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# Does the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 Support Insider Movement Practices?

Jeffery Morton and Harley Talman

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## I Jeffery Morton: Questions and Concerns

### 1 Why Acts 15, and why now?

This article is a conversation between a proponent of insider movements (IM) and myself, a sceptic. The two of us disagree about most of the issues that comprise the IM (Insider Movement) position, which should make for an interesting article.

The essential element in our disagreement is whether or not Scripture supports IM's principles. Both Talman and I are biblical Christians and understand the Bible to be the inerrant and inspired word of God. However, it seems IM proponents and its sceptic

approach Scripture differently. IM is a set of observations in search of a biblical foundation, and since they approach the Scriptures with observations about what God is doing—or allegedly doing—the IM proponent's *a posteriori* conclusion inevitably finds support in the Bible.

The burden of the case rests on IM proponents, since IM offers a new understanding and application of certain passages. It is my contention that there is no scriptural support for the IM understandings of what God is doing among Muslims.<sup>1</sup> I believe it can be shown that IM does not have any biblical legs to stand on, let alone to run.

With this all too brief, biased, and inadequate introduction let me begin to take a careful first step toward explain-

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these passages in relation to IM, see my *Insider Movements: Biblically Incredible or Incredibly Brilliant?* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

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ing why I believe it can be shown that IM has no biblical support, and why its advocates should stop considering it a biblical movement.

## 2 Sifting and weighing

The book of Acts is historical narrative rather than gospel or apocalyptic. This shapes how Luke's stories are to be understood. Every historical event is unique and non-reproducible; the story from Acts 15 is *sui generis*. While the reader may develop principles from such a recorded event, it is vital not to make the text mean more than it does.

I believe the proponents of IM who have written about this text have done exactly that—they have taken the text to mean more than it does. The interpreter must allow the story to be the lesson. Whatever the story means, that meaning is not dependent upon the reader's context. The nature of historical narrative demands caution: care when creating analogies from the story to the present, and prudence when developing principles. Ben Witherington says it well: 'Luke does not encourage us simply to play first-century "bible land" and assume that all the early church did and said should be replicated today. This means that the text must be sifted and narratives must be weighed before they are used or applied.'<sup>2</sup>

Not only is the text historical, it is narrative. Therefore, we expect to encounter a setting, characters, plot

and resolution, and literary devices. These structures must guide our hermeneutic, and for this essay it means observing the wider biblical context, and subsequently asking narrative-based questions of the text.<sup>3</sup> The result should be an interpretation that

- a) appreciates the historical uniqueness of the event(s);
- b) and cautiously elicits principles from the text for application in a manner that maintains the storyline as the lesson to be learned.

## 3 What is the plot of Acts 15?

The events of our text provide the crystallization of a longstanding divine purpose: creating a people who call upon the name of the Lord. The group called the *people of the Lord* began with Seth, though arguably with Abel (Gen. 4:25–26), was then developed by God among the Jews, finally coming to fruition with believing Jews and Gentiles.

To appreciate the plot of Acts 15, a quick survey is in order. Beginning in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' first sermon included two Gentiles (Lk. 4:25–27). Later Luke mentioned the faith of a centurion (7:9), Jesus' experiences with the Samaritans (9:51–56; 10:25–37; 17:11–19), and the reminder of Jonah's mission to the Gentile Ninevites (11:29–32).

Luke continued the thread in Acts by addressing his work to Theophilus (Acts 1:1), arguably a Gentile. At his ascension, Jesus told the disci-

<sup>2</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Book of Acts: a Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 102. Cf. David Garner, 'Messianic Muslims and Muslim Evangelicals', *Themelios* 37 (2), 259.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative* (Knoxville, Tennessee: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 206–210. Space does not allow me to include an analysis of the characters and rhetorical devices of the story.

ples they would be his witnesses in Gentile regions (1:8). Philip preached to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:4-40). Cornelius heard the good news of Jesus' resurrection from Peter (10:24-48), and Luke followed this with the adventures of Barnabas and Paul among the Gentiles of Galatia (chs. 13-14). Not all were happy with the inclusion of Gentiles into the church. A party of believing Pharisees taught, 'Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved' (15:1b).<sup>4</sup> The plot thickens.

#### 4 Questions for the text

##### a) Who was the hero of Acts 15?

Neither the apostles, the missionaries, nor James were the heroes; it was God. He was credited with working through the missionaries (vv. 4, 7), and it was the Lord who accepted the Gentiles (v.8). Peter argued that God no longer distinguished between Jew and Gentile (v.9), concluding, 'It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are' (v.11).

##### b) How was the plot resolved?

God rose to the challenge, creating a *people* (laos) *for himself* (v.14c) that included the Gentiles—transforming them from *ethnos*, the LXX term for Gentiles—to *laos*, the term for the Jews. He sent Peter to witness to the Gentiles (v. 7b) resulting in the Gentiles being filled with his Spirit (v. 8b), erasing the dividing line between believing Jew and believing Gentile.

##### c) What was achieved by the resolution of the plot?

The plot of Acts 15 was resolved because the protagonist accepted the Gentiles in the same manner as the Jews. Faith in Jesus saved the Jews just as it did the Gentiles. Jew and Gentile were purified by faith—circumcision and uncircumcision played no part in salvation—and this by the means of the grace of Jesus (vv. 6—11). The tent of David was restored (v.16).

#### 5 Implications from the questions

What analogies can be made between insider movements and Acts 15?

##### a) Theology

Acts 15 presents a theological question, not one about cultural identity. Some proponents of IM make the question of identity a major issue in Acts 15, but the story is not oriented to the question of whether Gentiles can retain their identity?<sup>5</sup> This question is peripheral at best.

Muslims are coming to know Jesus, just as the Gentiles were, but the text is silent on the matter of Gentiles/Muslims changing their identity. The story deals with the matter of salvation by Jesus alone, not the importance of remaining a Gentile/Muslim. To see

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kevin Higgins, 'Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 23 (3) (2006), 117-123; Rebecca Lewis, 'Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community', *IJFM* 26 (1) (2009), 16-19; John Travis, 'Messianic Followers of Isa: a Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations', *IJFM* 17 (1) (2000), 53-59.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture citations are from the NIV.

the question of identity in the story is anachronistic eisegesis. The terms *Gentile* and *Muslim* are categorically different. *Gentile* is an ethnic, linguistic identity<sup>6</sup> whereas *Muslim* is a socio-religious identity.<sup>7</sup> The IM inference of identity from Acts 15 distorts the uniquely historic storyline.

### b) Religion

Some proponents of IM suggest the text teaches that a change of religion is not necessary for salvation.<sup>8</sup> The parallel is easily made to the situation today: do not expect Muslims-following-Jesus-as-Muslims (my term) to take on the forms of Christianity.

Most critics of IM do not expect Muslims-following-Jesus-as-Muslims to resemble the Christians around them, but do advocate biblical discipleship and the necessary inclusion into local congregations where possible or at least Muslim convert congregations. The Body of Christ is essential to every believer. The person who is born again

immediately becomes part of the *ekkle-sia* (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:19–22; 4:4–6; 5:29–30).

Suggesting Acts 15 focuses on *not* changing one's religion misses the reality that Gentiles who followed Jesus by faith *did* give up their former religions—whatever idol-based or animistic religion that was. If there is a principle from Acts 15 for application to Muslims-who-follow-Jesus-as-Muslims, the principle is just that: trusting Jesus for forgiveness of sin entails turning from one's former religion, a religion that did not trust Jesus.

## II Harley Talman: Acts 15—an inside look

The Holy Spirit is doing the unexpected: multiplying disciples of Jesus within non-Christian religious traditions, in movements often designated 'insider movements' (IMs). Are there solid biblical and theological foundations that support IMs? Some who are critical or sceptical of IMs, deny that there is *any* scripture that can be cited to validate these movements. An upcoming book that I am co-editing provides significant scriptural perspectives and theological foundations on this question. However, I have been asked in this article to focus solely on the contribution of Acts chapter 15 to this issue.<sup>9</sup> I will argue that the author of Acts 15 provides God's people with a model of a theological process and principles that can guide us in addressing missiological controversies, such as IMs.

6 Hans M. Weestra, 'Mission to the Nations: a Biblical Word Study of Ethnos', *IJFM* 9 (3) (1992), 101.

7 Whether or not the term *Muslim* is primarily a socio-religious identity is not relevant here. Many proponents of IM believe that it is socio-religious, thus making the Acts 15 text a story that focuses on issues of identity. Cf. Rick Brown, 'Biblical Muslims', *IJFM* 24 (2) (2007), 65–74; Lewis, 'Insider Movements'; Kevin Higgins, 'Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective', *St Francis Magazine* 5 (4) (2009), 74–91.

8 Cf. John J. Travis, 'Jesus Saves, Religion Doesn't', *Christianity Today* (January/February 2013), 30; Lewis, 'Insider Movements', especially p. 18 in her discussion of Kingdom Circles.

9 Harley Talman and John Jay Travis are editing a textbook on insider movements, to be published by William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA, in late 2013.

## 1. Acts and Paradigms for Cultural Diversity

A highly-regarded study by NT scholar Dean Flemming maintains that Luke wrote Acts not just to promote mission to the Gentiles, but to provide paradigms for how Spirit-guided believers are to deal with cultural diversity: Palestinian Jews, Hellenist Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, and a eunuch. The crescendo builds through the book as God demolishes these sociological and religious barriers and climaxes in Acts 15. The rest of Acts fleshes out the implications of the Jerusalem Council's decision.<sup>10</sup>

Brian Rosner avers: 'The book of Acts without chapter 15 would be like a wedding ceremony without the crucial pronouncement.'<sup>11</sup> Flemming regards Acts 15 as 'a decisive moment in the encounter between faith in Christ and culture within the life of the early church, which helps to give the task of incarnating the gospel a historical and theological basis'. The crisis precipitating the Council concerned entrance requirements to the messianic community: Must Gentiles who believe in Jesus conform to the social identity and religious traditions of the Jewish believers, following the example of Jesus and his disciples?<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2005), 43.

<sup>11</sup> Brian Rosner, 'The Progress of the Word', in I. Howard Marshall and D. Peterson, *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 227. Cited by Flemming, *Contextualization*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 43-44. While he does not directly address insider movements, I find his study offers tacit support.

The Council's proceedings are relevant to IMs, because the key concerns in both are the same: Is justification solely through faith in Christ and purification by the Spirit, or is proselytism required? Can communities of believers multiply and grow to maturity as disciples of Christ Jesus within a Gentile (or Muslim) society, or do they need to abandon their native society to become proselytes in a traditionally Jewish (or Christian) church and subculture?

Jews recognized two types of proselytes: (1) 'proselytes of the gate' (*ger toshaw*) were resident aliens who followed some of the Jewish customs, but not circumcision and Torah observance; (2) 'proselytes of righteousness' (*ger tzedek*) were full-fledged Jews, who adhered to all Jewish doctrines and religious requirements, including circumcision and ritual immersion.<sup>13</sup> The latter was demanded by the Pharisee party.

The Pharisees based their theological position both on Scripture (e.g., Gen. 17:9-14) and on ancient tradition. For them, Flemming explains, 'circumcision was not simply an optional cultural form; it was a matter of religious life and death—the indispensable symbol of the covenant relationship. If Jewish...law observance and the Jewish way of life, were divinely sanctioned, how could they possibly be negotiable?'<sup>14</sup> Had they prevailed, the progress of mission to non-Jewish peo-

<sup>13</sup> Josephus describes the latter as one who adopts the Jewish customs, adheres to Jewish laws and ways of worship of God, i.e., one who has become a Jew. See Wikipedia 'Proselyte' <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proselyte>>, cited 1 June 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 45.

ples would have been greatly hindered. 'Theologically it would declare that God's grace and the gift of the Spirit were not fully sufficient for salvation.'<sup>15</sup>

In Acts 15:17 James cites Amos 9:12 because it validates Peter's witness to God's activity of including Gentiles in his messianic Kingdom, not as proselytes, but as 'Gentiles who are called by my name' (Acts 15:17 ESV). 'Sharply put', says Flemming, 'God's present activity among the Gentiles becomes the hermeneutical key for understanding the biblical text.... Amos, rightly interpreted, gives Scripture's grounding for the theological principle of salvation for the Gentiles by faith apart from circumcision' and adherence to the Mosaic Law.<sup>16</sup> The gospel renders proselyte conversion unnecessary because it gives all peoples and cultures equal standing before God.<sup>17</sup> Kevin Higgins observes:

While the Pharisee believers have already argued their case from the Torah, James, in effect, is looking at the whole canon ... the inclusion of the Gentiles was akin to the Holy Spirit's action in forming Israel itself.... 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.<sup>18</sup>

David Peterson concurs. 'They constitute a new people of God and not

simply a large addition to the existing people known as Israel. The critical question is therefore how these two peoples relate to each other'<sup>19</sup> in expressing their belonging to the one Body of Christ.

The Council's decree allowed Jews to fellowship with Gentile believers without incurring a perceived defilement that could hinder their outreach to fellow Jews who heard Moses read every Sabbath (Acts 15:21).<sup>20</sup> Although these prohibitions had scriptural precedent, they seem to have been a contextual compromise<sup>21</sup> to provide a *modus vivendi* for Gentile believers living among Jewish believers.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Acts 15 and the Intercultural Context

How is Acts 15 relevant to IMs? Flemming understands Luke as presenting a 'paradigmatic narrative' of 'God's people articulating their faith within an intercultural context, which carries implications for the church in any generation'. Luke's concern is not merely the Council's theological conclusions,

<sup>19</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 432.

<sup>20</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 47. See also Becky Lewis 'The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements', *IJFM* 27 (1) (Spring 2010), 44. Available online: <[http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/27\\_1\\_PDFs/27\\_1\\_Lewis.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/27_1_PDFs/27_1_Lewis.pdf)>.

<sup>21</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 50. With Gentiles living in pagan contexts, Paul permits believers to eat food offered to idols in certain situations (see 1 Cor. 8-10).

<sup>22</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 557.

<sup>15</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 45.

<sup>16</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 46.

<sup>17</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Higgins, 'Acts 15 and Insider Movements among Muslims: Questions, Process, and Conclusions', *IJFM* 24 (1) (Spring 2007): 29-40. Available on line <[http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/24\\_1\\_PDFs/Higgins.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/24_1_PDFs/Higgins.pdf)>.



but its theological process, which can guide us in addressing missiological questions that emerge when the gospel crosses cultural barriers. Two important criteria appear: (1) the testimony of field workers that Gentiles have received the Holy Spirit apart from circumcision (which seemed to conflict with the theological understanding of many Jewish believers); and (2) a fresh look at Scripture to see if the observed phenomenon harmonizes with it.<sup>23</sup>

Dudley Woodberry delineates seven criteria that were utilized to resolve the crisis that resulted from Gentiles coming to faith in Christ: how God is working, the call of God, reason, theology, scripture, the guidance of the Spirit, and essentials for fellowship.<sup>24</sup> If we apply these criteria to IMs, we get the following results:

- Case studies reveal astounding growth of movements of Muslims who believe fully in Christ Jesus while remaining inside their Muslim communities.
- As God called Peter to give the gospel to Gentiles (Cornelius' household), so many Muslim disciples feel led to remove historic barriers by incarnating the gospel within the Muslim community, and the Spirit

confirms this by their transformed lives.

- Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, not by proselyte conversion to a new religion. (Muslim disciples remain in their communities, but meet in homes for Bible study and worship).
- The inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God in a non-traditional way was in accord with Scripture (Acts 15:15–17)—so also with insider movements.
- Just as the work of the Spirit was evident among the Gentiles, so, too, Muslim insiders manifest spiritual fruit, wisdom, and devotion. Due to limited formal training options, they rely more heavily on the Holy Spirit to teach and guide.
- Peter thought it unreasonable to burden Gentile disciples with a yoke of Law (v.10). Similarly, adopting Christianity (as a culture, civilization and religion) puts an unnecessary burden of cultural baggage and misunderstanding upon Muslims, who can express their discipleship to Christ in different, but biblical, ways.
- The Council's addition of some 'essentials' (15:28-29) to facilitate fellowship and ethics.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, for Muslim believers 'there is freedom to observe the Law or not to do so, since salvation does not come through the Law. But because relationships and fellowship are so important, these disciples of Christ should not use their freedom in a way that might unnecessarily hinder their relationships with Mus-

<sup>23</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 48. He describes these two criteria as 'the appeal to the church's experience of God's activity' and 'the work of the Spirit in the community as the context for creative theologizing'.

<sup>24</sup> J. Dudley Woodberry, 'To the Muslim I Became a Muslim', in Gailyn Van Rhee (ed) *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, EMS Series (William Carey Library, 2006). Access a reprint in the *IJFM* 24 (1) (Winter 2007): 23-28. [http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs\\_IJFM/24\\_1\\_PDFs/Woodberry.pdf](http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/24_1_PDFs/Woodberry.pdf) Higgins, 'Acts 15', article builds upon Woodberry.

<sup>25</sup> Woodberry, 'To the Muslim', 27.



lims or traditional Christians.<sup>26</sup>

- The Gentiles, says David Peterson, 'constitute a new people of God and not simply a large addition to the existing people known as Israel. The critical question is therefore how these two peoples relate to each other.'<sup>27</sup> They retained their distinct identities, but adjustments were required to facilitate fellowship as a demonstration that Christ had demolished the barrier between Jew and Gentile (1 Cor. 12:12–27), as Woodberry affirms:

So with the insider movements, there is much freedom for them to retain their identity but over time some adjustments will need to be made for the sake of fellowship in the broader Church....In like manner traditional Christian and Muslim Christ-centered communities should have the same freedom to retain their own identity, but must express the unity of the Body of Christ by their love one for another.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, we see the relevance of the Jerusalem Council's deliberations and decision with regard to how we reflect on insider movements. The essence of its significance is expressed by Flemming:

Acts 15 describes a church on a journey to a deeper understanding of its identity as the one people of God comprised of two distinct cultural groups who believe in Jesus. Neither group must surrender its cultural identity, and Jews may continue to observe their ancestral traditions.... The resolution of the

Council allows for theological diversity regarding the way of life and approach to missionary outreach of the two cultural groups. By the same token, not even the original, divinely-sanctioned culture of God's elect nation has the right to universalize its particular expression [of faith in Christ].<sup>29</sup>

Because of Acts 15, Jewish Christ-followers accept western Christians whose manner of discipleship has departed from the divinely mandated practices of the OT (followed by Jesus and his disciples) so they could remain insiders to the western cultural tradition, in spite of its pagan roots.<sup>30</sup> Mark Kinzer has called for a bilateral ecclesiology between Jews and Gentiles in the one Body of Messiah.<sup>31</sup>

But this is still too limiting, because the Gentiles are nations. As Gavriel Gefen argues, 'There is no one monolithic Gentile ecclesia. As Jews, it is easy for us to see everyone else as lumped into the one category of Gentile...the one body we speak of is meant to consist of a multilateral ecclesia.'<sup>32</sup> He believes that it was largely Hellenized

<sup>29</sup> Flemming, *Contextualization*, 52. Bock concurs. 'As long as the gospel is not compromised, then diversity of expression can be tolerated.' In Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007, 508).

<sup>30</sup> See Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices* (Barna Books, 2008), 9-104.

<sup>31</sup> Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> Gavriel Gefen, personal correspondence, April 17, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Woodberry, 'To the Muslim', 25-27.

<sup>27</sup> Marshall and Peterson, *Witness*, 432.

<sup>28</sup> Woodberry, 'To the Muslim', 28.

Jews in Antioch who worked with Paul to develop the first 'Greco-Roman expression beyond Judaism', but rightly asserts that 'to consider their locally appropriate adaptations of following Jesus as being "the" expression of new covenant faith for every kind of Gentile, at all times and in all places, would serve to distort the Gospel for so many peoples'.<sup>33</sup>

Acts 15 required that Jewish believers recognize the freedom of Gentile believers 'to live a life that is determined by Christ and his Spirit'.<sup>34</sup> Christians must give that same liberty to believers from non-Christian religious traditions.

I pray that all followers of Christ will adopt this perspective—but if not, that they will agree to disagree amicably. As Woodberry observes, 'Acts 15 ends with Paul and Barnabas separating in their missionary work because they could not agree on whether to take John Mark (vss. 36–41). Here we see that when we cannot agree, we can nevertheless carry on God's work in separate spheres until we can reach agreement'.<sup>35</sup>

### III Jeff Morton—Response to 'Acts 15, an Inside Look'

Talman frequently cited from Flemming's *Contextualization in the New Testament*. It is true that one of Flemming's goals is 'to provide a stronger biblical foundation for the church's efforts to contextualize the gospel',<sup>36</sup> but

it is not the case that Flemming supports anything resembling the insider movements (IM). Most advocates of IM do not generally speak of IM in terms of contextualization—and Flemming does not even hint at IM—yet the essay leaves the reader with the impression that Flemming provides a foundation for IM.<sup>37</sup>

It seems to me that the principles of IM are assumed to be present in Acts 15. My first essay mentioned that IM advocates use an *a posteriori* approach to the Bible; Talman's essay illustrated this at several points.

*'The Council's proceedings are relevant to IMs, because the key concerns in both are the same: Is justification solely through faith in Christ or purification by the Spirit, or is proselytism required?'*

Acts 15 is a story focused on the theological question of what is necessary for salvation. Acts 15:1 and 5 reveal one flavour of Jewish-Christian understanding that salvation was Jesus plus circumcision. There is no mention in the story that the Jewish-Christians required Gentiles to become culturally Jewish—that converts should take on existing church culture—only that they should become religiously and ceremonially Jewish for the sake of salvation. The Judaizers did not insist the Gentiles move to Judea, speak Aramaic, change their Greek names to Aramaic names, or wear Jewish clothing. Talman's essay makes no differentiation between the religious requirement of Judaism and the cultural aspects of

33 Gefen, personal correspondence, April 18, 2013.

34 Marshall and Peterson, *Witness*, 433.

35 Woodberry, 'To the Muslims', 27.

36 Flemming, *Contextualization*, 16.

37 Flemming characterizes contextualization as 'the gospel's interaction with all kinds of contexts, including social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial settings', *Contextualization*, 18.

being a Jew. The Jewish-Christian complaint was not primarily cultural, but theological.

While Talman's essay makes an effort to parallel the Gentiles with Muslims, it neglects the contrast between them—a contrast that is fatal to his argument. *Muslim*, unlike its alleged counterpart, *Gentile*, is an identity derived predominantly from religious values and practices. Pakistan and Malaysia, while two very different societies, are both Islamic and can be said to have Islamic cultures. But they are Islamic cultures because of the religion of Islam, not because of the local, indigenous cultures. We hear many voices saying Islam is both religion and culture; Islam is a way of life.<sup>38</sup>

The Muslim way of life is influenced by the religious practices of Islam, but there is no such flavour to *Gentile*. *Gentile* is the Jewish name for the non-covenantal peoples. While Gentiles are identified by means of religion—that is, they are not of Judaism—Gentiles share no identifiably common trait known as *Gentilism* derived from their religious practices or worldviews. It is, therefore, inappropriate to substitute Gentiles with Muslims in Acts 15 as if they were equivalent terms.

Talman's next parallel between Acts 15 and IM is Flemming's criteria, 'the testimony of field workers' and 'a fresh

look at Scripture to see if the observed phenomenon harmonizes with it'. I understand the necessity of the reports from workers, but it is the second criterion that makes me nervous.

A fresh look at Scripture is a good thing, but not if it takes us away from the text itself. The story leading up to the Jerusalem council concerned the Gentiles repenting and entering the Kingdom of God as preached by Barnabas and Paul. Acts 14:15 has Paul pleading for the Lystrans 'to turn from vain things to the living God' (*apo toutôn tôn mataiôn epistrepsein epi theon zônta*). This 'turning to' was also a 'turning from'. What were the vain things from which the Gentiles should turn? These would necessarily include some cultural practices, values, and religious activities. Certainly Paul and Barnabas never encouraged Gentiles to turn from being Gentiles—'Your Greekness has got to stop!'—but the Gentiles did turn from their evil practices (see 1 Cor. 6:9–11 for a partial list of those practices). They turned to Jesus; they turned to the living God. It is not unbiblical to expect believers to turn to God while also turning from evil practices, including Islam, a religion that is the antithesis of biblical Christianity.

Neither of our two essays dealt with a definition of *Muslim* or *Islam*, but how one understands these terms is pivotal. Some advocates of IM speak of Christian converts from Islam as members of cultural Islam—neo-Islam?—yet these believers may still hold to some of the religious practices and values of theological Islam:

[S]ome Jesus-following Muslims ... continue to recite the confession: Muhammad called his people

38 Cf. Imad ad-Din Ahmad, 'Islamic Religion and American Culture', <<http://www.minaret.org/islamic%20religion%20and%20western%20culture.pdf>> (accessed April 21, 2013) in which he consistently speaks of Muslim culture. For a different perspective, see Michael Cooperson, 'Culture', in Jamal J. Elias (ed.) *Key Themes for the Study of Islam* (Oxford: One-world, 2010).

to turn from polytheism to the God of Abraham; he commended ... the Holy Books of the Jew and Christians, and he warned of an impending day of God's judgment ... For these reasons, he is honored... some Jesus-followers explained that they do not repeat the second part of the Islamic confession, choosing instead to substitute something that is both biblically and qur'anically correct such as 'Jesus is the Word of God'.<sup>39</sup>

Reciting the *shahada* is a not a cultural value, but a religious activity.

Despite this religious practice, according to Travis and Woodberry, a Muslim-following-Jesus-as-Muslim is a cultural Muslim, though he remains identified as a religious, albeit somewhat confused, Muslim. In other words, the authors describe Muslims who are following Jesus but remain essentially Muslim. Reciting the *shahada* is a not a cultural value, but a religious activity.

Talman's final parallel is to understand that 'Acts 15 required that Jewish believers recognize the freedom of Gentile believers "to live life that is determined by Christ and his Spirit"'.

I agree Gentiles must live their lives in the freedom Christ gives, but what neither Barnabas and Paul nor

the Jerusalem council proclaimed was that Gentiles ought to attend temple sacrifice, confess their submission to Diana, and remain Pagans-following-Jesus-as-Pagans. Had the missionaries preached such a message, this would have been equivalent to a first century insider movement; however, the text nowhere hints at such a message. It is the advocate of IM who brings such insider ideas to the text.

#### IV Harley Talman: An Inside View of the Issues

Jeff, I appreciate your summary of Acts 15. The clear statement of your concerns gives us opportunity to clear up major misconceptions. Your assertions (in italics) are followed by my response under four categories: church, scripture, identity and religion & discipleship.

##### 1 Church

*'Most proponents of IM believe a follower of Jesus may remain in his socio-cultural-religious context...with little to no connection with the church that is not of the believer's context.'*

Since we are talking about IMs as movements of the gospel inside social structures and networks, these believers' primary connection is naturally with other believers inside their own social network. However, your comment begs the question, 'How much contact does the average American evangelical church have with "the church that is not of its context"'? Do Baptist churches have close connections with Pentecostal churches in the same city?

Building of relationships with the broader body of Christ often occurs

<sup>39</sup> John J. Travis and Dudley Woodberry, 'When God's Kingdom Grows Like Yeast', *Mission Frontiers* (July-August 2010): 29. The characterization of Jesus as the 'Word of God' being qur'anically correct is misguided at best. Jesus as *kalimatullah* means that Jesus is a message from Allah. He is a word *from* Allah, not the word *of* Allah (cf. Qur'an 3:45). This is hardly the meaning of *logos* in the New Testament.

when a church engages in mission and is forced to think beyond its local context. One of the most encouraging aspects of the growing IM movements is the way that they move across ethnic and national boundaries into new contexts. Connections between believers from other cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious backgrounds more commonly occur at the leadership level. Leaders of these movements also interact with the western Christians and Christ-followers from other religious traditions. If they were not interacting in these ways, we would know very little about what is happening.

## 2 Scripture

My chief objection is your assertion that IM proponents impose preordained conclusions on Scripture. Unfortunately, your article seems to completely miss the way Acts 15 is used by most proponents of IMs. We maintain that Luke is concerned not just with the Council's theological conclusions, but its theological process, as I noted above, and that field reports are to be included in that process.

## 3 Identity

*'Acts 15 presents a theological question, not one about cultural identity.'*

Is the theological question, 'Is salvation available to both Jew and Gentile apart from circumcision?' If so, then the theological question is about identity, for cultural identity is a part of who a Gentile and a Jew were (circumcised = Jew; uncircumcised = Gentile). Bock and other scholars rec-

ognize this.<sup>40</sup> These two issues are inseparable. The story emphasizes that salvation is by faith in Jesus alone, and therefore it allows a Gentile to remain a Gentile who follows Jesus, without becoming a Jew marked by circumcision.

*'Gentile is an ethnic, linguistic identity whereas Muslim is socio-religious identity.'*

This distinction is unconvincing. Circumcision was a religious, social, ethnic marker. Therefore, it encompassed socio-religious identity. Circumcision of a Gentile would often cut off his social relationships, his religious relationships, and could even result in death. Consequently, circumcision was at the heart of each group's identity.

*'The text is silent on the matter of Gentiles/Muslims changing their identity.'*

This may not be explicit, but it was certainly involved in the decision not to make it difficult for the Gentiles who were turning to Jesus, and for the sake of unity asking them to do these minimum things that were deeply offensive to Jews. The text respects each group's identity, recognizes the differences, and seeks to promote their unity in Christ.

## 4 Religion and Discipleship

*Some proponents of IM suggest the text teaches that a change of religion is not necessary for salvation.*

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<sup>40</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 502 observes, 'Even a committed Jewish believer such as James can see and affirm that Gentiles can be included among believers directly without having to become Jews. This is an innovation of the new era that Jesus and the distribution of the Spirit on Gentiles have brought.'

Is changing religion necessary for salvation? If we use an essentialist<sup>41</sup> definition, which assumes a single set of religious beliefs and practices, then a change of religion is needed. However, the essentialist concept of religions has been widely discredited by the academy—there is simply no monolithic set of beliefs and practices held by all who hold any ‘religious’ identity.<sup>42</sup>

If Islam is defined in a non-essentialist manner, where it is seen primarily as a cultural or sociological phenomenon, then there is no need for a ‘change of religion’ because what we are talking about is *not a religion, but a socio-religious community*.

*Most critics of IM...advocate biblical discipleship and the necessary inclusion into local congregations where possible or at least Muslim convert congregations. The Body of Christ is essential to every believer.*

Absolutely! Every IM proponent that I know of believes in the importance of every believer being part of a congregation of Spirit-led, Bible-obeying, Christ-followers. If however, you mean that Muslims must reject their community and become proselytes of a

religion called ‘Christianity’ or change their legal, political or socio-religious status to become like those who are born into a socio-religious community of ‘Christians’, then we disagree.

*Gentiles who followed Jesus by faith did give up their former religions—whatever idol-based or animistic religion that was.*

We agree. New Muslim Christ-followers do turn away from folk Islamic, idol-based and animistic practices in order to serve the one true God. They trust Christ for forgiveness of sins and are delivered from their fears and bondage to fortune tellers, shamans, and healers. Gentiles were expected to turn from idolatry and from idolatrous practices, but they were not expected to turn from being Gentiles to Judaism.

Believers of all cultures are free to retain any and all elements, values, beliefs and practices of their culture (which includes their religious culture and traditions) that are compatible with the Bible. Those which are not must either be rejected or else reinterpreted (just as we have done with Christmas trees and Easter eggs).

*‘Trusting Jesus for forgiveness of sin entails turning from one’s former religion, a religion that did not trust Jesus’.*

It is ironic that you accuse IM proponents of eisegesis and yet anachronistically impose your concept of ‘religion’ onto this passage. Where in the text of Acts 15 is this statement made or even inferred? The New Testament speaks loudly concerning turning from idolatry and shifting one’s total allegiance to Jesus, etc. But religion as a conceptual category is not in view in the text.

<sup>41</sup> See the section of ‘The essentialist view and the cultural view of world religions’ in the article in Wikipedia, ‘Insider Movements’ <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insider\\_movements](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insider_movements)> (cited 1 June 2013).

<sup>42</sup> See Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2011). Ronald Lukens-Bull, ‘Between Text and Practice: Considerations in the Anthropological Study of Islam’, *Marburg Journal of Religion* 4 (2) (December 1999), 1-10.