

## **A BIBLICAL CRITIQUE TO C5 STRATEGIES AMONG MUSLIMS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Field practitioners have been experimenting with varied approaches to Muslim evangelism. There are some who seek culturally relevant ways to proclaim the gospel without compromising the integrity of the biblical doctrines. On the other side, some committed missionaries have converted to Islam in order to work among Muslims who will remain in Islam after conversion. Communities of baptized Muslims are being established that still believe that Mohammed is the ultimate prophet, the Qur'an is the supreme inspired book, and Islam is the only true religion. The latter are some of the practices followed by many missionaries in contextualized ministries.

Several Bible passages have been used to support the so-called “contextualized ministries” among Muslims at “C5 level.” This article will study these passages to evaluate the validity of their approaches. However, before the biblical perspectives are considered, a definition of key terms is necessary, including the concepts of contextualization, syncretism, and the C-scale.

### **Selected Definitions**

The following selected terms are related to Muslim evangelism. Some of them describe valid missionary strategies, while others are not in harmony with the principle of Sola Scriptura, as they compromise the integrity of biblical doctrines.

**Contextualization** is the intentional and discriminating attempt to communicate the gospel in a culturally meaningful way. Contextualization “attempts to communicate the gospel in ways that make sense to the people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people’s deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their own culture”<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, culture is defined as “a set of rules or standards shared by members of a society, which when acted upon by the members, produce behavior that falls within a range the members consider proper and acceptable.”<sup>2</sup>

A survey of the methodology of the various models which are proposed for contextualization shows that there are basically two groups: 1) those who have a high view of Scripture, and 2) those who have a low view of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> This is not a matter of just having two equally valid interpretations of the biblical text. There is a radical difference between both groups. The first group adheres to the principles of *sola scriptura*, *tota scriptura*, and *prima scriptura*. They believe that the Scripture interprets itself, and they make the Word of God the sole authoritative source for theological content. However, there are ways that are not consistent

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<sup>1</sup>Darrel L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1997, 2.

<sup>2</sup>William A Haviland, *Cultural Anthropology*, 5th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975), 27.

<sup>3</sup>McGavran, 52-54.

with a high view of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The second group lets the historical influences and social and cultural contexts be the filtration system through which the content of their message is determined. A clear understanding of biblical principles must always inform and drive missiology. Missiology helps keep theology practical and alive, but in the process, missiology must not run ahead of theology and take the leading position.

This paper assumes that God's Word is authoritative in every culture. It also assumes that remaining in a culture does mean retaining elements which contradict the supracultural elements of the gospel. Some cultural traits are not options in a society that follows Christ. Other cultural traits are neutral. Missionaries must learn to differentiate between them.<sup>5</sup>

**Syncretism** is the blending of different and even opposing systems resulting in a new one. There is syncretism in music, literature, science, and culture, and it is not necessarily wrong or evil. However, theological blending religious truth and error is unacceptable.<sup>6</sup> We must avoid the compromise of biblical doctrines. Theological syncretism starts when we set aside the

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<sup>4</sup>Carlos G. Martin, "What Constitutes Acceptable Contextualization," *Asia Adventist Seminary Studies*, 1, no. 1 (1988): 19-25.

<sup>5</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 183-92; Donald A. McGavran, "*The Clash between Christianity and Culture* (Washington, DC: Canon Press, 1974), 38-43; Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis), 120-24. Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Syncretism and Contextualization: The Church on a Journey Defining Itself," in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed. Gailyn Van Rheenen, Evangelical Missiological Society Series no. 13 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 3-7.

<sup>6</sup>According to Hiebert, syncretism is "the mixture of old meanings with the new so that the essential nature of each is lost." Paul G. Hiebert, "Culture and Cross-Cultural Differences," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1981), 378.

principle of *sola scriptura* or simply neglect the study of the Bible. In time the basic content of the gospel is reshaped by the cultural values of the context, usually in attempts to make the church more acceptable to the local culture.<sup>7</sup> Syncretism is the intentional or unintentional fusion of two or more opposing forces, beliefs, practices, principles, or religious systems that result in a new thing, which is contrary to Christianity, as revealed in the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> Syncretism occurs when Christianity adapts a cultural form, but it still carries with it attached meanings from the former belief system. These old meanings can severely distort or obscure the intended Christian meaning.

When Christians arrive at a point where they cannot distinguish between biblical principles and cultural practices, they accept syncretism as normal. The problem is not punctual, but systemic. Syncretism becomes a missiological option when scholars and missionaries confuse cultural contextualization with religious contextualization.<sup>9</sup>

The **C-Scale**, or “Contextualization Spectrum,” measures on a scale from 1 through 6 the level of contextualization among believers in Muslim contexts.<sup>10</sup> Levels C1 and C2 are described as “extractionist” models, because believers adopt another culture in order to be Christians. Levels C3 and C4 are described as “contextualized,” because they retain as many cultural forms

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<sup>7</sup>Gailyn Van Rheenen, “Worldview and Syncretism,” *Missiology.org*, <http://www.missiology.org/mongolianlectures/worldviewandsyncretism.htm> (accessed March 10, 2012).

<sup>8</sup>Hiebert, “Culture and Cultural Differences,” 378.

<sup>9</sup>Edwin Reynolds, “New Testament Principles and Models for Ethical Contextualization of Missions.” A paper presented at the Eighth Biblical-Theological Symposium for the Faculty of Theology at the Adventist University of Chile, Chillan, Chile, May 18-20, 2009.

<sup>10</sup>John Travis, “The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 1998): 407-8.

as possible. The problem addressed in this paper centers around C5 level, because believers maintain their Muslim identity.

- C1 Traditional church using outsider language (for instance, English).
- C2 Traditional church using insider language (for instance, Arabic, Bengali, Pakistani).
- C3 Contextualized communities using insider language and cultural forms (clothes, music, etc).
- C4 Contextualized communities using insider language, cultural, and Islamic forms which are compatible with biblical forms (such as removing shoes, raising hands, and prostration). Believers develop a Christian identity.
- C5 Communities of Muslim believers who maintain their Islamic identity.
- C6 Secret, isolated, or underground believers. This is not a contextualization model but a survival strategy.<sup>11</sup>

### **Similarities and Differences Between C4 and C5**

Both subscribe to vocabulary, diets, clothing, and culture that is Muslim-friendly.

Neither model would support extraction of Muslim converts and placing them in churches that are culturally foreign (i.e., churches that use a language, musical forms, thought patterns, architecture, or social practices which are not common to worshipers). The vast majority of what C5 proponents say about strategy reinforces the good missiology of C4. The crucial difference which separates C4 and C5 is that of self-identity by believers. Many believers related to C4 efforts call themselves “followers of Isa” to avoid the term “Christian.” Muslims, however, don’t see C4 believers as Muslims. In contrast, C5 believers see themselves as Muslims, and the Islamic community sees them as Muslims. Some C5 believers may say they are “Muslim followers of Isa,” and some in Islam might refer to them as a “strange kind of Muslim.”<sup>12</sup> The C5

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<sup>11</sup>Jim Leffel, “Contextualization: Building Bridges to the Muslim Community,” *Xenos Christian Fellowship*, <http://www.xenos.org/ministries/crossroads/OnlineJournal/issue1/contextu.htm> (accessed January 12, 2008).

<sup>12</sup>Joshua Massey, “God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 8.

believer remains “legally, culturally, and religiously within the Muslim Ummah.”<sup>13</sup> Muslims don’t see C4 believers as Muslims. In contrast, C5 believers see themselves as Muslims, and the Islamic community sees them as Muslims. Believers at C4 level are called “Muslim Background Believers” (MBBs) because they are not Muslims. Believers at C5 level are simply called “Muslim Believers” (MBs).

C4 and C5 initiatives start with similar approaches, such as using the Qur’an in initial stages and encouraging the believers to maintain their culture. However, they baptize believers at different points. In C4 believers are baptized when they are ready to identify themselves as Christians. In C5 believers are still committed to the Five Pillars of Islam. The Five Pillars are as follows:

1. Perform the *salat*, or Muslim prayers towards Mecca, usually five times a day.
2. Recite the *shahada*, or confession of faith: “Allah is the only God and Mohammad is His prophet.”
3. Fast during the month of Ramadan in commemoration of the giving of the Qur’an.
4. Give the *zakat* or alms, equivalent to 2.5%.
5. Go on the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) at least once in a lifetime. The *hajj* includes the visit to several sacred sites, animal sacrifices, and walking seven times around the *Ka’bah*.

Almost all C4 practitioners would say that a transition time of coming out of the mosque is natural and understandable. Since his first contact with biblical truth, a Muslim may require more transitional time to the church than a Christian moving from one denomination to another. The converts themselves, based on the Holy Spirit’s conviction, will determine the timing of their exodus. In contrast, C5 practitioners encourage baptized believers to retain their Muslim identity and their identification with the mosque.

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<sup>13</sup>Jerald Whitehouse, “Issues of Identity,” Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations, 2005, Appendixes 3, 27.

C4 MBBs are baptized when they are ready to “come out” of the mosque (they are *ekkleesia*, “the ones called out”). C4 believers are baptized when they decide to “come out” of the mosque and join the church. C5 MBs remain in Islam after baptism and use the mosque as a platform for reaching out to other Muslims.

C4 MBBs will only use biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms such as removing the shoes in a place of worship (Exo 3:5; Josh 5:15; Acts 7:33), prostration, or touching the ground with the forehead during prayer (Gen 17:3; Exo 34:8; Josh 5:14; Eze 9:8; 2 Chr 10:18; Matt 17:6; 26:39), raising hands during prayer (Ezr 9:5; 1 Kgs 8:22; 2 Tim 2:8), and even having a separate place for women (Solomon’s Temple had a Women’s Court). By contrast, baptized C5 MBs may incorporate other practices, including the Five Pillars of Islam. The rationale for this is that the practice of the Five Pillars is “one of the major defenses against all accusations by fellow Muslims.”<sup>14</sup>

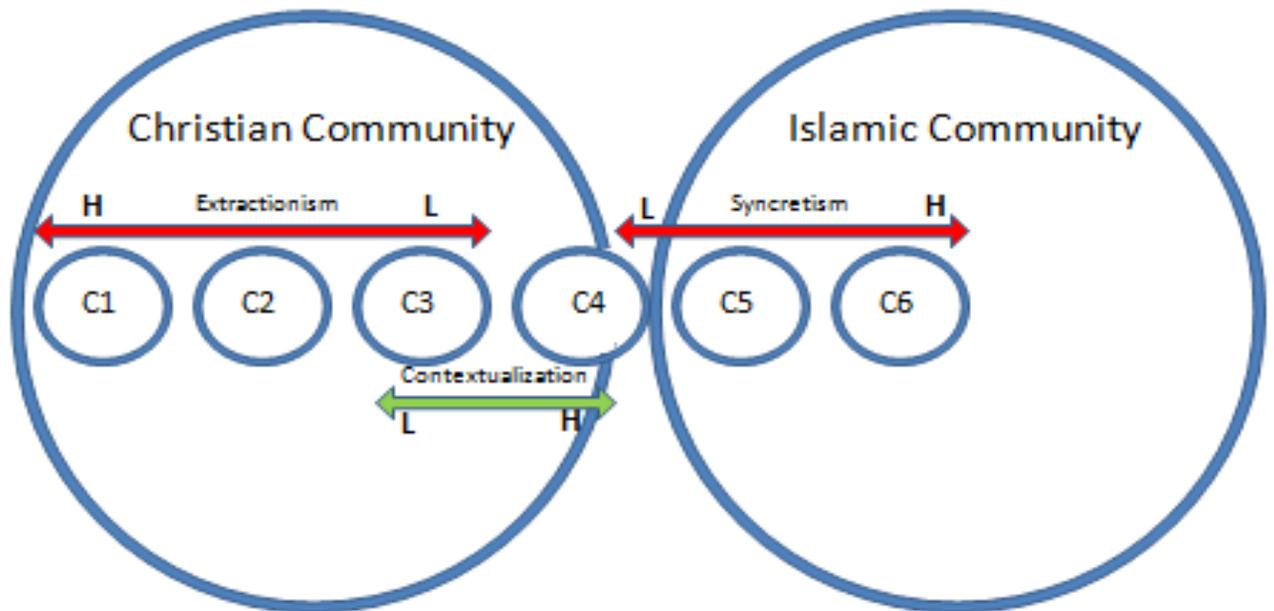
Phil Parshall, a renowned author and missiologist who has worked among Muslim people on Bangladesh and the Philippines for the past 44 years, places C1 to C4 within the contextualization spectrum. “C-1 starts at low contextualization and works up incrementally to C-4 at the high end.” He concludes that “C-5 can be placed anywhere along the syncretism spectrum.”<sup>15</sup> The following graphic<sup>16</sup> illustrates this view:

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<sup>14</sup>Wolfgang Lepke, “An Evaluation of a Contextual Witnessing Project within a Resistant People Group,” Ph.D. dissertation (Andrews University, Berrien Spring, Michigan, 2001), 230.

<sup>15</sup>Phil Parshall, “Danger! New Directions in Contextualization,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 1998): 405.

<sup>16</sup>Adapted from Timothy C. Tennent, “Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 ‘High Spectrum’ Contextualization,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 102, 103. Notice that C4 approaches may be implemented in such a way that they may also fall outside the Christian realm.



### Biblical Perspectives

The following study reviews the biblical texts most frequently cited in support of C5 strategy: 1 Cor 7:20, 1 Cor 9:19-22; and Acts 15:19. It is important to notice that both C4 and C5 utilize the same Scriptures to support their positions. This is understandable because both approaches have the common purpose of encouraging the believers to maintain their culture. Both C4 and C5 start with similar approaches, such as using the Qur'an in initial stages; however, they differ on how far they will use contextualization. In contrast with C4 strategies that encourage converts to maintain their cultural identity while avoiding syncretism, C5 missionaries will baptize Muslims who will culturally, legally, and religiously remain Muslims. While these texts provide support for C4 approaches, some of them in a compelling way, the question that following study asks is whether or not they provide support for C5 approaches.

**1 Corinthians 7:20:** “Each one should remain in the situation in which he was when God called him.” This idea is repeated three times, relating to marital status, slavery, and being Jew or Gentile. The theory goes that if a person was a Muslim, he or she should remain a Muslim after coming to Christ.<sup>17</sup> Jerald Whitehouse explains: “He/she is a Muslim. We have never asked that they reject that heritage or identity. He can continue to relate in the Muslim community as a Muslim.”<sup>18</sup>

An exam of the biblical context reveals that the text is addressing the issues of 1) marriage and singleness (vv. 7-11); 2) believers married to unbelievers (vv. 12-17); 3) circumcision and uncircumcision (vv. 18-20); 4) slaves and free (vv. 21-24); and 5) singleness (vv. 25-40). Biblical use of the Jew/Gentile distinction relates to Israel’s distinctness as God’s people (Eph. 2:11, 12, 13, 16). The passage does not suggest that people in a false religion should remain in that state.

The passage encourages people to remain in the familial and social status where they were prior to knowing Christ. The passage is not encouraging people to remain in their former religion. Reynolds argues, “It is one thing to tell people that they do not need to leave their familiar cultural setting when they come to Christ—provided that it does not involve a compromise of biblical principles—but it is quite another to tell them that they do not need to

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<sup>17</sup>H. L. Richard asks, “Is there not actually a command to retain the position in life that one had when called to Christ? As Paul specifically applied this principle to the main distinctive of Jewish or Gentile culture (v. 18, 19), should it not today apply to Hindu and Muslim cultures also?” H. L. Richard, “Is Extraction Evangelism Still the Way to Go?” *Mission Frontiers Bulletin*, [http://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdf/1996/0910/\\_so966.htm](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdf/1996/0910/_so966.htm) (accessed March 12, 2012).

<sup>18</sup>Jerald Whitehouse, “A Working Paper from GCAMR and Associated Entities on AMR Identity Issues” (August 2000), 2.

leave their false religion that stands in conflict with the claims of Christ and the Bible.”<sup>19</sup>

The “remain-as-you-are” principle as it pertains to the Jew/Gentile question did *not* relate to the religious identity of pagans and cannot be extended *prima facie* to explicitly religious aspects of Islamic culture or Muslim identity.

Conclusion: When quoted in its context, this passage provides possible support for C4, but cannot be cited to support C5 strategy. The desire to respect the family and social community should not lead us to embrace a theology that is contra-biblical. Culture should be embraced only to the extent that it does not cause theological syncretism.

**1 Corinthians 9:19-22:** “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some.”

It is clear in this passage that Paul’s approach to win more people to Christ was varying methods to fit each group. This is precisely what C4 and C5 proponents are arguing for. The tension arises in what Paul means when he says, “To the Jews I became like a Jew.” Even the leading advocates of C5 are not encouraging outsiders to “become Muslims” in order to reach Muslims. But Muslims are encouraged to remain Muslims in order to reach Muslims. Only a few non-Muslim background Christians have officially assumed Muslim identity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Reynolds, 11.

<sup>20</sup>Whitehouse, “Issues of Identity,” 17

What is Paul saying here? Ethnically, he was already a Jew. He had departed from the Jewish system of beliefs by accepting Jesus as the Messiah and as the risen Lord. He became “as a Jew” as he took on the Jewish traditions and culture as much as possible, while maintaining a vibrant faith in Jesus. “The very fact that Paul could become *like* a Jew in one text and *like* a Gentile in another clearly demonstrates that he is not becoming self-identified as a Jew or a Gentile in the way that is required for C-5 advocates to quote this text to support C-5.” There is a vast difference between being culturally relevant and theologically accommodating.<sup>21</sup>

Paul becomes like a Jew, but he had already moved from Judaism to Christianity. He looks like a Jew culturally but holds firmly to the Christian truth—and *the other Jews know that he does*. The Jews knew what Paul believed. Because of the missionaries’ departure from Judaism, Jews “expelled them from their region” (Acts 13:50) and even “stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead” (Acts 14:19). Lowering theological standards to avoid persecution was not Paul’s approach.

Conclusion: Missiologists are in broad agreement that this text provides support for those who are in contextual, rather than extractionist, ministries. This text does appear to provide further support for C4 ministries. This text *does not* teach that we should take on the religious identity of a Jew or a Gentile, and by extension it should not be applied to a Muslim’s remaining Muslim.

**Acts 15:19** is James’ conclusion of what should be required of Gentile converts by saying, “Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God.” C5 advocates that requiring a Muslim to become a Christian is to follow “the

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<sup>21</sup>Tennant, 108.

old proselyte model.” Allowing a Muslim to stay fully connected with his Islamic identity is consistent with “the new model” posed by the post-Jerusalem Council.<sup>22</sup>

The issue was not keeping Gentiles within their pagan religion, as opposed to their converting to Christianity. The issue of the discussion was whether or not Gentiles were required to convert to Judaism. “There is no equivalent that would apply to Muslims in the modern context.”<sup>23</sup> Tennent observes, “In order for this text to be used as a basis for C-5, one must also argue that the Gentiles were not asked to abandon their *religious* identity.”<sup>24</sup> To answer the hypothetical question of whether the Jerusalem Council would have insisted that Muslims renounce their religious identity, Tennent offers a hypothetical scenario. In order not to make it too difficult for new believers within Islam, the Council could have set forth the following three prohibitions: 1) during the daily *salat*, refrain from saying the *Shahadah*; 2) acknowledge that only the Bible is the Word of God and that the Qur’an has no authority over the Bible; and 3) when reciting the 99 beautiful names of Allah, add the following three: (a) God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, (b) Holy Spirit, and (c) Blessed Trinity. Tennent asks, “Could a ‘Muslim’ disciple of Jesus Christ, as espoused by 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 “certainly not.”<sup>25</sup>

Conclusion: Rather than supporting C5 approaches, Acts 15 provides compelling support for C4. Gentiles were allowed to join the church without embracing the old covenant in order to

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>23</sup>Reynolds, 14.

<sup>24</sup>Tennent, 105. Italics in original.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 106, 107.

be saved. Acts 15 reminds cross-cultural workers of the importance of making important decisions within established theological structures.

The text of 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 indicates that there should be a sense of “separation”:<sup>26</sup> “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? . . . Therefore ‘Come out from among them, and be separate,’ says the Lord. ‘Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.’”

This passage is often misquoted when dealing with a believer who wishes to marry an unbeliever. The context is about believers from pagan backgrounds continuing to worship in their former context. God’s command is extremely clear: “Get out!” (Remember that *ekklesia*, “church” in Greek, means “the called-out ones”).

Some may argue, “This passage only relates to idol worshipers.” First, a heavy dose of caution needs to be administered to those who assume that the Allah of Islam is the same as the Triune God of Scripture. However, the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely necessary, due to the fact that a Muslim must accept that Jesus is God and not merely a prophet. This, implicitly and biblically, requires the concept of the Trinity.

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<sup>26</sup>Larry Poston, “‘You Must Not Worship in Their Way’: When Contextualization Becomes Suncretism,” in *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, ed. Gailyn Van Rhee, Evangelical Missiological Society Series no. 13 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006), 252.

Second, the mosque is saturated with theology that says: “Jesus was not crucified,” “Salvation is by merit and not by grace,” “Belief in the Trinity amounts to polytheism,” “Mohammed is Allah’s prophet,” and “The Bible has been corrupted.” This shows that believers cannot find sanctification and edification in the mosque. However, the C5 strategy assumes that in order to serve as witnesses, believers need to retain contact with the mosque.<sup>27</sup>

Since the mosque cannot edify believers, the logical outcome is to “come out from among them” in order to find a healthy environment for growth. However, without attendance at the mosque, C5 believers cannot be considered faithful Muslims. In some areas it may be possible for MBs to meet in their own mosques, but this runs contrary to the very missionary purpose of the C5 strategy.

Third, while MBs accept Jesus as Savior, the majority of them are still attached to the teachings of the mosque. According to Parshall, a 1998 survey among 72 key C5 leaders representing 4,500 believers indicated that 97% said that “Jesus is the only Savior.” However, 96% still believed that the Qur’an was one of four holy books from heaven. Parshall also alarmingly reported that after ten years, 45% of those leaders did not affirm that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Trinity.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, most Muslims practice Folk Islam and have a myriad of *jinn*, spirits, and powers that they are trying to master, even though orthodox Islam teaches otherwise. This form of Islam fits exactly what was going on in the pagan context of 2 Cor 6:14-17.

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<sup>27</sup>Gorden R. Doss, “Too Far or Not Far Enough: Reaching Out to Muslim People,” *Ministry*, February 2005, 29.

<sup>28</sup>Parshall, 406.

It is true that Islam contains some truth. However, the bulk of what is preached in the mosque and what is practiced by Muslims is incompatible with the Scriptures. If a person worships in a mosque, people will assume he or she is a Muslim and will recite the *shahada* (“There is no God but God, and Mohammed is His prophet”). Some C5 believers may argue that they replace “Mohammed” in their hearts with “Isa Al Mahid,” while others may freely affirm that Mohammed is God’s prophet. In order to be culturally relevant but at the same time maintaining the integrity of the biblical doctrines, some C4 believers modify the *shahada* in their house-church meetings.

The admonition to “come out from among them” is similar to God’s call to His people living in the midst of false religion: “Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins” (Rev 18:4). “There is a grave danger in failing to recognize the seriousness of continuing to live in the midst of falsehood and deception. Regular contact with falsehood makes it seem less dangerous and more tolerable, until we embrace it comfortably.”<sup>29</sup>

C4 approaches establish communities of “followers of Isa” who have responded to the call to come out of darkness into the marvelous light. The study of the Scriptures reveals that there is no biblical support for C5 strategies. Remaining in Islam is not a viable option for “followers of Isa” with a high view of Scripture.

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<sup>29</sup>Reynolds, 14.

A valid approach to contextualization demands two commitments: First, it demands a commitment to biblical authority. The message of the Bible must not be adulterated. It requires faithfulness to the Scriptures, faithfulness to the *sola scriptura* principle. Second, it demands a commitment to cultural relevance. The biblical message must be related to the cultural background of its recipients. It requires cultural sensitivity. Field practitioners, missiologists, and administrators of sending agencies need to move forward with these two commitments in mind.

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