

# A Response to My Respondents

by Gary Corwin

I would like to begin by thanking each of the six respondents to my article for their willingness and their labors to further this important conversation, and to bring greater clarity to the issues involved. Though still a considerable distance from perfect understanding and clarity, I think we may have made some progress together.

A colleague with another agency, L. D. Waterman by pseudonym and a highly experienced leader working in Muslim ministry in Southeast Asia, sent both me and the *IJFM* editors about 3600 words of response to particular points made by the six respondents. In my view, he did a superb job of pointing out the problems with many of those responses. It became clear to me upon reading his material that I could not do better in responding to the nuts and bolts issues he addressed, and very much desired his work to be published in this issue either as a stand alone piece or as part of my response. The *IJFM* editors ultimately decided that a detailed format of that kind would be confusing for readers and that it was not best to extend the literary genealogy of this particular discussion another generation. They did, however, invite him to submit a new and more focused article of his own, and it is good news that such an article is included in this issue (see pp. 57-63, "Do the Roots Affect the Fruits?"). The bad news, though, is that readers will not get exposure here to his detailed counter-critique of what the respondents had to say (the essence, I believe, of an effective dialogue). Many of the more important issues are covered in his new article, however, and I will respond in a less detailed fashion below. In addition, *IJFM* has offered to email to any reader who requests it, Mr. Waterman's statement of issues not addressed in his "Do the Roots Affect the Fruits" article in this issue (pp. 57-63).<sup>1</sup>

I had also wished to include a statement I assisted Arab World Ministries to develop on the appropriate limits of contextualization for cross-cultural workers in ministry among Muslims. It was recently approved as company policy after over a year and one half of review and revision by various levels of leadership and the AWM membership at large. It also represents my own thinking quite

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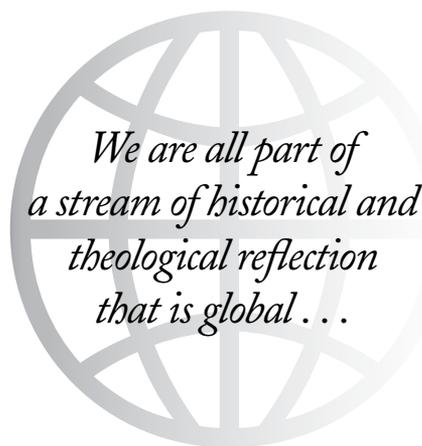
thoroughly and what I believe is a sensible and balanced way forward in how agencies may responsibly deal with a large piece of the subject under discussion. Unfortunately, this also is not included here because the editorial committee did not think it prudent to publish the policies of specific agencies. They did encourage me to discuss several key elements from that document, however, and I will do so below.

We shall turn now to some more general points of response. First, I would like to underscore how diverse what is called C5 and/or insider movements seem to be. The terms are sometimes used synonymously, sometimes in distinction from one another, and sometimes the definition that is understood for each term individually differs according to who is using it!<sup>2</sup> One takes great encouragement, for example, from Brother Yusuf's testimony that "The disciples make no pretension of being ordinary Muslims. They stand out as the ones who talk about the Lord Jesus..." as well as their being known to have been baptized, and that they celebrate Holy Communion every month or two; or, from the parallel testimony that Herbert Hoefler offers from the Hindu context of India that "most of the 'Jesu Bhaktas' ('Devotees of Jesus'), as they have come to call themselves, make a clear distinction between the religious and communal aspects of festivals." One is dismayed, on the other hand, to hear some C5 missionary advocates describing how they have avoided just such practices, and/or offering an apologetic as to why they are unnecessary. If advocates would do more to address non-biblical excesses among themselves, and do so publicly in response to public or published shortcomings as necessary, I am confident that the points of ongoing debate would be far fewer. There seems to be some movement in this direction, and in that one takes hope.

Secondly, I would like to address the hornet's nest I seem to have stirred up with my comments about Acts 15 in question #4. Besides the three respondents who took me to task in the last issue, Professor Tennent, and

L.D. Waterman did as well. (Professor Tennent unfortunately was in the process of leaving Atlanta right after I asked my question in the panel discussion, thus providing no opportunity to clarify.) I must also add that if I was meaning what everyone seems to think I was meaning, in what was obviously less than stellar communication, I would also have to object!

In defense of what is actually written there, I would point out that what I was questioning as "template" in the initial question, I did affirm as "model" in the commentary that followed.



What I was clumsily trying to say is that in God's progressive revelation of Himself, the shift from life under the Old Covenant to life under the New Covenant created points of tension between Jewish believers and God's people from among the rest of the world's peoples (Gentiles). That was a unique circumstance because both communities were operating out of a theological foundation in divine revelation (a written Old Testament one for Jewish believers, and signs and wonders mediated through Christ's Apostles on the part of the Gentiles). What that means in the context of the current debate, is that attempts to treat as equivalent circumstances the interaction of "Messianic Islam" with Christianity as it has existed elsewhere, as some have seemed to do, is to compare apples and oranges. Islam does not come with the same divine mandate that first-century Jewish practice based on the Old Testament Scriptures did, even if that Jewish practice was not, as Jesus often pointed out,

as faithful to that mandate as it ought to have been. Nor does it come with a big "A" Apostolic truth pedigree.

What I do acknowledge clearly mis-speaking is the last sentence of my commentary. What I should have said is "But that is different than saying that each new ethno-linguistic context, let alone each local socio-religious context, *requires an Acts 15 event, though an Acts 15 process will often be needed.*" The original was "*requires an Acts 15 event or process for that context.*"

Part of what was in the back of my mind on all this was the original billing for the September 2006 ISFM Meeting in Atlanta, which spoke of a "Second Jerusalem Council." I had written several reasons why this seemed clearly over the top, and was glad to see the billing subsequently toned down, though the cover title of the last *IJFM* issue, "The Jerusalem Council: Description or Prediction?" is also less than helpful. It ignores the facts described above that Acts 15 describes the church's response to a unique circumstance that will never be repeated, though it is a superb model for determining appropriate application of biblical principles in new cultural contexts that has been repeated, and will no doubt continue to be in the future.

Thirdly, there is a point of view common to C5 thinking that can be seen in some of the respondents' comments as well, that all new believers need is the Bible and the Holy Spirit, and that cross-cultural workers should back off from trying to influence their faith and practice. This is a point of view that includes a significant kernel of truth with which I fully agree. In the conclusion to my article I wrote,

Our job [as cross-cultural workers] is not to lead or direct, but it is to point them to salvation in Christ and to the Word and prayer, and to teach them by example how to handle the Word well, pray in the Spirit, and to obey—to the glory of God and the joyous salvation of all whom God is drawing to himself.

Along with the kernel of truth, however, is also some chaff. First, from a practical perspective we must recognize that

cross-cultural workers will be asked what they think about certain practices. While not directive, our responses need to be biblical and full of grace and truth, so we too do need to do our homework. There is a fine line to be walked between being inappropriately directive and not speaking the truth in love. The art of knowing how to ask good questions ourselves will always be a great asset in the task.

But from an equally important and long-term perspective, cross-cultural workers also need to consciously and earnestly be asking the Lord to show them those whom he has uniquely gifted intellectually and spiritually to study and understand the historical and theological development of the church in all times and places, and help them gain access to opportunities to do advanced study. Ultimately it will be such leaders who will help to shape the church in their own culture and context in truly biblical and wholesome ways. It is no more ideal for MBB's to sit alone in their closets with their Bibles and the Holy Spirit to determine God's plan for his church in their context, than it is for American believers or anyone else to do so. We are all part of a stream of history and theological reflection that is global, and we must all be cognizant of that stream if we are not to end up in cultic aberration.

Fourthly, I would like to just mention a few of what I would consider the more important shortcomings of my respondents' feedback—mostly places where either they or other C5 advocates should seek to provide more adequate responses to *IJFM*'s readers. These and many other issues are much more adequately addressed in the Waterman and AWM pieces, so I would encourage readers to examine those. For the sake of rounding out this response, however, they would include:

1. Really addressing the great differences that exist between Messianic Jewish churches and what is being advocated as Messianic Islam (or Messianic Muslim movements, if you prefer).
2. Acknowledging and responding to the *enormous implications* of the fact that unlike Christianity or

Judaism, in which heart commitment is central, Islam is *to a much greater degree* a religion of outward obedience and social conformity. Some of the most telling of these implications would involve the message conveyed in the long term by:

- a) continuing to say the *Shahada*: "There is no god but Allah and Muhammed is his messenger."
  - b) continuing to participate in the ritual prayers (*Salat*) in the mosque.
  - c) acknowledging Muhammed as God's *Rasul*, which implies affirmation of the contents of the Qur'an and perhaps some of the *hadith*.
  - d) identifying oneself by one's actions and words as a Muslim in terms of faith commitment.
3. Reflecting on Waterman's telling question, "Should mature followers of Christ play with the meaning of words, in order to encourage less mature followers to make an affirmation that, in its original and normal meaning, is quite contrary to biblical truth?"<sup>3</sup>
  4. The fallacy of speaking of any approach that is not C5 as a "traditional model of church," thereby slighting the great work that God is doing through C3 and C4 ministries.

Finally, I should remind all readers by way of conclusion that what we were attempting to address in our original article and again here is not what new MBB's do in the process of their coming to faith or in their early growth in sanctification. Rather, it is about what is normative and how cross-cultural workers in Muslim contexts ought to function and disciple responsibly and biblically to the glory of God and for the joy of Muslim peoples. **IJFM**

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> If you would like to receive a copy of L. D. Waterman's work, just send an e-mail to [response@ijfm.org](mailto:response@ijfm.org), with "Waterman" in the subject line. For a copy of the AWM statement that will be discussed shortly, send an e-mail to [garcorwin@aol.com](mailto:garcorwin@aol.com) with "Request for AWM statement" in the subject line so that your request will not be mistaken for spam.

<sup>2</sup> The reader should be reminded first of all that while it comes with implications regarding contextualization, the C1 to C6 spectrum is, according to its author John Travis (*EMQ*, October 1998), not intended to describe levels of contextualization, but types of Christ-centered communities (churches?). There is also great merit in the suggestion offered by Rebecca Lewis that C5 and insider movements should not be thought of as synonymous (though we think so for different reasons). At the same time, her usage of "insider movements" provides a prime example of how terms are used differently by different people. She wrote in a recent email (now slightly edited, expanded and available to the reader in a fuller way on p.76):

*In my view, "insider movements" are distinct from the C-scale in that, regardless of how Western or non-Western their forms, all that matters is that no new communities (no "aggregate churches") are formed to extract believers from their pre-existing families and networks, so that they naturally retain their former identity. As such, "insider movements" can take place within any non-Christian socio-religious context (such as Mormonism, Judaism, Hinduism, etc.), as long as the believers remain inside their families, networks and communities, retaining the socio-religious identity of that group... "Messianic synagogues," for example, though highly contextualized in forms to religious Judaism, are not an "insider movement" because they are neither flowing through Jewish family networks nor have they succeeded in retaining an acceptably Jewish identity among Jews. Messianic mosques and messianic ashrams often suffer the same fate...*

Others of us would argue that appropriate "insider movements" are precisely those, like messianic synagogues and messianic ashrams, that maintain as strong a cultural connection to their families and communities as possible (a cultural "insider movement," e.g., C3, C4), without crossing the line into religious syncretism. The line is crossed, we believe, when those in the context are led by the individual's words or actions to believe that one's faith commitment is to Islam rather than to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We believe that a commitment to Christ marked by obedience does require identification in some fashion to an "aggregate church," as it also requires non-identification with elements of Islamic practice that contradict the Bible or that send the message that one is indeed a Muslim.

<sup>3</sup> From Waterman's original piece, now integrated into his paper in this issue, p. 59.