

The Jerusalem Council Applied

Acts 15 and Insider Movements Among Muslims: Questions, Process, and Conclusions

by Kevin Higgins

In his essay on C5 movements in Islam (*“To the Muslim, I Became a Muslim?”* in this issue, pp. 23–28), J. Dudley Woodberry has examined the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council narrative and drawn parallels to movements with which he is familiar in different parts of the Muslim world. For our purposes here, I will assume that the reader is already familiar with Woodberry’s paper, especially his seven points from Acts 15¹ (pp. 25–27).

In this paper, I will attempt to explore in more depth some important issues related to ones raised by Woodberry. First, I will examine the Acts 15 passage, paying particular attention to the two primary *questions* the leaders addressed, the *process* they followed to find answers to those questions, and the *conclusions* at which they arrived. Next, I will compare the *questions, process, and conclusions* of Acts 15 to the current discussion within mission circles concerning insider movements among Muslims. Finally, I will offer some tentative conclusions based upon our study of Acts 15 and my experience as a practitioner, and suggest directions for future study.

Acts 15: Questions, Process, Conclusions

Acts 15 occupies a central place within the larger work of Luke–Acts, which is the story of how an essentially Jewish reform movement gave birth to a movement to Jesus among the Gentiles. As various commentators have pointed out, the chapter forms the structural and theological center—the “watershed”—of Acts (Marshall, *Acts*, p. 242, and Strong, in *Mission in Acts*, p. 197). It also serves as a geographical pivot point in Luke’s narrative, showing how the “center” of gravity of this gospel movement shifted from Jewish Jerusalem in Luke/Acts 1–12 to Gentile Rome by Acts 28 (see Bosch’s discussion of Luke–Acts, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 93–94 and 115ff.²). This passage deserves our careful attention before we attempt to discuss possible parallels between the emerging Gentile Jesus movement in Luke–Acts and movements among Muslims today.

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The Questions: Acts 15:1–5

The new Gentile work in Antioch (Acts 11:19ff.) had already been investigated by the leadership in Jerusalem, through Barnabas. In addition, the Antioch movement resulted in the first recorded intentional effort to expand the work among the Gentiles (Acts 13:1ff. and 14:8ff.).

In Acts 15:1–5 we read that some Jewish believers (from the party of the Pharisees—see Marshall, *Acts*, 247ff.³) had begun to teach that without circumcision the Gentile believers could not be saved. Their concern, however, went far beyond circumcision and included the whole Torah: “It is necessary to circumcise them and charge them to keep the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5).

We can state the foundational, biblical, and theological issues underlying their concern as a single question:

How are Gentiles saved and what is the place of the Torah (including but not limited to circumcision) in the new movement?

At stake here is not simply whether Gentiles must become culturally Jewish to follow Jesus.⁴ Peter’s conclusion in verse 11 makes it clear that the question is *soteriological* in nature: “we shall be *saved* through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will.” Thus, the main issue facing the gathering in Jerusalem is the salvation of the Gentiles, and the ongoing place of the divinely revealed Torah in their salvation.⁵ Similarly, in discussing insider movements among Muslims today, we must realize that the fundamental issue is *not* about culture and forms, but about salvation.

As the meetings proceed, another important issue emerges. James, at the end of the process, describes certain essentials that will be required of the Gentiles who are turning to God (15:19ff., and compare 15:28). Commentators and missiologists generally agree that these essentials concern table fellowship, that is, the “unity of the church.”⁶

Concerns about table fellowship partially explain the reasoning behind the four elements listed in James’ conclusion and the subsequent letter, but there seems to be more to it. While “blood” and “strangled meat” are obviously related to the issue of food (and, thus, table fellowship), fornication is clearly in a different category. But what about “food sacrificed to idols”? It seems that this extends beyond table fellowship to concerns about actual idolatry, or what modern missiologists would call *syncretism*.

I will refer to these four items as “essentials for unity.” Blood and strangled meat



relate to food (and table fellowship). Fornication, on the other hand, relates to the fundamental ethical issue of sexuality, and idolatry to a fundamental shift in allegiance and worldview.

To summarize, two important questions have emerged thus far in our study of Acts 15. The first and primary question pertains to salvation (though this is also related to Torah), while the second concerns “essentials for unity” among believers from Gentile and Jewish backgrounds.

We will return to these essentials for unity when we look at conclusions, both in this section and in the application part of the paper. For now, let me state what questions I believe the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council would have asked had it been held to discuss insider movements among Muslims:

What is necessary for a Muslim to be saved?

What is necessary for unity between believers in a movement to Jesus among Muslims and believers from other backgrounds (for example, western Christian)?⁷

The Process: Acts 15:6–18

Within Acts 15, we should note that there had already been extensive discussion and argument on this issue in Antioch itself (Acts 15:1ff.). The discussion seems to have included not only key leaders, but perhaps the whole church as well (15:3).

As the story unfolds, we see that the debate continued to intensify (15:7) and that the process likely required several meetings. Indeed, the meeting in 15:6 seems to be separate from the one recorded in 15:4 (so too, Marshall, *Acts*, p. 249). Undoubtedly, a process is in view here, involving give and take.

Not only did the process require a period of debate within the community, but (as Woodberry has pointed out in his paper) Peter, Paul and Barnabas were invited to tell about the things God had done among them.⁸ Empirical evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit was clearly a deciding factor for those gathered—both the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as in the Cornelius event (Acts 10, 11), and the signs and wonders that followed the ministry of Paul and Barnabas.

Note, too, the place that Scripture played in the discussion (again, see Woodberry’s paper). The believers among the Pharisees felt very strongly that the biblical revelation to Moses needed to be taught and obeyed. It would have been natural to cite any number of references from the Torah to this effect and to show, from the Torah, the relevance of the Law for Gentiles (including, but not limited to, circumcision).⁹

James relied on Scripture as well. After hearing from the various parties, he stood up, made a brief reference to Peter, then gave his conclusion. Notice, however, that he prefaced his decision

by making the crucial point that the “prophets” agreed with Peter.

There are several points we should note about this passage:

First, James says concerning Peter’s report that God has *visited* the Gentiles—a word used of Israel in the birth narratives of Luke (see 1:34 and also 1:68 and 78 and 7:16; Marshall, *Acts*, p. 251). God did this to take for himself a people (Greek: *laos*) from the nations (Greek: *ethne*). Second, James quotes primarily from Amos 9 (although he possibly refers to Jeremiah 12 and Isaiah 45 as well). While the Pharisee believers have already argued their case from the Torah, James, in effect, is looking at the whole canon as he interacts with the question of salvation and the Torah.

Thus, in James’ view (as these first two points show), the inclusion of the Gentiles was akin to the Holy Spirit’s action in forming Israel itself. That God would form “a people” from the Gentiles/nations is very telling indeed. James does *not* say that God was adding the Gentiles to his people Israel, but that he was forming a people for himself from among the Gentiles.¹⁰

This apparent reality of two “peoples” of God (Jews and Gentiles) leads to the second primary question for the Jerusalem gathering: How will these two peoples relate to one another and have fellowship (since the “two” are also “one”)?¹¹ That is, since God has formed a people (Israel) for himself, and a people for himself from among the Gentiles, how do these two “peoples” relate to one another?¹² What is essential for their unity, even in the face of their diversity? We will look at this question in the next section.

To summarize thus far, the Jerusalem Council involved a process characterized by 1) much discussion over time and in community; 2) listening to what God was doing through his Spirit as evidenced by miracles and his direct intervention; and 3) debate and discussion about the Scriptures,

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including both the Torah and the Prophets.¹³ But there’s more to it.

As we consider their process, it is helpful to note that in the formative years of the movements to Jesus among Jews and Gentiles, questions regarding circumcision, the Law, and table fellowship were clearly major issues. This is true both before Acts 15 and afterward. A few pertinent passages include:

1. Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where the Law, circumcision, and food are all hot issues. (The events of Galatians 2 took place before the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15.)¹⁴;
2. Acts 15;
3. First Corinthians (while circumcision and the Law are not as pressing, the need for teaching about the issues of food, sex, and idolatry is still obvious);
4. Romans, where the Law, circumcision, and food (see chapters 14 and 15) are all prominent themes; and
5. Colossians and Ephesians (evidently, these issues are not as pressing, but still receive mention, e.g., the reminder in Ephesians 2 and 3 about the destruction of the dividing wall of the Torah and the implied new fellowship).

The issues that drew the attention of the Jerusalem Council were issues that had arisen well before Acts 15 and that continued to be important afterwards. This is an important reminder to us about the nature of “process” in addressing such questions in our time as well.

Although the Act 15 gathering focused on two primary issues, the discussion raises many other questions. For example, what authority did the gathering in Jerusalem actually have? Since Paul never quotes the letter from James

and the other leaders—and since he never refers to the gathering at all (if we follow Bruce and Marshall in their views of Galatians 2)—one wonders if he actually considered the decisions of the Council to have any binding authority. As relevant as the question of “who has authority over them?” is to the topic of insider movements, it is outside the scope of this paper.

We now examine in more detail the conclusions reached at the meeting, as summarized by James and written in the letter of Acts 15:22ff.

The Conclusions: Acts 15:19–29

We find the first element of a conclusion in James’ statement, “We should not trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). The phrase “turning to God” refers to spiritual conversion, but without proselytism (see 14:15 and 26:20). It might appear obvious, but it is important to state clearly that James has no doubts about the conversion of the Gentiles in question. They are turning to God, a phrase in Acts that means more than simply being sincere seekers or inquirers; they are fellow believers. Note too that the letter is written to Gentile “brothers” from fellow “brothers” (15:23). Yet they remain “Gentiles,” rather than proselytes.

After James concludes that the Gentiles should not be “troubled,” the next verse opens with a strong “but” (*alla* in Greek, as opposed to the weaker *de*). The Gentiles are not to be troubled, *but* “we should write to them to abstain” from four things (15:20). These same four are repeated both in the letter in 15:29 and in 21:25. Luke uses this triple repetition only a few other times in Luke–Acts, for example, in the case of Stephen’s martyrdom, Paul’s conversion, and the Cornelius event (Dollar, *St. Luke’s Missiology*, p. 108). Plainly, the decision to ask

the Gentiles to abstain from these four “necessary things” is of crucial importance for Luke. But why? Since the next verse (15:21) begins with the conjunction “for,” its purpose is to answer that question: “For from early generations Moses has had, in every city, those who preach him...” However, that’s where the clarity about this verse ends.¹⁵

Marshall (*Acts*, p. 254) summarizes the two major positions on this verse. Either James is saying, “Please abstain from these four things because Moses is widely known and read and this will prevent undue conflict with the Jews,” or he is saying, “Please abstain from these four things, because Moses is widely known and read, and you Gentiles will learn more over time.”

The latter position does not make sense, since the whole argument from Acts 15 has led to the conclusion that the Gentiles do not need to keep the Law to be saved! James would have been contradicting himself if he had been advocating that Gentiles begin by keeping the four minimum necessary things and then learn the rest later.

Is James merely asking for a concession? This may well apply to the issues of blood and strangled meat, since Peter’s vision in Acts 10 included the triple command to rise and eat *unclean* foods, and Jesus had already pronounced all foods clean, according to Mark 7:19. So one could argue that James is asking the Gentiles to refrain from blood and strangled meat as a concession for the sake of unity, specifically unity in table fellowship. However, to consider idolatry and fornication a “concession” to ease the offense of the Gentile movement in the minds of Jewish believers in Christ seems unthinkable from the evidence available in the New Testament.

Perhaps the best option is to consider 15:21 as clarifying one moral requirement (abstain from fornication) and one “theological” requirement (abstain from idolatry) that together form a “minimum requirement” (and not a

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concession!). At the same time, we can recognize that the leaders are asking the Gentiles for a concession on two specific food items for the sake of maintaining fellowship. This makes emotional and relational sense, since the Jews themselves were making “concessions” based on the evidence of God’s own favor in accepting and blessing the Gentiles apart from circumcision and prior to baptism in Acts 10.

We need to be careful, however, when using the word “concession” in reference to the Jews, lest we come dangerously close to trivializing the issue at stake. James and the Council are saying that the Torah is *not necessary* for the Gentiles who have turned to Jesus and been filled with the Holy Spirit. Not only are Gentiles *not required* to become culturally Jewish, they are *not required* to become religiously Jewish either.¹⁶ The import and radical nature of this conclusion are difficult to overstate.

To summarize, two of the four “necessary things” can appropriately be called “concessions” while the remaining two are issues of ethics and theology. Taken together, these four things are considered “necessary things” for unity between the two movements.

We should emphasize here that nowhere in the Acts 15 passage was there any hint that keeping this requirement was an issue of salvation for the Gentiles. In fact, the version of the decision sent out in the letter suggests that all four of these items are a “burden,” and that the Jewish leaders know it (see 15:28, and see Marshall, *Acts*, p. 250).

Summary of the Acts 15 Discussion

Thus far, we have sought to trace the main points in the Acts 15 passage. We began by highlighting the primary questions:

What is required of Gentiles to be saved?

What are the essentials for unity?

Next, we discussed the process whereby answers to those questions were formulated. From Acts 15 we found that this process included long and open discussion over multiple meetings. We saw the importance given to testimony of the sovereign acts of God among the Gentiles through his Spirit. We also saw how they weighed the Scriptures and examined their questions in light of the wider canon of the Old Testament, not just passages from the Torah.¹⁷ Then we saw that the “process” involving the issues in Acts 15 arose before, and continued after, the gathering of the leaders in Jerusalem. Finally, we discussed the leaders’ conclusions, especially as voiced by James and in the letter.

Now that we have examined Acts 15, we are ready to proceed to its application to movements to Jesus among Muslims today.

Acts 15 and Insider Movements among Muslims

For the purposes of the ISFM meetings in Atlanta, our assignment was to answer the question, What might the gathering in Acts 15 have done had they been asked to consider an insider movement among Muslims, instead of a Gentile movement? To answer, I will use the same three major points that we used in examining Acts 15: the questions, the process, and the conclusions.

The Questions: Insider Movements among Muslims

In one sense the questions posed in Acts 15 also apply when wrestling with the subject of insider movements among Muslims:

What is required of Muslims to be saved, and are Muslims in fact being saved in insider movements?

What are the essentials for unity, including ethical/theological “mini-mums” and cultural concessions?¹⁸

The Process: Insider Movements among Muslims

As we turn to the question from Acts 15 of what process would be used to determine the validity of insider movements among Muslims, I contend that it should be much the same as what we found in our study of that passage:

1. It should be a long-term process, involving multiple gatherings and contexts, much debate, and many people. A question this raises for the Islamic context is, Who should take part? How can such a broad and open discussion take place given so many security concerns in today’s world (concerns not faced in Acts 15 in anywhere near the same way)?

Perhaps we have a clue in the Acts 15 event itself. The debate erupted in Antioch. The discussion in Jerusalem evidently only involved a relatively small number of key “bridge people” representing the Gentile movement, and those bridge people were Jews themselves (Paul and Barnabas, Peter). The mention of the whole church in Jerusalem is referring to the Jewish leaders of the believers there.

I would suggest something similar for our day, i.e., a process that would be undertaken intentionally, over time, in a variety of settings, and draw primarily on “bridge people.”¹⁹ As much as possible, and especially given security concerns, I suggest that such bridge people include Muslims who have embraced Christ, not merely western practitioners who claim to speak for insiders.

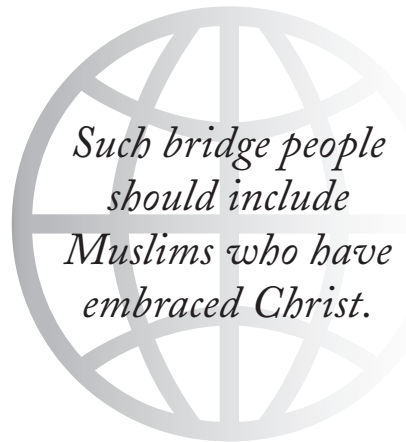
2. The process should involve a careful and open-minded consideration of how Muslims are turning to the Lord and the signs of God’s favor among them, similar to the consideration given to the case of Cornelius and the miracles granted through the hands of Paul and Barnabas.

We would expect to hear accounts of miracles, dreams, and visions—the very phenomena that were a key compo-

nent of the Acts 15 gathering (indeed, Paul pointed to such phenomena in the defense of his apostleship in 2 Corinthians; see especially 12:12).

At the same time, we need to explore more fully the biblical theology of how God is (and is not) at work in other cultures and religions (I refer again to my previous article in *IJFM* 21:4, “The Key to Insider Movements”).

3. The process should involve listening to the experiences of hardship and persecution faced by insiders. This, too, was a part of the validation used in James’ argument in Acts 15 (see verse 26, refer-



ring to Paul and Barnabas, but also 2 Corinthians 11:16ff., in which Paul defends his apostleship on the basis of his sufferings).

4. The process should include continual wrestling with Scripture. Ideally, this would take place within actual “Acts 15” types of gatherings with representative participation, however, the ongoing process of writing and publishing is another venue through which this process can take place. I would cite Timothy Tennent’s article in *IJFM* 23:3 (“Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 ‘high spectrum’ Contextualization”) as an example of the kind of biblical work that needs to be done, even though I do not agree with all of his conclusions. Such work is needed from those who represent all “sides” of this issue.

More missiologists need to engage in thorough exegetical work, and more

exegetes need to grow in the disciplines of missiology. Topics to explore through exegetical and missiological study include:

- a. Allusions and citations of non-biblical material within the Bible: Jude’s quotes of apocryphal works, Paul’s citations of pagan poets, etc. These should help to inform our evaluation of the use of the Qur’an.
 - b. The role of non-Jewish “prophets” in the Bible such as Melchizedek and, to a lesser degree, Jethro. These can help us evaluate possible understandings of Muhammad.
 - c. The New Testament actually gives us varieties of theological expression, and several ways in which the communities of believers (*ekklesiai*) were organized or structured. For example, Mark’s Christology is expressed differently than John’s. James and Paul have differing perspectives concerning works. Paul’s own thought and expression changes in different settings (compare his sermons in Acts 13 and Acts 14; the thinking and language of Ephesians with say, Galatians; or the polity of Ephesians with that found in 1 Timothy). Such study will help us explore both the flexibility and limits of polity, vocabulary, and theological expression that are biblically possible in insider movements as well. It may also help us recognize that theological expression and understanding grow and develop over time within a movement as new situations and questions are addressed, and as more of Scripture is assimilated and applied.
- 5. Finally, such a process should be characterized by a spirit of brotherhood, as was the case in Acts 15.* Yes, the precipitating crisis was likely not a model of brotherly affection. Yes, Acts 15:1–5 does give a realistic sense of the conflict that occurred. Nevertheless, the gatherings in Jerusalem to which

we are looking as a model did in fact demonstrate a respect for the emerging Gentile movement as a movement of God among *brothers* in Christ. This is different from what we often experience in the current “debate.” I offer two examples.

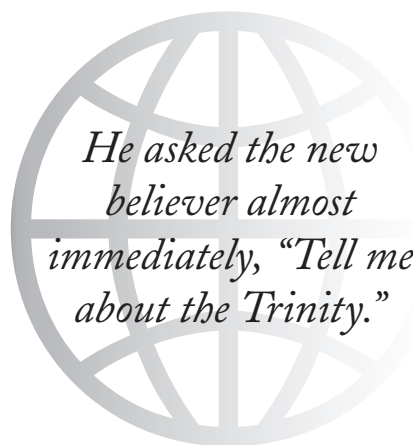
In the early days of our work, I was encouraged by a co-worker from a Muslim background to bring an early believer from another Muslim people group to the local, national church (the members of which were primarily from another people group). My co-worker wanted the new believer to meet the pastor and be baptized into the church. While I was inclined against the idea, I decided to respect my brother and go along with it. When we arrived, the pastor did not give water or tea. He did not exchange the normal greetings. He asked the new believer almost immediately, “Tell me about the Trinity.” The new brother was at a loss, but tried to explain as best he could. He and I both left discouraged when the pastor cut him off by turning to me and saying abruptly, “He is not ready.”

This example illustrates a number of issues, including assumptions about what is required for salvation. A key factor here was the tremendous animosity between the Christian and Muslim communities in that context. Sadly, that animosity carried over into interactions between Christians and “converts.” For the process outlined above to succeed, gatherings will need to be free from such presuppositions and prejudice. Participants will need to believe the best about one another.

A second example comes from a more western context. Ten years ago I had the privilege of playing a small role in helping to design, implement, and evaluate a study of an insider movement among Muslims under the sponsorship of its leaders. A group of us, including Muslim followers of Jesus, carefully developed and designed the research goals and trained people who would collect the information. The goal of the movement’s leadership was simple—to discover how to improve the ongoing discipling of believers in their move-

ment. The results were not published, but were quietly circulated among some mission leaders. Later we were shocked to see some of our statistics quoted in a major missiological journal and interpreted rather unfairly. Not only was I sad that this was done without our being consulted, but that the tenor of the essay was entirely critical.²⁰

For a true “Acts 15” process to be possible, those on both sides of the “fence” will need to see each other as brothers for whom Christ died, and respect each other’s consciences, as Paul admonished the Romans to do.



The Conclusions: Insider Movements among Muslims

By offering conclusions, I do not mean to either short-circuit the process that we have been discussing or dictate its results, but I do offer some tentative thoughts about each of the main questions we have been asking.

Applying Question One

This question has two parts: 1) *What is required of Muslims to be saved; and* 2) *Are Muslims in fact being saved in insider movements?*

The question specifically addressed in Acts 15 concerns salvation, as we have shown above. Actually, however, I know of no critic of insider movements who questions whether Muslims are being saved—or can be saved—as “insiders.” Thus, at one level, the question that prompted the original Acts 15 gathering is not even the question most often posed about insider movements among Muslims. Nevertheless,

embedded in many of the critiques of the insider movement paradigm is part one of this question: What are the essential “theological” minimums for salvation? Would they include a belief in the Trinity? An understanding the infallibility of the Bible? An ability to articulate an understanding of Christ’s substitutionary atonement?

Again, Acts 15 offers some clues. The Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit (15:8) and God had cleansed their hearts (15:9). They experienced and knew the grace of Christ (15:11). They were called upon to abstain from idolatry.

Each of these affirmations implies cognitive beliefs that accompany them, but they are rather minimal. The text says that God gave them the Holy Spirit (before they even knew who or what the Holy Spirit was) and cleansed their hearts (indicating a profound inner transformation). However, their knowledge of Jesus did not extend much beyond the facts of his earthly ministry, death, resurrection, his lordship over all, and the forgiveness that believers in him receive.

What might this mean in a Muslim context?

First, I would conclude that the “measurement” of salvation is not the cognition-centered measurement so typical of modern western Christianity (articulated primarily in specific belief statements). Instead, the measurement assumed in Acts 15 is one of lives transformed by the grace of God through Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

This was borne out in the study mentioned earlier. Our research showed that the behavioral and affective dimensions of faith and conversion had developed ahead of the cognitive understanding of biblical teaching in some areas. Is it because we had neglected biblical teaching? On the contrary, the insider movement that we studied was—and is—radically committed to the regular nurture of leaders and believers through consistent and

repeated use of the Scriptures, using inductive study methods. It is a fundamental principle of that movement that the *Spirit of God*, through the *Word of God*, will build up, correct and establish the *People of God*. This means that, since there is an intentional process for being “in the Word,” the cognitive aspects of faith and teaching will grow and develop. This principle has greatly influenced my own subsequent work in other contexts.

To clarify, I am not saying that the cognitive, doctrinal element is not important. I am saying that cognitive “belief” and “understanding” of doctrine, in itself, is not what saves (see James 2:19ff.) and that the actual amount of such cognitive understanding necessary for salvation is actually relatively small. As I am sure we would all agree, God is the one who saves by his own action (see Ephesians 2:1–10). The cognitive dimensions will grow if we build insider movements around a regular pattern of engaging God’s Word.²¹ This has been my experience in every context in which I have worked among Muslims.

Most of the concerns raised by the critics of insider work are not questions about salvation itself, but rather about ongoing attention to discipleship and discipline in these movements.

When I say that most of the questions about insider movements concern discipleship, and not salvation (or, to use McGavran’s terminology, are about perfecting, not discipling), I am not trying to minimize their importance in any way.

I cannot speak for every C5 advocate or practitioner, but in our own work we have sought to build into the insider movement a regular process of leadership development by walking them repeatedly through large portions of Scripture. I describe this effort and the key principles underlying it in more detail in another article.²²

In our work, insider movements encourage regular “disciples” gatherings, as well as attendance at the mosque and other religious events. We encourage

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a lifelong process of soaking in the Scriptures together. The important thing is that we understand this to be a *process*. Moreover, we see this process to be under the leading of the Spirit working within “insiders,” through the Word in the hands of “insiders.”²³

Applying Question Two

What are the essentials for unity, including ethical/theological “minimums” and cultural concessions?

Acts 15 asks the very important question of unity and fellowship “between movements.” Woodberry acknowledges this in his paper as well, and it forms his concluding “crucial issue” for insider movements to address.

The issue is complex. At the simplest level there are two possible, contradictory, answers to this question in Muslim contexts. The first is that since God was working among Jews and Gentiles to create one new Body, we should not seek the development of movements among Muslims that are separate from existing Christian churches. Certainly some texts could be cited that seem to point to this (especially Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and passages such as Galatians 3). On the other hand, some would argue for two completely separate movements—one among Muslim followers of Jesus and the other among “Christians”—with no contact between the two. I have heard some people advocate this position. In support of such a position one might cite Paul’s self-description in 1 Corinthians 9:19ff., as well as Acts 21:17ff. Both passages could be considered evidence of separate Gentile and Jewish movements to Jesus (so that Paul could say “With the Jews I am a Jew and with Gentiles I am a Gentile...”).

In fact, the reality is far more complicated. A brief look at the Body of Christ in its current, messy “form” is

instructive. There is one body, yes, but that unity is expressed in an amazing diversity of movements—e.g., Orthodox, Roman, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, and many “Anabaptist” forms—each representing still more movements, sometimes even dozens. (And I have not even really begun to make a complete list!) The Pentecostal/Charismatic movements are even more varied and fluid than those just mentioned, sometimes taking expression inside existing non-Pentecostal/Charismatic denominations, sometimes taking on their own denominational identities. At other times, they emerge as what some Christians would label syncretistic movements (e.g., some of the so-called African Independent Churches).

I will say more on this later, but for now this question raises two additional questions:

First, what are the concessions that could be requested (or perhaps required) on both “sides” for true fellowship to occur?

Second, in what context or format should unity be expressed?”

In the Islamic context, the issue of concessions might take the opposite form from the one we saw in Acts. Instead of asking Muslim believers to make concessions in matters of food for the sake of unity, it would seem more natural to ask the Christian background believers to make concessions regarding pork and *halal* foods. Other areas might include modesty in dress among females, separation of the sexes in some meetings, etc.

As for the settings and contexts of such expressions of unity, a direct parallel with Acts 15 is more complicated. Certainly, the early New Testament Jesus movement experienced persecution and “security risks,” but their

nature was very different than in today's Muslim world.

In the New Testament, it seems clear that many of the fellowships were, in fact, mixed. And there were contexts in which we see separate movements with Gentile or Jewish believers) Acts 21:17ff. describes such a Jewish context). But clearly many of the congregations faced the challenges of meeting together as Torah-observant believing Jews and non-Torah following believing Gentiles in the same "meeting."

Such meetings in themselves did not, however, pose the kind of risk now present in the Muslim world. Nor would the Acts 15 gathering itself have presented the kind of security risk we would imagine were such a meeting including Muslim believers held today. Thus, defining "unity" by visible mixed gatherings is not always the right approach.

Certainly, unity would still require concessions. At the same time, because the first century and current Muslim contexts are so different, actual expressions of unity will need to reflect those differences.

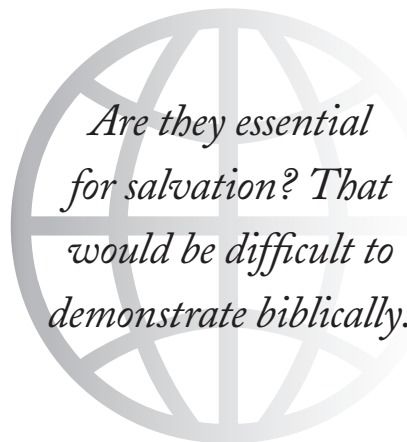
The second—and in some ways more controversial and difficult—question concerns the issue of theological and ethical "minimums." The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 made it clear that the new Gentile movement should abstain from idolatry and fornication. What would the theological minimums be in a Muslim insider movement context? I will now turn to this issue.

As I consider some of the questions being asked about insider movements today, it seems that these movements are being expected to arrive at an articulation of Christian faith that matches the creeds of the 4th and 5th centuries, but within four or five years. In fact, in the case of the new believer mentioned above, the expectation was reduced to 4 or 5 weeks. It seems, then, that Trinitarian definitions or understanding the Sonship of Jesus in a Nicene philosophical framework have become for some an "essential." The same is true for

numerous other important topics and doctrinal formulations. For example, is it sufficient for a follower of Jesus to affirm the unique and final authority of the Old and New Testaments, or must they articulate a particular definition of infallibility that some western Christians might see as "essential"?

Are these understandings important? Of course. Are they essential for salvation? That would be difficult to demonstrate biblically.

I am not saying the creeds have no place or value. However, in my view



the creeds are good, valuable examples of how believers in earlier times and in very different contexts developed biblically-based articulations of the faith within the context of the culture and questions of their time. This is a critically important and valid task for every insider movement, something that cannot be accomplished by the mere translation of the creeds. What is crucial is a process whereby leaders grow in their ability to use the Scriptures to address contextual and cultural questions. We must realize that the Holy Spirit takes believers through a long-term process where they are developing a biblical theology in a specific cultural context. Such a process calls us to exercise patience as we allow the process to take course and diligence as we seek to encourage emerging leaders to work the process and not settle for easier, predigested answers from outsiders.

Is there a "minimum?" This is related the question of how much one needs to

know *about* Jesus in order to be saved *by* him. I would like to suggest that we return to what we find in Scripture, which, frankly, is a wide variety of responses to (and understandings of) Jesus and his work. These are what I would call "salvation starting points."

My position affirms the whole canon of the New Testament. Each book needs to be read in its own context and with an appreciation of its inspired author's unique viewpoint. We should not seek to fit everything from the Gospels (or James or John) into, say, a Pauline framework, as if Paul were a canon within the canon. God gave us the whole canon as a many faceted diamond of his revelation, not a single-paned mirror.

Again, what is the "minimum?" What are some of the biblical "salvation starting points"? Acts 15 states that the Gentiles were being saved as they turned to God. Other New Testament passages would say that people are saved as they have come to know Jesus as Lord, or have found forgiveness through the proclamation "of repentance and forgiveness of sins in his Name," or have had their hearts cleansed by God through him, or have "confessed" with their mouths, or have reached out and touched his garment.

Perhaps we should be content with Jesus' own summary of the core of the Old Testament in Luke 24, where, following Christ's own "hermeneutic," the Scriptures point to three main things:

1. Christ himself and his work (including his fulfillment of prophecy, death and resurrection);
2. The inclusion of the Gentiles through the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins; and
3. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 24:44–49).

Following this passage, a "test" of faith would simply be, Does the disciple believe Jesus died and rose again? Have they repented of sin? Have they received the Holy Spirit?

All this raises another question about the “essentials.” Who decides? On what basis? Who has authority? Acts 15 spelled out four things for Gentiles (presumably all Gentiles, even us!) to abstain from, a decision handed down by a council of apostles and elders. The fact is that few of us Gentiles today even give two of the items any thought.

Granted, fornication and idolatry are still very much appropriate concerns, but remember that “blood” was also one of the essential, necessary things, required by Acts 15. Yet, how many of us would reject—on religious and spiritual grounds—eating blood sausage in Spain? My point is that we ourselves intuitively decide how and when to obey this passage. What then will we “require” of Muslim followers of Jesus? Will we (non-Muslims) trust them to make the same type of contextual decisions that we ourselves make?

A Question Underlying the Questions

We have examined Acts 15 and have tried to apply it to insider movements among Muslims. Yet, lurking below the surface of this discussion remains a crucial and foundational question, which I will briefly address.

Timothy Tennent, in the IJFM article mentioned earlier, goes straight to the heart of the matter and asks if insider movements are even biblical at all. He examines many of the passages used by C5 proponents and argues that they do not support “insider” thinking, at least not as articulated by those with whom he dialogues.

I said earlier that in some cases in the New Testament we find Jews and Gentiles meeting together. How does this fit in with my advocacy of “insider movements”? I also acknowledged that since Acts 15 deals with a pagan Gentile context, and since it calls those pagans to repent of idolatry, it is not advocating a Gentile insider movement in the same way that many of us advocate for Muslims.

T*his points to the fact that there can be authentic movements to Jesus within religious movements that Jesus himself would have criticized!*

How should we address these valid issues? In the space I have left, I can do no more than outline the directions an answer will need to take. Some fruitful areas for study would include:

1. Did the New Testament encourage or describe any sort of “insider movement” among pagan Gentiles? This would require a thorough study of 1 Corinthians 8–10, particularly one that keeps this missiological question in view. Paul, without mentioning the Acts 15 letter, voices succinctly its ethical and theological essentials: no fornication and no idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:6ff.). However, it is not so clear that his position about food is quite the same as that of the letter. Paul’s rationale for encouraging the “strong” not to eat came from his desire that the “weak” not be tempted to eat, thus defiling their conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7–9).

More to our point here, he makes a very strange comment in 8:10 about a brother in Christ sitting at table in the idol’s temple. Paul’s concern in the verse is not that the action was wrong in itself; in fact, he does not criticize the brother for the action. Rather, Paul’s critique is based on that fact that it might encourage a weaker brother to eat in such a way, and again, defile his conscience. My point is that this text seems to refer to a Gentile believer who, without committing idolatry, is not only buying meat in the market or eating it in a private home, but is sitting at table in the idol’s temple. Further study is needed to determine what is in fact happening here. For now, I am only prepared to suggest that this is a possible example of a Gentile believer who is still “inside” part of their religious heritage.²⁴

2. What about the Samaritans (see John 4 and several references in Luke–Acts)? As I have argued

elsewhere,²⁵ this monotheistic (but heretical and perhaps syncretistic) offshoot of Jewish faith offers a fitting opportunity to explore the possibility of insider movements in a non-pagan context, specifically within Islam.

3. Turning from pagan Gentiles and heretical Samaritans to orthodox Jewish religion, we note again that there was a movement to Jesus among the Pharisees (Acts 15:5 is a clear example, and Acts 21:17ff., which describes thousands of Torah-observant believers, would likely include Pharisees in that number). Why is this an important example? One reason is that Jesus’ ministry includes a number of critiques of Pharisaic practices and beliefs. Jesus does enjoin Torah keeping (though he deepens the application of Torah in his Sermon on the Mount). At the same time, he clearly criticized the Pharisees on many points, including their tendency to elevate human tradition to the functional level of the Torah. Despite this, there was a movement to Jesus among the Pharisees (and other Torah-observant Jews as well). This points to the fact that there can be authentic movements to Jesus within religious movements that Jesus himself would have criticized!

A related example is the growing movement to Jesus in Jerusalem in the earlier chapters of Acts. I have argued elsewhere that Temple attendance by believers continued in the context of Acts 2 and 3, right after the Temple leadership had participated in Jesus’ death and had repudiated his claim as Messiah. This is very much parallel to ongoing attendance at mosques for Muslim followers of Jesus.²⁶ Again, in such contexts, it is vital to encourage believers to meet as believers for regular fellowship and teaching in venues separate from the official religious

The true test of any movement claiming to be an authentic Jesus movement in any context will be hearts cleansed and lives transformed . . .

events of the culture (as modeled in Acts 2:42–47).

Insider Movements and Transformation

As we close this study of Acts 15 and its application to insider movements among Muslims, I want to bring into focus a personal assumption that I have alluded to, but not stated directly.

It is obvious that I am a supporter of insider movements. By arguing that authentic movements to Jesus can and are taking place within Islam, I am not saying that Islam as we know and experience it—nor even in its supposedly pure or orthodox form—is “true,” or that it can be embraced as it is by a believer.²⁷

I do, however, believe that authentic Jesus movements within Islam will bring transformation (and indeed reform) in the light of God’s Word and Spirit as applied from the inside. Views concerning Muhammad, the place of the Qur’an, the value of the *salat*, the meaning of the word “Muslim,” the nature of Jesus, the character of Allah, and many other elements of Islamic faith and life will change within and through such movements to Jesus.

There will be a radical re-interpretation of the Qur’an, Muhammad, the hajj, and the *shabadah*. Jesus launched a new movement within Judaism that re-interpreted everything through the lens of a “Jesus Key” to the Old Testament. Paul proclaimed the Gospel to the Athenians by applying a “Jesus Key” to the interpretation of their poets and religious hymns.²⁸

These radical re-interpretations were not accepted by many, even most, Jews and Athenians. This lack of acceptance by the “orthodox” majority, however, was not proof that either Jesus or Paul was wrong.

Similarly, the theology and practice of insider movements among Muslims might not be accepted by most Muslims.

This does not invalidate these movements, nor the new interpretations of Qur’anic texts that such movements will develop in the light of Christ and his Word.

A Final Word

While it is important to affirm the validity of insider movements as one of the things God is doing among Muslims, the true test of the authenticity of these movements will not come from articles, from the agreement and assent of missiologists, nor from rational argument and discussion. As we have seen in Acts 15, the true test of any movement claiming to be an authentic Jesus movement in any context will be hearts cleansed and lives transformed through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as God continues to work in the world to create a people for himself. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

¹ I am referring to a pre-published version of his paper.

² Bosch’s entire section on Luke–Acts is a helpful introduction to the missiology of Luke, although interestingly, he never discusses the role of Acts 15 specifically or its missiological implications anywhere in the book.

³ It is important to realize that this was, in fact, a debate among believers with very different, strongly held opinions.

⁴ It is common for missionaries and missiologists to miss this point and to see the question as primarily one of culture. See for example Strong in *Mission in Acts* (p. 203), Charles Kraft’s comments (*Anthropology for Christian Witness*, pp. 196 and 448) and the introduction to *Contextualization*, edited by David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen (pp. 10 and 11). All three of these examples see the Acts 15 question as a question of whether Gentiles need to become culturally Jewish to be saved. For positions closer to my own see the discussions in Marshall, *Acts* (p. 249) and Dollar, *St. Luke’s Missiology* (p. 96).

⁵ Bosch makes the fascinating point that in fact the question of salvation actually forms the overall frame for Luke and Acts. Only in Luke among the Synoptics is Jesus called Savior, for example. And the word “salvation” (*soterion* and *soteria*) appears six times in Luke/Acts (never in Mark or Matthew). Four of those are in the infancy narratives of Luke, and one is in Acts 28:28. Thus, Luke’s two-volume work begins and ends with salvation as a key theme (Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 104ff.).

⁶ Wagner, *Acts of the Holy Spirit*, pp. 364ff., calls this a “diplomatic concession” for the purposes of unity. Though they state things differently, others agree. See Dollar, *St. Luke’s Missiology*, p. 100 and 161; Marshall, *Acts*, page 243; Strong, *Mission in Acts*, p. 204.

⁷ I am not claiming that these are the only important questions to be asked of

insider movements. I am simply summarizing the argument from Acts so far.

⁸ In addition to the empirical testimony in Acts 15, Paul also had a developed theology of God's work among pagan Gentiles. This is worked out in Romans, but is also found in his sermons in Acts 14 and 17. Acts 17 especially clearly shows Paul's strong conviction that God is at work in every culture so that people every may seek him, feel after him, and find him. I have developed this more fully in Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements: The Devoteds' of Acts", *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21:4; Winter 2004, pp. 155ff.

⁹ The question Jesus' relationship to the Law and, even more so, Paul's teaching on the Law is one of the more complex fields in New Testament study. W.D. Davies' *The Setting of the Sermon on Mount* and Donald Hagner's thorough study *The Sermon on the Mount* explore in some depth the relationship of Jesus and the Law. In addition, the works of E.P. Sanders are controversial, but helpful studies, especially *Jesus and Rabbinic Judaism*, and *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*.

¹⁰ Marshall (p. 251) discusses several other Old Testament references regarding God's work among the Gentiles. The point is that while the Old Testament does teach that the nations will come to Israel and be joined to the people of God, there are also other themes which seem to be in keeping with the conclusion James reached: God works, and will work, directly among the Gentiles to make a people for himself.

¹¹ That there are two "peoples" is one of the points of James' words. That the two are also one is assumed as well, as I will argue below.

¹² Applying these points in an Islamic context is complex. We will return to that in a later section.

¹³ Marshall, *Acts*, p. 252 sees the "prophets" as a reference to the whole scroll of the Minor Prophets.

¹⁴ I am following the reconstruction of events described in F.F. Bruce's Commentary on Galatians (*New International Greek New Testament Series*, see pp. 20ff.) and of Marshall (*Acts*, 242ff.).

¹⁵ See Dollar's reference to Dibelius' comment that from every angle other than its meaning, this is an easy verse to understand! *St. Luke's Missiology*, p. 99.

¹⁶ Though monotheism is certainly required. This is reflected in Paul's preaching to specifically Gentile, pagan (as

opposed to God-fearer) audiences in Acts 14 and Acts 17. Note that those sermons reflect Paul's preaching to Gentiles before and after the Jerusalem Council. In both contexts, he called people to repent of polytheistic idolatry and turn to monotheism. My point here, however, is that the call to monotheism is *not* the same as a call to Judaism. In fact, in Acts 14 the new Gentile disciples are clearly not welcomed in any sense by the Jews who arrived from Iconium and Antioch, and there is no mention of any Jews in the Lystra area.

¹⁷ In connection with the Scriptures, it is crucial to add that a very different hermeneutic was being employed in James' use of the Scriptures, a hermeneutic the church inherited from Jesus himself. Apart from a different interpretive set of assumptions, a natural reading of Amos 9 would not lead one to conclude that circumcision and the Torah were no longer required of Gentiles (Dollar, *St. Luke's Missiology*, p. 98). However, in Christ's own "hermeneutic," the Scriptures point to three main things: himself and his work, the inclusion of the Gentiles through the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (see Luke 24:44-49). The inclusion of Gentiles through proclamation (not the Law, not circumcision, not joining Israel) is part of the "Jesus Hermeneutic" that is as radical as his claim that Scripture pointed to himself.

¹⁸ Certainly, these have not been the only questions voiced in recent discussions of C5 and insider movements. The recently published open discussion between Ralph Winter and Gary Corwin in *Mission Frontiers* (Volume 28:1, January-February 2006, pp. 16-23.) is a representative summary of some of the other questions, as is John Piper's brief paper in the same edition. (Ralph Winter is General Director of the Frontier Mission Fellowship. Gary Corwin is associate editor of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Both gentlemen have many other roles as well. John Piper is Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.)

Some of the questions raised there and elsewhere include:

1. Are new believers embracing the essentials of the faith (e.g., belief in the Bible as the only infallible written revelation of God, belief in Christ as God, belief in his atoning death, etc.).

2. Do former religious behaviors (attending mosque, for example) communicate falsehood?

3. Do members of insider movements speak the plain truth or do they mislead (when they say "we are Muslim," for example).

4. Are insider movements actually just a new form of missiological western imperialism?

5. Is ongoing participation in the religious practices of Islam appropriate and biblical for a follower of Jesus in a Muslim context?

6. How can we make sure that new believers understand Christian doctrine as outlined in the creeds (a criticism sometimes leveled at insider movements)?

7. Is there (and this is fundamentally important) any parallel at all between the Gentile movement in Acts 15 and insider movements among Muslims? (For example, one is pagan and polytheist while the other is radically monotheist.) Some critics of C5 approaches would argue that Acts 15 is not advocating an insider Gentile movement in the sense of approving that Gentile believers remain in the pagan temples the way C5 advocates argue that Muslims can remain in the mosques. (See for example, Timothy C. Tennent's excellent article, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'high spectrum' Contextualization," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 23:3, pp. 101-115. That same edition of the journal includes several responses to Tennent's thoughtful critique of C5 thinking.)

To reply to each point is beyond the scope of this paper and has been attempted by others. (For readable and brief discussions, see the whole *Missions Frontiers* edition referenced above (28:1, January-February 2006) where several sides of these issues are discussed by a number of writers.)

¹⁹ In Acts the bridge people mentioned by name were Jews who had experienced God's grace among the Gentiles (Peter), or Jews who had extensive life experience in Gentile contexts (Paul and Barnabas). We do not know the identity of the "some others" in 15:2. They may have been Gentiles.

²⁰ Some of the criticism may have been due to an assumption by the author regarding our intentions in the study. Our

intention was not to use the study to *pre-scribe* the findings of our research (though we did discover what we felt were important principles for this type of work). We wanted to *describe* accurately the state of the movement and ascertain where it might be in need of correction and more effective teaching. The critique of our study took our study out of context, and continues to be quoted in later writings.

²¹ I firmly believe that the cognitive and doctrinal elements of “the faith” are best developed in an ongoing process of “biblical theology in culture.” This is in fact how the earliest versions of short creeds and eventually the Nicene creed were all formed: time, Scripture, interaction with culture, ongoing corrections, attempts, edits, agreement, disagreement, etc. Therefore, in our work, we have committed to gather emerging leaders every 40 days for several intensive days walking through whole books of Scripture. Those who cannot read join with those who can. The focus is on obedience to the Word.

Those who “stick” with this process experience the power of his Word to interpret itself and correct the believer.

²² “The Key to Insider Movements: The Devoteds’ of Acts”, *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21:4, Winter 2004, pp. 155ff.

²³ My definition of “insider movement” includes at least three “insides”: social structures, religious life (including terminology and practices), and the wider cultural milieu. There will be facets of each that will need confirmed by the Gospel as good and true, and facets in each that will be transformed by the Gospel since they are broken, or in some cases under the grip of the elemental powers (see Paul in Galatians 3 and 4, where even the *Law* is linked with the “powers”).

²⁴ I have always maintained that, even in insider movements, there will be major changes in the “insider disciples”

worldview and belief systems. I cite the Corinthian passage as an apparent example of an “insider” (in the temple) who has also changed (no idolatry).

²⁵ In an article published under a pen name. Caldwell, Stuart. “Jesus in Samaria: A Paradigm for Church Planting among Muslims”, *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 17:1, Spring 2000. Pages 25ff.

²⁶ See The Key to Insider Movements, *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 21:4, Winter 2004.

²⁷ I do, however, think it is quite possible that there is an “original Islam” in the Qur’an, an Islam that has been lost through the misinterpretation of what became the “orthodox” versions, and that this may well be in closer (if not complete) harmony with biblical truth. This thesis awaits more detailed and thorough exploration, and its truth or lack of truth does not affect the main thrust of my paper here.

²⁸ Higgins, Key, pp. 160ff.

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