

# Must all Muslims Leave “Islam” to Follow Jesus?

John Travis

**F**or the past decade, my family and I have lived in a close-knit Muslim neighborhood in Asia. My daughter, who loves our neighbors dearly, asked one day, “Daddy, can a Muslim go to heaven?” I responded with an Acts 15:11-type “yes”: “If a Muslim has accepted Isa (Jesus) the Messiah as Savior and Lord, he or she is saved, just as we are.” We affirmed that people are saved by faith in Christ, not by religious affiliation. Muslim followers of Christ (i.e. C5 believers) are our brothers and sisters in the Lord, even though they do not change religions.

Can a Muslim truly accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, thereby rejecting some elements of normal Islamic theology, and yet (for the sake of the lost) remain in his or her family and religious community? Due to the extreme importance Islam places on community, its nearly universal disdain for those who have become “traitors” by joining Christianity, and our desire to see precious Muslims come to Christ, finding the answer to this question is essential. I agree with Dr. Parshall; it is time for missiologists, theologians, and others, especially those who work face-to-face with Muslims, to seriously seek God’s will over this C5 issue.

## The Islampur case study

The results indicate that nearly all of the leaders of this movement hold firmly to biblical teachings about the identity and work of Christ. Not only is their basic theology solid, they are active in their faith through prayer, scripture reading and listening, and coming together for worship. The fact that over half understand the Trinity well enough to affirm God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is actually astounding considering it would be considered apostasy by most Muslims! How many American pastors would be delighted to find the same vitality among their own congregations?

Regarding the retention of some Islamic practice and belief, we should not be surprised that nearly half feel close to God when hearing the Qur'an read. Since they don't understand Arabic, it may be the familiar melodious chanting that touches their hearts. (Some C4 and C5 believers where I work sing a beautiful worship song which sounds a great deal like Muslim chanting.) It is also not surprising that half continue to worship in the mosque in addition to attending weekly C5 gatherings. This practice is reminiscent of the early Jewish followers of Christ meeting both in the temple

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and in homes (with the old community and the new). One village C5 group I know prays at the mosque at noon on Friday, then meets afterwards in a home for Bible study and prayer led by "Achmad" (a pseudonym), a C4 pastor and former Muslim teacher.

In this case these believers actually find mosque gatherings shallow and lifeless, and, for a time, stopped attending. Their absence greatly threatened the mosque leader and he tried to stamp out their Friday afternoon meetings. Achmad suggested they go back to the mosque, meaningless as it was for them. The imam's face was saved and the new believers have continued to meet for over a year. New Muslim inquirers (even two Islamic teachers) have attended.

Concerning the high regard for the Qur'an among Islampur believers, an apologetic response concerning the Qur'an must be developed whereby the truth in it can be affirmed (especially for purposes of a bridge for witness), yet it is not put on equal (or superior!) status to the Injil. Fortunately, until such an apologetic is developed, the Islampur believers are regularly reading the Injil rather than the Qur'an. Returning to the case of my friend Achmad, he holds evening "Holy Book reading sessions" in his home. He often opens by reading a Qur'anic passage in a respectful manner, then proceeds to the heart of the evening reading from the Torah, Zabur, and Injil (the Bible).

Unsaved Muslims are more likely to attend Bible reading sessions when they also contain some Arabic Qur'anic reading. Achmad is careful to read Qur'anic passages which do not conflict with the Bible.

Three final points concerning the Islampur study: First, these C5 Christ-centered communities consist entirely of new believers from a highly resistant people group. They are very much in process, and their struggles are not unlike what many first century congregations faced. We must pray that the same Holy Spirit whom Paul so relied upon to guide and purify those first groups of believers is active as well in these new Islampur groups.

Second, to attain a more accurate perspective, we need to assess the quality of the new believers' lives in Christ and not just their theology. Is the fruit of the Spirit evident and do they now show a deeper love for others?

Scripture is clear that by qualities such as these we will recognize true followers of Christ (Matt. 7:20, John 13:35).

Last, were it not for the C5 approach used in this church-planting ministry, would there be these many thousands of new believers to analyze in the first place?

### **C5 missionaries (Christians becoming Muslims to reach Muslims)**

This perhaps is Dr. Parshall's greatest concern, and overall I agree. Christians becoming Muslims to reach Muslims (i.e. C5 Missionaries) is a step beyond simply urging new believers to remain in the religious community of their birth (i.e. C5 believers) for the sake of their unsaved family and friends. In our current situation I have counseled my own Christian background co-workers, especially the expatriates, to take on a C4 expression of faith, and not enter Islam to reach Muslims. Yet I could imagine that in some instances God may call uniquely gifted, well-prepared individuals, whose ministries are firmly backed by prayer, to C5 outreach and religious identity. These C5 missionaries would be Muslims in the literal Arabic sense of the word (i.e. "one submitted to God") and their theology would, of course, differ from standard Muslim theology at a number of key points. They would have to be ready for persecution, and it would be best if these believers were of Muslim background.

If over time they made their beliefs clear, and the surrounding Muslim community chose to allow them to stay, should we not praise God for the opportunity they have to share the Good News in a place few would dare to tread? It would appear that neither "Abdul," the Muslim convert, nor "Harry," the Western missionary, were called and prepared for this kind of work.

Regarding how Muslims would "feel" about such an approach, I think the question is a bit irrelevant. The majority of Muslims that I have talked to object to any activity they perceive as an attempt to attract Muslims to Christianity. However, the C5 approach, which communicates the message of salvation in Christ without the intent to persuade Muslims to "change their religion," might in fact be the one most appreciated by Muslims. By



separating the gospel from the myriad of legal, social, and cultural issues implied in changing religious camps, a more straightforward, less encumbered message can be shared and (we hope) embraced. On the question of how Christians would feel if Muslims entered a church with the purpose of winning converts to Islam, I personally would not be fearful. Indeed, for a variety of reasons, non-Christians often grace the doors of churches, and many in the process come to Christ!

### Reinterpreting Muhammad and the Qur'an

Can individuals be a part of the community of Islam and not affirm standard Muslim theology? Yes, so long as they remain silent about their unorthodox beliefs. Indeed, there are millions of "cultural Muslims" who have divergent beliefs or know virtually nothing about Islam, yet who, because of birth and the fact they have not formally left the fold, are seen as a part of the community of Islam. However the goal of C5 believers (unlike C6 believers) is not to remain silent about their faith, but rather to be a witness for Christ. As they share, eventually the issue of the prophethood of Muhammad and the inerrancy of the Qur'an will arise. A follower of Jesus cannot affirm all that is commonly taught about the Qur'an and Muhammad.

Certain aspects of the role of Muhammad and the Qur'an must be reinterpreted. This will perhaps be the most challenging task of C5; to not do so will in time cause these believers to move toward C4 (contextualized, yet not Muslim) or C6 (underground/silent believers). Reinterpretation goes far beyond the scope of this brief article and would require the input of Muslim leaders who have put their faith in Christ. A tremendous starting point toward reinterpretation is found in Accad's excellent book *Building Bridges* (1997). As an Arab scholar and pastor, he suggests ways that Muhammad, the Qur'an, and Qur'anic verses which seem to deny the crucifixion can be reinterpreted (pp. 34-46; 138-141). He cites, as well, examples of Muslims who have successfully remained in the community of Islam after accepting Christ, some referring to themselves as "Muslims who are truly surrendered to God through the sacrifice of Messiah Isa" (p. 35).

### Guidelines for avoiding syncretism in a C5 movement

The idea of Muslim followers of Jesus or messianic mosques has been suggested by a number of key missiologists (see Winter, 1981; Kraft, 1979; Conn, 1979; Woodberry, 1989). We do need guidelines, however, so that a C5 expression of faith does not slip into a harmful syncretism. Those working with new believers should emphasize at least the following in the discipleship process:

1. Jesus is Lord and Savior; there is no salvation outside of him.
2. New believers are baptized, meet regularly with other believers (this may need to be done with great discretion), and take communion.
3. New believers study the Injil (and Torah plus Zabur if available).
4. New believers renounce and are delivered from occultism and harmful folk Islamic practices (i.e. shamanism, prayers to saints, use of charms, curses, incantations, etc.).
5. Muslim practices and traditions (e.g. fasting, alms, circumcision, attending the mosque, wearing the head covering, refraining from pork and alcohol, etc.) are done as expressions of love for God and/or respect for neighbors, rather than as acts necessary to receive forgiveness of sins.
6. The Qur'an, Muhammad, and traditional Muslim theology are examined, judged, and reinterpreted (where necessary) in light of biblical truth. Biblically acceptable Muslim beliefs and practices are maintained, others are modified, some must be rejected.
7. New believers show evidence of the new birth and growth in grace (e.g. the fruit of the Spirit, increased love, etc.) and a desire to reach the lost (e.g. verbal witness and intercession).

We must bear in mind that C5 believers, at some point, may be expelled from the community of Islam. C5 may only be transitional, as Dr. Parshall suggests. Yet, would it not be much better for Muslim followers of Jesus to share the Good News over months or years with fellow Muslims who may eventually expel them, than for these new believers to

leave their families and community by their own choice, being seen as traitors by those whom they love?

## Conclusion

If perhaps the single greatest hindrance to seeing Muslims come to faith in Christ is not a theological one (i.e. accepting Jesus as Lord) but rather one of culture and religious identity (i.e. having to leave the community of Islam), it seems that for the sake of God's kingdom much of our missiological energy should be devoted to seeking a path whereby Muslims can remain Muslims, yet live as true

followers of the Lord Jesus. The issues involved in such an approach are thorny and complex and require consideration from a number of different disciplines (e.g. church history, Islamics, theology, missiology). A consultation comprised primarily of people involved in sharing Christ with Muslims, which would grapple with the implications of C5, would be beneficial. Any type of ministry undertaken in the Muslim world involves great risk. But for the sake of millions of souls bound for a Christless eternity, and for the glory of God, the risks, efforts, and tensions are worth the price.

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## Study Questions

1. Does "Travis" feel that the greatest hindrance to faith in Christ among Muslims is a theological one or that of cultural identity?
2. What does the author suggest as guidelines for treatment of the Qur'an and of Muhammed for Muslim followers of Jesus?
3. What difference is there between C5 missionary and a C5 movement in terms of credibility with Muslim culture, fidelity to Biblical faith, or viability of church planting?

