

Biblical and Historical Reflection on Ecclesiology and Insider Movements

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Introduction

The explosive growth of the church in the non-Western world is raising many new questions regarding the doctrine of the church. Philip Jenkins in his book, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*¹ has reminded us of the vigorous growth of Christianity in the non-Western world. Jenkins predicts, for example, that if current trends continue that by the year 2050 six countries in the world will have 100 million Christians or more and only one of the six (the USA) is located in the industrialized West.² Within the next twenty-five years there will be more Christians in Africa than in the traditional heartland of Christianity, Europe. Christianity is also exploding in the midst of the heartland of Hinduism, Buddhism and Chinese religions. In these contexts the very word “Christian” has strong connotations and associations with Western culture or foreign-ness. For many of them the words “Christian” and “Church” call to mind British imperialism or colonialism or worse. In short, the phrase “Christian church” may carry very negative, cultural connotations whereas Christ may not. This reality has caused many to re-think the very nature and structure of the church as it has been known in the Christian West. This re-examination of the doctrine of ecclesiology is certainly a welcome and important development since the doctrine has often become unnecessarily tethered to Western expressions of the church which may not always be appropriate for the growing church in the non-Western world. The purpose of this paper is to reflect historically on ecclesiology in light of the emerging and growing phenomena known as insider movements.

Insider Movements

The term “insider movements” is a broad term referring to a range of emerging expressions of groups of people who are trusting in Christ as their Lord and Savior but choose to remain culturally and religiously identified as a Hindu or a Muslim. They are referred to as “insider” believers because they are following Christ within the religious and cultural structures of non-Christian religions.

Herbert Hofer in his book, *Churchless Christianity* has compiled hard data from people living in rural Tamil Nadu (S. India) and in urban Chennai (Madras) who are devoted followers of Christ who have not joined a Christian church and, indeed, remain within the Hindu community. He does not call them Christians, but *Jesu bhakta*, i.e. devotees of Jesus. This is no small movement. In fact, Hofer’s research suggests that there are more non-baptized followers of Jesus in Madras than there are formal, visible Christians in the traditional sense.³ The Hindu *bhakti* movement allows for Hindus to

¹ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, (New York: OUP, 2002). See also, Dana Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 24, 2 (April 2000): 50-58.

² Philip Jenkins, 89, 90.

³ Herbert Hofer, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001) 96. Hofer cites at least 156,000 “non-baptized believers in Christ” (30,000 high caste, i.e. Brahmin, 70,000 middle castes, i.e. Kshyatriya and Vaisya, 56,000 Scheduled castes, i.e. Sudra and Dalit). See Appendix II - V, pp. 277-352.

worship a particular god, so it is not particularly scandalizing in the Hindu community for a Hindu to choose to worship Jesus – even exclusively Jesus. These *Jesu bhakta* who follow an *ishta devata* theology and thereby maintain their cultural and social particularities as Hindus.⁴ If asked, they continue to call themselves Hindus. They will not identify themselves with the term ‘Christian’ and many do not attend any church.⁵ This unwillingness to identify with the church or with baptism is not due, according to Hoefler, to any shame about following Christ, but due to strong cultural associations surrounding the terms and the range of their semantic meaning.

This attitude towards the Christian church is not a new development in India. Brahmabandhav Upadhyay, the well-known Bengali Brahmin who converted to Christ in the late 19th century once remarked that, prior to his conversion, he thought that a “Christian” meant someone with white skin who wears pants, eats meat and uses a fork and knife.⁶ Since he was an Indian and would never wear pants, eat meat or use a fork and knife, it seemed, he was forever disqualified from being a Christian. But he was nevertheless drawn compellingly to the person of Christ. Eventually, Brahmabandhav was converted to Christ and was baptized in February, 1891. However, it was over six months after his baptism that he actually joined a visible church due to his own internal struggles about what it meant to become a Christian and a member of the church, which, from his point of view, seemed a rather different proposition than being a follower of Jesus Christ.

During a two year period from 2001-2003 I surveyed the attitudes and perceptions which North Indian Hindus have regarding the Church and Christianity.⁷ I found that many Hindus have distorted and unfortunate associations with the notion of the church or organized Christianity. Hindus, for example, sense that Christians are disrespectful because they keep their shoes on in the presence of God. They often look on Christians as culturally foreign because they will sit on pews rather than on the floor, or use Western musical forms rather than the indigenous *bhajans*. They simply do not understand why Christian women will no longer wear bangles or participate in popular cultural festivals. In short, even if a Hindu is drawn to Christ, they may find membership in the church or the word “Christian” repugnant. It is at this point that we come upon the horns of our dilemma. Can someone say “yes” to Jesus and “no” to the visible church?

Distorted associations with the terms ‘church’ and ‘Christianity’ are not limited to India, nor is the presence of non-baptized followers of Jesus who do not identify with the visible church. This has also been observed throughout the Muslim world. Robby Butler tells the story of a Kuwaiti Muslim who was asked what he knew about Christians and Christianity. He replied that a Christian is someone who promoted immorality, pornography and television programs like Dallas (we might say today, Sex in the City). Butler goes on to comment that “for a Muslim to say that he has become a Christian is to communicate that he has launched into a secret life of immorality.”⁸ This embarrassing

⁴ The practice of *ishta devata* in Hinduism allows a person to worship a particular, chosen deity without necessarily denying that other gods exist. It is a Hindu form of Henotheism.

⁵ Some will make pilgrimage to a large church on an occasional basis in the same way that Hindus make periodic pilgrimages to great temples in India.

⁶ Timothy C., *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations* (ISPCK, 2000) 20.

⁷ This research has been compiled in a booklet, published in Hindi and in English under the title, Your Questions – Our Answers.

⁸ Robby Butler, “Unlocking Islam,” *Mission Frontiers* (Pasadena, CA: USCWM, January/March 1991).

perception regarding words like “Christian” “church” and “Christianity” within the Muslim community has also spawned these churchless (Insider movements), but Christ loving movements. For example, Rafique Uddin and David Cashin, among others, who have worked in Bangladesh have observed many Muslim followers of Jesus (*Isa*) who remain within the mosque and do not separate from the mosque or unite with a visible church.⁹ *Mission Frontiers*, the journal of the U.S. Center for World Missions, ran an article in 1997 highlighting a missionary couple named Alejandro and Bertha Ortiz who have nurtured several of these “Jesus Mosques” in Benin. They claim that in another Muslim nation there are over 100,000 Muslims who worship Jesus as *Isa* in Islamic mosques.¹⁰

These are just a few examples of a growing body of field-based observations which have led, in recent years, to a variety of proposals which might help the church to more effectively communicate the gospel to Muslims who continue to be the most resistant groups to the Christian message. The growing emphasis on “insider movements” often linked with “C-5” strategy has sometimes not been sufficiently related to historical perspectives on ecclesiology or similar movements around the world which are unrelated to the Islamic context.

It should be noted that this issue is not isolated to the non-Western world. The Pew Internet and American life Project (an initiative of the Pew Research Center) identified 28 million people in the West whose only religious connection is the cyber church. Up to three million people every day claim that they worship, listen to sermons and pray on-line.¹¹ Though the statistics do not clearly state how many of these cyber church persons are baptized and/or belong to traditional churches, it is safe to assume that a substantial percentage of the cyber church may identify themselves as followers of Christ, but would not be baptized or belong to any formal, visible ecclesiastical community of faith. So, this global phenomenon raises some very important ecclesiological questions. For example, can a Hindu or a Muslim come to Jesus Christ, accept Him as Lord and Savior and not unite with the visible church? Does a Hindu or a Muslim have to become a Christian in order to belong to Christ? What is the meaning of baptism – is it a public profession of one’s personal faith in Christ or does it also necessitate incorporation into a visible community of believers? These are a few of the questions which are pressing for missiological reflection.

Theologically, these questions are exploring the boundaries between soteriology (doctrine of salvation) and ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). Indeed, what is the relationship between Christian conversion and membership in the visible church? Can someone belong to the universal, invisible Church (capital C) and not identify themselves with any visible community of believers (lower case c)?

⁹ Barry Yeoman, *Mother Jones*, “The Stealth Crusade,” (May/ June 2002). To my knowledge, Rafique Uddin has not published his research in Bangladesh, but an article by Uddin does appear in *Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road* edited by J. Dudley Woodberry (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1989) 267-272.

¹⁰ Erich Bridges, “Of ‘Jesus Mosques’ and Muslim Christians,” *Mission Frontiers* (Pasadena, CA: USCWM, July/October 1997).

¹¹ The Pew Internet and American life Project began in 1999 under the direction of Lee Rainie. The main concern of the project was to chart the social (not just commercial) impact of the internet. Extensive questionnaires and phone surveys assisted them in compiling information on the way the internet has influenced religious life in America. See, www.pewinternet.org.

Exegetical and Historical Snapshots

To properly address these important questions, it is essential to set the whole discussion into its proper historical perspective. We cannot properly evaluate the ecclesiology of “insider movements” without being cognizant of five important milestones in the history of the church’s understanding of ecclesiology. Indeed, the contemporary challenges (or missiological opportunities) cannot be viewed in an historical vacuum, but rather they emerge at the end of a long and sustained discourse concerning the topic. I am seeking to place the entire discussion within a proper historical framework for analysis. In other words, I do not question the veracity or *descriptive* nature of what Hoefler and others are describing. I am interested in whether or not the church has a *prescriptive* role in guiding and shaping this movement and our response to it. But, to do that we must highlight five major historical snapshots: The New Testament Church within Jewish identity, The Nicene Creed, Roman Catholic ecclesiology in the Middle Ages, The Reformation, and, finally, the later Protestant creedal affirmations regarding the church.

Snapshot #1: New Testament Church within Jewish Identity

This first “snapshot” will be the lengthiest one since it will carry both the historical and exegetical weight of the paper. However, all the snapshots are important for keeping the exegetical observations within the context of the historical development of ecclesiology until the present day.

It is the clear testimony of the New Testament that the earliest followers of Christ were Jews and discovered the fullest identity of Christ within the context of their Jewish faith. The Apostles were all Jewish in religious identity and in embracing Christ did not, at least initially, “convert” from Judaism to a new religious movement known as Christianity. Rather, they seemed to recognize that the identity of Jesus was a fulfillment of Jewish hopes and expectations which had been prophetically promised, but which were not widely understood or embraced by the first century Jewish religious community. While this understanding of the earliest stages of Jewish identification with Christ is not widely disputed, what is less clear are two important issues. First, the exegetical basis for the introduction of the word “*èkklēsia*” in the gospels. Second, the nature of the religious identity of the earliest followers of Christ within the context of two emerging realities: the increasing recognition that Jews were not going to widely embrace the Apostolic proclamation of Christ’s identity as a fulfillment of Jewish hopes and the increasing presence of Gentile followers of Christ who were now united in faith with Jewish believers (as exhibited in the challenge of the Jerusalem Council). Each of these issues will be briefly explored.

Èkklesia in the Gospels

The word *èkklēsia* as a reference to the emerging new community who follows Jesus Christ is introduced by Jesus himself at Caesarea Philippi. When Peter first articulates that Jesus is the Messiah in Matthew 16:16, this is immediately followed by Jesus declaring that on this “confession” He will build his church.¹² This is the first usage

¹²It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore why I say “upon this confession” rather than upon Peter per se. However, Protestant ecclesiology has long recognized that the church is built upon the solidarity of

of the word church in the context that it is used today. The second occurrence is found in Matthew 18 in the context of church discipline (Matthew 18:17). These are the only two usages of the word *èkklēsia* in all four gospels.

The difficulty is in why Jesus introduced the word at such a crucial moment in the early formation of this new community. The Jews already had several religiously powerful words which were in use to describe the gathering of believers for worship, prayer and instruction. The most prominent and obvious word was the term “synagogue” (*synagogē*). The absence of this term is exegetically significant. The significance is heightened by the fact that the *èkklēsia* was a secular (non-religious) word meaning “public assembly” and had to be subsequently filled with distinctive religious and Christian meaning. In short, one cannot overlook the importance of the non-use of a readily available religious word for “religious assembly for prayer, worship, fellowship and instruction” for a secular word which had little, if any, religious connotations.¹³ The most likely explanation for the introduction of the word *èkklēsia* is that Jesus was anticipating that the good news of His Person and Work would quickly transcend the boundaries of Judaism and it would not be fruitful to build this new community on a word which was associated exclusively with the Jewish religion.

Jewish reception of Jesus and the Gentile ingathering

We can probably assume that the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus were so convinced of the identity of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Jewish hopes that they were reluctant to abandon Jewish religious structures because they anticipated the possibility of a major movement of Judaism to the Christian faith. When this did not happen the Jewish believers began to find the word *èkklēsia* a better term to distinguish their own gathering which was clearly becoming a separate religious movement from Judaism. This process was further accelerated by the increasingly large numbers of Gentiles who were coming to faith and who had no prior connection or particularized knowledge of Jewish religious terms or gatherings.

Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council

The Jerusalem Council is a relevant text for consideration since it involves the first formal church discussion regarding the relationship between these two distinct cultural communities, Jewish and Gentile, who, quite surprisingly, were finding a common, new identity in Jesus Christ. Many of the Jewish leaders harbored deep suspicions and even prejudice against Gentiles, and found it quite scandalizing that they might now be welcomed by God as full and equal participants in the People of God on their own cultural terms. The Jerusalem Council was called to discuss this problem, which is best summarized by the opening verse which captures the heart of the complaint against these new Gentile believers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Before examining the

Peter’s confession rather than on Peter himself. This is understood because of the two words used for Peter and Rock as well as the strong rebuke of Peter which appears in the same passage – Matthew 16:23.

¹³ The common point made by pastors that the word *èkklēsia* means “the called out” ones is widely recognized in the scholarly community as a false understanding of the word which would not have been recognized by those who first used it. It is what Don Carson calls an “exegetical fallacy” to assume that the root meaning of a word is the conveyed meaning of a word which is widely used. See, Don Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984).

decision of the Jerusalem Council, it is crucial to understand that long before the advent of the New Testament there was already in place an accepted method through which a Gentile could become a full (if not always ‘equal’) participant with a Jew in God’s redemptive plan. The Old Testament contains many verses which reveal God’s heart for the Gentiles.¹⁴ In response to this, there developed an accepted protocol for how a Gentile could be accepted in Israel. A Gentile could become a Jewish “proselyte” by separating from his own culture, becoming circumcised, accepting all of the dietary restrictions of Judaism and fully accepting the covenantal obligations of the Torah. As Andrew Walls has noted, “to become a proselyte involves the sacrifice of national and social affiliations. It involves a form of naturalization, incorporation into another milieu.”¹⁵ Since this was the established procedure, it should not surprise us that these Judean believers were very angry when Paul and others were welcoming Gentiles who continued to live as full participants in their own culture, including diet and even remaining uncircumcised. The Jerusalem Council met to discuss whether any or all of these new practices which had started in Antioch and were later replicated by Paul should be accommodated, or if the whole thing should be rejected.

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

It seems evident that Acts 15 does provide powerful and compelling support for C-4 strategy in the Muslim world since the Gentiles were not asked to sacrifice their social and national identity.¹⁶ However, in order for this text to be used as a basis for C-5,

¹⁴ For a good overview of this see, Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

¹⁵ Andrew F. Walls, “Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 21:4 (Oct., 1997) 148.

¹⁶ This paper assumes the reader is acquainted with John Travis’ C-1 to C-6 taxonomy which is widely used as a framework for discussing insider movements. See, Travis, John 1998 “The C1 to C6 Spectrum” – *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (4): 407-408. John Travis is a pseudonym. See also, Parshall, Phil. 1998 “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization.” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (4): 404-406, 409-410 and Williams, Mark. “Aspects of High-Spectrum Contextualization in Ministries to Muslims” *Journal of Asian Mission* vol. 5:1 (2003). I have written an extensive response to John Travis in “Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 ‘High-Spectrum’ Contextualization.” *International*

one must also argue that the Gentiles were not asked to abandon their *religious* identity. In my view, this is a difficult task. James goes on to recommend a list of four things which the Gentiles should be asked to avoid: food polluted by idols, sexual immorality, the meat of strangled animals, and from blood. The Council accepted these guidelines. However, it is important to note that they did not accept these four prohibitions as some kind of “add-ons” to Gentile’s faith, so that they were saved by faith plus a short list of duties which serves as a kind of Jewish-law-in-miniature. No! The Gentiles were being saved by grace through faith, without compromise or qualification. The prohibitions serve to visibly separate the Gentiles from their former *religious* identity as pagans, since all four of these prohibitions are linked to common pagan practices of the time. This, in turn, would enable the Jews and Gentiles to live out their common faith with a new identity which, remarkably, is linked to neither the Law (the Judean proposal) nor pagan religious practices (the Gentiles’ experience) but a new identity in Jesus Christ. Thus, Acts 15 represents a generous compromise – The church will retain multiple cultures and lifestyles, but there will always be only one body of Christ. Thus, Acts 15 does seem to provide compelling support for the proposal that Muslims be allowed to retain their cultural identity (C-4), but no support for the proposal that Muslims be allowed to retain their *religious* identity (C-5). Those who say that Muslims cannot separate religion and culture are ignoring over thirty years of successful C-4 contextualization throughout the entire Islamic world which has proved that MBBs’ new identity in Christ is so powerful that it does, in fact, provide a new religious identity without one having to sever their former cultural identity.

Some readers might raise the question if it is fair to equate *pagan* identity with *Islamic* identity since Islam is far closer to Judaism than either is to paganism.¹⁷ Would the Jerusalem Council have insisted that Muslims forsake their *monotheistic* religious identity the way they insisted that the Gentiles forsake their *pagan* religious identity? I think the answer becomes clear by posing two hypothetical scenarios – one from the “Jewish” side of the question (i.e. those who want to compare Islam to Judaism rather than paganism), and the other from the “Gentile” side of the question (i.e. those who longed for the Jewish believers to embrace them with as little dislocation as possible).

Scenario #1

If, hypothetically speaking, Judaism had accepted Jesus Christ as the true fulfillment of their own prophetic expectations in sufficient numbers so that faith in the deity and dignity, the person and work, of Christ became fully identified with Jewish *religious identity*, then there would be no reason whatsoever for a Jew to separate from their religious identity with the synagogue and Temple.¹⁸ Indeed, this explains why the earliest Christians continued to worship in the Temple for some time. They were there in the hope that their fellow Jews would see Christ as the proper fulfillment of their own Scriptural texts, as He truly was. After all, they had found Jesus *within* Jewish, religious

Journal of Frontier Missions 23, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 101-115. This journal is now known as the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*. My exegetical reflections on the Jerusalem Council were first published in the 2006 article.

¹⁷ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore the role of pagan practices in folk Islam around the world which further complicates the C-5 case, so – in the spirit of charity – we will focus on Islam at its best.

¹⁸ It is difficult to fully imagine how the wide acceptance of Jesus would have changed the legal and ritual practices of faithful Judaism.

identity. However, once they realized that the mainstream Jewish community was not going to accept the view that Jesus was the Lord and the Messiah of their own scriptural, prophetic expectations, then it became clear that they had to form a *new* religious identity; namely, the church, which would properly celebrate their identity in Jesus Christ.

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

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

Scenario #2

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

1. During the daily *salat*, refrain from saying the *Shahadah* unless you omit the second phrase, “and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah” and, instead insert “and *Isa* is the Eternal Word of Allah” or “and *Isa* is the Sovereign Lord.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Surah 4:171 extends the honorific title “Word” (of Allah) to Jesus, providing a contextual bridge to John 1:1. Phil Parshall rightly points out that “if one affirms the ‘prophet’ of the creed, doesn’t it follow that one must therefore believe his prophecy? And that prophecy, being the Qur’an, presents us with a major problem....I cannot affirm the Qur’an as the Word of God.” See, Phil Parshall, “Lifting the Fatwa,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, (Vol. 40, #3), 291. (288-293)

2. Acknowledge that only the Bible is the Word of God and that the Qur'an, while containing beautiful Arabic and important insights into Arab culture, has no authority over the Bible.²⁰

3. When you are reciting the 99 beautiful names of Allah with a *shubha*, add the following three: (1) God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (2) Holy Spirit and (3) Blessed Trinity (or Tri-unity).²¹

It should be noted that there were several at the Cairo Conference who insisted that a fourth be added; namely, the "Risen One". But, after much discussion the Council thought that Christ's resurrection was sufficiently implied in the titles "Lord Jesus Christ" and "Blessed Trinity" (or Blessed Tri-unity) and so it was not necessary to add a fourth. The point is, the Cairo Conference really worked hard to be as generous as possible with these new Muslim believers. The question is this: Could a 'Muslim' disciple of Jesus Christ, as espoused by the C-5 strategists, maintain his or her *religious* identity with Islam even if the only adjustments they made were the above three minimalist prohibitions? The answer is most certainly not. These three strike at the heart of Islamic *religious* identity; namely, the prophethood of Muhammad, the sacred perfection and superiority of the Qur'an and a rejection of Allah's Triune nature. The moment any Muslim discovers that someone claiming to be a Muslim has these particular beliefs in these three areas then they will automatically see that "Muslim" as someone with a religious identity in discontinuity with their own. Furthermore, the Muslim believer (MB) who is seeking to maintain his self-identity as a Muslim must also sense the profound ethical burden of living a life of integrity while knowing that his central core confession is in profound discontinuity with the core confession of Islam. Thus, while I find Acts 15 a compelling defense for C-4, it remains difficult to exegetically demonstrate that it provides a sufficient basis for justifying C-5.

Snapshot #2: Nicene Creed. With this background in New Testament ecclesiology which is pertinent to "insider movements" we now move more quickly through church history for additional insights. Certainly one of the earliest ecclesiological statements which was embraced by the church is found embedded in the Nicene Creed which was affirmed in 325 A.D. The phrase is, "I believe in one, holy, catholic, apostolic church." Two of these words are of particular significance to this discussion: apostolicity and catholicity. Apostolicity may be in jeopardy if, for example, some insider movement

²⁰ It is true that the Qur'an is not nearly as offensive to Christian doctrine as is sometimes supposed. However, the only way MBBs have successfully been able to retain the Qur'an (or some portions of the Quran) is if the Bible is used as the hermeneutic to constantly re-direct, re-interpret and clarify various texts in the Qur'an. For more on this see chapter seven of my, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 169-194.

²¹ A *shubha* is a set of rosary-like prayer beads which are commonly used by Muslims to recite the 99 beautiful names of Allah. Since most Muslims use a *shubha* with only 33 beads, which they will cycle through three times, it was also practical to only add "three" names to the 99. It meant, practically speaking, adding only one extra bead. Although it should be noted that even when Islam and Christianity agree on a certain attribute of God, such as "power" (al-Muqtadir, one of the 99 Names of Allah), there may be striking differences on how it is understood. For example, Christians sees God's greatest power over Satan exhibited in the weakness and vulnerability of the cross. Muslims would not understand God's power in such terms. Thus, all of the 99 names would require adjustments as they are conformed to the Biblical witness.

Christians continue to worship other gods besides Jesus or fail to embrace Trinitarianism.²² However, even if we allow that these followers of Christ are essentially orthodox in their doctrine, one is still left with an important discussion concerning their recognition of the catholicity of the church, i.e. the universality of the church. Despite our many differences, catholicity reminds us that there is one Lord, one faith and one baptism. Do non-baptized followers of Jesus fully reflect the catholicity of the church? Are they an expression of the true mystery of catholicity which defies all human organizational efforts or are they a fracturing of the visible community of faith which exists around the world which, despite its many organizational and theological differences, nevertheless confesses Jesus is Lord in concert with other believers from around the world?

Snapshot #3: *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*

The phrase, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* (outside the church there is no salvation) was first coined by Cyprian of Carthage in his *On the Unity of the Church*²³, who argued that the doctrine was based on Jesus' words "unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no part of me." The doctrine was more fully articulated by Pope Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and by Pope Boniface VIII in 1302 who identified salvation with being sacramentally connected to Christ through the church. Thus, to not be receiving the sacraments – baptism, absolution, the Eucharist and so forth is to cut yourself off from Christ. The church is, to invoke a favorite metaphor, like an ark. It is the vessel God has provided to save us from judgment. Those who get into the ark are saved, those who do not, are lost.²⁴ From the traditional Catholic perspective, there is absolutely no room for an un-baptized follower of Christ who does not belong to the visible, established church. In the post-Vatican II era of Roman Catholicism all of this has been re-visited, especially under the writings of Karl Rahner who espoused implicit Christianity which is, quite clearly, untethered from either baptism or membership in any visible church. Vatican II decreed that "those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation."²⁵ That is a major ecclesiological shift in modern Roman Catholicism which is quite distinct from long-held views within the Roman church.

²² Hoefler has surveyed the range of theological orthodoxy among certain clusters of churchless Christians. He has also explored what, in his view, the public spirituality of a churchless Christian in India might look like. See, Herbert Hoefler, "Follow-Up Reflections on 'Churchless Christianity,'" (Mission Frontiers, March-April, 1999) 36-41.

²³ St. Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle LXXII, 21. See also, St. Cyprian of Carthage, Treatise 1. See, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) 384, 421-429.

²⁴ The Epistles of Cyprian, Epistle 74, par. 15. See, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) 394.

²⁵ The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council; Lumen Gentium, par. 16. See, www.usccb.org/catechism/text. See Article 9, I Believe in the Holy Catholic Church. This is the official website of the United States Conference on Catholic Bishops.

Snapshot #4: The Reformation. The fourth ecclesiological snapshot lands us in the heart of the Reformation. One of the biggest theological problems with the Reformation was that it seemed to be a destruction of the ‘catholicity’ of the church. As far back as Cyprian, the church fathers interpreted the church’s unity as not merely mystical or invisible, but episcopal. It is Cyprian who not only gave us the phrase, *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, but also the statement that “he cannot have God for his father who has not the church for his mother.” The apostolic authority of the church was conveyed and continued through the episcopal laying on of hands from St. Peter to the present Pope John Paul II. The Reformation, therefore, represented a fracturing of the outward, visible unity of the Roman Catholic church, was a challenge to their episcopal authority and thereby was viewed as schismatic and a destruction of the Nicene marks of ‘oneness’ ‘apostolicity’ and ‘catholicity’.

Luther responded by a re-articulation of ecclesiology which was not as tied to the structural and sacramental connection with a particular church organization, but the mystical communion of the saints which transcends all particular ecclesiastical organizations. The church is apostolic, not because of an episcopal chain of the laying on of hands, but the true church is in apostolic succession when and only when it teaches what the Apostles taught – thus *sola scriptura*. If the Apostolic message is proclaimed, then the church is apostolic and it shares in the mystical oneness and catholicity which are the marks of the true church. Luther, in his *On the Councils and the Churches* defines the true church as the *sancta, catholica, Christiana*, i.e. a Christian, holy people. Luther goes on to explicitly argue that when the Nicene creed says, one holy, catholic, apostolic church, what it meant was one, holy, catholic apostolic *people*.²⁶ The emphasis, he argued, has always been on the people of God, not the organizational structure to which they belonged. This is why Luther did not like the German word *Kirche* for church, but preferred the word *Gemeinde*, community. This true, organic church, for Luther, therefore has both a ‘visible’ and an ‘invisible’ nature. The visible church contains both unredeemed sinners and those who are saints by God’s divine work. The invisible church, in contrast, consists of all true believers throughout time and *space*; the composition and number of which is known only to God.²⁷ Nevertheless, this Reformation articulation of a

²⁶ Works of Martin Luther, vol. 5, 264-266, as quoted in Hugh T. Kerr, ed., *A Compend of Luther’s Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) 124, 125.

²⁷ Luther’s concept of the ‘invisible’ church was widely accepted in Protestant ecclesiology as is reflected in, for example, the Scotch Confession of Faith in 1560 which stated that, “This Kirk is invisible, knawen onelie to God, quha alane knawis whome he hes chosen; and comprehends as weill (as said is) the Elect that be departed, commonlie called the Kirk Triumphant, and they that zit live and fecht against sinne and Sathan as sall live hereafter.” (Scot Confession of Faith, 1560, Article XVI). The language also appears in the Irish Articles of Religion of 1615 which states, “because this Church consisteth of all those, and those alone, which are elected by God unto salvation, and regenerated by the power of his Spirit, the number of whom is known only unto God himself: therefore it is called the *Catholic* or universal, and the *Invisible* Church (emphasis original). (Irish Articles of Religion, 1615, line 68.). The language is also enshrined in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647 which states, “The catholic of universal Church, *which is invisible*, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the lead thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. The *visible Church*, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law) consists of all those, throughout the world, that profess the true religion, and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (emphasis mine). (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1657, Chapter XXV “Of the Church” article 1, 2). The Savoy Declaration of 1658 (See Chapter XXVI, articles I and II) and the

spiritual rather than Episcopal basis for ecclesiology still finds its expression, however varied, in some visible expression of the church.

Snapshot #5: Protestant Creedal Formulation regarding the Church

The fifth and final snapshot emerges in the wake of the Reformation and is also pertinent to our evaluation of the ecclesiology of insider movements. As the number of Reformation churches grew, a new crisis of ecclesiology developed because the initial “protest” from which we get our word Protestant did not fully anticipate the dizzying array of divisions, disputations and controversies. Each new branch of Protestantism was forced to articulate its own understanding of the true marks of the church. The Augsburg Confession, for example, states that “the Church is the congregation of saints (the assembly of all believers), in which the Gospel is rightly taught (purely preached) and the Sacraments rightly administered (according to the Gospel).”²⁸ Similar words appear in the 39 Articles of the Church of England which states that “the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”²⁹ The spiritual nature of the true church is often affirmed as is seen, for example, in the Belgic Confession of 1561 which stated that “this holy Church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same spirit.”³⁰ However, the marks of the true church delineated in the Belgic Confession of 1561 further clarifies the Augsburg Confession of 1530 by explicitly including church discipline:

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God.³¹

Baptist Confession of 1688 (See Chapter XXVI, line 1) also accepts this distinction. This is particularly notable in that the Baptist Confession largely accepts much of the Westminster Confession, but undertakes a major re-write of the section on the church. However, the ‘invisible’ – ‘visible’ distinction is preserved in both confessions.

²⁸ Augsburg Confession, Article VII “Of the Church” as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 11, 12.

²⁹ The Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England, Articles XIX, “Of the Church” as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 499. Very similar words appear in the 1784 Methodist Articles of Religion, Article XIII which states that “the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered, according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same” (Schaff, ed., 810).

³⁰ Belgic Confession, Articles XXVII as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 417.

³¹ Belgic Confession, Article XXIX as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 419, 420. The Confession also states that, “No person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it (i.e. the church); but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ” (Article XXVIII). Similar emphasis on discipline and proper authority occurs throughout the Protestant creeds (See, for example, the Savoy Declaration, 1658).

The Baptist confession of 1688, despite significant changes in church polity, nevertheless affirms a similar understanding of the nature of the church. The ‘visible’ church is defined as

a particular church gathered and completely organized, according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church for the peculiar administration of ordinances, and execution of power and duty, which he instructs them with or call them to, to be continued to the end of the world, are bishops or elders and deacons.³²

A Baptist confession widely accepted by Baptists throughout the United States affirms a similar understanding of the ‘visible’ church:

A congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word; that its only scriptural officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus.³³

Conclusion of Historical Survey:

A reflection on church history reveals that the practice of unbaptized believers in Christ who are not under the authority of the church is not accepted as normative ecclesiology. The traditional Catholic view, *Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, outside the church there is no salvation, certainly would not accept the notion of followers of Jesus who are not in any sacramental relationship with the church. Similar statements could be found in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.³⁴ The Reformation and the subsequent creedal formulations which speak to ecclesiology reveal that, despite a vigorous re-thinking of the doctrine of the church, the Reformation churches could not possibly comprehend or accept a person un-tethered from the doctrine and discipline of the visible church. Indeed, virtually all Protestant churches have insisted on, as a minimum, the sacrament of baptism and the Lord’s Supper or Communion as necessary signs of the visible church. Even the radical Waldenses, who were one of the earliest groups to rebel against Papal authority way back in the 12th century, nevertheless affirmed (when they later embraced Protestantism), the essential nature of the sacraments.³⁵ Most also insist on some

³² Baptist Confession of 1688 (The Philadelphia Confession), chapter XXVI, line 1 as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 738.

³³ The New Hampshire Baptist Confession of 1833, article XIII as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 746. The Free-Will Baptists in 1834 and 1868 invoke the word “organized” in their descriptions of the local, visible church.

³⁴ Orthodox ecclesiology has been set forth best by Dumitru Staniloae. See, especially his *The Experience of God*, chapter four, entitled, *The Church as the Instrument for Preserving Revelation as well as his monograph, Theology and the Church*. Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980); Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God*, (Brookline, Massachusetts, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998).

³⁵ Confession of the Waldenses, 1655, Article XXVIII as quoted in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 765.

organized authority of pastors, priests, bishops or elders who preside over a defined, gathered community. Thus, if insider movements are to be accepted as a permanent (not merely transitional) Christian movement it clearly represents a departure from the historic doctrine of ecclesiology as espoused by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Protestant Christians. Indeed, it would require a radical reformulation and understanding of ecclesiology. Such a proposal has been made by, among others, M. M. Thomas, the well-known Indian theologian, ecumenical leader and for years the director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. The major critique of M. M. Thomas' ecclesiology was developed by Lesslie Newbigin, British missionary to India, ecumenical leader and bishop of the Church of South India. The result was a whole body of literature between these two men on the subject of ecclesiology, with many discussions around the nature of the church as a visible community. They are both the authors of dozens of books and articles.³⁶ Since the M. M. Thomas – Lesslie Newbigin debate on this issue remains the most sustained and theologically reflective discussion to date on this issue, we will now summarize the major points made by both of these exemplary theologians and Christian leaders. This discussion is important for those who have only been exposed to the discussion of C-5 within the context of Islam. This will help to broaden the historical parameters of the debate, especially since both sides are so ably defended by such two notable church leaders and missiologists.

M. M. Thomas and Lesslie Newbigin: Divergent Ecclesiologies

In 1971 M. M. Thomas published a landmark book entitled, *Salvation and Humanisation*.³⁷ It is an examination of issues related to the theology of mission seen from within the particularities of the Indian context. Central to Thomas' vision is a radical re-thinking of ecclesiology. Thomas is concerned with the implications of a church which becomes increasingly isolated from society. He, therefore, encourages the idea of a "Christ-centered secular fellowship outside the Church."³⁸ He goes on to argue that a vigorous ecclesiology should embrace a view of the church which can "take form in all religious communities" because it "transcends all religious communities."³⁹ Thomas would clearly embrace the notion of what Hoefer calls "churchless Christianity" but would rephrase it by simply saying that the church does not always exist as a defined, visible community, but can be formed within other religious communities, such as Hinduism and Islam. He states this explicitly when he says that the "Church" can "take form as a Christ-centered fellowship of faith and ethics in the Hindu religious community."⁴⁰ The fact that these followers of Jesus reject the sacrament of baptism is not, according to Thomas, because they do not wish to identify fully with Christ, but because, in India, baptism has become "a sign not primarily of incorporation into Christ but of proselytism into a socio-political community involving rejection of their [own]

³⁶ A bibliography of the key documents related to this particular debate has been provided in the helpful articles, George R. Hunsberger, "Conversion and Community: Revisiting the Lesslie Newbigin – M. M. Thomas Debate," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July, 1998).

³⁷ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, (Madras: CLS, 1971).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 40. He cites Keshub Chunder Sen as one who modeled this possibility through his Church of the New Dispensation.

socio-political-religious communities.”⁴¹ Since baptism as a “transfer of communal affiliation” is understood in India as an act of hostility towards your own culture and social background, it makes a travesty of the true nature of baptism. Therefore, according to Thomas, we should not insist that the sacrament of baptism is a mark of the true Church. In this case, their rejection of baptism is actually part of their faithful response to Christ to transform their own communities with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Thomas insists that there is a distinctive New Humanity which belongs to Jesus Christ, but that New Humanity cannot be equated with the visible church. He says that “in spite of the famous slogan *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” the New Humanity of Christ does, in fact, exist outside the “empirical Church.”⁴² This is a new understanding of what might be called the ‘invisible church.’ You will recall that when Luther introduced the distinction of the ‘invisible’ and ‘visible’ church it was for the purpose of acknowledging that there were unregenerate, unbelievers who did not truly belong to Christ, but who had becoming empirically united with the visible church on earth. Thomas is arguing the reverse situation. Namely, that there are those who truly belong to Christ and thus are members of the Invisible Church in heaven, but who have not united with any empirical, visible church on earth. Luther is concerned about unbelievers inside the visible church; Thomas is concerned with believers inside the visible community of Hinduism.

Lesslie Newbigin, in contrast, does not agree with Thomas’ ecclesiology. Newbigin, in *The Finality of Christ*, insists that the church must involve a “visible community.”⁴³ However, Newbigin wants to be clear that by “visible community” he is not merely embracing the notion that salvation in Christ is linked to mere “church extension” or the “aggrandizement of the community.”⁴⁴ Instead, Newbigin argues that “a visible fellowship is central to God’s plan of salvation in Christ; but God’s plan of salvation is not limited to the visible fellowship.”⁴⁵ According to Newbigin, the proper balance is achieved when we realize that “true conversion involves *both* a new creation from above, which is not merely an act of extension of the existing community, and *also* a relationship with the existing community of believers.”⁴⁶ Thus, while acknowledging that salvation comes from God and is from above, central to God’s plan of salvation is the uniting of His redeemed people to a visible community. So Newbigin directly responds to our Churchless Christianity question when he says, quite bluntly:

Can a Hindu who has been born again in Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit be content to remain without any visible solidarity with his fellow-believers? The answer to that question is No. The New Testament knows nothing of a relationship with Christ which is purely mental and spiritual, unembodied in any of the structures of human relationship.⁴⁷

⁴¹ M. M. Thomas, “Baptism, the Church and Koinonia”, *Religion and Society*, vol. XIX, No. 1 (March, 1972) 73.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*. (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1969) 96.

⁴⁴ George R. Hunsberger, “Conversion and Community: Revisiting the Lesslie Newbigin – M. M. Thomas Debate, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July, 1998) 112.

⁴⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ*, 97.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 107, emphasis original.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

Newbigin thus rejects what he regards as M. M. Thomas' over-spiritualization of ecclesiology which says that Christianity is primarily concerned with 'faith' not with 'religion', meaning by the term 'religion' gathered, organized communities.⁴⁸ Thus, Newbigin calls Thomas' ecclesiology overly docetic, i.e. a conception of Church which is not properly grounded in real life sociological realities. For example, he asks, if someone belongs to a community sodality known as Hinduism, but at the same time confesses ultimate loyalty and allegiance to Jesus Christ, is it not naïve to not expect that there will be various points whereby commitment to Christ will "override his obligations as a Hindu, [and that] this allegiance must take visible – that is, social – forms?"⁴⁹

Presumably, the acceptance of Jesus Christ as central and decisive creates *some* kind of solidarity among those who have this acceptance in common. If it did not do so, it would mean nothing. The question is, what is the nature of this solidarity? It has always been understood to include the practice of meeting together to celebrate with words, songs and formal actions the common faith in Jesus.... A man who is religiously, culturally and socially part of the Hindu community is a Hindu.⁵⁰

Contemporary Contributions to the Ecclesiology of Insider Movements

The value of the Thomas-Newbigin debate is not only found in the clarity in which they state their views, but the depth of their theological reflection. Indeed, good Biblical exegesis united with solid historical and theological reflection must be the ultimate arbiter of this debate. The most prominent contemporary missiologist to weigh in on this debate is Ralph Winter, the founder and director of the U.S. Center for World Missions located in Pasadena, California. Winter has made numerous statements in favor of the insider movements. Winter's comments indicate that the presence of these believers who remain untethered from a visible and distinct fellowship of believers is not only missiologically sound, but strategically superior to traditional churches. Winter says,

Apparently, our real challenge is no longer to extend the boundaries of Christianity but to acknowledge that Biblical, Christian faith has already extensively flowed beyond Christianity as a cultural movement, just as it has historically flowed beyond Judaism and Roman Catholicism. Our task may well be to allow and encourage Muslims and Hindus and Chinese to follow Christ without identifying themselves with a foreign religion. The Third Reformation is here!"⁵¹

⁴⁸ In a letter written to Newbigin and published in *Religion and Society*, vol. XIX, No. 1 (March, 1972) 70, M. M. Thomas insists that faith will express itself in religion and therefore he is not saying that faith can exist *apart from* religion, but he is not insisting that that religious expression must take place within distinctive Christian communities. See, "M. M. Thomas' Letter to Bishop Newbigin dated 21st October 1971."

⁴⁹ George R. Hunsberger, 115, quoting Newbigin.

⁵⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, "Baptism, the Church, and Koinonia," *Religion and Society*, vol. XIX, No. 1 (March, 1972) 78.

⁵¹ Winter, Ralph. "Eleven Frontiers of Perspective," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, (Vol. 20, No. 4, (October-December, 2003): 136. 135-141.

Winter's allusion to the Reformation is significant. When he says "third" reformation it is important to remember what he regards as the first two "reformations." The first 'reformation' is the "Gentile" Reformation. This is the dramatic movement of the gospel from being a fulfillment religion within Judaism which affirmed that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, promises and prophecies to its encounter with the Gentile world whereby the gospel was proclaimed as good news to all peoples. The first reformation was the movement of the gospel from within Judaism to a real encounter with the Gentile world.

The second 'reformation' is the "Protestant" Reformation which allowed the gospel to break out of its territorial and ecclesiastical solidarity with Roman Catholicism and articulate a different ecclesiology based on the priesthood of all believers, the centrality of salvation through faith, the priority of Scripture over all human institutions and/or structures and, finally the centrality of Jesus Christ.

If the first reformation was to move beyond the mono-cultural framework of Judaism and the second was to move beyond Roman Catholicism, this 'third' reformation is "churchless Christianity." This brings us full circle to the central issue of this article. Winter argues that we must now embrace the fact that the gospel has already moved beyond explicitly identifiable Christian communities and can now exist – and even prosper - within the communities and structural framework of non-Christian religions.⁵²

⁵² Sometimes Winter's language may lead one to think that he is merely stating the obvious; namely, that Christian growth cannot be identified with organizational aggrandizement or that his real concern is that we need to be careful not to bring Hindus into a "foreign religion", but still insist on a definable community within the indigenous culture. Winter's imprecise use of words, I think, is the source of this misimpression. For example, in *Mission Frontiers* Winter states that "the formal, religious "Christianity" that includes more than 30 million is apparently far exceeded by other millions that are Bible-reading devout followers of Christ but not part of the considerably Westernized movement of "Christianity. Here you see in further articles about "Churchless Christianity" by Richard and Hoefler a phenomenon that is both less understood and even more important than anything else in India - - the very serious acceptance of a Biblical faith within the cultural tradition of India itself." There are two points in this comment which may be misleading. First, Winter's use of the term "Westernized" may imply that he is merely arguing for the emergence of an indigenous Indian church which is not rooted in Western soil, a point to which few today would find exception. Second, Winter's use of the phrase "the cultural tradition of India itself" may obscure the fact that he is not talking merely about a distinct Christian church in India which is a part of the larger cultural traditions of the sub-continent. The articles to which he refers are talking about Hinduism as a distinct community, not just a vague "cultural tradition of India." Christian community within the larger cultural tradition of India is not "new" and "revolutionary". It is not, to use the language of H. L. Richard, "radical contextualization" or worth calling, as Winter does, a "Third Reformation." Rather, it is what has been going on in India for centuries, especially since the 19th century and the emergence of indigenous Christian reflection. Thus, despite the imprecise language of Winter, it is clear that he is enthusiastic about 'churchless Christianity' along the lines of what has been described by M. M. Thomas and Herbert Hoefler. In the March/April 1999 issue of *Mission Frontiers* Winter published H. L. Richard's extensive review of Herbert Hoefler's *Churchless Christianity*. (The article was also re-printed in a subsequent issue (Special Hindu Issue, January 2000). The positive review drew a letter of protest from an Indian Christian who read the original article. Winter published his response to the Indian enquirer in the August, 1999 issue of *Mission Frontiers*. In his response Winter clearly draws a parallel between the Christian concessions made to pagan Europe with the kinds of concessions Indian Christians should be prepared to make as they follow Jesus within Hinduism. Winter cites as examples the pagan festival of Eostre, the spring goddess of fertility which was brought into Christianity as an Easter sunrise service as well as the Roman pagan festival of Saturnalia which, he argues, is the source of our gift giving on December 25th. The fact that Winter re-printed the article without any qualifying comment in his editorial, as well as the fact that William Carey Publishers (founded by Winter) published Hoefler's landmark study, *Churchless Christianity*, it seems clear

We, therefore, have a body of evangelical scholars such as Ralph Winter, Herbert Hofer and H. L. Richard who are increasingly siding with M. M. Thomas' new ecclesiology.⁵³ It is, therefore, increasingly important for evangelical theologians to assess whether this new ecclesiology should be embraced by evangelical missiologists and, in general, by the missionary community, whether working among Muslims (Jesus Mosques), Hindus (Jesus Bhaktas) or post-modern Westerners (cyber-church).

An Evangelical Missiologist's Response

I would like to offer an exploratory response to the issue of the ecclesiology of insider movements and the direction which Winter, Hofer, Richard and others have suggested we go. While generally supportive of many of the contributions and insights of many of these writers, I have some reservations about endorsing a "churchless Christianity" along the lines suggested by Thomas and H. L. Richard. To Richard's credit, he has called for a more vigorous debate on this issue⁵⁴, so it is here that I offer several points which, I hope, will be the beginning of a new wave of discussion on this issue. I remain committed to learn and adjust my own views throughout this process. However, I think there are several key issues which must be addressed before the church can prescriptively endorse insider movements and call, as H. L. Richard does, for mission societies and organizations to formulate strategy around this new ecclesiology.

Conversion, "Church" and Community

First, to un-tether Christian conversion from visible Christian community is to separate what God has joined together. The word 'church' (*ekklesia*) in reference to the Christian community is inaugurated by Jesus Christ himself. Furthermore, it is not a mistake that the seminal, defining confession of the Christian faith (which marks the initial point of conversion) found on Peter's lips in Matthew 16:16 (You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God) is then linked to the necessity of community in the very next verse. Furthermore, this encounter with Peter took place in the context of the pluralistic, multi-religious context of Caesarea Philippi. After Peter's declaration/confession that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" Jesus responds, by blessing Peter and declaring as follows: "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will *build my church*, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). To the charge that Jesus' use of the word 'church' is a spiritual-only and not by necessity a visible community demonstrates a deficient understanding of the semantic range of the Greek word *ekklesia*. The very word "*ekklesia*" means a 'public assembly'. The early church

that Winter is broadly supportive of the movement, even if he may have disagreements with the particular suggestions or conclusions of either Herbert Hofer or H. L. Richard. (See, publisher's preface in *Churchless Christianity*.)

⁵³ Winter, H. L. Richard and Herbert Hofer would identify themselves as evangelical voices. Hofer is actually a missionary of the Missouri Synod Lutheran church.

⁵⁴ Richard states, "In the eight years since the publication of *Churchless Christianity* little notice seem to have been taken, debate has not been stirred and, most tragically, ministry strategies that affirm and empower the NBBC have not yet been born. Yet this is a book that demands debate and response. But where and by whom might this begin?" See, H. L. Richard, "Christ-Followers in India Flourishing – But Outside the Church," Special Hindu edition, *Mission Frontiers* (Pasadena, CA: USCWM, January 2000) 19. Also found in H. L. Richard's book review which is published within *Churchless Christianity*, 263, 264.

could have escaped persecution by distancing itself from the word *ekklesia* and accepting the status of a *cultus privatus* (private gathering). However, the choice of the word ‘*ekklesia*’ launches us as a visible, defined community into the world. As Kittel comments in his article on “*ekklesia*” we are not a *cultus privatus*, but a *cultus publicus*! (public gathering)⁵⁵ Lesslie Newbigin agrees when he states as follows:

The community that confesses that Jesus is Lord has been, from the beginning, a movement launched into the public life of (hu)mankind. The Greco-Roman world in which the NT was written was full of societies offering to those who wished to join a way of personal salvation through religious teaching and practice. (Instead) it was from the beginning a movement claiming the allegiance of all peoples... using the term *ecclesia* (church).⁵⁶

Thus, to argue that the word ‘church’ can be separated from a public, visible ‘community’ is, it seems to me, unwarranted.

Westernized Christianity vs. “Churchless” Christianity

Second, the discussion often creates the notion that the choice is between a “Westernized” Christianity and “churchless” Christianity within Hinduism or some other religious community. In this scenario, it is easy to knock down the ‘straw man’ of a Westernized Christianity in introducing the idea of “churchless Christianity.” H. L. Richard correctly points out that the emerging Gentile Christianity found some within the Jerusalem church hostile to them and yet God was clearly blessing the new movement. He is certainly correct in expressing his frustration against Christian communalism, legalistic sectarianism, separatist cultural attitudes, rigidity among Christian communities and so forth in India and elsewhere. However, that is like pointing out a thousand examples of bad and fragmented marriages as a reason to jettison the institution of marriage. However, thousands of examples of bad marriages do not actually negate the tens of thousands of good marriages, nor does it provide a proper basis for attacking the institution itself. If the church, as with marriage, is a divinely ordained institution, then we are duty bound to support it.

In the case of India there are tens of thousands of churches all across India which do sing Christian *bajans*, not Westernized hymns, who do take their shoes off and sit on the floor rather than in pews, who do not think twice about their women wearing bangles or participating in cultural festivals and so forth. But these are distinct, defined Christian communities. This has been going on for centuries in India. One need only think of Robert de Nobili who propagated Christianity within the very strict boundaries of Brahminical social customs in the early 17th century to realize that attempts to promote indigenous expressions of Christianity in India are not new or absent from the culture. I share Hoefer, Winter and Richard’s enthusiasm for the Jesu Bhakta gatherings who make use of a whole range of indigenous forms in their worship of Christ and who are identified as valuable, contributing members to their communities which may be majority Hindu. But, these followers of Jesus must, in my view, be baptized and then, as members

⁵⁵ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 515, 516.

⁵⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, 1995) 16.

of a global movement, (even if they continue to reject Westernized forms of worship⁵⁷) they should still find creative ways to express their catholicity with the global church.

Andrew Walls has powerfully pointed out that one of the true marks of the church is that the “dividing wall of hostility is broken down.” He calls this the Ephesians moment when we move beyond a “us” and a “them” orientation and see ourselves as one body. However faulty Western Christianity may be, we share in the one body of Christ with our Indian brothers and sisters. To not identify oneself with others in the world who also identify the ultimate significance of Jesus Christ is to deny not only our catholicity, but the possibility of another “Ephesians moment” in the life of the church.

Community and Apostolicity

Third, the church is the divinely ordained institution which links believers to one another for correction, training in righteousness and preserving the apostolic message. In a passage peculiar to Matthew’s gospel Jesus speaks about the role of the church in administering church discipline which, by the way, is the biblical basis for the wide acknowledgement of church discipline as a “mark” of the true church in the Protestant creedal tradition. In the passage Jesus says that if a brother in Christ refuses to repent you should confront him one on one. If he still refuses to repent you should approach him with several others. Then, Jesus says, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:15-17). It is clear that the church exercises an important role in disciplining and defending the moral and doctrinal purity of the church. The Epistles of Paul are filled with examples where the church is called to exercise direction, guidance, and even church discipline against those who either morally or doctrinally deficient. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, is, for example, used to not only judge a man who was living in immorality (I Cor. 5), but rebuke the church for not properly emphasizing the importance of the doctrine of the bodily resurrection (I Cor. 15). How are these kinds of issues to be addressed properly in a context where followers of Jesus are primarily connected to another religious community? What is the social context through which an Indian Christian who serves as an elder in a visible Christian community can confront or rebuke an erring *Jesu bhakta* woman who, for example, continues to go to Hindu temples to perform *puja* to Ganesh or Krishna alongside of her worship of Jesus Christ? This elder has no acknowledged authority over the life, faith and practice of this *Jesu bhakta* and as a man it would be almost impossible to find a cultural acceptable avenue through which he could meet with her and discuss her life and faith. Only the visible community provides the social structures which are essential to Christian discipleship in this context. Furthermore, it is baptism which brings a believer into this new social context. Biblical baptism is being baptized not only *spiritually* into Christ (Romans 6:1-7), but also being brought into the *visible community of faith*. Paul compares baptism to the corporate act of Israel passing through the Red Sea (I Cor. 10:2). Since churchless Christianity is, by

⁵⁷ Many Indian church planters I have spoken with have expressed frustration that outsiders do not regard an Indian church as authentically indigenous unless they see a sitar, for example, rather than a “Western” guitar. They have argued that a guitar is every bit as “Indian” as a sitar and for these outside observers to want to crystallize some idealized musical past in India’s history is insensitive and uncharitable. A folk instrument like a guitar can be used to play *bajans* and other indigenous musical forms with a lot more ease than a sitar since very few Indians can play the sitar properly, it is very large to carry on a bus or on the back of a motorcycle into remote areas, and it is almost impossible to keep in tune.

definition, about non-baptized followers of Jesus then it seems to me that this makes it nearly impossible to recognize, fellowship with, worship with, encourage, disciple or discipline these un-tethered believers.

Ontic Expansion of Christ in the world

Finally, I am concerned that those of us in various visible communities around the world will not be able to properly benefit from the beauty of Christ which is uniquely manifested in these new believers. When the gospel was first preached in the first century, it was confined to a single Jewish ethnic group. However, as the gospel expanded and translated itself into Hellenistic culture and later into Chinese and Indian and Korean and others, we gain more insights into the beauty and reality of Jesus Christ. This phenomenon has sometimes been referred to as the ever growing expansion of our insight into the true nature of God in Jesus Christ. This does not, of course, refer to any ontological change in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, our understanding and insight into the full nature of God in Jesus Christ is continually expanding as more and more people groups come to the feet of Jesus. Indeed, it is still true that ‘it takes a whole world to understand a whole Christ.’ We in the West have glaring blind-spots which need to be illuminated by these followers of *Isa* within Mosques. Perhaps our very understanding of the church does need to be broadened in certain areas and revisited in light of Scripture. Likewise, there is little doubt that we can help our brothers and sisters to grow in the faith. But, practically speaking, none of this is possible if they do not belong to some visible, defined community.

God is a Trinity, i.e. he is by nature relational. He made His relational nature fully public in the incarnation of His Son which is reflected in the life of the church which is called his body. Thus, our very doctrine of Christ, it seems, demands that all believers, in all times, in all parts of the globe must seek – whenever possible – to form themselves into visible communities of faith. The visible communities may have to meet in the catacombs or suffer great persecution or cultural misunderstanding, all of which occurred in the life of the primitive church, but the one option they did not have was to forsake the assembling of themselves together – because conversion, by definition, means community.

Conclusion: Reformation in Reverse?

This paper has focused on a major debate in missions circles about the acceptability of the ecclesiology as espoused by the supporters of C-5. This article has sought to highlight some of the key exegetical and historical issues which are highlighted in this debate. Nevertheless, no one can deny that, descriptively speaking, there are Muslims coming to Christ in some dramatic ways today. How should we respond to the genuine movement to Christ among these Muslims, many of whom have encountered Christ in dreams and visions?

Perhaps the best approach is to see C-5 as a temporary, transitional bridge by which some Muslims are crossing over into explicit Christian faith, hopefully to one of a C-3 or C-4 character. On the one hand, a wide number of C-3 and C-4 church movements have long and distinguished track records showing that they are sustaining faith in the lives of MBBs without major cultural disruption and yet maintaining historic Christian orthodoxy.

Could this be an example of the “Reformation in Reverse?”⁵⁸ In other words, our own Reformation history is the story of a people who saw themselves as Christians because they belonged to the formal, ecclesial “structure” of Christianity, i.e. they were members of Christendom. The Reformation was, among other things, the gradual recognition over several hundred years by “Christians” that they were, in fact, not Christians at all and needed to become Christians even though they were baptized Christians in the public, formal sense. In the Islamic context which we have been considering, could the exact opposite be taking place – a kind of Reformation in reverse?

Could there be tens of thousands of people who belong to Islam in a public, formal sense who gradually over many years realize that they are no longer Muslims, but Christians? Could we see thousands of Muslim followers of Jesus who currently are wrongly trying to maintain their Islamic identity but who gradually come to see that their truest identity is with the people of God throughout space and time who also know, serve and follow Jesus Christ as Lord? In the New Testament, despite decades of hostility and suspicion, Jew and Gentile find that in Jesus Christ the “dividing wall of hostility” has been destroyed (Ephesians 2:14). There are not two bodies of Christ, one Jew and one Gentile, or one “Western” and one “Eastern”. There is *one* Body of Christ throughout the world, culturally diverse, and yet the one church of Jesus Christ, against whom, the powers of hell itself cannot prevail.

⁵⁸ I am indebted to Jonathan Bonk, director of the OMSC in New Haven, CT for this insight.

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