

Responses

Four Responses to Timothy C. Tennent's *Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 "High Spectrum" Contextualization*

Response One (by John Travis)

Timothy Tennent, a seminary professor whose experience is in Hindu ministry, has written a comprehensive article critiquing C5 movements (on the C1-C6 scale). This is a type of church-planting movement in which Muslims accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, yet remain socio-religiously within the Muslim community. I commend this article for its comprehensiveness and even asked Dr. Tennent if I could use it for a graduate level class I will soon be teaching on contextualization. I feel the strength of the article is that Tennent, as a professor *not* involved in day-to-day ministry with Muslims, brings a fresh set of eyes to the issues under discussion by evaluating the literature available on the topic. He points out that much, maybe most, of the articles written to date are *ad hoc*, having been produced by busy missionaries on the field who are witnessing C5 movements but only occasionally writing an article. Tennent's article, therefore, serves as a challenge for those who believe in C5 as a valid expression of the body of Christ, to reflect Biblically, theologically and strategically on the issues he has raised. As a professor, I am sure one of Tennent's motives in writing this article was to make his students think deeply, and that is good. Yet in spite of strengths, this article also has at least four weaknesses, as I see it.

The first weakness (which Tennent does not try to hide) is that his paper is *only* based on things he has read that others have written, often in an *ad hoc* fashion; there is no original research, data or first hand field experience mentioned. In that sense, the paper is largely theoretical. We need to be aware that the "validity" of a religious movement such as C5

can only rightly be understood through the interaction of Biblical/theological reflection *and* first hand experience of what God is doing today in the Muslim world. This is what the leaders of the early church did when they met in Jerusalem to determine issues of contextualization surrounding the Gentile congregations (Acts 15). It is highly instructive to note that as they came together to decide a theological matter (is circumcision required?), they did not first go the Scriptures; rather they went first to case studies of what God had been doing among the Gentiles. In Acts 15:3-4 and 6-14,



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Paul, Barnabas and Peter relate their experiences in Gentile ministry. It was only after very extensive review of what God was doing among Gentiles that the leader, James, turned to the Word, interpreting the text in light of what the Holy Spirit had been doing through the apostles.

The following types of questions can help us evaluate what God is doing among Muslims:

1. Are the new believers trusting God through Christ alone for their salvation?
2. Are they becoming more Christ-like, being shaped by the Word of God, both as individuals and as Christ-centered communities?
3. Are they able to grow in spite of being part of a larger community that rejects some Biblical truths?
4. Are they able to continue their witness in their community so that the Gospel spreads?

5. Are they reproducing themselves by spawning new fellowships and house churches?

The second weakness, related to the first, is that Tennent has gone too far in making sweeping judgments, dismissing C5 based on short phrases in popular articles. This especially comes out in his section entitled "Theological Considerations." Bits and pieces of various articles are tied together as if a well-researched evaluation of C5 was being made. The one piece of field data he uses comes from a study supposedly published by Phil Parshall. In fact, this research was conducted by others and has never been published. Parshall simply refers to it in his article and includes his personal interpretation on certain aspects of the study. Such articles do not provide the type of data required to back up Tennent's statements.

In footnote 20 Tennent draws the incorrect conclusion that if a fellowship has elders, it must not be a C5 fellowship. Scores of C5 fellowships with which I am acquainted have elders. (Tennent saw that in one article I mention a "C4/C5 fellowship," and concluded it actually must be a C4 fellowship. In fact, this particular fellowship contains both kinds of believers.) On what basis does Tennent mention long-standing evidence of the effectiveness of C3 and C4, as opposed to no such evidence for C5? In fact at this early stage in Muslim ministry, there are not enough case studies published to definitively show that one approach is always better than another. When the Gospel has barely entered the Muslim world, it is far too early to dismiss particular efforts to reach Muslims. We need to allow a variety of approaches. From a missiological point of view, these are all new movements still in their infancy. If they are seen by outsiders as deficient, let the observers pray and give them more time. The C5 movements with which I am personally familiar are all based

on the bedrock of inductive Bible study. I believe that as they continue to come together in Christ around his Word, they will become more or more like Jesus and more mature in their faith (as we all should!). It is premature to say that this will or should lead them to become C4 or C3 fellowships.

The third area of weakness concerns Tennent's comments that C5 is unethical. He implies that if a Muslim follows Jesus and does not renounce Islam, he is unethical. That is an extremely biased statement, spoken by an outsider. The Muslims I know who have accepted Christ are not hiding, are not lying, deceiving or being unethical. They say to Christian and Muslim alike, "We follow Christ and uphold the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament as the Word of God." The question of whether or not this is "ethical" can really only be answered by Muslims who claim to follow Christ. Only they can say whether or not their conscience is violated.

The fourth area of weakness is that the article does not take into account the changing world we are living in. Most of the Tennent's critique is based on his evaluation of four Scripture passages which have been mentioned by supporters of C5 movements and on church history, where it appears to Tennent that nothing like this has ever happened before. Yet C5 communities can be found in a variety of cultures. In the past four decades tens of thousands of Jews have accepted Jesus as their Messiah yet remain socio-religiously Jewish. This has not been seen for hundreds of years. What Paul did in accepting uncircumcised Gentiles into the community of faith was a new thing. Martin Luther, a great reformer, did a new thing. In many ways the charismatic / Pentecostal movement of this century has been a new thing. Messianic Jews, the ministry of Paul, the work of Martin Luther, and the charismatic movement of today, have been criticized by many, yet God does new things to

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expand his body in new ways. Before we are too quick to judge a very new part of the body of Christ, let us make sure we are not in fact working against God as he does a new thing to lead many to himself.

John Travis lives in Asia where he has been involved in contextualized ministry to Muslims for over twenty years. He has visited and done workshops in many locations in Africa, Asia and Europe and frequently lectures in seminaries and Bible colleges.

Response Two (by Phil Parshall)

Thorough, thoughtful and respectful. Dr. Tennent has done a masterful job of incisively dissecting the major issues that differentiate the C's. Of all the writings on the subject, this is the work that goes deeper and broader in setting forth the problems many are experiencing with C5 or as it is also known, the "Insider Movement."

I so appreciated the theological focus. It is interesting how both C4 and C5 utilize the same Scriptures to bolster their positions. The exception is I Cor. 7:20, which I have never understood as a C5 apologetic. These verses are clearly on another track.

Tennent more than adequately discounts the comparison of First Century Jewish converts to Christianity being aligned with 21st Century C5 "Insiders." The differences loom too large to ignore.

I would also agree that "Muslim Believer" would be a more appropriate term for C5 believers than "Muslim Background Believer." However, some C5ers advocate only the identity of "Muslim" with no qualifier.

One of my frustrations has been that the Insider Movement uses the same arguments to bolster their position as C4 folk do, and then make it sound like it originated with them. We C4

missionaries, for 30 years, have been an Insider Movement—have always advocated MBBs remaining in their culture, job, family, and sociological circle. Our strong position is to avoid what we consider to be theological and/or ethical compromise. I do recognize that we come out on different sides of the fence as to what comprises compromise!

YES to C5 as a starting point, but always with a laser beam focus on going down the scale to C4 within an appropriate timeframe. And always with a focus on keeping MBBs maximally within their own sociological structures.

Let me be clear. I have high esteem for my colleagues who are engaged in the "Insider" approach to Muslim ministry. I do not consider them to be ultra-pragmatists or purposefully deceitful. They long for the Kingdom to be extended. Our methodologies may, at times, be in conflict, but not our hearts' desire that Muslims come to explicit faith in Christ.

May our Lord be glorified as we seek to proclaim the "only name whereby men may be saved."

Phil Parshall is one of the leading authorities on ministry to Muslims. He and his wife, Julie, have lived among Muslims since 1962, first with International Christian Fellowship (now SIM) in Bangladesh and in the Philippines. He holds a doctorate from Fuller Seminary and has had fellowships with Harvard and Yale Universities. He is published in a number of Christian magazines, and has authored nine books.

Response Three (by Herbert Hoefler)

Iam involved most intimately with C-5 phenomena among caste Hindus in India. In Hindu society, it is quite acceptable to have differing religious beliefs and practices, as long as one carries out "dharma" (social

duties) faithfully. It is a society of orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. It is no problem to have one's identity as a Hindu culturally but as a follower of Jesus spiritually.

In addition, the Hindu society approaches its spiritual activity primarily in the family context, occasionally in individual temple worship, and only at festivals in a corporate fashion. Therefore, it is quite possible for people to be known as devout followers of Jesus and still be accepted wholeheartedly in the society. There are aspects of these Hindu cultural activities that are religious, and the "Jesu bhaktas" ("devotees of Jesus") simply abstain from participating.

In general, I would concur with Dr. Tennent's closing remark that "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." In fact, that approach is what I intended in the quote provided from my "Theologyless' Christ" article. Even at that, the organization of church may well differ from culture to culture, as I've tried to develop in a forthcoming EMQ article "Church in Context."

In mission work, we are constantly trying to keep up with the movement of the Spirit. He does not conform to our established rules and structures. We frustrate Him badly when we try to box Him and His People in. We want to maintain the doctrinal integrity of any developing Christian community, but we are open to the many different ways that truth can be framed, expressed, and lived culturally.

Herbert Hoefler is a former missionary to India, having served from 1968-1983 with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. He is currently professor of theology at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon.

Response Four (by Rebecca Lewis)

What is the relationship between contextualization and syncretism? Unfortunately, it is not a simple relationship whereby avoiding extreme contextualization one can avoid syncretism as charts B and C on page 103 might imply. Examples of Christian or "Christian" movements can be found in each of these quadrants:

- A. High Syncretism/low contextualization: pre-Christian beliefs mixed with acceptable "Christian" foreign forms (e.g., folk Catholicism)
- B. High Syncretism/high contextualization: pre-Christian "insider" forms + pre-Christian beliefs (e.g., cargo cults)
- C. High contextualization/low syncretism: pre-Christian "insider" forms + orthodox beliefs (e.g., Messianic synagogues)
- D. Low contextualization/low syncretism: foreign "Christian" forms + orthodox beliefs (e.g., evangelical churches in India)

Notice, one would think that quadrant C would be the ideal basis for an effective "insider" movement, where orthodox beliefs in culturally familiar forms could spread rapidly

within a pre-existing socio-religious network. However, the example of "Messianic synagogues" shows that setting up completely contextualized but new structures does not necessarily lead to acceptance. In fact, those Jews who join Messianic synagogues today are rejected by other Jews and even the State of Israel as traitors to the Jewish people, and are thus "extracted" from Judaism into Messianic Judaism. So while Chart C on page 103 could be understood to suggest that "extraction" only happens when non-contextualized forms are used, "extraction" can happen in any of the four quadrants below. **IJFM**

Rebecca Lewis grew up in Guatemala. After receiving her BS in History from the California Institute of Technology in 1977, she and her husband Tim helped found Frontiers and led a team of 40 adults to reach Berbers of North Africa.

