sup>5</sup> Corwin's response is well-worth reading. "My own acquaintance with the term (insider movement) comes primarily from the sphere of discussions of Islamic contextualization. In that context it is used pretty much as a synonym for C5 contextualization, which includes not only accommodation to language and culture but to actual religious practice (which of course is so intertwined with culture in most Islamic contexts). Advocates of this view argue that continuing to call oneself a Muslim, and long-term participation in mosque worship, including recitation of the creed (shahada) and performance of the ritual prayers (salat), are appropriate." Finally, people such as John Travis consider the possibility of C5 being transitional. He does think that a Muslim follower of Jesus can retain all Muslim practices, including prayer toward Mecca and recitation of the Muslim Creed, but at least considers the possibility of future change. I suppose the point is that he does not consider such a change necessary. He also distinguishes himself from some expressions of C5 by opposing coercive measures to persuade practicing Christians to assume a Muslim identity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization* (Waynesboro: Ga.: Gabriel, 2003) 68-74.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Massey, "Misunderstanding C5 and the Infinite Translatability of Christ: Why C5 has been so misunderstood by its critics" *EMQ Unabridged* online edition (July 2004) 10-12. Massey effort to stretch 1Cor 7:18-20 to justify Muslims remaining Muslims frankly strays badly into isogesis. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* and Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* for an accurate synopsis of the context. Fee is particularly helpful here in focusing our attention appropriately on sociological differences, not competing faith systems.

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Massey, "Misunderstanding C5." Massey assumes that an accurate reading of the Qur'an will lead the reader closer to embracing the Bible.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Winter, "An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements: Responses to the September-October 2005 *Mission Frontiers*" *Mission Frontiers* (January-February 2006) 19. Later in the article Winter admits problems with the syncretism that may be cloaked within calling oneself a Muslim, but does not think it is important enough to argue over.

## Messianic Muslim Testimony:

One of the issues that plagues discussion concerning C5 regards what Messianic Muslims actually believe and practice. Discussion usually takes the form of Westerners discussing the issue at long range. We seldom get introduced to Messianic Muslims first-hand. Stories by proponents of the ideology always quote pseudonymous Messianic Muslims and then go on to describe these anecdotes as proof of the positive drift of the entire movement. We never get a chance to interrogate people directly. This can prove to be an exercise in frustration. The privileged few that are able to travel, in my experience, often meet “Insiders” in staged circumstances. This may not always be the case, but it certainly happens with unhappy frequency.

In my opinion, direct, non-choreographed contact with Messianic Muslims transforms the situation. At a more sophisticated level, blog-spots render a service in letting us read what C5ers think and say for themselves. Admittedly, blogs cannot approach accuracy in describing specific movements in east or south Asia, but they at least allow us to speak to Insiders rather than Outsider proponents and trainers. Here are a few samples: “We messianic Muslims believe: Jesus is not God’s Son and that Trinity is a pagan belief adapted from polytheism. We believe all ‘written scripture’ has some corruption in it and that God keeps the true Bible/Qur’an/Gospel in heaven protected until the end of days when he will return in messianic form to correct mankind’s corruption of religion. We believe Judas’ soul was put into the body of Christ prior to crucifixion as just punishment: ‘the sinner’s sin sacrificed and the sinless saved.’ Judas, having been punished, was forgiven by Allah prior to death. Jesus appeared in resurrected form to show his people what was to come on the last day. Mohammed was the promised counselor and last prophet.<sup>6</sup> Another site called “Messianic Madrassa” introduces the reader to his “Friday School.” What follows is a kind of lesson patterned after something of an Islamic format. Under “what all Muslims believe, he lists, belief in Allah, his angels, his messengers, his books (*Note: not book, but books*), the judgment day, and that all things are good and bad, but ultimately under Allah’s control.<sup>7</sup> You can clearly see that this teacher, while using the “Injil” throughout the lesson, grants authority to non-biblical texts. In what sense can that approach be considered biblical?

On the other hand, Al Murreddin sounds a good deal more conventional. “We believe he (Jesus) is the Son of God!!, he was in essence the same as Allah, just as we would say the ‘son of the road is a traveler (as mentioned in the Qur’an). That is a traveler is in essence the son of the road.”<sup>8</sup> Al Murreddin intrigues me. His blog also mentions with regard to Jesus, “We follow his teachings as Mohammed has done.” How can any unbiased study of Mohammed yield the conclusion that the founder of Islam actually followed the teachings of Jesus? This reveals an unfortunate tendency within the ideology to at the very least mislead. The blogger goes on to say, “Mohammed schooled from the Torah and the Gospels-so do we.” This is an enormous distortion. It ignores the overwhelming testimony of the Qur’an and the Bible. Mohammed’s exposure to the old Testament and New Testament does not equate to his following Jesus. Either the blogger

---

<sup>6</sup> “Messianic Muslims.” *The Narrow* (10 January 2005) [www.thenarrow.org](http://www.thenarrow.org).

<sup>7</sup> Sheikh Yahia, “Messianic Madrassa, (Friday School)” (2003) [www.webspawner.com](http://www.webspawner.com). The emphasis is mine.

<sup>8</sup> [Http://messianicmuslims.blogspot.com](http://messianicmuslims.blogspot.com).

is sincerely ignorant of the facts or he is intentionally misleading in his attempt to erect a bridge between Jesus and Islam. Furthermore, he follows a familiar pattern in citing extremely dubious interpretations of Qur'anic verses in support of the bible and Jesus. He quotes a translation of the Qur'an itself written by an outcast of Islam, Mohammed Ali, part of a heretical sect of Islam. Do Christians welcome aberrant Bible translations in order to persuade us of Islam? This practice is what Muslim apologists employ when they quote the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses to prove that the paraclete is really a prophecy concerning Mohammed. Al Murreidin quotes Sura 19:33-34: "when Allah said: 'O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to myself.'" This is meant obviously to invoke the image of the Resurrection, but it denies the context. The following lines refer the reader to the Jews charge of blasphemy, but Allah will clear Jesus and bring him back for judgment on the Day of Resurrection. This Day is not the 3<sup>rd</sup> day but the final day. The Qur'an elsewhere completely denies Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus is indeed raised up but not following a crucified death, according to the Qur'an. Many texts are thereby twisted in order to mislead Muslims into following Jesus, the exemplary Muslim.

Finally, an even closer examination of the blog gives a distinct impression that it may have been written, not by someone from a Muslim cultural background, but perhaps an American, a westerner at the very least. Western Christians devoted to this line of thinking do attempt to pass themselves off as Muslims in mosques etc. There is little doubt why Muslims accuse western missionaries of duplicity.

Anecdotes from missionaries abound. An experienced missionary with long Muslim experience, Harold Steward noted: "I have recently spoken to Messianic Muslims, who confidently and vigorously deny the physical death, bodily resurrection and ascension of our dear Lord. How precious are these truths to god's people, which we must defend."<sup>9</sup> I received an E-Mail from a friend working as a missionary in an Asian country. He passed on to me a portion of a conversation that another friend had with two Insider leaders who had been leading a movement among Muslims for 10-15 years. The Christian asked a series of questions to the leaders. Here is part of that exchange. Do you believe the Qur'an is the Word of Allah? Yes. Do you believe that Mohammed is the prophet of Allah? Yes. What is the difference between you and Muslims? The only difference between our faiths is that Jesus is our savior while Mohammed is the savior of Muslims. Otherwise we are the same." Those who wish to encourage Insider movements sometimes describe these as transitional movements. Interestingly, those who teach the methodology generally do not term it as transitional. None state that it has to be transitional. Furthermore, what about these two leaders? How long should a leader who is introducing more and more people to Jesus cling to these non-biblical ideas? If the leaders themselves have not distinguished between the radically different natures of Islam and the Bible, what hope do we have of a happy outcome for a national movement? In my own experience, I have interviewed many messianic Muslims in Asian contexts. Among the leaders to whom I spoke, few showed satisfactory understanding of Christology and a host of other crucial biblical fields. Let me just give one example. I met one such leader, who had been a believer seven years. To my delight, he quickly affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, Son of God, and in some sense (his words) God. I had never heard anything so encouraging. I asked one last question before leaving. Who made

---

<sup>9</sup> Harrold Steward, "Holy Spirit Promised by God's Dear Son" [www.biblestories.stellaris.com.au](http://www.biblestories.stellaris.com.au).

Jesus? The reply, God made Jesus of course. To this young man, Jesus was set apart from ordinary humans, but as he said, “There can only be one God.”

### **Assessment:**

**Outside-sponsored, Insider movements:** Some of its opponents and many of its proponents would like us to think, that it is some spontaneous outbreak of the Spirit. There may be truth in this. There certainly have been indications of a movement of the Spirit. God does seem to be moving in the Islamic world. On the other hand, other expressions of contextualization are also demonstrating significant visible results, so one would not wish to confine claims to the Spirit’s activity to C5 alone. Sadly, at the same time as legitimate fruit is borne, counterfeit fruit also appears. Recent events in one Asian country simultaneously disclose strong evidence of a gospel awakening and the devastating disclosure of a scandal involving the intentional misleading of people into seeing a movement where none really exists. I do not insinuate that what is taking place within C5 can be dismissed wholesale as either Satanic or fraudulent. I simply assert that its claims must be approached with some caution. The same would hold true for any movement. Satanic activity is to Spirit-led activity as idolatry is to Creation. The world manifests the wonders of Creation and the wreckage of the Fall.

Furthermore, claims to indigeneity notwithstanding, C5 is a reflection of **intentional western missiology, western training, and often a great deal of western money**. Mission agencies expend a great deal of effort to promote “Insider” methods. Gary Corwin focuses on the problem with this. “On an even sadder level, it advocates-in the name of cultural appropriateness-a new form of western missiological imperialism into contexts where local believers are already believing, living, and applying the Gospel!”<sup>10</sup> Proponents often portray C5 as a heroic movement fighting uphill against uninformed opposition. This has not been my experience, though I do not doubt that opposition exists; I am a critic of it. In contradiction to the heroic image, some I have had personal contact with use financial incentives to keep insiders inside. Others counsel less mature C5ers not to leave, even when they desire to or their conscience dictates that they must. I appreciated John Travis speaking of the possible transitional nature of the movement, but all too often we have missionaries and national leaders preventing it. “In fact we have found at times ...that we need to encourage the person not to reject his culture and thereby burn bridges with his past.”<sup>11</sup> Missionaries and C5 national leaders have used seemingly every means (seniority, theology and sometimes money) to keep believers from leaving C5. C5ers are often not encouraged to attend seminars or other forums where alternative understandings might be suggested. Quarantine is imposed to prevent contamination of the movement. Where this is practiced (it is not universal), it puts the lie to any talk of transition.

In truth, there is very little in place that would allow for easy transition. Leaders I know will not even allow Insiders to associate with visible believers at all, at times docking pay for such infractions. It may look “native”, but it owes more to missiological

---

<sup>10</sup> Gary Corwin, “An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements: Responses to the September-October 2005 *Mission Frontiers*” *Mission Frontiers* (January-February 2006) 18.

<sup>11</sup> Andy Butcher, “Radical Missionary Approach Produces ‘Messianic Muslims’ Who Claim to Retain their Islamic Identity” [www.beliefnet.com](http://www.beliefnet.com). The author cites YWAM sources.



laboratories in the west than it does to Asia. This is how it works: westerners are trained and indoctrinated to prefer C5 as an advisable methodology. They go into the mission field and indoctrinate nationals. Leaders emerge among nationals who then often are employed by westerners to evangelize and form communities of believers. Bible study methods, such as Manuscript Bible Study are taught by parachurch organizations that help the nationals love Jesus without having to give up Islam. Missionaries return home with stories of breakthroughs, omitting uncomfortable details, to raise more funds that fuel the growth. At least in its more extreme expressions, it smacks of a new kind of neo-colonialism imposed on the “natives.”

**Reactive to perceived failure:** John Piper notes a John Travis comment, “We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wider scale.” Piper responded, “They have concluded that the gap between the glory of Christ and the felt needs of their neighbours, or between the glory of Christ and the religion of the nationals, is simply too great for the fullness of God to overcome.”<sup>12</sup> Piper sees this as a failure to trust the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it may signal this at times, but I think it points to a different problem. Missionaries have personally experienced the barriers posed by westernized Christianity. “I believe that our best hope for reaching the vast Muslim populations of the world is to plant flourishing churches of Muslim background believers who remain culturally relevant to Muslim society.”<sup>13</sup> This seems fair enough. The problem is with the proposed cure, not so much the diagnosis of the disease. I believe that this probably has less to do with trust than it does with defective theology that produces extreme and unbalanced solutions. Theologies are not just thought up, but lived out. The rationale for adopting C5 (cultural barriers) would also suggest C3-C4, a move that removes the threat of a slide into syncretism. Insisting on C5 when C3-C4 are plausible alternatives indicates theological deficiency. Whatever C3-C4 possibly surrender in terms of community acceptance is more than made up for by greater biblical and theological soundness.

**Justification based on dubious biblical and theological grounds:** 1 Corinthians 7:20 (“Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him”) is used repeatedly to justify remaining in Islam. The context however does not fit as it deals with domestic circumstances like marriage. To drag an application from that to a question of the endorsement of another religion does violence to the text. Furthermore, it ignores the vast array of biblical injunctions to avoid other religions. The Bible is saturated with injunctions to avoid syncretism and idolatry. C5s reply with the situation in 2 Kings 5 concerning Naaman worshipping at the temple of Rimmon.<sup>14</sup> I fail to see how this trumps anything. One vague, unexplained reference does not counteract the weight of the entire

---

<sup>12</sup> John Piper, “An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements: Responses to the September-October 2005 *Mission Frontiers*” 16f.

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Dutch, “Should Muslims Become Christians?” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17.1 (Spring 2000) 15. He justifies remaining with Islam by citing Islam’s “high view” of Jesus and “previous scriptures.”

<sup>14</sup> See John Travis, “Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa: A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17.1 (Spring 2000).

Old Testament which condemns false religion.<sup>15</sup> As Woods adds, we do not know whether Naaman's freedom to go to the temple is not transitional. Arguments like this from silence are poor pegs from which to hang one's methodological hat. Insiders also attempt to distinguish between idolatry and monotheistic religions like Islam. This however does not clear up their difficulty because the Bible equates true religion with covenantal revelation. To equate biblical revelation and products of general revelation and human fallenness such as Islam is to erect a bridge to syncretism not incarnational, contextual witness. The Bible never stops with a simple, generic monotheism. Perhaps this simply indicates the habit of C5 and similar ideologies to read the Bible as though it were an anthology of quotations rather than one irreducible story. Standing on the other side of the equation are passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, counseling believers against being unequally yoked to unbelievers. As Woods again notes, the context is believers from pagan backgrounds continuing to worship in their former context. The counter argument that Islam does not worship idols is not completely accurate. Islam does not worship the Triune God, hence their worship must be seen as idolatry.

**Dismissive of historical, doctrinal standards:** Piper again asks, "Are the essentials of biblical faith embraced by new converts to Christ, and do they make them known in love to others? For example, do they embrace and make known that the Bible is the only inspired and infallible written revelation of God, and that Christ is God and was crucified for sin and raised from the dead above all authority?"<sup>16</sup> It would be misleading and even impossible to lump all C5s together. The standards of doctrinal teaching vary considerably. John Travis, for example, states that believers must never stray from core components of the gospel to include Jesus' divinity.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, to answer the question honestly, we must conclude that a great deal of evidence suggests that the teaching is far from adequate. We know this because more and more messianic Muslims are being questioned without the presence of western interpreters concerning their doctrinal views and we are learning a great deal from what they say. Secondly, we know it because the writing of western missionaries is often terribly defective as well. Again and again, we are introduced to messianic Muslims who place their trust in sacred "books."

C5 missiologists appear to place the bar too low in an attempt to keep the church from placing it too high. They prove the genuineness of C5 by stating, "Of those we know in these groups, true evidence of the good news is seen: they are admitting their sins to each other, they are forgiving each other, they are at peace, they pray for the sick in Jesus' name, they actively share Christ with their neighbours and relatives, there is no financial incentive to believe, they meet together in their small groups and they are giving to the poor (though they themselves are quite poor!). New leaders are being raised up."<sup>18</sup> There is much to be thankful for here. It would be a great blessing anywhere. Unfortunately, it does not match my and others' first-hand experiences with Insiders, where they do not meet together to study the good news, are not at peace with their neighbours due to their own coercive practices and there is an abundant financial

---

<sup>15</sup> Scott Woods, 192.

<sup>16</sup> John Piper.

<sup>17</sup> John Travis, "Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa" 55.

<sup>18</sup> John and Anna Travis, "An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements" 21.

incentive to believe. Second, the comments are instructive both by what they focus on and what they leave out. First, they leave out the visible church and everything that goes with it. Dutch states that the denial of Christ crosses the line into syncretism, but that surely cannot be enough.<sup>19</sup> Denying Christ as what? What constitutes denial? It seems that denial should include the denial of Christ's exclusivity as well as that of his revealed Word. It is a denial of essential truths such as his membership in the Godhead, eternal pre-existence etc. It is a denial of his visible body, the catholic (Universal) visible church. It is a denial of the standards for faith and life laid down by the Bible, the essence of which contradicts every other faith system.

Travis in fact sees the entering of Christianity (whether that is what it is termed or something more contextual e.g. "follower of Isa, etc.") as an extra step. At the same time, he focuses on behaviour. This is of course good news, but it is not enough. Christology and Trinity are not disposable, cultural relics. They are core components for the believers. Faithful biblical churches believe these things. It is unfortunate that fine historians from the free church tradition such as Andrew Walls honour the past, but not the core doctrinal development of the past, such as Trinity and Christology.<sup>20</sup> It of course is likely that a new believer will not know much, but she must be disciplined in all truth. The use of Manuscript Bible Studies and other inductive tools without the instruction of the church is no way to learn these. Either messianic Muslims are left to their own devices from the start or they receive initial training at the hands of missionaries. This is cold comfort given the fact that the people teaching them already apparently devalue doctrinal distinctives. It is apparently, in contradiction to all of the rhetoric about community versus western individualism, driven by a strange kind of modernist autonomy. It is about individuals' interest in Jesus, but their unwillingness to break free of their culture. I mention this because so much of C5 is driven by cultural anthropologists committed to the conversion of entire peoples. It is ironic that the same people cordon off the insider community from the larger church where they belong. Insiders claim that their beliefs are not accepted and that is the problem. As I see it, a larger problem is in the deliberate efforts of western workers to quarantine messianic Muslims from any instruction coming from the larger church. The fear of contamination behind so much of this is just further proof of the defective ecclesiology resident in the movement's proponents.

Attempts to dismiss the gravity of this by trying to compare C5 with the early church is intellectually and historically unsupportable. "It is interesting to ponder how comfortable James, Peter, and the other Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem Council would

---

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Dutch, 19.

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Church History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*. His work is outstanding at showing the difficult process of incarnating biblical truth in the world's cultures. It does value the past and out connection as believers to it. As he says, "We belong to the ancestors." On the other hand, his use of the motif of a space visitor alighting in different time periods overlooks the sense of great continuity within the church. He also runs the risk of trivializing great universal doctrines such as Trinity by "pigeon-holing" them far too much as local reactions to theological problems. He also does not assert their superiority to the false stories of the past, such as Arianism, subordinationalism, and adoptionism. It creates the impression that doctrines are almost bits of anthropological, archeological digs. A survey of C5 literature demonstrates an intellectual reliance on Walls along with Kraft, Dunn, and Bosch as well as a pronounced neglect of reformed or evangelically conservative sources.



have been with the language of later Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds.”<sup>21</sup> Almost by fiat, Massey erases the entire historicity and value of the church. We can call it the “Rome wasn’t built in a day” argument.<sup>22</sup> Neither were cults. In the absence of clear teaching that connects messianic Muslims to the Bible and the universal, visible church through time, what safeguards are there to prevent C5 from becoming something that is a syncretistic amalgam of Islam and liberal evangelicalism? So much is up for grabs as far as C5 proponents are concerned. Trinity, the nature of Christ, church are all challenged. This is done at times in the name of separating the “real” message of the Bible from its Greco-Roman, western trappings. It shows a profound lack of understanding of early church history and far too little trust of the traditions of the church. Massey’s interpretations are particularly disturbing, casting doubt on the historical process as he sees Gentile Fathers distorting the original gospel message with their Greek categories, philosophical leanings etc. To the contrary, history teaches us that far from distorting the biblical message, Gentile (as he calls them) church fathers fought with courage and integrity to protect the biblical message from distortion from the machinations of Gnostics and Arians. Massey’s poor and dated grasp of church history undermines trust in the received tradition of the church.

Without telling you that he is doing it, Massey takes us away from biblical orthodoxy. His jaundiced view of the church and its early history is one key reason. In this sense, he seems to have taken inspiration from liberal church historians like Harnack. He also harnesses his opinions to those of minority positions concerning biblical studies such as Dunn, but does not seem interested in interacting with the majority view. Most vexing is his habit of stating positions as though no informed scholarship would dare disagree. His work repeatedly questions the veracity of the process resulting in the Trinitarian and Christological formulas. Along the way, he with Dunn and others discounts pre-existence in the texts that most current evangelical scholarship accept.<sup>23</sup> In doing so, he sides with classical opponents of the church such as the Ebionites.<sup>24</sup> Somehow his unorthodox views do not trouble him. Astonishingly, he even thinks that historical theologians would see it his way if they, like he already has, sat in the place of second temple Jews. I do not know how familiar he is with the historical disciplines, but it is normal for any competent historian or historical theologian to do what he seems to find revolutionary. Furthermore, there is abundant evidence that a great many scholars, upon reflection, do not agree. His treatment of Trinity is equally imbalanced and wrong-headed. Far from witnessing an alien Greek takeover of the church and its doctrines, church history describes precisely the opposite situation from that claimed by Massey. Arius and other threats to Trinity wished to take the church in the direction of Greek

---

<sup>21</sup> Joshua Massey, “Misunderstanding C5 and the Infinite Translatability of Christ: Why C5 Has Been so Misunderstood by its Critics” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* Unabridged online edition (July 2004) 2. He cites as support Rick Brown, Colin Brown, and J.D.G. Dunn.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Joshua Massey, “Misunderstanding C5 and the Infinite Translatability of Christ” 2.

<sup>23</sup> Compare his comments concerning the contents of verses such as 1Peter 1:3 with Luke Timothy Johnson, “God Ever New, Ever the Same: The Witness of James and Peter” *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology* A. Andrew Das, ed. (London: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 221, and Robert Letham’s *The Trinity* 387. Contra Massey’s statements, these scholars place the verse in its clearly Triadic context.

<sup>24</sup> Joshua Massey, “Misunderstanding C5” 6.

philosophy. Orthodox spokesmen such as Athanasius preserved, perhaps imperfectly, the original intent.

He claims to be Christ-centered rather than church-centered, creating a false dichotomy. Christ is the head of the church, not outside the church. One must conclude that he ultimately endorses some other faith. “C5 Muslim believers are, of course, rethinking and redefining Islam according to the authority of the Bible. Some are even calling their Muslim countrymen ‘Back to the Qur’an,’ since most biblical Islamic beliefs are more rooted in Islamic traditions (hadith) or in poorly interpreted verses of the Qur’an.”<sup>25</sup> This can not be seen in any other light legitimately than syncretism. Far from the church misunderstanding C5, Massey and other badly miss what the Bible really says. Had he done so, he would not have accused his opponents of being Judaizers. He would have looked in the mirror. Andrew Walls provides an excellent contrast to C5. he notes that converted Maoris from New Zealand evidenced “repentance, a clean break with the past, a turning toward the God of the Scriptures.” They did all of this enduring openly the humiliation of their enemies. He adds, “They turned to Christ when they had come to an end of themselves and of the resources of their society.”<sup>26</sup>

Timothy George illuminates modern anxiety over the church itself and encourages us back to our real roots. He cites the modernist Walter Bauer’s seminal teaching in the 1930s, depicting the emerging mainstream orthodoxy of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries as but one strand of a very diffuse Christian movement.<sup>27</sup> Bauer suspected that this one obscure strand simply won out over the other equally legitimate claimants. As George notes, this thesis has become the prevailing paradigm for modern understanding. He contrasts this with what H.E.W. Turner called the pattern of truth that was discernable through the early history of the church, the *depositum fidei*. It is a pattern embedded as George puts it like genetic code into the inspired Bible. The early church recognized its patterns as it grew in conflict with challenges to this pattern from Gnostics, Arians and the like. It taught the church to recognize the difference between Scriptural truth and heresy. It recognized it not because of some power play on the part of the leadership, but because as it grew in Scriptural competence, it was able to clearly distinguish between truth and error. This ability to discern truth from falsehood was a key role for the church. This is worth considering as we struggle to come to grips with ideas. We have the responsibility for embracing the truth as it has been faithfully preserved by the Holy Spirit. When it is obscured or corrupted as it was in the late Middle Ages, the church is responsible for confronting and refuting the error. “A Church that cannot distinguish heresy from truth, or even worse, a church that no longer thinks this is worth doing, is a Church which has lost its right to bear witness to the transforming Gospel of Jesus Christ who declared himself to be not only the Way and the Life but also the Truth.”<sup>28</sup>

**Deceptive practices:** Piper asks, “Are the former religious behaviours of converts to Christ, which they may retain, communicating regularly a falsehood about what the convert means and believes? Are the words being used by converts that mislead people

---

<sup>25</sup> Joshua Massey, “Misunderstanding C5” 14.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-cultural Process* 23.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy George, “The Pattern of Christian Truth” *First Things* 154. (June-July 2005) [www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com).

<sup>28</sup> Timothy George, “The Pattern of Christian Truth.”

rather than make the truth plain? Are missionaries and converts following Paul's commitment to candor: 'But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God' (2Co 4:2)? People go for life to the mosque, retain a self-identity as Muslims, pray the salat, pronounce the shahada and go on Hajj. They may eventually be seen as heretical Muslims by their communities, but they present themselves as mainstream or even "completed" Muslims, as though Islam has room for a fully-realized Christ (which it does not). Apologists for C5 counter the deception charge with a variety of means. Believers change the words in their prayers and creed (but no one in the mosque can hear them). In any case, they can claim that Paul did the same sort of thing in Athens.<sup>29</sup>

The meaning of terms such as prophet are so broadened that there is room for both Jesus and Mohammed. The problem of course is that it is unbiblical and unethical to do so. Words cannot intentionally mislead. It does not matter what the C5er thinks "prophet" means. When he is presenting himself as a Muslim, he must adopt the Muslim's definition of the term. Furthermore, if he wishes to claim the Bible is his ultimate dictionary, Mohammed would never pass muster. Deception is a regular part of the program, it just seems to be a lower priority because it seems to work. This is not to say that the process of someone coming to Christ and forsaking the former ways has to be instantaneous. It may take a long time. The point is that there is a targeted end to these practices. Paul became all things to all people, he became like one under the law to save those under the Law(1CO 9), but unlike C5 he publicly announced his allegiance to Christ. There was no doubt concerning what he really stood for. Messianic Islam in contrast fosters confusion.

Practices such as the salat are not seen for what they really are. As Warren Chastain points out, the salat is not simply seen as a prayer, but more accurately as a liturgical act, worship. To accept this worship is to implicitly reject Jewish and Christian because worship is exclusive.<sup>30</sup> To perform the salat "is a statement of allegiance and of community. He joins with Muslims all over the world in facing the same centre; all his words and actions, except for some trivial differences among different schools of thought, are the same. Thus he expresses his spiritual unity with the community of Mohammed."<sup>31</sup> It is therefore no wonder that other believers to include C4s are often incredibly offended by C5 practice. What outsiders such as cultural anthropologists see as community practice, real insiders, the indigenous people (whether they be Muslim, messianic Muslim, Isai, or Christian) see it as an act of worship and primary allegiance. Additionally, the fact that some Muslims do not really take the theological ramifications of the faith seriously, does not excuse this kind of deceit.

**Confusion over identity:** Are messianic Muslims, related to Muslims or Christians? Missionaries are quick to associate them with Christians. Rebecca Lewis, for example,

---

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Dutch, 17. He seems to gloss over Paul's subsequent and very public call for repentance on the part of the Athenians.

<sup>30</sup> Warren C. Chastain, "Should Christians Pray the Muslim Salat?" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12.3 (July-September 1995) 161. He adds, "Are some modern missionaries trying to perform a bit of magic by turning the lead of Muslim salat into the gold of Christian worship?"

<sup>31</sup> Warren C. Chastain, 163.

thinks that “the pre-existing network becomes the believing community or ‘church’, while expatriate workers avoid pulling people into new, artificial networks, no matter how contextualized. How can they be in church if what is artificial is the church? If they are insiders and the Church is an outsider, how can they be in the church?”<sup>32</sup> Likewise Bernard Dutch calls his work the establishment of the church, but then wonders, “How and when do Muslim background Believers become part of the worldwide body.?”<sup>33</sup> Well, if they already are a church, why does he ask the question? One would think the question was unnecessary. The confusion stems from the confusion of thought as the C5 movement attempts to avoid any categorization that forces it to submit to a larger body. The description of C5 that it prefers, “movements to Christ” sums up the problem. Where is a movement? Proponents of the methodology say, “exactly” as though the attempt to locate it is misguided, but they ultimately miss the point. As Edmund Clowney said, *ekklesia* and *qahal* are Greek and Hebrew terms signifying actual assemblies of god’s people, unified under the covenant with God.<sup>34</sup> Clowney also illuminates the source of some of the difficulty in how to look at the tension between “church” as we understand it traditionally and the way the proponents of C5 use it. As he explains, a new idea of church emerged out of liberal ecumenical concern in the 1950s. “The church had been defined as becoming rather than being, it was not a company of the redeemed, but a ministry of redemption. The incarnate Christ as well as the church exists in act, not in being.”<sup>35</sup>

To say you are a church implies things about you, one of which is that you can not simultaneously belong to two different faith systems. The church, unlike her apparent characterization cannot be designated on our terms. God established it and the Bible defines it. To say that you constitute a Muslim church is a contradiction in terms. Muslims have the same kind of problem with the movement. Because messianic Muslims are willing to say that there is no God but Allah and that Mohammed is his prophet, that creed entitles them to call themselves Muslims, but knowledgeable Muslims know that they are false Muslims masquerading under false pretenses in order to subvert the true beliefs of Muslims. In a sense, the movement has positioned itself to slip through the crack between Christianity with its accountability and Islam. What then does that make C5? Additionally, what do Insiders think the Church really is? I suspect at the heart of this lie theological problems again. Lewis’s justification for her statement is to once again invoke the early church and Judaism. She states, “Jews kept going to the Temple” as though the covenantal, revelational circumstances of the early church did not matter.

**Looking at things backward:** In contrast to much literature by or in support of C5, the goal of contextualization is not to make the gospel as Islamic as possible.<sup>36</sup> It is as Scott Woods says, to communicate the unchanging truth to an Islamic audience so that it makes sense to them. In other words, it is a bridge from Islam not toward it. Paul mentioned Greek poets in Athens so that he could build a bridge **from** philosophy to Christ. The

---

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Lewis, “An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements” 22.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard Dutch, 22.

<sup>34</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 1995) 30f.

<sup>35</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* 16f.

<sup>36</sup> Scott Woods, “A Biblical Look at C5 Muslim Evangelism” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 2003) 189.

issue was not agreement with Stoicism or Epicureanism, but repentance and faith. Islam cannot be the believer's home, the heavenly Jerusalem is. It would be as if the Bible in contrast to Hebrews 12 commanded our movement from Zion back to Sinai.<sup>37</sup> This backward orientation could be easily rectified by embracing C3-C4, contextually sensitive expressions of the new life. C4 would afford ample transition time, but would force C5s to distinguish their beliefs from Muslims.

**Out of step with most of the church:** the Insider movement often presents itself as a mainstream proposal. Detailed treatments such as those of Joshua Massey, present critics of the movement as either uninformed or mired in an obsolescent past. Others use guilt by attempting to convince the critics that people will go to hell because they did not go along with C5 or at least keep silent. The fact is that "the vast majority of highly experienced mission leaders today would reject the idea that remaining in one's worship context as a Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist is a viable response for true followers of Christ."<sup>38</sup> Massey's and Brown's articles, for example, present highly detailed arguments, but almost no references point to any dissenting opinions. We are left with the idea that theirs' is the only legitimate choice. In other words, the contentiousness of their ideas are masked from the reader.

It is also out of step with the church because it is divisive. Western supporters of C5 often point the finger of division at anyone indigenous or western that disagrees openly with their movement. On the other hand, it has at times undertaken actions that they know will antagonize the national MBB (Muslim Background Believer) church congregations. Initiatives to create a Muslim-oriented Bible translation that deliberately omits "Son of God" from the text is one such example. In one such case, a satisfactory Muslim-sensitive Bible translation already existed and was being used in such a way that it served as a common text uniting the believing communities throughout the country. The C5-sponsored Bible was and is seen now as not only improper but hugely divisive. In this case, the C5 community may claim to desire fraternal relations, but their actions have antagonized the visible body of believers and convinced them that C5 is nothing better than a cult, a new religion of sub-biblical members. This more than justifies the charge of syncretism.

**It repeats avoidable mistakes of the past:** The church has always been tempted to avoid the broad daylight. Sometimes it could not be avoided. Catacombs were in a way the ventricles of the emerging church. The darkness however also contained its risks. Roman Catholicism grew among the barbarian tribes, greasing the rails of progress through such an expansive catholicity that pagans could feel at home without the trauma of fundamental change. In doing so, the church lost its way for a thousand years. It is an all too human solution. As Joy Davidman described the relationship between Jesus and his followers, "They wanted him to save their lives. He said, 'He that loseth his life for my

---

<sup>37</sup> Contra Joshua Massey's multi-part article, "Living Like Jesus, a Torah-Observant Jew: Delighting in God's Law for Incarnational Witness to Muslims" *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (Spring-Summer 2004). Massey's justification for once again living under the law (missionaries included) is that we can delight in it. Calvin's third use of the law notwithstanding, Massey's articles seem to turn Galatians on its head. His opinions seem to owe a great deal to Jewish and messianic Jewish sources.

<sup>38</sup> Gary Corwin, "An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements: Responses to the September-October 2005 *Mission Frontiers* 17.



sake shall find it.' This is a hard saying. It was hard for the disciples; they didn't want a suffering, dying, crucified God; they wanted a God alive and victorious, with priests and kings and Roman governors kneeling at his feet. It was hard for the martyrs; they didn't want a painful death, they wanted to be happy ordinary citizens with wives and children and a small business. And it is hard for us. We don't want a Christianity that demands we give up our lives; we'd prefer a Christianity that would show us an easy way of keeping them. Though we often couple death and resurrection in one phrase, we are seldom quite as sure of our promised resurrection as we are of our inevitable death. And we hesitate to gamble our lives on Jesus' promise."<sup>39</sup>

Proponents of C5, while earnestly attempting to carry out the great Commission would be wise to heed the experience of the church. St. Cyprian, the third century church father offers sage advice to those who endeavor to live in a fallen world. "Persecution alone is not to be feared, nor the advances which are made in open attack to overwhelm and cast down the servants of God. The enemy is more to be feared when he creeps up secretly, when deceiving us under the appearance of peace he steals forward by hidden approaches, from which too he receives the name of serpent. He invented heresies and schisms with which to overthrow the faith, to corrupt the truth, to divide unity. Those whom he cannot hold in the blindness of the old way, he circumvents and deceives by the error of a new way. He snatches men from the church itself. This happens, most beloved brethren, because there is no return to the source of truth, and the Head is not sought, and the doctrine of the heavenly master is not kept."<sup>40</sup>

We all have to live in the tension between the need for safeguarding the body and maintaining the faith. We lose our way ultimately when we allow excessive concern for the former to compromise our commitment to the latter. In this sense, I think C5 represents a considerable, and in my mind, unwarranted risk.

## Conclusion:

C5 claims the desire to avoid syncretism, but this is truly attempting to close the barn door after cows has already gone. Its identity crisis with its divided loyalties, deceptive religious practices, long-term unbiblical theology, and separatist initiatives such as a redundant Muslim-background Bible all are convincing proof of its syncretism.

On the other hand, there is much to work with. Messianic Islam might in fact best be seen as a seeker movement. Classified as such, we can see C5 communities as an excellent springboard for biblical C3-C4 movements.

A careful examination of C5 movements does suggest the critical need on the part of western churches to assess the role of western missionaries engaged in Muslim-focused ministry. Initiatives such as C5 could scarcely have arrived at the present point without the active financial support of both churches and individuals. The presence and practices of C5 suggest that it would be in the direct interest of the worldwide church for it to more directly engage in participation in the missionary endeavor. The church and the

---

<sup>39</sup> Joy Davidman, *Smoke on the Mountain: An Interpretation of the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) 134f. The quotation gains a certain poignancy given the author's Jewish background.

<sup>40</sup> St. Cyprian, "The Unity of the Church" *Saint Cyprian Treatises* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1958) 95ff.

field are far too distant from one another. Consequently, far greater accountability is called for than has been thus far manifest. I once met a former C5 national on a visit to an Asian location. In the course of conversation, he enquired whether he might ask me a question. After assuring him that he could ask anything he wished, he asked “Does the money spent in our country on missions come from drugs and prostitution?” I was astounded and alarmed. I quickly stated that within the ecclesial tradition that I represent and as an officer of that church, I could assure him that the money came from hard-working, generous believers that were committed to seeing the gospel flourish in his culture. I then asked him what prompted him to pose such a question. His answer is the most revealing thing of all. He said that since so much of the money was so poorly and unethically used in the field, and since those that donated it had apparently little interest in its distribution, they must be ashamed of how it was raised.

This to be clear is not a reason for churches and believers to back away from the work. To the contrary, it is a compelling reason to be all the more involved.