

CONTEXTUALISATION, CONTEXT AND COMPROMISE

As long as religion and community are identified as an inviolable link, whether in Ancient Israel, modern Arabia or a seventeenth century rural English parish, there is no problem for how people live, but as soon as this link is broken issues arise. In particular we have the problem as to how a belief in Jesus Christ relates to both the culture in which you have been brought up and your relationship with others of a different culture who hold the same belief. It is an issue that has been with us since the beginnings of the Gentile mission in the Book of Acts. It is an issue that is in many ways peculiar to Christianity in that we accept the plurality of cultures with the centrality of belief. The very name "Christian" demonstrates that we are defined collectively by our relationship to the Christ rather than by the adoption of any particular cultural pattern.

In the modern world this issue is most keenly felt in the case of Muslims coming to faith in Jesus¹. Islam is also a missionary religion, but it has linked culture and belief in a different way from Christianity. To become a Muslim means not only to embrace a belief, but also to take on a culture of behaviour. In many cases it will also involve the transportation of particular clothing styles from the desert into the streets of London. A similar situation is to be found in some branches of Orthodox Judaism which ossify a certain period of European culture for its followers. By contrast Christianity will often adopt cultural practices of converts and make them part of their Christian expression. For example the Western pattern of prayer – hands together, squat position, eyes closed – is from Northern European culture and not anything Biblical or Middle Eastern.

It is in this context that in 1998 John Travis (a pseudonym) set out the spectrum of Christ Centred Communities under term C1-C6².

The C1-C6 Spectrum	C1: Foreign church transplant, foreign in culture and language	C2: C1 using local, non-Islamic language	C3: C2 using non-Islamic cultural elements (e.g. dress, music, diet, artwork)	C4: C3 with some biblically acceptable Islamic practices	C5: C4 with a "Muslim for Jesus" self-identity	C6: Secret believer, may or may not be an active member in the religious life of the Muslim community
Self-definition	"Christians"	"Christians"	"Christians"	"Followers of Isa"	"Muslims for Jesus"	"Christians," "Followers of Isa," or "Muslims for Jesus"
Muslim perception	Christians	Christians	Christians	A kind of Christian	A strange kind of Muslim	?

This has played a key role in missiologists' view of Muslim evangelism and generated a large amount of literature. Dr Matthew Sleeman of Oak Hill is about to publish a literature survey which comprehensively charts the debates³

Travis has further defined his viewpoint:⁴

“... Our intent is not to prove if C5 can happen, as case studies already indicate that it is happening. Rather, we hope to help build a framework from which to understand this phenomenon and to answer some of the questions which have arisen such as:

- *From a Biblical perspective, can a person be truly saved and continue to be a Muslim?*
- *Doesn't a follower of Christ need to identify himself as a Christian and officially join the Christian faith?*
- *Can a Muslim follower of Christ retain all Muslim practices, in particular praying in the mosque toward Mecca and continuing to repeat the Muslim creed?”*

“He then sets out ten premises:

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

He further responds to criticism from Phil Parshall, who has a long track record of ministry to Muslims in South Asia.

“What makes a particular Muslim “C5” is that he has received Isa (Jesus) as Lord and Savior, meets regularly with other such believers, and yet is still seen as “Muslim” through his or her own eyes, as well as the eyes of fellow Muslims. AC5 believer will certainly have different beliefs from other Muslims (e.g., Isa did die on the cross, Muhammad is not a prophet in the biblical sense, salvation is in Isa al-Masih and not in works). However, C5 believers remain in the Muslim community (i.e., they do not officially become members of a traditional church), and they still participate in Muslim cultural and religious practices—except for those contrary to Scripture. The simple fact is, I know individuals who are truly born again and living for Jesus, yet because of their upbringing, ethnicity, or community, simply see themselves as Muslims who have found salvation in Jesus. I would be hard pressed to say by biblical definitions that they are not part of God's Kingdom”⁶.

You may want to discuss these statements and compare them with your understanding of scripture. Biblical treatment within the C5/“insider movement” community is often very shallow and shows little understanding of the specific historic circumstances of the NT. It seeks to present C5 as a form of Messianic Islam

(comparable to Messianic Judaism) and in crucial passages like Acts 15 puts the Muslims in the place of the Gentiles and seeks to depict Christian churches as those who want to put a heavy burden on new believers.

There is a difference between this as part of Mission policy and historical incidents of movements among Muslims on the journey towards Christ that have happened historically. One of these would be the establishment of the church in East Java in the Nineteenth Century associated with the work of Coolen ⁷. Objections to C5 have come from various quarters, the most significant of which are those from veteran missionaries amongst Muslims ⁸. Bill Nikides has also been a strong critic and warns the Christian world of the danger of adopting this policy ⁹.

My own critique of the movement was given at a meeting of the Muslim World Forum of Global Connections in October 2009 where I focussed at the scriptural teaching on the church ¹⁰.

“Jesus said that he would build his church, his ecclesia, and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it (Matt. 16.18). The disciples are given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. It is in the same Gospel that the great Commission is given in its fullest authentic form:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you to the end of the age.”

The first Gospel preaching on the Day of Pentecost contained the invitation to belief that Jesus had been made Lord and Christ; to baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins; and to receive the gift of the Spirit. Throughout the Book of Acts we see the fulfilment of the Great Commission and the establishment of churches in cities across the Empire. Initially it was Jews who came to faith in their Messiah, but the message was not limited to them and, although there was a continuing “insider movement” amongst Jews in Jerusalem, the new churches that are planted are composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

Acts 15 establishes that the laws given by God to Israel through Moses do not need to be applied to the Gentiles ¹¹.

The mainline story of Acts is that the church of Jesus Christ is formed not on an ethnic basis, but on a living relationship with Jesus himself by his Spirit.

The historical accounts are backed up by the more doctrinal discussions of the Epistles. I would like to look particularly at Ephesians. First salvation of those in the church in Ephesus is presented as part of God’s plan from before the world was made. The two components of Jews, “the first to hope in Christ”, and Gentiles have received the one Holy Spirit guaranteeing the same inheritance. Jesus is the head of his body which is the church. No distinction in character is made between the church in Ephesus for which Paul prays and the universal body for whose benefit Christ becomes the head of the universe. In chapter 2 the formation of the church is described both in terms of conversion by the sovereign act of a life-giving God and also the process by which a new humanity is established in the cross of Christ. Addressing the issue of an ethnic and law defined people of God, the cross of Christ is shown to be the abolishing of distinctions between Jews and Gentiles to form “one new man” – one new humanity – who through Christ have access to one Father by one Spirit. Both Jews and Gentiles are part of the one household of God not just in spiritual or invisible terms, but in the reality of life in Ephesus. If we follow Clinton Arnold’s reading of the situation into which this letter was written, we may want to argue that this emphasis on the unity of diverse people in one body of Christ who show love one to another is the very power of God to the defeat of all the evil forces in the universe ¹². What

cannot be denied is that one of the major themes of the NT epistles is the unity of the church as a distinct people of God with a distinct lifestyle that is neither Jewish nor pagan.

To digress for a moment - the unity of the people of God across all racial and cultural boundaries is one of the most neglected aspects of being an evangelical and Biblical Christian at the present time. I began ministry in the 1960s when for many evangelical Christians the term “ecumenical” was a swear word indicative of those who would deny the centrality of the cross of Christ and the authority of scripture for some spurious un-doctrinal communist-fuelled united church. When I reached Indonesia I had to relearn the meaning of the word. Indonesia had been evangelised by people who concentrated on specific ethnic groups. This meant that division amongst Christians followed ethnic and tribal lines rather than doctrinal or theological. The Indonesian ecumenical movement was concerned with establishing the unity of the body of Christ across tribal barriers. I became a convinced ecumenist and rejoiced when I ministered in a congregation of about 1200 people who were drawn from a variety of ethnic groups and where almost two-thirds were MBBs worshipping in one congregation with people who claimed that they had been Christians for 400 years.

An “insider movement” may be a stage in people’s opening up to the claims of Christ, but should not be viewed as the end aim of evangelism. It is not just those who are involved in “insider movements” who need to reconsider what it means to be the united universal people of God. We cannot emphasise the need to contextualise to any people group in such a way that we keep apart in their ethnic distinctives, brothers and sisters who should be showing the beauty of a renewed humanity focussed on Christ as the precursor of the new heaven and new earth.

Some of the most serious criticism comes from Muslim converts (MBBs). Not only have they distanced themselves from these Islamic forms of Christian worship, but they have found themselves isolated in times of persecution. Whereas they want to testify to the new life in Christ, they are encouraged by missionaries to keep their identity with the Muslim community and at times to renounce their Christian profession.

This is an issue that brings many dangers to the missionary movement. Theological disputes are often badly conducted amongst those who are concerned about truth and the advancement of the Kingdom of God (remember Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15). Our concern to be true to scripture can lead us to forget how we should deal with brothers in Christ who differ from us. I have tried to approach this issue by looking more closely at the nature of the church of Jesus Christ as a multi-cultural community. Those who take a different view are brothers and sisters in Christ and I don’t want to demonise them or pronounce them as heretics. Many of them are ministering in difficult and challenging places and have given their lives to see Muslims come into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Let us pray for that and for those with whom we differ that we may all see the scriptures more clearly and follow Christ more nearly.

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References

¹ Hindu background believers also have serious debates on this issue.

² Travis, John (1998) The C1 to C6 Spectrum? *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 43: 407-408

³

http://www2.mtw.org/home/site/templates/mtw_invision.asp?_resolutionfile=templatespath|mtw_invision.asp&area_2=public/Resources/Invision/2005/10/Incarnational accessed 19/9/11

⁴ Matthew Sleeman (2011) The Origins, Development and Future of the C5 / "insider movement" Debate. He will also be publishing an assessment of the use of passages from Acts of the Apostles used by advocates of the "insider movement". He is submitting them to IJFM, but will otherwise offer them to St Francis Magazine

<http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/>. These two journals represent the two sides of the debate.

⁵ <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdfs/27-5-travis.pdf> accessed 19/9/11

⁶ http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/17_1_PDFs/Editorial.pdf accessed 19/9/11

⁷ See David Bentley-Taylor *The Weathercock's Reward* Overseas Missionary Fellowship 1967 London

⁸ e.g. Warren Chastain critique of the adoption of Muslim Prayer patterns – accessed 19/9/11

http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/12_3_PDFs/09_Chastain.pdf

⁹ One of his strongest articles is referred to in Footnote 8

¹⁰ I have added a few footnotes and edited lightly

¹¹ For an understanding of the Jerusalem decree see (as well as standard commentaries especially Witherington) also

David Instone-Brewer's paper on Infanticide <http://www.galaxie.com/article/10687> Accessed 1/10/11

¹² Clinton Arnold *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989)

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