

Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa

A Closer Look at C5 Believers and Congregations

Our team has prayed for and patiently shared with many Muslim friends about Isa al-Masih (Jesus the Messiah). Some have become Messianic Muslims who reject or modify unbiblical Islamic teachings, yet they still see their lives woven together by the social fabric of Islam. They strive to form groups with other like-minded Muslim followers of Jesus to study the Bible, pray for each other, and fellowship in Christ. Yet they do not view or call themselves “Christians.”

by John Travis

For the majority of the world’s one billion Muslims, “changing religions” is never seriously contemplated. Even nominal Muslims tend to see Islam as a single fabric weaving together tradition, culture, and customs related to dress, diet, family life, morality, worship, and in some contexts, even economics and politics. Having lived in the heart of a Muslim community for the past thirteen years, my family and I have had the privilege of praying for and patiently sharing with many Muslim friends about *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). I am convinced that many Muslims are drawn to the person of Jesus, and some long to accept him as Savior, though “changing religions” is for them unthinkable.

I personally know many Muslims who have put their faith in Jesus. Some have formally converted to Christianity and worship at local (often Westernized) denominational churches, or in small home fellowships with other Muslim background believers (MBBs). Fearing persecution, others worship underground. Still others, often called “Messianic Muslims,” follow Christ but remain within the Muslim community. These Messianic Muslims reject or modify unbiblical Islamic teachings (e.g., they insist Jesus did die on the cross), yet still see most aspects of their lives woven together by the social fabric of Islam. They are not silent about their faith in Jesus, though they are discerning about when and where to share. They strive to form groups with other like-minded Muslim followers of Jesus to study the Bible, pray for each other, and fellowship in Christ. Yet they do not view or call themselves “Christians.”

I designed a simple chart called The C1-C6 Spectrum to graphically portray these different expressions of faith by MBBs (Travis 1998; see chart on page 5 in this edition). It must be noted that each “C” on the spectrum represents a particular type of “Christ-centered community” or follower of Christ, differentiated by language, culture and religious identity. While this spectrum helps us distinguish several different kinds of MBBs, it also raises many questions, particularly about the C5 “Messianic Muslim” expression of faith. The purpose of this article is to take a closer look at C5 by examining its background and several present-day case studies. However, three points must be emphasized at the onset.

First, most of these case studies chronicle the very first penetrations for the Kingdom of God among a particular Muslim people group. Consequently, these newly emerging bodies are very much in process (see Gilliland 1990 concerning “process”). Hiebert (1994), in his theory of “bounded and centered sets,” also reminds us that the *direction* in which a believer or group of believers is headed is extremely crucial. For any group of Christ-followers, it needs to be asked whether or not they are becoming more or less Christ-like and Biblical over time.

Second, there are inherent limitations in how much non-Muslim outsiders like ourselves can dictate what happens in C5 fellowships. We proclaim the Gospel, lead Muslims into relationship with Jesus, and invite them to immerse themselves into the Word of God with us. How they view Islam is not prescribed by us, but left to them as they are guided by the Word and the indwelling Spirit.

Finally, Muslims are coming to faith in many different contexts worldwide all along the C1-C6 spectrum. C5 is neither the greatest nor the only thing

God is doing in the Muslim world, but it is something about which we must know, rejoice and pray.

What is Meant by the Word “Christian”?

The term “Christian,” when coined two thousand years ago in Antioch, originally meant “those belonging to Christ” (Barker 1995). Today however, the word means different things to different groups. To American evangelicals, “Christian” is a positive word meaning one who knows or is committed to Christ. More than mere religious affiliation, this term describes one’s heart-faith and relationship with God. Therefore, it is not uncommon for evangelicals to say, “I went to church regularly as a child, but became a Christian in high school.” Here “becoming Christian” refers to the time he experienced salvation and life-changing faith in Christ. Using this understanding of the word “Christian,” some evangelicals might say the United States is not a Christian country, since the majority of the population has not experienced this life-changing faith in Christ.

Nevertheless, Johnstone indicates that over 86% of those residing in the

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United States consider themselves “Christian” (1993:563). In contrast to evangelical use of the term, many within this 86% define “Christian” in terms of tradition, nominal religious affiliation, ethnic heritage, or, most of all, by not belonging to another religion (e.g., Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism). To those holding this definition, it sounds peculiar for one raised in the church to proclaim later in life, “I have become a Christian.”

In the Muslim context, the word “Christian” is now largely devoid of its original spiritual meaning in Acts. It now connotes Western culture, war (the Crusades), colonialism and imperialism. While some Muslims may associate Christianity with the love and selfless living of Mother Teresa and relief organizations, most tend to focus on negative aspects of present day Western culture like immodest dress, sexual promiscuity, disrespect of elders, indulgence in alcohol, Hollywood violence, narcotics and pornography. With such negative perceptions of the Church rooted in negative stereotypes of the West, it is little wonder that “joining Christianity” is often seen by Muslims as betraying one’s family and community to join the heretical camp of their enemies.

Consider, therefore, how different listeners will perceive the news, “Achmad (a Muslim) became a Christian.” Evangelicals hear a spiritual message of supernatural encounter with the living God: “Achmad is now a born-again follower of Christ!” Nominal church members hear a religious or administrative message: “Achmad has become a member of a church.” Muslims, however, hear a message of betrayal and apostasy: “Achmad has forsaken the faith of his forefathers and joined with immoral infidels.”

Because of the above semantic misunderstandings, we never speak of Muslims “becoming Christians” in our ministry. Instead, we speak of those who have “experienced life-changing faith as followers of Isa.” Still, is the problem only one of semantics, easily corrected with a change of terminology? Could the problem of old and new religious community run much deeper? In these days, for the sake of the lost, might the Holy Spirit be moving the hearts of some Muslim background believers to live out their new faith in Christ while remaining in the Muslim community?

C5 Believers and Congregations

C5 believers are Muslims who have been drawn to faith in Christ by the Spirit of God, often through reading the Bible on their own, hearing a radio broadcast, receiving a dream or vision, experiencing a miraculous healing in the name of *Isa*, or seeing the loving, patient, incarnational witness of a believing friend. C5 believers understand that good works and religious observance cannot remove sin; that the sacrifice of the Word made flesh, the Messiah, is God’s only provision for salvation; that the *Torah*, *Zabur* and *Injil* (the Old Testament, Psalms and New Testament) are the Word of God; and that obedience to Christ was God’s original plan for true “Islam” (Arabic for “submission to God”). Heart attitudes, family relationships and communication with God change radically, as the indwelling Holy Spirit produces his fruit in their lives. Just as early Jewish followers of the Way enjoyed fellowship in homes and in the temple with the larger Jewish community, so many C5 believers gather in small home fellowships and in the mosque with the larger Islamic community. Just as early Jewish followers of Jesus changed few of their outward Jewish religious

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forms, so too C5 believers change little in their outward Muslim religious forms—most of which, incidentally, are derived from ancient Jewish and Christian traditions (Woodberry 1989 and 1996).

Objections and Responses

Phil Parshall, respected missiologist and pioneer in contextualization, expressed objections related to C5 (1998). Massey (1999), Gilliland (1998), Travis (1998) and Winter (1999) responded briefly to some of Dr. Parshall's concerns, three of which are as follows:

1) Deception in Christians posing as Muslims to reach Muslims (i.e., "C5 missionaries").

2) Danger in ongoing mosque attendance past a transitional period for new believers since "the mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology" (Parshall 1998:400) and exalts Muhammad as a prophet.

3) Affirming the prophethood of Muhammad by recitation of the Muslim creed (shahada): "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet."

On Parshall's first concern, I agree. C5 was never intended to be a "missionary approach," but rather to describe how some MBBs live out their faith in Christ. I personally cannot endorse Christians claiming to be Muslims for outreach. However, I want to add a word of caution. Missionaries to Muslims are also "in process." Although there have been some very noble and fruitful attempts at Muslim outreach in previous centuries, on the whole the Church worldwide has only recently begun a concerted effort to bring the light of the Gospel to the Muslim world. With so few Muslims responding to the Gospel, it is premature for anyone to conclude that they have arrived at the correct way to reach the Muslim world. If a believer truly feels called of God to somehow enter a certain sect or local expression of Islam, and if he can with integrity share the identity of those Muslims and maintain his witness for Christ, then I will not condemn him. Theoretically, I suppose it is possible that some types of folk or Sufi Muslim groups, or other localized forms of Islam, may be conducive to such an approach, but officially converting from Christianity to any variety of orthodox Islam involves so many complex theological and cultural hur-

dles that it is most unwise for the typical young, aspiring missionary who is eager to contextualize.

On point two concerning mosque attendance, I have known some C5 believers who attend prayers in the mosque, some who only attend occasionally and some who never go at all. In much of the Muslim world, there are many nominal Muslims who seldom attend the mosque anyway. Returning again to Gilliland and Hiebert's emphasis on process and direction, mosque attendance may only be a transitional part of some C5 believers' spiritual journey. For others, they may attend with the mindset of Naaman in 2 Ki. 5:18, where he asked Elijah's permission to still enter the temple of Rimmon in his home country. Still other C5 believers may attend the mosque like evangelical Catholics who attend mass but no longer pray to saints or exalt Mary. On the other hand, it is not unusual for some C5 believers to avoid mosque attendance all together, especially if they did not attend prior to following Christ.

As followers of Jesus, C5 believers understand that they must never disown or deny Christ as Lord, no matter the circumstance (Mt. 10:32-33). They must also never stray from the core components of the Gospel (e.g., the atoning death of Christ, his resurrection, salvation through Jesus only, his divinity,

and the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God). How much of orthodox Islam they can affirm is determined as they study the Word of God together and are guided by the Holy Spirit. What various C5 communities affirm in Islam will vary in different contexts. Irrespective of mosque attendance, however, most C5 believers remain acceptable members of the Muslim community by continuing to give alms, keep the fast, pray daily, wear local dress, and use their customary religious vocabulary and worship style. Affirmation of these acceptable Islamic forms not only allow MBBs to keep their place in the Muslim community, but they also build bridges for effective witness to their family and community.

Regarding Parshall's third concern, being C5 does not insinuate that the creed (*shahada*) is recited. Some C5 believers I know change the creed when performing their prayers to exalt *Isa* rather than Muhammad, proclaiming "there is no god but God, and *Isa* is the Straight Path" (see case studies below). Others whisper prayers in the name of Jesus or remain silent when the *shahada* is recited in public worship. I have heard of some C5 MBBs

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who say the creed because they feel it is an important sign of solidarity with their community, and they consider Muhammad to be a sort of "prophet" or religious leader, at least inasmuch as it was his words about Jesus in the Qur'an that first stimulated them to find a Bible to learn more about Christ in the Gospels.

Some C5 believers adopt Samuel Zwemer's approach toward Muhammad by affirming all the truth Muhammad brought and never speaking disrespectfully of him. They emphasize that Muhammad was a great statesman and religious reformer, bringing Arabs from pagan polytheism to Abrahamic monotheism. They are quick to add that Muhammad spoke of *Isa* the Messiah (his virgin birth, miracles and sinlessness) and acknowledged that the *Torah*, *Zabur* and *Injil* are God's Word and must be obeyed. When it becomes clear that the Muslim listener is ready for more, they, like Zwemer, share Jesus as Lord and Savior. My observation is that over time, without dictating how new MBBs should view Muhammad, he becomes less and less important to them as they grow in their love and obedience to Jesus. The interaction of C5 believers with outside Christians and theologians is very limited. They rely heavily on the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. We must pray for these groups and trust the Holy Spirit will give them supernatural wisdom to respond to the inherent religious and social tensions which arise in their families and communities.

The following four case studies will attempt to illustrate the principles discussed above. I have been personally involved in the first three case studies, while the final one comes from my colleague, Andrew Workman.

Case Study 1: Taufik

Taufik comes from one of the most fanatic Muslim areas of the country. Now in his early 50s, Taufik was led to Christ over ten years ago by a foreign Christian coworker. We first met soon after his profession of faith and have fellowshiped together many times since. His family, most of whom don't yet believe, have stayed in my home. To my knowledge, he has only attended one church service, and that was while he worked abroad. He faithfully keeps the fast of *Ramadan*, and in his clothing, diet, and vocabulary seems outwardly like any other Muslim in the community. However, he reads God's Word daily, especially the *Zabur* (Psalms) and the *Injil* (New Testament). For several years the desire to succeed financially—not Islam—drew him away from his walk with Christ. But in recent months he has been faithfully meeting weekly for Bible study with a foreign believer, our coworker.

Taufik enfolded another Muslim man into this small Bible study group, who in turn occasionally brings his adult son. The verses Taufik shares from the *Zabur* and *Injil* with Muslims in his community are well received as a blessing from a fellow Muslim. Taufik faithfully carries out his daily prayers, experiencing the presence of the Lord as he uses a small booklet with verses from the *Torah*, *Zabur* and *Injil* to accompany the motions of his Muslim prayer ritual. To date neither his wife nor his two teenage children have come to faith in Christ, but Taufik continues to share his faith with them regularly. He never thinks of himself as being a "Christian," but reads many Christian devotional books. He sees himself as being a good Muslim, called to share salvation in the Messiah with fellow Muslims.

Case Study 2: Achmad

Achmad lives several miles from my home. Unlike Taufik, who is an upper-middle class university graduate, Achmad is poor and the father of eight children. He came to Christ in 1996 through several dreams and the witness of another foreign coworker. He is now being disciplined by a national MBB on our team. Achmad and most of his family were baptized with several other MBBs in 1997. Before coming to the Lord he made a living as an Islamic shaman. His economic situation has worsened since coming to faith, having left his practice of sorcery and divination. He faithfully attends a weekly C4/C5 MBB fellowship and may soon be appointed one of its first elders. Achmad frequently brings Muslim friends and relatives to the fellowship. He perceives himself as a Muslim who knows *Isa*, and faithfully shares Christ with fellow Muslims. Before coming to faith he rarely attended the mosque, and has not changed this pattern since his decision to follow the Messiah.

Case Study 3: Abdul

On a recent taxi ride through town, my colleague and I enjoyed a brief conversation with the driver, Abdul. Having mentioned early on that he was a Muslim, Abdul astonished us both when he asked, "Did you know that *Isa* can forgive sin? Look at the hair on my arms," he said, "every time I say the name of *Isa*, the hairs stand up! Jesus is the King of kings!" We asked how he knew so much about Jesus, then Abdul described his search for freedom from his sins. After someone gave him a New Testament years ago, he began reading it frequently.

He now regularly shares what he reads with fellow Muslim taxi drivers, and plans to become a Christian, along with his two daughters, in five years' time. Abdul wondered out loud, "What if I die in my sins before I become a Christian?" We asked why he wanted to wait. He explained that his two daughters, when older, could stand up against the persecution they may receive from their mother and other relatives. I responded, "Abdul, if you really believe the *Injil* (Gospel), and the promises of God for salvation in Christ, then you can be saved this very day." He started weeping—while we were driving! As we neared our destination, we pulled over, stopped the car, and prayed together in the taxi. He confessed his sins and received Christ.

An MBB coworker and I visited Abdul several times since then. God is using Abdul to draw a whole group of fellow taxi drivers to Christ. One of these, a *haji* (a respected Muslim who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca), was moved to tears when he read portions of the *Torah*, *Zabur* and *Injil* (the Bible).

Abdul's wife recently heard from an acquaintance that Abdul must be thinking about changing religions. She suddenly began opposing Abdul's faith with great vehemence. At this time, she does not seem open to the Gospel at all. What kind of fellowship would be best for Abdul? A congregation of C5 drivers?

Case Study 4: Soleh, (by Andrew Workman)

Soleh is a respected member of a remote village community. In order to provide income and employment for his extended family, he works as the foreman of a construction crew from his village, buys goods from local farmers to resell in the city, and raises

chickens. Soleh also teaches religion at the local mosque, mostly by helping children learn the Arabic alphabet so they can eventually recite the Qur'an.

Soleh received an opportunity to construct a dormitory at a small Christian boarding school in the city. He had worked for this school before and was confident they would be good employers. So he took the contract, gathered his crew, and left the village for a few months to do this work.

During construction, Soleh and his crew interacted with the school's students and staff. The students, mostly from poor villages, spent break times with Soleh and his crew, trading stories about village life. They brought tea to the crew, shared what little food they had, and even spent personal money to buy them cigarettes. The students also shared their testimonies, especially about answered prayer. On several occasions the students prayed in front of the crew for their families and situations. The crew felt cared for and began to bond relationally to the students. Soleh once saw how the students prayed for God to supply their need when they had no food. Miraculously, food was donated to the school. Soleh had neither experienced such faith, nor ever seen God answer prayer so dramatically. He was deeply moved. Soleh also wanted this sort of relationship with God, but kept quiet.

One day Ali, a student, sat down to talk with Soleh, unaware Soleh had been desiring such a relationship with God. Having recently studied contextualized ways to share his testimony with Muslims, Ali began asking questions and listening. Soon Soleh opened his heart and asked how he could join the students, learning to pray in faith like them. Soleh was ready to become a traditional Christian (C1). This would have almost certainly resulted in social ostracism from his village and great difficulties with his family. Soleh was willing to undergo these trials to obtain the kind of relationship with God he saw these students had. Ali explained that Soleh could have this same relationship with God by praying for forgiveness through *Isa al-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah). Soleh accepted this invitation and prayed with Ali.

Ali then explained that if Soleh wished to reach his family and crew for Christ, he might consider becoming a “follower of *Isa*” (C5) instead of a “traditional Christian” (C1), because staying in his community as a Messianic Muslim would likely increase his ability to share his faith with them. Soleh agreed. He would remain in his Muslim community, instead of joining the C1 Christian community. The two agreed to keep this matter private until Soleh could study more about following *Isa*. This all took place in December, 1996.

Within a few weeks Soleh shared his new faith with his son, who worked in the same city. His son wanted to read the Gospel but was too afraid to enter the Christian bookstore to buy a Bible, since a Muslim acquaintance might see him and cause trouble. Ali arranged to get him a Bible, and now he is reading it.

Since Soleh became a follower of Jesus, he has read the Bible, met with Ali for prayer and study, and witnessed to many coworkers on his crew. In fact, many crew members and heads of households in his village have also prayed for salvation through *Isa al-Masih*! Of those who attend prayers at the mosque, many have changed their creed. They now proclaim, “God is great. God is great. There is no god but God and *Isa* is the Straight Path.” No one suggested that Soleh change the creed; he did so on his own and tells his friends. He is convinced that true prayer is only through *Isa*, and that before putting his faith in Christ, he had no connection to God.

Soleh and his wife recently had a baby boy, whom they named after *Isa*. His in-laws asked if this meant Soleh was a Christian. He denied it, but later felt uncomfortable that he had not explained things more fully. Soleh therefore invited all heads of households in his village, including elected community and religious leaders, to attend the customary ceremony for his infant son. This ceremony of thanksgiving and prayer for God’s protection on the newborn is usually officiated by the head of the mosque or a Muslim shaman. However, on this day Soleh officiated himself. And in the presence of all the leaders, Soleh announced that he was a Muslim who now followed *Isa*. Not only did nobody seem upset, but many people were very interested, including the village chief who also became a follower of *Isa* soon thereafter!

As of June 1999, twenty male heads of households have become followers of *Isa*. It is unknown how many women and children also believe. Recently they asked for advice regarding a village tradition of visiting ancestral graves. Their conscience was bothering them not only about ancestor worship, but also about certain animistic aspects of marriage and burial ceremonies. Like many Muslims around the world, their folk Islam condoned the continuance of many ancient rites to appease the spirit world. Now, however, many have turned to *Isa* to protect them from the spirit world. Furthermore, the village heads have asked the Christian students to come and pray against the plague of rats that has destroyed their crops for many years. A team gifted with faith and experience in this kind of ministry went to the village to pray. While we wait on God’s answer to these prayers, the village is growing in faith as they pray in the name of *Isa al-Masih*.

Concluding Observations

Some Muslims who receive Christ as Savior deliberately choose a C5 expression of faith, not for their own sake (e.g., Soleh was prepared to join a church), but for the

Let us pray for these infant, emerging C5 congregations and believers. In particular, please join us in praying for Taufik, Achmad, Abdul, Soleh and the thousands of other Messianic followers of Isa. Pray for all those whom their witness touches.

sake of the lost who would be far less likely to receive truth from outsiders (i.e., “Christians”). Others, like Taufik and Achmad, love Jesus, but simply see staying in the Muslim community as something natural.

There are surely points at which C5 believers must reject the theology of non-Messianic Muslims. Clearly, one can’t affirm two completely opposite statements as true (e.g., “Jesus died on a cross,” and “Jesus didn’t die on a cross”). Therefore, C5 believers will be found to have “aberrant” beliefs. However, when confronted by family and friends with their deviance from Islamic orthodoxy, we have seen the Holy Spirit empower C5 believers to reply with amazing answers (Col. 4:6; Mt. 10:19,20). They often present reinterpretations of particular Qur’anic verses, bringing much glory to Jesus.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the “aberrance” of C5 Messianic theology almost pales in comparison to the “aberrance” of numerous folk beliefs and shamanistic Muslim practices that saturate popular Islam in our context. Therefore, the way in which C5 believers are received by the larger Muslim community will depend on a variety of factors such as tolerated Islamic heterodoxy, country, ethnicity, local politics, size of the local mosque, and so on. C5 may be appropriate in certain milieus, but not in others. Again, we need to affirm the diversity found throughout the C1-C6 spectrum.

It is possible that C5 may only be a temporary option. Few case C5 studies have been documented, and none go back far enough to watch C5 dynamics across several generations of time. C5 may prove to only be a transitional stage, ending when believers choose, or are forced by the Muslim community, to leave Islam, thereby moving to another point on the C1-C6 spectrum. The first century Jews gathered regularly in the temple with non-Messianic Jews, and in homes with fellow Messianic Jews (Acts 2:46-47). However, in time Jewish authorities began expelling any Jew who believed Jesus was the Messiah. It is noteworthy that this separation of the two communities was not initiated by Jewish believers. Still, many Jews and Jewish leaders came to faith in the intermittent years. The same sequence of events could eventually happen to today’s Messianic Muslims. Meanwhile, MBBs like Soleh who stay in their community may be used of God to usher millions of Muslims into His Kingdom.

While we must be careful to guard against syncretism, we must also be mindful that ascent to perfect theological propositions is not the apex of the coming Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. All our work must be judged according to Scripture. So let us pray for these infant, emerging C5 congregations. In particular, please join us in praying for Taufik, Achmad, Abdul, Soleh and all the people whom their witness touches.

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Followers of Isa, like the one interviewed on page 22, note that the word Muslim simply means "one who submits" to God, and that Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of such submission. Ongoing Debate. Insider movements raise important questions about the nature of faith in Christ. Can a Hindu or a Muslim accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior but not join some expression of the visible local church, yet still be a "true" Christian? C-5 refers to "Christ-centered communities of 'Messianic Muslims' who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior." These followers of Isa remain legally and socially within Islam. The Muslim community views them as Muslims. They reject or, if possible, reinterpret features of Islamic theology that are clearly incompatible with biblical faith. This is a list of notable people who have been said to be a messiah, either by themselves or by their followers. The list is divided into categories, which are sorted according to date of birth (where known). In Judaism, "messiah" originally meant a divinely appointed king, such as David, Cyrus the Great or Alexander the Great. Later, especially after the failure of the Hasmonean Kingdom (37 BC) and the Jewish-Roman wars (AD 66-135), the figure of the Jewish messiah was one who would deliver the Jews