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Muslim Insider Ecclesiology: Does Insider Movement Contextualization Produce Biblically Faithful Churches or a Mere Mosquerade?

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ABSTRACT

Contextualization is fundamentally the process of communicating the unchanging message of the Gospel within the changing contexts of the world. Until Christ returns, contextualization will always be an aspect of the missionary task. One contemporary approach to contextualization, the Insider Movement, has risen to the fore of missiological discussion due to its controversial embrace of existing religious forms and identities as potential conduits of biblical truth. Insider Movement advocates working among Muslims teach that one can remain identified spocio-religiously as a Muslim while still faithfully following Jesus as savior. While the past two decades have played host to multiple layers of discussion surrounding Insider Movements, this essay investigates an under-discussed element of Insider Movement methodology among Muslims: Ecclesiology. This paper analyzes four key biblical texts pertinent to ecclesiology as a rubric for determining whether Insider Movement strategies among Muslims are likely to produce biblically faithful churches.

In 2013, my family and I were living in Alexandria, Egypt, along with a small team of expats. We had been in North Africa and the Middle East for two years and had experienced a wide variety of responses to the Gospel among the people we met. However, most perplexing to us was a conversation that took place in a McDonald's overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

Sitting across from us eating a Big Mac and fries was a bearded man who introduced himself as Sheikh Ahmad. He wore the traditional attire of one who had taken the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and he informed us that he was a regular Friday preacher in a local mosque. However, Sheikh Ahmad also told us that he was a Muslim follower of 'Isa—the Qur'an's name for its Jesus character—and that when he preached, he only focused on the parts of the Qur'an that taught about 'Isa.

While we had studied theoretical missiological strategies that have come to be known as the Insider Movement (IM), Sheikh Ahmed provided us with our first encounter with an actual Insider.

Sheikh Ahmed also provoked a number of questions from our team. How does one preach Jesus from the Qur'an? How does one avoid syncretism when leading people to worship in Islamic fashion while internally hoping to lead them to Christ? And finally, how much of the practice of Islam can be reconfigured and reimagined so as to provide a suitable cultural vehicle for Christ-centered worship while remaining identifiably Islamic? As it so happens, our team is not alone in asking such questions about the feasibility of IM methodology and theology.¹

A difficulty that presents itself as one pursues answers to these questions is that Insider Movements are by no means monolithic. Having been observed and promoted among Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, IM is difficult to fairly and fully define.² In fact, several proponents of IM admit that critics may be able to find expressions of IM that exhibit the flaws identified by their critiques while denying that such examples are necessarily representative of IM.³

Despite the breadth of expression of IM, Rebecca Lewis offers a broadly appropriate description of the ethos common among various Insider Movements as she writes, "Insider movements can be defined as movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or inside their natural community."⁴ Lewis goes on to further define this integration by highlighting the importance of maintaining one's socio-religious identity. Pervasive among these approaches is the understanding

¹ For example, one might consider the questions posed by more than thirty authors who recently contributed chapters to Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham, eds., *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018). See also the compilation of articles written in support of IM and included in Harley Talman and John Jay Travis, eds., *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus within Diverse Religious Communities* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015).

² Highlighting the various religious contexts in which IMs are occurring, see William Dyrness, *Insider Jesus: Theological Reflections on New Christian Movements* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016).

³ Kevin Higgins, Richard Jameson, and Harley Talman, "Myths and Misunderstandings about Insider Movements," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, 41, who compare critiques of IM to a Chinese proverb that says, "Whatever you have heard about China is true *somewhere* in China." In other words, since IM is not practiced universally, some expressions may be susceptible to critique while the critiques fall far afield from the actual practice of other IMs. While certain critiques may not be representative of each individual IM, such rebuttals fail to address the other substantive critiques leveled against IM writ large. For example, in the article cited in this footnote, the authors "counter" the claim that IM introduces syncretism by saying that Insiders "hold to a wide range of views on Islam, the Qur'an and Muhammad... . However, empirical research has shown that as [Muslim Followers of Christ] study the Bible together and apply its truths to their lives and community, progressive transformation of character happens and biblical perspectives and behaviors develop" (46). This response does not address what mixture of Islamic perspectives and theology remains a part of the movement, and thus side-steps the issue of syncretism. Also, as will be seen by Jan Prenger's research cited throughout this article, progress towards biblical theology is not a given. Prenger includes problematic examples of several IM leaders who persist in denying Christ's divinity, substitutionary atonement, and even crucifixion based on Islamic theology.

⁴ Rebecca Lewis, "Insider Movements: Retaining Identity and Preserving Community," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 673.

that Christ completes non-Christian religious desires and teachings and thus validates them.⁵ In order to limit the scope and focus of this paper, we will adopt Lewis' definition as we consider IM strategies among Arabic-speaking Muslim people.

It should be noted from the outset that all criticism is directed towards IM as a missiological strategy rather than as an attack or commentary on the soteriological status of those who participate as Insiders.⁶ In other words, the phenomenon of IM is not my concern. Rather, my particular concern is the ecclesiological impact of IM strategies that prescribe the retention of a socio-religious Islamic identity. I will focus on those strategies that include the reading of the Qur'an as a component of gathered worship, the use of Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) of the Bible, and the intentional separation of IM gatherings from those of non-Muslim believers.

Despite a long history of development within Christian missiological discussions,⁷ the ecclesiology produced by such movements has received insufficient attention.⁸ Most of the discussion surrounding IM strategies focuses on soteriology, hermeneutics, and mission, even when purporting to discuss IM ecclesiology.⁹ Yet if IM is the biblically valid missiological method it claims to be, it must be able to account for the biblical teaching about the church.

In an effort to assess whether or not IM strategies are likely to produce biblically faithful churches, this paper will consider four aspects of what might be considered a mere biblical ecclesiology:

⁵ See the self-identifier "completed Muslim" as referenced in Jan Hendrik Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers: Their Theological and Missional Frames* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2017), 257. This concept of Christ as the completion of Islam also derives from the statement of an Insider referred to as Paxton in Prenger's book, as he says, "Anything that has led me to Christ has a function like you find in the Old Testament, as a mentor who guides you along until you are educated, and after that its function is finished."

⁶ This is contrary to the claims of some IM proponents that criticism of IM is implicit criticism of the faith of genuine believers in Jesus. See Higgins, Jameson, and Talman, "Myths and Misunderstandings," 41, who view the criticism of IM methods to be direct criticism of the faith of believers, writing, "In the last few years some have attempted to systematically discredit these followers of Christ."

⁷ The term Insider Movement is relatively recent, though the contextualization conversation that gave birth to it traces its roots back at least to Charles Kraft and Eugene Nida who developed the idea of receptor-oriented translation theories in the mid-1970s. See Georges Housney, "Watching the Insider Movement Unfold," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ*, ed. Ayman Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 398.

⁸ For example, see Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, xix. Prenger's book is a compilation of research on Insider Movements that adds the voices of actual IM participants to the broader missiological discussion. In explaining his approach to the interviews that provide the backbone of his book, Prenger states, "I interviewed 26 insider movement leaders and asked them to share their views on what we could call theology-proper topics such as God, man, the cross, Jesus, election, salvation, heaven, hell, the gospel, and our mandate." Curiously absent from this list is any question seeking an Insider's view on the gathered church. This is not to say that no IM advocates have written on IM ecclesiology, but rather, when they have, the focus tends to be on the outward activities of the gathering rather than a robust biblical understanding of the essence of the church. Cf. Leonard Bartlotti, "Seeing Inside Insider Missiology," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, 57–58.

⁹ See especially the disappointingly titled article by Herbert Hofer, "Church in Context," in *Understanding Insider Movements*. The title would lead the reader to assume that the church would be discussed, when in fact Hofer repeatedly places the church in the category of extra-biblical adiaphora based upon his observation of supposedly churchless Christianity.

(1) the declaration of Jesus as the Son of God (Matthew 16:13–20); (2) the identifiable, gathered, and responsible body of local believers (Matthew 18:15–20); (3) the role of upholding the truth of the Gospel (1 Timothy 3:14–16); (4) and the inclusion of believers from various socio-religious backgrounds (Galatians 2:11–21).

While a robust biblical ecclesiology would require attention to many more aspects of the church, these four passages highlight aspects of the essential biblical nature of the church that confront several of the core elements of IM strategies. Thus, this paper will argue that if these four components are not encouraged by IM methodology, it is unlikely that IM strategies can produce biblically faithful churches.¹⁰

1. History of IM Discussion

The contextualization discussion surrounding what has come to be known as Insider Movement strategy has a longer history than does its name. In fact, according to one commentator, the Insider Movement (IM) traces its roots back to the mid-1970s through the work of Charles Kraft and Eugene Nida. During that time, Kraft and Nida proved influential in advancing a translation theory known as Dynamic Equivalence (DE).¹¹

Dynamic equivalence translations are highly receptor-oriented and attempt to leverage vocabulary and vernacular familiar to the audience in the process of communicating the gospel. From this linguistic foundation, IM strategies continue along the receptor-oriented trajectory by seeking to retain not only the vocabulary of the context but also its cultural and religious forms. In fact, Charles Kraft himself began exploring the idea of DE churches as early as 1978.¹²

Interestingly, despite some Western missionary optimism regarding IM contextualization, Arab Christians have often opposed such strategies, noting their concerns that “continuity with the past will tie the Muslim believer to darkness.”¹³ In noting such reticence to endorse these contextualization strategies, however, Western advocates have at times chosen to reject the warnings of our

¹⁰ Having noted the tendency within IM responses to deny that a particular criticism is characteristic of their particular approach, the conditional statement of this thesis is intended to function as a rubric by which to assess a given IM strategy rather than an attempt to define any and all IM approaches and undermine them. That said, the four aspects of IM that are investigated here are pervasive throughout the literature and might be considered to be at least broadly representative of most Muslim Insider Movements across the board.

¹¹ Housney, “Watching the Insider Movement,” 397–99.

¹² Kraft delivered a paper at a conference in Colorado Springs in which he explored DE churches. See Sam Schlorff, *Missionary Models in Ministry to Muslims* (Upper Darby, PA: Middle East Resources, 2006), 81.

¹³ Bruce Heckman, “Arab Christian Reaction to Contextualization in the Middle East” (MA Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1988), 80–81; As quoted in J. Dudley Woodberry, “Contextualization among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars,” in *Understanding Insider Movements*, 411.

brothers and sisters in Christ who are culturally closer to IM participants in favor of our outside analysis of the dynamics of such strategies.¹⁴

2. Jesus's Church vs. Paul's Church

Contextualization is the attempt to present and embody the unchanging message of the Bible within the changing contexts of the world. Thus, one of the typical approaches to contextualization is to seek out the irreducible core of biblical teaching and then to clothe that teaching in culturally communicative forms.

In search of an irreducible core teaching regarding the church, some IM proponents such as Leonard Bartlotti argue that there is a spectrum of cultural expression that ranges from minimalist to traditionalist ecclesiology.¹⁵ The theory for IM proponents like Bartlotti is that if one takes a minimalist approach to ecclesiology, wherein one practices some of the biblical minimum of two or three gathered around the Word and in the Spirit, then IM might meet these basic criteria.¹⁶

Attempting to establish the biblical basis of the minimalist approach, Bartlotti writes, "In [the minimalist] view of the church, believers who gather around the Word and the Spirit of Christ have essentially all they need to grow and develop in faith, practice, Christlikeness, and witness."¹⁷ Bartlotti sees this minimalist approach as distinct from a traditionalist expression of church, writing, "This side of the spectrum values simplicity, freedom, informality, and a synoptic 'Jesus style' somewhat removed from Pauline theologizing and complexities, but not removed from Pauline dynamics."¹⁸ IM ecclesiology is then merely a minimalist approach.

However, to grant this distinction is to grant that Jesus's ecclesiology is an option that can be chosen over and against a more robust Pauline expression. Bartlotti's spectrum suggests that it is possible—and potentially appropriate for IMs—to cut off Paul's ecclesiological teaching from Jesus's and still remain biblically faithful. Yet, even if one were to admit such an untenable division between

¹⁴ Woodberry, "Contextualization among Muslims," 411, cites several Arab Christians voicing their concerns regarding IM. Unfortunately, he sidelines their theological concerns by paralleling their situation with the cultural debates over forms of worship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the early church.

¹⁵ Bartlotti, "Seeing Inside Insider Missiology," 57–58.

¹⁶ Bartlotti, "Seeing Inside Insider Missiology," 56–57. Bartlotti argues that the concept of a spectrum is appropriate for many different doctrines within the church, where believers and groups of believers may differ on either side of a perceived middle-point on an issue while still maintaining evangelical faith. From that argument, then, he suggests the biblical spectrum for church as running from "Synoptic Jesus emphasis" to "Pauline emphasis." This spectrum concept infers that one's choice on either end of a supposed ecclesiological spectrum is perhaps equally "biblical" and admissible.

¹⁷ Bartlotti, "Seeing Inside Insider Missiology," 57.

¹⁸ Bartlotti, "Seeing Inside Insider Missiology," 57.

supposedly Jesus-style and Pauline-style churches, Jesus's ecclesiological concerns challenge IM strategies in at least two ways. A brief consideration of the two occasions where Jesus uses the word *ekklesia* proves vital in the task of assessing IM ecclesiology.

2.1 Peter's Confession and Jesus's Church: Matthew 16:16

The first occasion that Jesus uses the word *ekklesia* is a climactic moment in Matthew's gospel. After Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter speaks up and declares that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God."¹⁹ Most protestant scholarship understands this passage to mean that Jesus intends to build his church both on Peter and his declaration, and also through those who would likewise recognize him as the Son of God.²⁰ As Stuart Weber comments, "What Jesus was saying is that Peter would be a 'first among equals' in the history of Jesus' church. Peter would be the initial spokesman among those who would become the custodians of the revealed truth about Jesus' identity—the heart of the revealed gospel."²¹

This particular claim is of little challenge to advocates of IM strategies as it is clearly a universal or invisible church that Jesus has in mind rather than an organized local church. One might readily affirm that those who believe in Jesus are incorporated into his invisible church prior to inclusion in a local expression of church. However, pertinent to our investigation is the declaration itself prior to unpacking its ecclesial implications. When Jesus speaks of building his unshakable church, it is inextricably connected to the recognition of his Sonship.

2.2 IM Strategic Conflicts: Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) and Divine Filial Language (DFL)

This is the point at which IM strategists operating among Muslim peoples often become uneasy. Due to Islamic repulsion at the idea that God could sire a Son, missionaries hoping to contextualize the gospel for Muslim audiences regularly propose alternative titles by which Jesus might be known. Some missiologists merely suggest that witnesses should give verbal preference to identifying Jesus as Lord or King over and against Son. However, several IM proponents also desire alternative translations of this language in Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT) of Scripture.

¹⁹ Matthew 16:16.

²⁰ See Donald Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* WBC 33b (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 474; Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew* Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 251; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 714; John Peter Lange and Philip Schaff, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Matthew* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 298; Mark Dever, "The Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2014), 641.

²¹ Weber, *Matthew*, 251.

Resulting from this translation commitment, one Turkish attempt at a Muslim-sensitive translation renders the great commission of Matthew 28:18–19 as follows:

Now go to all the nations and train ‘islamic disciples’ [lit. *murits*] to me and make them ‘purify themselves by islamic ritualistic washing unto repentance’ [lit. *tovbe abdesti*] to the name of the Protector, his Representative and the Holy Spirit.²²

The problems in this representation of the great commission are manifold. One might be able to overlook the Islamic vocabulary used to identify Jesus’s disciples and the purification language to identify Christian baptism. But there is no way to justify the disregard for the Greek original of the biblical text that allows the triune persons of the godhead to be thus represented.²³

Practically speaking, it is possible that one might be able to observe initial pragmatic benefits of removing divine filial language (DFL) from the Bible and from gospel presentations. Yet observations of pragmatic effectiveness cannot supplant the importance of presenting the unadulterated biblical message of the Gospel. As demonstrated by Adam Simnowitz’s extensive research, MIT versions of the Scriptures often compromise biblical language and the theology that derives from it at the altar of expedient communication.²⁴

At the same time, it should be noted that most Muslims are already aware of the fact that the Bible speaks of Jesus as the Son of God. In fact, this is part of the qur’anic polemic against Christianity. Written on the pages of the Islamic holy book, Qur’an 4:171 declares, “God is only one God. Glory to Him! (Far be it) that He should have a son!”²⁵ Traditional Islamic interpretation of this verse—and the several others like it—recognizes that it is Christians who are the ones who declare that God has a son.²⁶ Thus, by exchanging the DFL for less offensive nomenclature, the Christian simply demonstrates complicity with the qur’anic accusation that Christians are willing to engage in scriptural falsification.²⁷ One thus loses any initial pragmatic momentum that comes from removing DFL as the effects of altering Scripture further undermine Muslim confidence in the Bible and the Christians who are willing to compromise its text.

²² Adam Simnowitz, “Appendix: Do Muslim Idiom Translations Islamicize the Bible? A Glimpse Behind the Veil,” in *Muslim Conversions to Christ*, 504. Simnowitz here refers to *The Sublime Meaning of the Injil Sharif (Matthew)* published in 2011.

²³ Simnowitz, “Appendix,” 514, concludes, “There is an egregious disregard for the Greek texts which results in highly interpretive and mistaken renderings.”

²⁴ Simnowitz, “Appendix.”

²⁵ Quoted from A.J. Droge, *The Qur’an: A New Annotated Translation* (Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2015). See also Qur’an 2:16; 10:68; 19:88–92; 21:26; 23:91; and 25:2.

²⁶ Droge, *The Qur’an*, 61 n192; Cf. 12 n138 and 225 n63.

²⁷ See especially Qur’an 2:59 and 7:162 for the qur’anic accusation that Christians falsify their revelation.

For the purposes of this investigation, we must note that Jesus connects his church to the explicit recognition that he is the expected Messiah and the Son of God. Any attempt to build a church on an altered understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son begins a church on an unhealthy foundation. Yet many IM advocates argue that such translations are essential components of IM success. For example, John Travis, J. Dudley Woodberry, and John Wilder argue that “It is crucial to have an appropriately contextualized Bible . . . that intentionally uses affectively and cognitively meaningful vocabulary for Muslim readers.”²⁸ Lest one think MITs are relegated to inconsequential vocabulary, Travis includes a footnote that demands “culturally appropriate ways to translate ‘Holy Spirit,’ ‘Son of God,’ ‘Lord,’ ‘Christian,’ and ‘church.’”²⁹

One sees these translations included in actual practice through Jan Prenger’s study of IMs. Citing the insistence upon a contextualized MIT, Prenger writes,

Having the appropriate version of the Bible seems important. [One interviewee] mentioned that having a contextual translation available was a huge factor in the movement. He said, “The churches don’t use that Bible, and these Muslims really view it as, ‘This is our translation.’”³⁰

Therefore, if IM strategies utilize MITs that obscure Jesus as the Son of God, a dangerous deference to Islamic theology emerges. Any gathering of such Insiders that might emerge is building upon a foundation that has exhibited more interest in crafting a message that can be embraced than translating the text as it was written.

Since the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God is tied to his Messianic role and is the foundation for his unshakable church, this is no trifling matter. If the contextualized translations of Scripture used in IMs persist in obscuring such a central element of biblical christology, it is difficult to imagine building a strong church on such a weakened foundation. In addition to this reference to the church, Jesus speaks of his *ekklesia* two chapters later in Matthew’s gospel.

²⁸ John Jay Travis, “Insider Movements among Muslims,” in *Understanding Insider Movements*, 137. See also Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 266, who states, “The jamaats in these IMs desperately need a Muslim-idiom Bible translation.”

²⁹ Travis, “Insider Movements among Muslims,” 137 n26.

³⁰ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 256. Another example of an Insider appropriating contextual language in translation of the Bible is mentioned on p. 259 as Prenger discusses an Insider identified as Axel who has taken it upon himself to produce his own translation of Scripture that he disseminates page by page. It is unclear whether Axel has any training in original biblical languages, but it is clear that the only theological training he has received is Islamic training (232). One wonders then what would prepare him to make a translation of Scripture that is more suited to his Muslim audience other than his own sense of what the Bible means to say? It is worth noting that this same person is elsewhere quoted as saying, “The Isa that came to earth is not Allah. That is *shirk*. We would be making someone the same as Allah. He was human, and you cannot say that a human is Allah” (228).

2.3 Local, Identifiable Expressions of Jesus's Church: Matthew 18:15–20

The second passage in which Jesus uses the word *ekklesia* occurs two chapters later in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew 18:15–20 Jesus discusses the process by which believers are to confront interpersonal sins within the local church community. While the first time that Jesus uses the word *ekklesia* is apparently in reference to the church universal, this instance clearly communicates a local expression of church. That this is true can be seen in Matthew 18:17, which states that the church is to be gathered, informed, and involved in excommunication of the unrepentant sinning brother or sister.

Since the church is a local and gatherable assembly in this passage, one cannot say that Jesus was unconcerned with the formation of local churches. In fact, these local churches are composed of believers who might be called to carry the weighty burden of rendering a verdict on another believer's status as a part of the church. This passage leaves no room for the notion of an isolated or unchurched Christian, as Donald Hagner comments,

The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders, in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name.³¹

In just two references to *ekklesia*, then, Jesus has established that his church will be built upon the foundation of the confession that he is the Old Testament's anticipated Messiah and the incarnate Son of God. Furthermore, he has established the fact that this church is composed of local, identifiable, gatherable, and mutually-responsible communities of believers.

2.4 IM Strategic Conflicts: Difficulty with Discipline

Sometimes, due to contextual stigma with the local word for "church" IMs opt to use alternative language to describe the gatherings of Insiders. While a few IM expressions are intentionally churchless,³² most encourage believers to be known to one another and to meet within the mosque structure.³³ For example, some IM groups are called *jamaats* using the Arabic word for gathering.³⁴ Some *jamaats* could easily be compared with house churches in that these Insiders meet together in homes

³¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 534.

³² See the works of Herbert Hofer, *Churchless Christianity*, new ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2001) and "Church in Context." Cf. Timothy Tennent, "The Challenge of Churchless Christianity: An Evangelical Assessment," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29 no. 4 (October 2005): 171–77.

³³ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 253. Prenger notes, "Small local fellowships, or *jamaats*, are the building blocks of all IMs represented by the 26 interviewed IM leaders. These groups form naturally within family, tribal, and mosque communities."

³⁴ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 246.

regularly, read or chant Scripture together, and often share a meal.³⁵ On the surface, then, if an IM strategy includes the impulse to gather in local groups, many of the biblical activities of a local church can be observed and practiced within a *jamaat*.

The concern for IM strategies, however, is not with the ability of IM gatherings to include prayer, worship, and teaching. If the church is to be an identifiable group that can exercise the church discipline expected by Jesus in Matthew 18, they must be able to differentiate between members in good standing versus members who are under church discipline. It is difficult to see how a group that is intentionally blending into the mosque community can exercise meaningful discipline.

Historically, identification with a local body of believers has been practiced and demonstrated through the ordinances of baptism and communion.³⁶ While some IM gatherings regularly practice baptism, there are other IM strategies that dismiss the importance of baptism. Such proponents argue that many unbaptized Christ-followers reject baptism not because they reject Christ, but due to the fact that it severs ties with one's former community and family. Thus, advocates such as Herbert Hoefler relegate the rejection of baptism to the realm of sociology rather than theology.³⁷

Likewise, since some IM strategies aim to see entire mosques dedicated to following Jesus as savior, Insiders often remain within the structures of the mosque system. As a result, the ability for such groups of Insiders to partake in communion is complicated by the fact that their gathering occurs in mixed company. If communion is not celebrated as a regular affirmation of the gospel and participation with the community, one wonders how the *jamaat* will differentiate a believer in good standing from those who are to be treated as Gentiles and tax collectors.³⁸

2.5 Summary: Jesus' Church and IM Jamaats

In closing this section, then, we note that Matthew's gospel and Jesus's own words about the church are sufficient to challenge IM methodology on at least two key points: (1) Jesus as the long-awaited Christ, who is the Son of God; and (2) the local church as an identifiable body of believers who can practice meaningful church discipline. Beyond Jesus's words about the church, however, at least two

³⁵ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 246–47.

³⁶ Jeremy Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2017), 63–67.

³⁷ See Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity*; see also, H.L. Richard, "Christ Followers in India Flourishing—But Outside the Church," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, 151. It is worth noting that Hoefler's study was done among Hindu Insiders, but Hoefler does compare the Hindu and Muslim rationale for not converting and receiving baptism, stating, "The sociological differences between the Christian and Muslim community are the major barrier."

³⁸ It should be noted that Prenger documents some exceptions to this practice of attempting to reform the mosques. These exceptions have formed a "Sufi-style para-mosque system, outside the existing local mosque system." Yet, as a Sufi-style para-mosque, baptism is described in Sufi-terminology so as to obscure its Christian meaning when an outsider inquires about the practice. See Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 260–65.

other aspects of biblical ecclesiology need to be considered. The following section will consider how IM strategies face challenges when confronted with Paul's teaching about the church in 1 Timothy 3:14–16 and Galatians 2:11–21.

3. The Church: A Pillar and Buttress of the Truth

As stated above, for an evangelical who is unwilling to pit the teachings of Jesus against those of Paul, one must not merely attend to what Jesus said of the church. Indeed, Paul clearly recognizes his instruction about the church as being the extension of Christ's ministry, Gospel, and teaching.³⁹ Thus, it is important for our purposes to consider what the whole of the New Testament says about the church in order to assess whether or not IM strategies are likely to produce biblically faithful churches. As such, we must consider what Paul writes to Timothy in his charge to his young disciple regarding the purpose of the church.

First, we find in 1 Timothy 3 a section of Scripture that is helpful for churches as they determine who among their members should be appointed to leadership roles. However, for our purposes, it is important to consider the final charge of this chapter wherein Paul gives his rationale for such specific leadership qualifications. In 1 Timothy 3:14–16, Paul writes,

I hope to come to your soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

As Paul concludes this section of his letter, then, all of the instructions given regarding leadership, orderliness, and teaching of doctrine that precede this conclusion serve the purpose of ensuring that the church upholds, displays, and supports the truth entrusted to it in the gospel. Anything that might obscure the central message of the gospel along with its transmission and application is a threat to the church's ability to fulfill this purpose.

3.1 IM Inclusion of the Qur'an in Worship

Despite the fact that Paul is explicit that the church is to be a gathering in which the faith, once delivered for all the saints, is taught, upheld, and passed on, IM proponents are keen to include the active and ongoing reading of the Qur'an as a part of Insider gatherings of all stripes, whether in the

³⁹ Consider how the sections of Paul's letters that include his introductions and greetings tie his ministry to the "churches of God" (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), the "church of Christ" (Rom 16:16), and the church in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). Furthermore, Ephesians 1:20–23 demonstrates that Paul views Christ as the head of the church which is his body (cf. 1 Cor 12), demonstrating the organic relationship between Christ, the Gospel, and the people gathered by believing the gospel known as the church.

mosque or the para-mosque. As Prenger states from his research, “The use of the Qur’an in *jamaat* gatherings is normal and expected. The Qur’an leads to the truth as it points to Isa and the Tawrat, Zabur, and Injil.”⁴⁰ Even more startlingly, Prenger cites an apparent IM in which “the *jamaat* members have no access to any Scripture portion. ‘It is a qur’anic Jesus movement. They use the Qur’an in fellowships, but it is seen through biblical eyes.’”⁴¹ Yet despite the apparent references to a Jesus character within the pages of the Qur’an, this Jesus is not the center of the Qur’an’s message. Thus, even if an Insider were to engage in a Christo-centric reading of the Qur’an, it could not lead to an understanding of the atoning work of the biblical Messiah.

By including the Qur’an within the worship gathering, one adds confusion to a community that has already been shaped by the Qur’an’s message as understood independently from the Bible. Thus, it is no surprise to find Insiders among Prenger’s research who are leading IMs yet making comments such as, “The Qur’an is saying that Jesus was not killed, but that he was taken away. So what is wrong with that? Arthur asked. Was Jesus really killed? He was symbolically killed, because his spirit cannot be killed.”⁴² Rather than viewing the Qur’an through the lens of the Bible, then, the biblical teaching is made to accommodate the Qur’an.

Again, striking at the core of salvation, another of Prenger’s Insider interviewees accepts Jesus’s death and resurrection but denies its atoning power, saying,

Allah says that each individual is responsible for their own life. Each one gives an account for what they did, right or wrong. In my understanding now, Jesus died and rose again and went to heaven as evidence that he was superior to others. He was not like us, but it doesn’t qualify that he died for my sins. It qualifies him for me to follow him, but I am accountable for what I do. If he died for my sins, I would not need to keep away from sins.⁴³

Though these two quotes do not necessarily represent the sentiments of every IM leader or participant, it is incredibly troubling to see these gospel-central issues being reframed by the Qur’an’s teaching. Furthermore, such interpretations contradict the claim of IM advocates that the Qur’an is included in IM worship, yet it is viewed through a biblical lens.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 257.

⁴¹ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 263.

⁴² Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 177.

⁴³ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 207.

⁴⁴ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 263. Prenger quotes Melvin as saying, “They use the Qur’an in fellowships, but it is seen through biblical eyes.” This comment follows the recognition that this movements does not yet have a translation of the Bible available to them, so it is difficult to see how this can be achieved. In fact, Melvin himself expresses concern that this IM “does not have the power of the Bible in their movements yet.”

Despite the repeated claims of IM advocates, the Qur'an has never been interpreted by Muslims as being compatible with the biblical gospel. As Ayman Ibrahim writes of such unprecedented re-interpretations, "It abuses the Qur'an and violates the interpretations offered by Muslim exegetes throughout history."⁴⁵ Ibrahim goes on to show that even if the Qur'an is reinterpreted to cohere with the Bible while yet adding nothing to the biblical testimony, "There is no theological worth or biblical value in [reinterpreting qur'anic passages] except to support and sustain the IM paradigm. In reinterpreting these verses to fit into Christian dogma, one would redact the Qur'an, abuse Islamic thought and history, and violate Islamic exegesis."⁴⁶

If the Qur'an, as understood by IM proponents, adds nothing to the biblical message, its inclusion in Insider worship only serves to reinforce the Muslim identity that IM advocates intend to retain.⁴⁷ However, if the *ekklesia* is to be a pillar and buttress of the truth of the gospel, one must consider the potential for confusion that the reading of the Qur'an introduces into the gathering of Insiders. As seen in the quotes above, the presence of the Qur'an can exert a pressure upon the biblical message that leads one to defer to the Qur'an on matters as central as the atoning death of Jesus. Thus, since the Qur'an adds no value to the biblical testimony, the risk of including the Qur'an in IM gatherings is unwarranted, unwise, and unlikely to contribute to the formation of biblically faithful churches.

3.2 The Church as the One People of God in Christ

Finally, as Paul discusses the unifying effects of the gospel in Galatians, he argues strongly that in Christ there is to be no ethnic, sociological, racial, or sex-based discrimination separating believers. To this point, Galatians 3:28 is especially clear, declaring, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Paul's teaching is especially pertinent to the local community of Galatian believers in that they were prone to dividing themselves according to their former Jewish-Gentile distinctives. In Galatians 2:11-21 Paul confronts Peter's withdrawal into the Jew-Gentile segregation observed under pre-Christ culture and law. Paul minces no words as he deems such socio-religious segregation as conduct that is "not in step with the truth of the gospel." The local church, then, is the visible expression of the unified people of God in Christ.

Biblical concern with the unity found in the Gospel is not relegated to Paul's writings. In Acts 15, one reads the account of the early church's process of reconciling Jewish-background and

⁴⁵ Ayman Ibrahim, "Who Makes the Qur'an Valid and Valuable for Insiders?" in *Muslim Conversions to Christ* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 142.

⁴⁶ Ibrahim, "Who Makes the Qur'an Valid," 144.

⁴⁷ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 1. Prenger defines Insiders as, "Believers in Christ who have decided to remain in their socioreligious community, and who retain their identity as members of that community, which makes them by definition, Muslim [I]nsiders."

Gentile-background believers. In this chapter, the Jerusalem counsel is called to determine what to do with the fact that Gentiles were believing the Gospel and receiving the same Spirit as believers from among the covenant people of Israel. The decision the council reached was that there was one Gospel and one Spirit, thus uncircumcised Gentile believers were to be included in the church, provided that they would abstain from some of the specific religious rituals that their Gentile communities practiced.⁴⁸ In other words, both the former Jews and former Gentiles saw some of their socio-religious practices excluded for the sake of demonstrable unity.

3.3 IM *Jamaats* Raise Religious Barriers to Diverse Members

In many ways, IM advocates call for the Western church to recognize Insiders in the same way as the early Jewish-background church recognized the Gentiles.⁴⁹ Some even make this comparison more contemporary by suggesting that in the same way as there are Messianic Jews who retain some of their culture while following Christ, so too there can also be Messianic Muslims.⁵⁰ The problem with this comparison is that Messianic Jews have inherited divinely prescribed feasts, fasts, and forms that derive from the pages of the Hebrew Bible and anticipate the Messiah. The Hebrew Bible, then, is inspired, canonical literature that points to Jesus as the culmination of God's progressively revealed purposes.⁵¹ For a Muslim to claim to follow the same trajectory is to adopt the Qur'an as an equally inspired record of God's activity that leads to Jesus as the anticipated Messiah. Not only does the Qur'an not allow for such a reading, but it would violate the evangelical understanding of Scripture to grant it such an inspired status.

Furthermore, when such Muslim Insiders gather, they intentionally do so in exclusively Muslim cultural forms. These forms intend to separate the Insiders from the local, national churches culturally, linguistically, and socio-religiously. In his interviews with IM leaders, Prenger does cite several believers who affirm the idea that, despite their intentional separation from the church, "[Insiders] consider ourselves to have one Lord with them, and one Spirit with them."⁵² At the same time, however, many IM strategists urge the Insiders with whom they are working to avoid the existing churches.

By their own testimony and strategy, these IM advocates separate themselves from the churches and silo themselves into communities of Jesus followers who remain intentionally self-identified

⁴⁸ Acts 15:28–29.

⁴⁹ See Harley Talman, "The Old Testament and Insider Movements," in *Understanding Insider Movements*, 193.

⁵⁰ See John Travis, "The C-Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-Centered Communities' Found in Muslim Contexts," in *Perspectives On the World Christian Movement*, 665.

⁵¹ See Jesus's testimony to this fact in Luke 24:25–49.

⁵² Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 269.

as Muslims.⁵³ This intentional division between IM *jamaats* and traditional churches is repeatedly affirmed by many of the Insiders interviewed by Prenger. Prenger states, “Many IM leaders mention that the traditional church [is] the main challenge to IM and insiders.”⁵⁴ This perceived danger expresses itself in the comments made by several other IM leaders who promote avoiding fellowship with Christians in their context.

One Insider says, “I feel like they will not be able to understand what we are doing. They have the traditional viewpoint that once a person receives Jesus, this person has to pull out and join the church. . . . We hope that [the traditional church] doesn’t know about us, but we consider ourselves having one Lord with them, and one Spirit with them.”⁵⁵

One might initially compare this movement to the division observed between different denominations in more traditional sense. Since Baptists and Presbyterians practice baptism and view church polity differently, perhaps the refusal of Insiders to fellowship with existing churches is merely comparable to these doctrinal distinctives. And yet in the case of Insider Muslims, one wonders if it is possible for someone from a non-Islamic background to join such a gathering without first becoming a Muslim? Would a non-Muslim seeking fellowship with Insiders be required to say the shahada? Would a non-Muslim be required to pray in the mosque in the Islamic style alongside of non-Insider Muslims?

While these may seem to be unfair, pejorative questions to raise, Prenger records an Insider’s testimony that describes exactly this: A Christian woman determined that it was necessary for the kingdom of God that she become a Muslim convert to Islam in order to advance the ministry in which her Muslim background husband was involved.⁵⁶

If, then, IM strategy requires Insiders to retain their Muslim identity in order to fellowship, it intentionally builds an extra-biblical socio-religious barrier to fellowship. Such barriers can only be transcended if an outsider becomes an Insider by professing Islam. One wonders how this type

⁵³ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 260–61.

⁵⁴ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 273.

⁵⁵ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 269.

⁵⁶ Prenger, *Muslim Insider Christ Followers*, 246. The direct quote to which I refer in the main text is: “As a Muslim it is easy for me to share the gospel, because when I talk about Isa as a Muslim with other Muslims they know that I am not trying to convert them. That is not a problem. It is a very different story when a Christian talks to a Muslim about Jesus. He would say, ‘Be careful, you cannot convert me.’ When I initially discussed this idea with my wife she told me that I could do it, but that she could not, since she is from a Christian background. Over time she saw and understood what was happening in the ministry, and she decided to become a Muslim convert to Islam. I did not force her, but she personally understood that this was needed for the kingdom of God.”

of contextualization can be construed as anything other than the issue that Paul took with the Judaizers who required Gentiles to undergo circumcision?⁵⁷

4. Conclusion: Sowing Seeds for an Unpromising Harvest

While there is much to be lauded about the desire of IM proponents to see the gospel bear fruit in diverse contexts, there are major problems with the strategies they suggest to manufacture such a harvest. The impulse to see appropriate cultural expression of the gospel is right. However, in fighting for a natural expression of church among Muslims, they encourage a minimalist approach to ecclesiology which is often misshapen by giving deference to Islamic forms. Such forms, as seen above, often threaten to introduce confusion around the central teachings of the Gospel and division among those who are being saved by a common Lord.

Furthermore, one must consider the fact that Jesus never called his followers to a bare-minimum commitment to following him. He never encouraged people to seek the least that one might have to do in order to find salvation. Instead, he said, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” If, in an effort to contextualize the biblical requirements for the church, IM strategists promote a reductionistic obedience that obscures the four components discussed in this paper, it is unlikely that these methods will produce biblically faithful and flourishing churches.

⁵⁷ See Paul’s reaction to those who would put stumbling blocks in front of believers in Galatians 5:1-15.