

Dear Nurture Program Member,

Bethlehem Baptist Church has a long history with the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* course. Many of our pastors are certified instructors for *Perspectives* and we have hosted the course on a number of different occasions (most recently in the Spring of 2013). We love the vision that *Perspectives* gives for unreached people groups and the *Perspectives* Reader is filled with numerous helpful articles that will benefit missionaries in the theology and practice of missions.

Over the last few years, however, we have grown concerned with some different elements in *Perspectives*. Part of why *Perspectives* is so beneficial is because it gives different *perspectives* on missiology—the study of missions. This allows for members of the Nurture Program to be exposed to differing views that they will likely encounter as they work with different teams and agencies. We have felt, though, that there are some positions that *Perspectives* takes that do not accurately reflect Bethlehem's positions. Two of these positions are *the centrality of the local church in the task of missions* and *appropriate boundaries for biblical contextualization*.

At Bethlehem, we believe that the Great Commission was given not just to Christians in general but to the church in particular. Therefore, we believe that the local church is central in the task of missions. This conviction is a key reason why we have a Nurture Program to help us prepare and evaluate prospective global partners. This is not to the exclusion of working with agencies, but we recognize that the local church bears the primary responsibility of discipling and caring for missionaries. Agencies provide strategic, logistical, and pastoral assistance, but the church has the primary authority to prepare, send, and support global partners. While the modality/sodality paradigm proposed by Ralph Winter is helpful, we do not feel that it reflects Bethlehem's conviction that agencies, though helpful, are not essential to missions. Rather, the *local church* is essential. Thus, we have included an article by Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, "The Church and Mission," to supplement *Perspectives* on this point.

We also appreciate *Perspective's* emphasis on the need for contextualization. Speaking and acting in such a way that the gospel—with both its beauty and its offense—is put on full display are essential elements of any Christian ministry. *Perspectives* offers many different views on contextualization; however, we are uncomfortable with the way that it discusses the model of contextualization known as the Insider Movement. We feel that this model goes too far by making compromises that blur the line between Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, we find the claim that a person does not need to change his or her religion in order to follow Jesus—a claim that appears in a number of articles on contextualization—to be both problematic and unbiblical. Therefore, we have included an article by David B. Garner, "High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel," that critiques the hermeneutic (or interpretation) that underscores the Insider Movement. We have also included the "Boundaries for Gospel Contextualization in Muslim Contexts" document that the elders at Bethlehem approved on April 15, 2014.

None of this is to say that *Perspectives* does not have any value. Far from it! This is merely our attempt to supplement the *Perspectives* course and to share convictions that Bethlehem holds in regards to these two areas. We ask that those who either have taken or are planning to take *Perspectives* read thoughtfully and prayerfully through these articles. We pray that they will be a blessing.

Together with you in the greatest cause,



Todd Rasmuson
Pastor for Global Outreach



Luke Humphrey
Ministry Assistant for Global Outreach

Bibliography

Ott, Craig and Stephen J. Strauss. "The Church & Mission" in *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010, 192–215.

Garner, David B. "High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel." *Themelios* 37/2 (2012), 249–274.

Boundaries for Gospel Contextualization in Muslim Contexts For Use by Bethlehem Baptist Church (April 15, 2014).



A. Scott Moreau, *series editor*

Also in the series:

Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey

A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee

The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends

Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell

Encountering Missionary Life and Work: Preparing for Intercultural Ministry

Tom Steffen and Lois McKinney Douglas

Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-first Century

Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney

ENCOUNTERING THEOLOGY OF MISSION

*Biblical Foundations,
Historical Developments, and
Contemporary Issues*

CRAIG OTT
STEPHEN J. STRAUSS
WITH TIMOTHY C. TENNENT


BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2010 by Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ott, Craig, 1952–

Encountering theology of mission : biblical foundations, historical developments, and contemporary issues / Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, with Timothy C. Tennent.

p. cm. — (Encountering mission)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8010-2662-1 (pbk.)

1. Missions—Theory. I. Strauss, Stephen J., 1955– II. Tennent, Timothy C. III. Title.
BV2063.O88 2010

266.001—dc22

2009052484

Unless otherwise indicated, scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations labeled NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Preface	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction	xi

Part 1 Biblical Foundations of Mission

1 God and the Nations in the Old Testament	3
2 God and the Nations in the New Testament	25
3 The Justification of Mission: <i>Missio Dei</i>	55
4 The Purpose and Nature of Mission	79
5 The Task of Missions: Convictions and Controversy	106
6 The Task of Missions: Convergence and Conclusions	137

Part 2 Motives and Means for Mission

7 The Motivation for Missions	165
8 The Church and Mission	192
9 The Missionary Vocation	217
10 Spiritual Dynamics and Mission	238

Part 3 Mission in Local and Global Context

11 Contextualization and Mission	265
12 Christian Encounter with Other Religions: Toward an Evangelical Theology of Religions	292
13 The Necessity of Mission: Three Uncomfortable Questions	317

References	339
Scripture Index	361
Subject Index	371

8

The Church and Mission

God has chosen to realize his purposes in history—his mission—primarily through a people. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, this people is in our day the church. In this chapter we shall examine the relationship of the church and mission with regard to (1) the missionary nature of the church, (2) the missional church conversation, and (3) the sending structures of mission.

THE MISSIONARY NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The question might fairly be asked, does the church have a mission, or does God's mission have a church? To claim that the church has a mission is to posit that the church has an existence apart from its mission, or at least that the church somehow stands above its mission or decides over its mission. In an institutional sense this is of course true. Institutions exist that are called churches, and these institutions must determine what their mission is. But because the church has been called into existence by God and derives its purpose from him, our understanding must go beyond mere institutional conceptions.

Mission and the Identity of the Church

God has called the church into existence for the very purpose of serving his mission. Jesus himself is the builder of the church, which is *his* church (Matt.

16:18). Jesus sends his disciples on a continuation of his mission, to be sent into the world as he was sent (John 20:21). Nothing could be clearer from the book of Acts than this: the church in the power of the Spirit becomes God's instrument to bear witness to the redemptive work of Christ and the coming kingdom. Robert Plummer's careful study of the Pauline epistles concludes that "Paul considered the general apostolic missionary obligation to devolve upon each local congregation. That is, each church, as a whole (not simply individuals within it), inherited the apostles' obligation of making known the gospel" (2006, 48).

"The Church on earth is by her nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, she has as her origin the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (AG 2). In this sense the mission of the Triune God must have primacy in our understanding of the church, and the church's very existence and legitimacy are linked to its mission in the world.

Thus church and mission are intimately intertwined. We cannot biblically speak of mission apart from speaking of the church, and we cannot speak of the church apart from speaking also of mission. A missionless church and a churchless mission are theological oxymorons (see sidebar 8.1). As Lesslie Newbigin claimed, "A Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church. . . . An unchurchly mission is as much of a monstrosity as an unmissionary Church. . . . No recovery of the true wholeness of the Church's nature is possible without a recovery of its radically missionary character" (1954, 169).

Johannes Blauw was commissioned by the WCC to produce a biblical theology of mission. The resulting work became a classic titled *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, in which he concluded, "Missionary work reflects in a unique way, particularly in its passing boundaries in space and spirit, the very essence of the Church as a Church. It returns (as it were) to its origin,

SIDEBAR 8.1

THE MISSIONARY CHURCH

"The Church is by nature missionary to the extent that, if it ceases to be missionary, it has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased to be the Church. Thus, the Church's self-understanding and sense of identity (its ecclesiology) is inherently bound up with its call to share and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and the end of time" (Kirk 2000, 31).

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree that a church without mission ceases to be the church? Explain your answer.
2. How would you describe the self-understanding of your church in relation to mission?
3. Why do you think that so few churches see mission as central to their identity?

and is confronted with its missionary calling. It is exactly by going outside itself that the Church *is* itself and comes to itself" (1962, 122).

The fact that many churches exist primarily to serve their own needs, relegating mission to a project or line item in the budget, is only testimony to their failure to understand the centrality of mission to their true identity and mission as the basis of their very existence.

Called out of the World, Placed in the World, Sent to the World

Blauw points out the linkage between ecclesiology and missiology when he argues, "A 'theology of mission' cannot be other than a 'theology of the church' as the people of God called *out* of the world, placed *in* the world, and sent *to* the world" (1962, 126). The idea of God calling persons, indeed a people, to himself to in turn be sent into the world is one that can be traced through salvation history.

- Abraham is called apart to be blessed, so that he might become a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:3).
- Israel, after its deliverance from Egypt, is reminded by the Lord "how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:4b–6a).
- Jesus appoints the twelve apostles "that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons" (Mark 3:14b–15).
- Peter echoes the language of Exodus 19 to describe the calling of the church as the new people of God: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." Peter then continues, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Pet. 2:9–10, 12).

God brings his people "to himself" so that as his possession they might be sent into the world. Only through relationship with him are his people empowered and made fit to be light. As they are taken up by his glory, they are able to live for his glory and draw others to glorify God. God's people can fulfill their priestly role among the nations only as they are consecrated and sanctified by God. Like the Twelve, the church is called apart from the world for the purpose of intimate fellowship with Jesus, to be sent again into

the world in the name of Jesus as a witness to Jesus and to demonstrate that the kingdom has broken into human history. Apart from this relationship mission is impossible; as Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Election, God's sovereign calling of the church, has often been misinterpreted as an election to privilege, to a special status before God as if God's elect were specially favored over others. This is a perversion of the biblical understanding of election that both Israel and the church today have at times advanced. Jesus, the Son of God, was sent into the world "not to be served, but to serve" on a mission of redemption (Mark 10:45). So too the church is sent into the world not to serve itself but to serve the world, on a redemptive mission of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom to all nations. We are called to have the same attitude of service and humility that was evidenced in Christ, who surrendered his position of privilege and took on the form of a servant (Phil. 2:5–8).

At the same time, the church is not merely called to be an instrument of the kingdom nor called in a primarily functional sense. The church as the new people of God occupies a special relationship to God as his treasured possession. The church is the bride of Christ whom he loves, gave himself for, and is beautifying for that great wedding day (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25–27; Rev. 19:7). Christians' preoccupation for all eternity will be to live as subjects of the King in the eternal kingdom, worshipping and serving the King.

The Church as God's Primary Agent of Mission

It should be abundantly evident from the preceding discussion that the church is God's primary agent of mission in this age. However, in the 1960s and early 1970s the understanding of mission in the WCC was heavily influenced by secularism and theologians such as J. C. Hoekendijk and A. T. Van Leeuwen. They argued that mission is God's work in the world to establish peace, justice, and humanization, and God uses many secular, political, and other means to accomplish this. The mission of the church is to serve the world by discerning God's direct work in the world and aligning with such movements. This viewpoint effectively marginalized the role of the church in mission and virtually ignored the role of God's supernatural working in history.

Though God is almighty and able to work through any means of his choosing, the scriptures are clear that the church is his primary instrument for proclaiming the gospel and realizing his purposes in this age. Surely the church can cooperate with various efforts for justice and compassion that are not immediately associated with the church. But the kingdom is spiritual at its core—the reign of God—and works from this spiritual center outward into lives, churches, communities, and societies. God has chosen to work through

kingdom communities comprised of redeemed persons entrusted with the gospel and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be and do what the world *cannot* be or do.

As the gospel is preached among the nations, people repent, believe, and are born again into the kingdom (Mark 1:15; John 3:3–5). New communities are formed as witnesses to the transforming power of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:8). They live as salt and light in the world glorifying the Father (Matt. 5:13–16). They live to the praise and glory of God in holiness (Eph. 1:4–6), break down barriers dividing people (Eph. 2:11–22), and evidence his wisdom according to his eternal purpose in Christ (Eph. 3:10). Such communities manifesting the kingdom of God can only be the result of the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. The scriptures tell us of no other people, no other message, no other power, no other movement that is the instrument of God's choosing for fulfilling his purposes in this age as is the church.

The Church as a Sign of the Kingdom

John the Baptist prepared the coming of the Messiah with the proclamation: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matt. 3:2). The kingdom hope of the Old Testament was about to break into history. Jesus himself began his public ministry with the same message (Matt. 4:17). The message of the kingdom as a present reality as well as a future hope was central to Jesus's teaching. Though direct reference to the kingdom occurs less often in the Epistles than in the Gospels, the same concept permeates the New Testament. God's kingdom is characterized as that place where Christ is acknowledged as Lord, the reign of God transforms all aspects of life, and the powers of evil are defeated. "The proclamation of the Gospel is thus the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ among the nations"; therefore, "mission is the summons of the Lordship of Christ" (Blauw 1962, 84).

We established in chapter 2 that the church is God's kingdom people in this age, and in chapter 4 that the kingdom is the center of mission. In this sense the kingdom of God is the kingpin of church and mission. Mission is about establishing God's reign through the redemptive and transformative work of Christ, and the church is a living sign and witness to that king-

dom. The church as God's kingdom people manifests the character of the kingdom in its common life as a redemptive community of love and in its public life as salt and light in the world.

But the church is only a sign of that kingdom. It does not and cannot fully realize the kingdom in this age; rather, it lives in the hope of the

The church is, therefore, an ecclesia, a called out assembly whose public life is a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument to which God is inviting all creation in Jesus Christ.

Alan J. Roxburgh (2004, 3)

coming of the kingdom in fullness at Christ's return. As an eschatological community, it anticipates that kingdom. The very life of the church should be a testimony to the glory of the kingdom before the observing world. The message of the church is an invitation to repent and enter that kingdom by receiving the gracious gift of God in Jesus Christ and experiencing a foretaste of the renewal of all things. Newbigin emphasizes a threefold relationship of the church and the kingdom, the people of God being a *sign*, *instrument*, and *firstfruit* of the kingdom: "Each of these three words is important. They are to be a *sign*, pointing men to something that is beyond their present horizon but can give guidance and hope now; an *instrument* (not the only one) that God can use for his work of healing, liberating, and blessing; and a *firstfruit*—a place where men and women can have a real taste now of the joy and freedom God intends for us all" (1994, 33).

In chapter 6 we established that the task of missions is to create kingdom communities among all people. Kingdom communities were described in terms of their three dimensions: the Great Calling (doxology), the Great Commission (evangelism and discipleship), and the Great Commandment (compassion and justice). The mission (singular) of the church may be defined as *being* such a community in word and deed. The task of missions (plural) is the creation and expansion of such communities among all people. The church must authentically *be* what it is *attempting to accomplish* in the world.

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH CONVERSATION

The Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN) has developed the concept of the unity of church and mission to yet another level.¹ The earliest usages of the term *missional* in the current sense to describe the activities of the church can be traced back to Francis Dubose (1983) and Charles Van Engen (1991). In the early 1990s the GOCN began using the term *missional church*. But the release in 1998 of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* marked the first major public discussion using the term. In the words of Alan Roxburgh, the term *missional* or *missional church* has gone "from obscurity to banality in eight short years and people still don't know what it means" (2004, 2). Despite the confusion surrounding its meaning, the missional church discussion has stimulated fresh thinking about the nature of the church and its mission.

According to the original advocates of the concept, the church is to be understood not as an organization with a mission; rather, the church's very identity *is* mission. Mission and church are merged into one. The church is not primarily a sender; rather, the church itself is the sent one, and it is sent on a

1. For brief summaries of the "missional church," see Roxburgh (2004) and Van Gelder (2004). For fuller descriptions, see Hunsberger and Van Gelder (1996), Guder (1998), Gibbs (2000), Frost and Hirsch (2003), Minatrea (2004), and a critique by Goheen (2002).

mission that is larger than itself. The mission of God becomes the mission of the church as a whole, and not the mission of particular ministries or emissaries of the church. "In this conversation, mission is no longer understood primarily in functional terms as something the church does. . . . Rather it is understood in terms of something the church is, as something that is related to its nature" (Van Gelder 2004, 437).

Roots

Several developments have led up to this rethinking. Already in 1938 the IMC in its meetings at Tambaram began rethinking the missionary nature of the church, speaking in its report of a "conception of the church as the missionary sent into the world" (cited in Goheen 2002, 481). Works such as Newbigin's *Household of God* (1954) and Blauw's *Missionary Nature of the Church* (1962) more fully developed an understanding of the church in terms of its missionary sending. During the second half of the twentieth century, mission came to be understood less in terms of a task that the church is to fulfill and more in terms of *missio Dei*, which gives birth to the church. These streams merged into the conviction that the church exists as the agent of God's mission. The church does not merely send missionaries; rather, the church itself is sent on God's mission. The church exists for the sake of God's mission and kingdom; thus, ecclesiology must be subordinate to missiology.

Newbigin and others noted in the 1960s that Western culture had become post-Christian and thus a "mission field." Missiologists had long recognized that mission is no longer something to be done exclusively in foreign lands and could no longer be geographically or culturally defined. Old distinctions such as "sending church" and "receiving church" or "mission church" had become anachronous and even harmful. Every church in every place must understand itself as a missional church, and every Christian should understand herself or himself as a missionary. In conciliar circles this thinking made the need for traditional missionary-sending agencies questionable. Upon returning to England after decades of service in India, Newbigin drew attention to the failure of Christendom and to the secularization and religious pluralism of Western culture. Not only is mission everywhere, for God seeks to establish his kingdom everywhere, but a new consciousness was raised for the missionary sending of the church in the West to be a witness for the kingdom in its own context. This spawned the GOCN and the missional church conversation in North America.

Affirmations

We must certainly affirm, as has been demonstrated throughout this volume, that the church is called to mission and that the church finds its very

identity in its participation in God's mission. We can thank missional church advocates for returning mission to the center of ecclesiology. Churches everywhere must rediscover their identity in their mission locally and globally, and not in denominational labels, programs, or anything that relegates mission to one of many things the church undertakes. The church does not determine its mission; rather, God's mission determines the church. In an ultimate sense the church does not *do* mission; rather, the church is taken up *by* and participates *in* God's mission.

The missional church conversation also rightly identifies the dangers of overly institutional understandings of the church, which tend to be self-serving and undermine its missionary calling. This conversation exposes functionalistic, managerial, and pragmatic understandings of the church, which are more a product of Western culture than of scripture (see Van Gelder 2000 and 2004). The identity of the church is not to be found in what it does, how large it is, what programs it sponsors, denominational distinctives, or what standing it has in the society. The identity of the church is to be found in its relationship to the Triune God, who has created it as his missionary people.

Furthermore, we are rightly reminded that the church does not exist for itself. As noted above, its election is an election not of privilege but of service. Unfortunately, the church too often has become a consumer-oriented institution serving the needs of its members. But "the church is not a gathering of those who are finding their needs met in Jesus," according to Alan Roxburgh. "This is a terrible debasement of the announcement of the reign of God" (2004, 4).

Finally, it is also a matter of fact that Western culture must be increasingly considered post-Christian. In Western cultural contexts most people no longer share a Christian worldview or Christian values, and the church increasingly exists as a counterculture in contrast to the prevailing society. Thus the church in such contexts must think less in terms of basic evangelism and more in terms of cross-cultural mission if it is to reach its contemporaries with the Christian message. The Western church needs a fresh sense of urgency to live missionally in its post-Christian context. We must confess the tendency for churches to gravitate toward meeting their own needs, retreating into a Christian subculture, and failing to see their primary calling to serve the world as part of their worship of God.

Cautions

At the same time, several cautions must also be raised regarding much of the missional church conversation. First, as we noted in chapter 3, definitions of *missio Dei* vary widely, and the term can be used to define mission in almost any manner. Most advocates of the missional church have defined *missio Dei* very broadly in terms of God's kingdom purposes in the world.

We have argued in chapter 4 that God's sending activity can be scripturally defined as having doxology as the purpose, redemption as the foundation, the kingdom as the center, eschatology as the hope, the nations as the scope, reconciliation as the fruit, and incarnation as the character of God's mission. Our definitions of *missio Dei* must retain biblical clarity and avoid overly broad and vague interpretations.

Second, the reasoning behind the missional church concept draws upon that of the WCC in the 1960s. It was boldly declared at Uppsala that the day of "missions" was past and the day of "mission" had arrived. Mission was no longer to be understood as the church sending missionaries; rather, everything the church does is to be mission. As a result, as we shall see, in many conciliar denominations sending structures such as foreign mission agencies were absorbed into denominational structures, and foreign missions was virtually abandoned as a result of this thinking. It can hardly be said that churches became more missionary in terms of global mission; indeed, the very opposite could be argued. All that the church does *should* in some way flow from and reflect its missionary character. But this principle can in practice be turned on its head so that anything and everything the church does is by definition "mission." It returns us to the old problem that Stephen Neill identified: "If everything is mission, nothing is mission" (1959, 81). When this happens, mission loses.

Third, missional church advocates repeatedly emphasize that the church does not *do* mission, but it is missional by its very nature. Church programs and plans to undertake mission as an activity are downplayed for fear of promoting a "corporate" or "organizational" understanding of the church (doing something on behalf of God). Although there is always the danger of reducing the calling of the church to a form of activism, it is also true that merely proclaiming the church to be missional by nature does not automatically make it missional in practice.

Clearly, not all churches of the New Testament have fulfilled their God-intended mission, though they continue to be called "the church." Every church must consciously discern its mission and intentionally resolve to fulfill that mission in alignment with God's calling as revealed in scripture. Churches failing to fulfill God's mission are in jeopardy of forfeiting their legitimacy and continued existence as Christ's church (e.g., Rev. 2:5; 3:1–2, 15–17). Yes, the church is in its very essence missional; but no, the church does not automatically live and act consistently with that mission. The church must in practice be intentional about living missionally and setting missional priorities.

An early critique of the missional church conversation was that it "remained a relatively theoretic and abstract academic conversation about the church" (Roxburgh 2004, 5). While calling the church to a prophetic, missional task, it offered "little guidance for the positive participation of the church in cultural development" and there was "no mention of ecclesial structures that would

prepare the laity for their callings" (Goheen 2002, 486, 488). Fortunately, increasingly this deficit is being addressed with works including practical suggestions and case studies to help churches realize missional transformation (e.g., Minatrea 2004; Hirsch 2006; Stetzer and Putman 2006; and Van Gelder 2007a, 2007b, 2008).

Fourth, missional church advocates generally decry any separation of church and mission (e.g., Van Gelder 2000, 64–65). Because the church does not merely have a mission but is on God's mission, this attitude is fully understandable. The existence of mission structures (such as mission agencies) apart from local churches can reinforce such separation and are thus viewed as "a reflection of deficiencies inherent within the understanding of the church's nature" (Guder 1998, 74–75). However, as we shall discuss later, the specialized task of reaching the nations is complex and can be greatly facilitated through the existence of such agencies. As long as they serve the larger mission of the church, they needn't be understood as a contradiction to the missional nature of the church. On the other hand, by disallowing any separate structure for global or local mission, mission suffers. The cause of mission as intentional outward engagement with the world becomes lost in the regular business of the church and the tasks of pastoral care, administration, and a host of other important concerns.

Fifth, bringing the gospel to yet-unreached peoples holds very little place in the missional church discussion. Although the emphasis on the local witness of the local church in post-Christian societies is a welcome one, one searches the missional church literature almost in vain to find references to bringing the gospel to the nations. Yet, as we demonstrated in chapters 1 and 2, this is one of the central themes of mission in the Bible. The fine distinction between *mission* (singular) and *missions* (plural) is missed by the vast majority of ordinary Christians. Intentional missions, particularly missions to yet-unevangelized peoples, can be lost in all the good things the church now does and calls "mission." While every locality is indeed a "mission field," we must not overlook the fact that there remain hundreds, by some estimates even thousands, of ethno-linguistic people groups that have no gospel witness or indigenous church whatsoever. There remains an urgent place for identifying the task of missions—the creation and expansion of kingdom communities among *all* the peoples of the earth—apart from all the other good and important things that the church can and should do.

THE SENDING STRUCTURES OF MISSION

The biblical mandate of mission includes the bringing of the gospel to yet-unreached peoples and nations. Ultimately, God calls, sends, and sustains such apostolic emissaries. But what means does he use, what is the role of local churches, and what, if any, is the role of mission agencies that have

some form of independent organization apart from local congregations? For example, the missional church understanding of the church seeks to merge church and mission into one entity, abhorring any separation of church and mission in either theory or practice. Does there remain any legitimate place for specially formed mission-sending agencies apart from local congregations? What, if any, form of mission society or parachurch agency is theologically or practically justified?

Never before have local congregations been so directly involved in global ministry. International short-term teams abound. Partnerships between congregations spanning continents have become commonplace. Increasingly, churches are taking the initiative in recruiting, training, and sending their own missionaries apart from traditional mission agencies. One study revealed that nearly half of all American churches with over two thousand weekend worshippers act as their own sending agency for some or all of their missionaries and agree or strongly agree that God's instrument of mission is the local church and not mission agencies (Priest 2008).

Though mission agencies in various shapes and forms have historically been the primary vehicle for churches to send and support missionaries, should this continue to be the case? Is there any biblical justification for the existence of mission societies as a parallel structure to local congregations?

Many Ways to Send Missionaries: A Historical Overview

Throughout the history of the global expansion of Christianity, the church has employed various means to facilitate the sending and support of foreign missionaries. In the church of the New Testament, we see that initially the gospel spread through various unintentional means such as persecution (Acts 8:1–4; 11:19–21) and traveling pilgrims (Acts 8:26–40). The first intentional sending of missionaries came many years after Pentecost with the sending of Paul and Barnabas by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1–3). Paul then recruited additional missionary coworkers from the churches he planted. He was financially supported in part by churches, such as the Philippian church (Phil. 4:15–16), and in part by self-support through the secular work of tentmaking (Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9:6). We have relatively little reliable information about the other apostles and their missionary activities.

During the first centuries of Christianity, there were a few missionary bishops such as Irenaeus and Gregory Thaumaturgus, but the gospel continued to spread largely through the informal means of Christian merchants, slaves, soldiers, travelers, and even prisoners of war. We know of no specific mission-sending organizations. James Scherer notes that with Christianity becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire, "mission was no longer something done by every local congregation. It developed into a separate activity carried on by special agents in remote areas. . . . Since the fourth century mission has been

thought of as something quite distinct from the mainstream of the church's life" (1964, 46). Monastic orders became most instrumental in the spread of the gospel as devoted monks traveled, at first primarily on ascetic pilgrimages and then later on intentional trips for evangelism and church planting. Historian Mark A. Noll observes, "The missionary expansion of Christianity was unthinkable apart from the activity of monks" (1997, 99). Unfortunately, it was not beyond the church to at times employ military conquest and coercion to advance the spread of Christianity.

In the age of discovery and European imperialistic expansion, the Roman Catholic Church established the system of patronage, whereby it was the responsibility of the colonizing political potentates to christianize the indigenous peoples in their colonial territories. Missionaries of the various religious orders served under the authority of the given king or magistrate. This system not only failed but led to abuses, so in 1622 the pope formed the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which brought the oversight and direction of mission activities directly under the authority of the church.

The Protestant Reformation was slow in developing a mission movement. The reasons for this are many, but one significant factor was that Protestants had no organizational structure similar to monasticism as a vehicle to carry out the task of foreign missions. Early Pietists and renewal movements saw little hope in the established churches taking up the cause of missions. They were viewed as being indifferent or hostile to the idea. Thus, without official church sanction, such groups formed small societies of the "revived" to advance the cause of foreign missions (Zimmerling 1985; note, however, that the very first Pietist missionaries, Ziegenbalg and Plütschau, were sent under the authority and financing of the Danish king, Friedrich IV, with the Danish-Halle Mission). Brian Stanley calls this the "communitarian-institutional" model (2003, 40).

In seventeenth-century London, congregations had begun forming voluntary societies to promote piety and combat various social evils. Foreign mission societies were formed after this model. Early societies such as the SPCK and SPG were linked with the established church but were generally ineffective in sending missionaries to unreached peoples (A. F. Walls 1996, 243). It would be William Carey's call in 1792 for structures similar to that of the trading companies, even more independent of existing church structures, that would create the vehicle so instrumental in launching the Protestant missionary movement. "The simple fact was that the Church as then organized, whether episcopal, or presbyterian, or congregational, *could* not effectively operate mission overseas. Christians had accordingly to 'use means' to do so" (ibid., 246).

These societies were often interdenominational in nature and frequently led by laypeople. For example, the SPCK was founded in 1698 by five people, four of whom were laymen belonging to the Church of England. The SPCK was viewed with skepticism by clergy and lacked the official support of the

Church of England. Out of this concern under Thomas Bray's leadership (the sole clergyman among the founders of the SPCK), the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPGFP) was created in 1701 with the official sanction of the Church and chartered by the king (see Van den Berg 1956, 40–44; and A. F. Walls 1996, 160–72; 2002, 215–35).

Though structurally different and separate from local church or denomination, the success of the societies lay in their ability to connect with local congregations and individual Christians. This was done by activating small groups and forming decentralized auxiliaries. In this sense, far from being isolated from congregational life, they were connected at the grassroots level, giving congregants the opportunity for involvement in mission that traditional church structures were unable to provide. This in turn led to increased numbers in missionary recruitment (A. F. Walls 1996, 250–51). The societies' independence at the same time allowed them to remain entirely focused on the singular task of foreign missions and to not become distracted or encumbered with ecclesial maintenance or other ministries.

The voluntary mission society thus became what Andrew Walls (2002, 232) calls the "organizational engine" of the Protestant missionary movement, the prime and virtually sole vehicle for the explosive growth of the Protestant missionary movement in the nineteenth century. Two broad forms of mission agencies developed. On the one hand were those formed and operated more independently from established denominations, which later included the so-called faith missions. Their missionaries were often less educated, nonordained, nonconfessional, and sometimes tentmakers. On the other hand were denominational mission agencies that were more closely subordinated to the institutional church. Their missionaries were often university educated, confessional, professional, and ordained (Wellenreuther 2004). Nevertheless, even during this "Great Century" of Protestant missions, the promoters of mission remained for the most part a minority of laypeople, and the missionaries were largely nonordained (A. F. Walls 2002, 215–35).

The responsibility of the mission societies and agencies grew to include nearly every aspect of the missionary endeavor: promotion, recruitment, training, deployment, communication, and the facilitation of financial and other support for the missionary. Local congregations gave of their members to become missionary candidates but were otherwise responsible mainly for ongoing prayer and financial support. By the mid-nineteenth century the number of such sending agencies had grown exponentially. They gained expertise and experience in the complexities of mission work, earning the trust of local churches. The difficulties of expense, travel, health, language, and communications made sending and supporting missionaries a seemingly impossible task for a single local congregation to adequately master apart from such agencies. Newer and older mission agencies alike expanded their

ministries from primarily evangelism and itinerate church planting to include medicine, education, social work, and a host of other ministries.

Stanley's (2003) excellent discussion of the development of mission-sending structures points out that initially the mission societies were simple structures with a board of directors intended to facilitate the sending and financing of missionaries. But over time the boards took increasing responsibility for decisions related to daily mission work and the emerging churches. "By the 1920s, the denominational missionary societies, especially in the USA, had become big business, relying explicitly on the methods of secular corporations to manage the whole enterprise" (Stanley 2003, 42). The formation of nondenominational faith missions was in part a reaction to such business-oriented approaches to management and fund-raising. Furthermore, whereas denominational agencies tended to become national institutions, many faith missions such as the China Inland Mission became forerunners of truly international agencies with sending bases in various countries.

In the twentieth century numerous more specialized mission agencies emerged, which developed expertise in ministries such as Bible translation, radio broadcasting, and missionary aviation. Globally the number of foreign mission-sending agencies has grown from about 600 in 1900 to 2,200 in 1970 and 4,410 in 2006 (Barrett 2006, 28). Many of these newer agencies have been formed in the majority world, as churches there have become a powerful international missionary-sending force.

By the end of the twentieth century, the situation regarding mission agencies had changed dramatically in both conciliar and evangelical circles. Conciliar churches increasingly questioned the lostness of the unevangelized and the necessity of personal faith in Christ. Humanitarian work gradually took prominence over traditional evangelism. Conciliar churches believed that the nations had been largely reached and the national churches should now be responsible for the further evangelization of their nations. For example, the official report from the WCC assembly at Uppsala in 1966 reads, "The missionary societies originated in a response of a past generation to the call to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Changing political, economic and ecclesiastical circumstances demand new responses and new relationships" (Goodall 1968, 35). This shift eventually meant the dismantling of many mission agencies and the redefinition of the role of missionaries. Already in the early 1950s Newbigin had argued that the church is missionary in its very nature and thus decried the dichotomy of church and mission as manifest in the existence of mission societies (1954, esp. 164). This view is echoed by missional church advocates (e.g., Van Gelder 2000, 64–65).

At the same time majority world—especially African—churches called for a moratorium on missions. Not a few mission boards affiliated with conciliar denominations were turned into commissions on ecumenical relations or interchurch aid or absorbed into denominational structures. This reflected the

integration of the IMC with the WCC in 1961 at New Delhi, which was based on the convictions that the mission field is everywhere and that all ministries of the church (at home or abroad) should be considered "mission." For example, Scherer argues that the very existence of mission societies resulted in a "legal separation" between church and mission, leading to "un-missionary churches and un-churchly mission" (Scherer 1964, 41–52, esp. 49).

Pierce Beaver has noted how the Presbyterian Church (USA) Board of Foreign Missions was replaced by the Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations. As a result, already in 1968 he can state, "It has relatively little to do with direct confrontation with belief and non-belief. A 'sending' enterprise has given way to a 'lending' operation. What now exists is largely a system of interchurch aid" (1968c, 80). Stanley observes, "Placing responsibility for mission squarely on the shoulders of the church seemed the only way to avoid the excesses of society control and the only way in which 'sending' and 'receiving' churches could begin to develop relationships of partnership rather than subordination" (2003, 42). As a result "some [agencies] have internationalized and reinvented themselves so radically that they have effectively ceased to exist as recognizably 'missionary' agencies in the traditional sense, becoming primarily facilitative structures for the management and channeling of interchurch aid, scholarship, training and development programmes, etc." (45). He describes how the London Missionary Society, once the second largest sending agency in Britain, became the Council for World Mission, which in 1999 had only forty-five missionaries but bore responsibility for vast financial resources (*ibid.*).

As a result of these developments, the number of missionaries sent by conciliar related agencies plummeted. In the wake of the modernist-fundamentalist debates, the number of conciliar-related missionaries began to fall as theological conservatives and fundamentalists lost confidence in denominationally related missions. In 1935 missionaries affiliated with mainline denominational missions comprised 60 percent of the North American missionary force; by 1952 their proportion fell to half and by 1980 to only 10 percent (J. A. Carpenter 1997, 184–85; Coote 1982). Overall, from 1900 to 2000 the percentage of North American missionaries sent by mainline mission organizations dropped from 80 percent to only 6 percent (Pierson 2003, 67; see also W. R. Shenk 1999, 180–81). Evangelicals, on the other hand, continued to maintain the necessity of sending missionaries, and their ranks increased dramatically. The number of conservative North American missionaries grew from under 5,000 in 1935 to over 32,000 in 1980 (J. A. Carpenter 1990; 1997, 184).

However, by the late twentieth century local churches increasingly wanted more direct involvement in foreign missions. This was especially the case in North America. Technological advances reduced the difficulty and cost of international travel and communication, enabling local churches to have more immediate contact with field missionaries and national believers. Through

short-term mission trips large numbers of local church members gained personal exposure to mission work. Direct international partnerships were often formed between local congregations on different continents—this often apart from mission agency involvement. Information on mission history, strategy, and cross-cultural ministry became widely available to local churches, which increasingly formed their own opinions about what makes for effective mission work.

By the end of the twentieth century, tensions between local congregations and mission agencies had only grown. An early sign of this was evident in 1971 at a conference of mission leaders at Green Lake, Wisconsin (Linhardt 1971; Shepherd 1971; and especially Gordon MacDonald 1971). The legitimacy of parachurch and mission agencies apart from the local church had already been questioned in the early twentieth century by theologians such as A. H. Strong (1909, 890) and missiologists such as Roland Allen ([1912] 1962a, 83; [1927] 1962b, 96). By the end of the century, however, the legitimacy and necessity of the mission agency were being challenged more widely, especially by local congregations directly involved in missions (e.g., W. Phillips 1985; Camp 1995; Rowell 1998).

There had always been local congregations, such as the early Moravian Brethren, the Churches of Christ, and the Plymouth Brethren, that sent missionaries apart from mission agencies. But these were until recently relatively isolated cases. However, by the mid-1980s this practice was becoming widespread and boldly advocated by both large and small churches alike. For example, in 1985 an article appeared in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* titled "Your Church Can Train and Send Missionaries," which claimed, "The local church is beginning to take its rightful place as the trainer and sender of missionaries. Any church can provide the right kind of help a cross-cultural worker needs before he or she gets on the plane" (W. Phillips 1985, 196–97; see also examples in Siewert 1997).

The term *congregational-direct missions* was coined to describe the movement (M. Phillips 1998). Adherents of this movement perceive mission boards as too bureaucratic, too expensive, too inflexible, unable to respond to the world's rapidly changing situation, and out of touch with (or even condescending toward) the desires of local congregations. Paul Pierson (1998) also attributes this development to a general distrust in American society of institutions, expectation of quick results, and an individualistic ecclesiology. Some have furthermore argued that the very existence of mission boards is unbiblical, illustrating Ralph Winter's observation that Protestants have always been a bit unsure about the legitimacy of such structures (1974, 133).

Most churches continue to send and support missionaries through mission agencies. But they are no longer satisfied to merely "pay and pray." They want more direct involvement in all aspects of mission work and more genuine partnership. Greater accountability and justification for the high cost of sending

missionaries through traditional mission agencies are expected (Borthwick 1999). Most mission agencies have attempted—albeit with some difficulty—to address these concerns. New paradigms for the relationship of church and agency are in the making (Guthrie 2002).

The Question of New Testament Precedent

Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church of Antioch, and they reported back to this church at the conclusion of their first mission journey (Acts 13:1–3; 14:26–28). We find nothing in the New Testament about an independent, formalized structure or organization to promote or facilitate the Pauline mission. Thus it was argued by Allen that there is no basis in the New Testament for the modern mission agency. He maintained that the early church itself was a missionary organization, “consequently there was no special organization for missions in the Early Church; the church organization sufficed. . . . The new modern missionary organization is an addition. . . . With us missions are the special work of a special organization; in the Early Church missions were not a special work, and there was no special organization” ([1927] 1962b, 96). Indeed, he viewed the very existence of mission agencies as a divine condescension (117). More recently, Harry Boer writes, “The missionary society is, scripturally speaking, an abnormality. But it is a blessed abnormality” (1964, 214).

Of course, there is no New Testament example of a mission agency in the modern sense—but then neither are there biblical examples of church buildings, legal incorporation, Sunday schools, youth groups, Christian publishing and media, Christian colleges, seminaries, Christian camps, and many other aspects of church life and ministry that are today taken for granted and greatly used by God. One can more persuasively argue that there is no basis in the New Testament for a single local church being solely and independently responsible for every aspect of the sending, support, and supervision of missionaries or mission activities. The earliest expansion of the church from Jerusalem into the surrounding region was spontaneous and unplanned, in part a result of persecution (e.g., Acts 8:1–8). “These movements of believers were neither planned nor controlled by the church in Jerusalem” (Severn 2000, 322).

The first recorded intentional sending of missionaries came with the aforementioned commissioning of Paul and Barnabas by the Antioch church. But Paul’s missionary call did not come through the Antioch church; rather, it had come with his conversion on the Damascus road (Acts 9:15; 22:21). In fact, he had worked previously as a missionary in Arabia, Cilicia, and Syria without even consulting the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:17–24; cf. Acts 15:23). The language of Acts 13:1–4 emphasizes more the sending by the Holy Spirit than by the church. Thus it could be argued that the Antioch church merely

confirmed and partnered with Paul in a new phase of his missionary work (see Schnabel 2008, 392).

Paul recruited coworkers from other churches (e.g., Acts 16:1–3), but we do not read of these coworkers reporting back to their home churches. Critical decisions regarding the direction of the mission were made by Paul and his team under the direct leading of the Holy Spirit without consulting the church in Antioch (e.g., Acts 16:6–10). The landmark decision regarding Gentiles and the law, which profoundly impacted the Pauline mission, was decided not in Antioch but in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–34). Intervention of the Antioch church is reported neither in the conflict between Paul and Barnabas nor in the recruitment of Silas as Paul’s new missionary partner, though they were both “committed” or “commended” to the Lord, apparently by the Antioch church (Acts 15:35–41). Paul received financial support from churches other than Antioch, such as the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:10–19). When conflict or false teaching arose in the churches Paul planted, he exercised his own apostolic (or missionary) authority over those churches and did not involve the churches in Antioch or Jerusalem in any way.

In fact, judging by Luke’s report in Acts, the involvement of the Antioch church in the Pauline mission and in the churches he planted was quite limited. Luke, of course, does not report all the details, and there were no doubt many practical reasons for this limited involvement such as first-century difficulty of travel and communication. Winter is surely correct when he observes of the Pauline missionary band: “No matter what we think the structure was, we know that it was not simply the Antioch church operating at a distance from its home base. It was something else, something different” (1974, 123).

Thus some have claimed that far from being an argument against mission agencies, “the Antioch model is the strongest biblical case for the formation of mission structures to spread the gospel to the regions beyond” (Severn 2000, 324; see also E. F. Murphy 1974; Glasser 1976, 26–27; White 1983; Blincoe 2002; and Plueddemann 2006). Winter (1974), Pierson (2009, 29–40), and others have argued that both mission structures (sodalities) and local congregation structures (modalities) are from a practical viewpoint not only equally legitimate but also equally biblical expressions of the church. Mission structures, distinct from congregational structures, are understood as both theologically and practically justified.

However, much like arguments against mission agencies, one cannot make a case for mission agencies based strictly on New Testament precedents. Parallels to modern mission agencies are incidental. Nor can one make a theological case for (or against) agencies based on historical precedent (Camp 1995, 200). Even if an analysis of the report in Acts could demonstrate clearly the relationship between the Antioch church and the Pauline mission, the question remains regarding the extent to which this account is merely a *descriptive* report of practical arrangements or a *normative* pattern to be applied in all churches

in all times. Given the enormous differences between the first century and today in travel, communication, resources, church structures, and so on, the debate over biblical precedent for or against sending agencies is historically anachronistic and hermeneutically problematical. In writing Acts, Luke was focused more on the spiritual dynamic of the gospel's progress than on the mechanics of support, accountability, and administration.

Stephen Neill warns of attempting to create a theology of missionary societies as "a theological justification of what we have done in the past and of what we are trying to do in the present" (1959, 82). He claims that this cannot be done because mission agencies are not a necessary part of the existence of the church. They perform a function of the church. To argue theologically for mission agencies would be like arguing theologically for the shape of a baptismal font. You can have a theology of baptism, but not of baptismal fonts! Walls quips that "there never was a *theology* of the voluntary society. The voluntary society is one of God's theological jokes, whereby he makes tender mockery of his people when they take themselves too seriously. The men of high theological and ecclesiastical principle were often the enemies of the missionary movement" (1996, 146).

Nevertheless, the New Testament does contain a clear ecclesiology and a descriptive account of the spread of the gospel. From these teachings and accounts, some broad principles can be deduced, even though they may not offer a dogmatic answer to the current debate about sending structures (Schnabel 2008, 444). In other words, the debate is not strictly pragmatic. It may be ill advised to attempt to formulate a theology of mission agencies per se. But as Walls goes on to say, the mission society has immense theological *implications* (1996, 147). Such questions are answered biblically not by looking for some precedent or exact parallel in the Bible. Rather, we must ask if such structures or systems facilitate the achievement of biblical purposes and principles. Are they *inherently* consistent or inconsistent with the concerns of the New Testament, the advancement of mission, and the values of the kingdom?

Biblical Principles and Theological Considerations

BIBLICAL PURPOSES

We have defined the task of missions as the extension and expansion of kingdom communities among all the peoples of the earth. We also defined doxology as the highest goal of mission, redemption as the foundation, the kingdom of God as the center, eschatology as the hope, the nations as the scope, reconciliation as the fruit, and incarnation as the character of mission. These are the guiding principles. Whatever the structures for missionary sending, they must serve such purposes. Obviously, a wide variety of structures and means can conceivably achieve these ends. Inappropriate structures, however, can compromise or hinder such goals. But the Bible is less concerned with the

methods than with the ends and with employing means that are consistent with those ends.

ECCLESIAL PRIMACY

The New Testament is quite clear that the local church is God's primary agent for realizing his purposes in this age. It is only consistent with this understanding that local churches should be intimately and directly involved in the sending of missionaries, whatever structures are used. In the New Testament the calling of missionaries is confirmed by the church (e.g., Acts 13:1–3; 16:1–3; 1 Tim. 4:14). Advances in travel, communication, and resources allow local churches today to be involved in many more ways than were possible in the New Testament church, and such possibilities should surely be utilized. Local churches are rightly taking greater initiative, refusing to leave everything to the mission agency, and expecting direct involvement.

Like most human institutions, mission agencies are in danger of becoming self-justifying ends in themselves (Allen [1927] 1962b, 99–101). But they are only provisional instruments of a higher cause. The church will endure until the day Christ receives it as his bride. All other agencies of the church will pass away—many long before Christ's return. Mission agencies are not to be confused with the church nor considered an expression of the church in any way equal to local congregations (see Camp 1995; Schnabel 2004, 1578–79; 2008, 393). Mission agencies retain their theological justification only to the extent that they *serve* the church in the fulfillment of its missionary calling. On the basis of what George Peters calls "the principle of delegated authority" (1972, 226), churches may choose to create institutions or organizations to facilitate fulfilling its mission.

Paul Beals aptly notes that local churches "are the hub of the missions wheel, while mission agencies are spokes in the wheel helping churches extend their work of world missions. . . . The mission agency is a service organization aiding the local church in its task as the sending agency" (1995, 133). Whereas the mission agency may represent and facilitate the missionary intention of the church, it can never become a substitute for the mission of the church, making mission an appendage of the local church. Much less can the mission agency become an excuse for the local churches to become passive in their missionary responsibility (Gensichen 1971, 174–77). Or as Peters states, "The mission agency ought to be the church's provision, instrument, and arm to efficiently expedite her task. It can neither displace nor replace the church, though it may be called upon to act in place of the church" (1972, 229).

HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

Though historical precedent is not authoritative, it is instructive and we are foolish if we fail to learn from it. Churches, like most human institutions, tend to look out for their own sustenance, needs, and interests. An examina-

tion of the expansion of Christianity reveals, as noted, that apart from the early beginnings, global outreach has rarely been facilitated by the sole initiation and sustenance of local churches or denominational structures. Winter (1974) points out that specially formed communities or agencies, structured separately from local congregations, nearly always played a significant if not decisive role in the spread of the Christian faith. In the Middle Ages these communities were the monastic orders. Among Protestants they have been the mission societies. Peters calls this "the principle of selective appointment" (1972, 226–28), whereby we observe in both scripture and history that God repeatedly raises up individuals—often apart from the initial sanction of the church and due to the failure of the church—who are catalysts for renewing passion and vision for missions.

Walls observes that one of the preconditions for sending missionaries was "a form of organization that could supply them, and forge a link between them and their work and the wider church" (A. F. Walls 2002, 221). The mission agency has for two hundred years provided such an organization. Wilbert Shenk's observation is no overstatement: "The modern missionary movement would have been inconceivable apart from the missionary society" (1999, 178). Conversely, it can be observed that where such structures do not exist or are absorbed into general church or denominational ministries, global outreach withers. Given the global expansion of the church today, James Plueddemann argues that "mission agencies will need to expand their focus from evangelism and church planting to mission-agency planting" (2006, 264–65), creating the vehicles for missionary sending by emerging churches.

The sending structures have varied greatly throughout Christian history, often reflecting the social structures of their time: monastic models in early Catholic missions, voluntary society and trading company models in nineteenth-century Protestant missions, and in the twentieth century corporate business models that sometimes resemble multinational corporations. Globalization and other developments have recently resulted in more fluid networking models that are transdenominational and transnational. But in each case these structures differ from local churches and are more highly focused, single-minded, and intentional about fulfilling the Great Commission than a local church can be.

Structures or organizations (i.e., mission agencies) in themselves are not the key to missionary effectiveness. That can be attributed only to God himself working through his people. Allen ([1927] 1962b, 106–7) pointed out a century ago that mission agencies may not only serve to advance the spread of the gospel, but all too often can hinder it when they become too cumbersome, self-justifying, and overly professionalized. But nearly two thousand years of church history is unequivocal: God has seen fit to work primarily through structures that have the singular focus of cross-cultural mission, whereas, generally speaking, churches without such structures fail to significantly advance

this cause. Even some of the strongest advocates of the primacy of the church, such as pioneer missiologist Gustav Warneck, have conceded the failure of the institutional church in its missionary obligation and that mission agencies are a practical necessity (Wellenreuther 2004, 179–80). One may debate whether this *should* be the case, or whether it will *remain* the case. Changing times may well demand changed sending structures, but existing structures should not be cast off lightly in the process.

CHRISTIAN UNITY IN MISSION

One of the remarkable fruits of the mission society was that it gave new and unique expression to unity in both the local and the global body of Christ. Christians from various denominations cooperated in the common cause of world mission via mission agencies (A. F. Walls 1996, 247–49). In fact, even the formation of national denominational associations and synods was in part a by-product of unified efforts to promote foreign missions through national societies. Stanley notes, for example, that, "the Baptist Union, until 1903, occupied no more than a few rented offices in the headquarters of the Baptist Missionary Society" (2003, 41). Otherwise, highly independent churches banded together to send and care for missionaries, which they could not do alone.

As many local churches today take responsibility for sending and supporting mission work apart from larger agencies, the danger of an overly independent spirit must be avoided. A congregation can easily have the impression that it can "go it alone" and thereby become oblivious to the larger work of God and the need for cooperation with others. The importance of partnership in mission has become widely recognized, but this recognition has most often applied to international partnerships. The importance of partnership among sending churches must be rediscovered. Congregations must continue to find ways to cooperate with and learn from one another. No single congregation has all the wisdom or resources necessary. Mission agencies have facilitated such partnership and cooperation in the past—doing what one church alone could not do. Other structures may possibly serve the cause of mission in the future. But one thing is clear: every congregation needs other congregations—especially in carrying out the task of global mission. Jesus himself prayed for Christian unity as a key to the world believing in him (John 17:18–23). Participation in the *missio Dei* has no place for ecclesial individualism.

PRACTICALLY INFORMED

If we have given attention to the above considerations, then it should not be considered unduly pragmatic to address this topic frankly on the basis of practicality: What is realistic? What has stood the test of time? What experience have others had? What really works? World mission is a complex undertaking

and costly in both financial and human terms. Good stewardship demands that we proceed with wisdom and efficiency. God expects us not only to depend on the supernatural provision of the Holy Spirit; he has also given us the ability to discern and act wisely.

Realistically, the energy of local churches and even denominations tends to gravitate toward ministries of maintenance and pastoral care. These churches normally lack the level of commitment, sacrifice, and single-mindedness necessary to sustain a long-term, cross-cultural mission effort. When mission structures are fully subsumed under congregational structures, mission usually suffers. "Missional church" advocates seek to overturn such tendencies, calling the church to be missional in all its undertakings. But the verdict is still out about whether this can be done, and history gives little warrant for optimism.

Most local congregations simply do not have the resources, personnel, experience, or infrastructure needed to train, send, support, and supervise foreign missionaries on their own. Considerable infrastructure, networking, trust building, and specialized resources are necessary to sustain missionaries and develop wise and effective relationships with national churches around the globe. Good intentions lacking wisdom and missiological insight often result in repeating the errors of history such as paternalism and cultural insensitivity. As Proverbs 19:2 reads, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way." Samuel Metcalf adds this concern about local church mission committees acting as mission agencies: "The average committee includes godly, well-meaning, but inexperienced people who go on and off the committee at the whim of church elections. Cross-cultural mission is far too complicated, as well as geographically distant from the supporting church, for the committee to exercise responsibility for field strategy and supervision" (1993, 145).

Even in churches with a weekend attendance of over two thousand, only 28 percent of mission pastors have more than two years missionary experience, and 62 percent have no missionary experience whatsoever (Priest 2008). Smaller churches have even fewer such resources. Even the most experienced missions pastor will not have all the gifts, expertise, or time to coordinate a significant missionary-sending program alone. Not a few churches that have attempted to "go it on their own" apart from any assistance from more experienced agencies have ended up seeking the assistance of such agencies when problems arise. Some congregations have banded together with other local congregations to cooperate in sending missionaries, but such arrangements quickly begin to look very much like traditional mission agencies. Though James Engel and William Dyrness take a critical view of historic mission agencies, they advise local churches against becoming yet another mission board: "Make no mistake about it, a retreat from continued agency/church partnership, no matter how well motivated, virtually guarantees that an independent initiative will face the same challenges and make the same

mistakes—without the benefit of the experience missions have acquired" (2000, 128).

Furthermore, direct local church involvement is simply not possible in many restricted-access regions of the world (see Borthwick 1998). Short-term mission trips and projects cannot be allowed to become ends in themselves, geared more toward meeting the needs of the sending church than making a genuine contribution to mission work. Independent, direct involvement in mission can easily lead to the sending church becoming overly invasive in local mission work or even lead to unhealthy manipulation and paternalism. The desire for international partnership has led many churches to naively support distant ministries that lack integrity because they have responded to attractive appeals but lack the cultural insight necessary for discernment.

The desire of churches for more active participation and direct involvement in all aspects of missions is a welcome development. Mission involvement of a congregation should not be limited to a few committee members, occasional prayer, or an annual conference. Today it is possible and desirable for many members of the congregation to gain firsthand exposure to and more personal identification with global mission undertakings. Mission agencies will need to adapt to this new situation if they are to serve the church well in the future. To the extent that agencies are willing and able to adapt, we concur with Eckhard J. Schnabel: "A mission agency is, for pragmatic reasons, the most effective means of initiating and supporting missionary work in distant regions, due to the specialized knowledge in regard to country, culture, language and politics of the particular region" (2004, 1579).

CONCLUSION

The answer is not an "either/or" approach, but rather greater cooperation and mutual appreciation between local church and mission agency in fulfilling the Great Commission. This can result in a synergy of local churches working together closely with mission agencies in a joint effort to advance the kingdom. Darrell L. Guder argues that these two types of structures "must exist in a symbiotic relationship with local congregations and their denominational structures. The apostolic church implies a variety of ways in which its mission is carried out, and thus a variety of structures that a missional ecclesiology must address" (1998, 75). We heartily concur with Bruce Camp when he concludes, "Pragmatically speaking, agencies (independent or denominational) are a gift from God and should be utilized by congregations. However, theologically speaking, they should never be considered as the church in mobile form. Legitimacy ascribed to mission agencies stems from their service with churches, not from usurping the local church's biblical mandate" (1995, 207).

Various models for the church-agency relationship have been proposed, such as a "synergistic (focused) church" (Camp 2003, 239–40) and a "servant-

partner" (Hammett 2000) that give the local church primacy while seeking cooperation with mission agencies (see also Beals 1995). As with so many questions relating to contemporary challenges, the Bible does not offer us a simple, easy answer. Rather, we must seek to apply scriptural principles, employ human insight and understanding, and act in the best prayerful wisdom.

The Missionary Vocation

The stereotypical image of the missionary in a pith helmet, living in the jungle and teaching "poor natives," is more a caricature from the past than a present reality, though such images die hard. For generations missionaries were the heroes of the church, shrouded in an aura of sacrifice and adventure and serving under compulsion of nothing less than the mysterious "missionary call."

Today not only has the missionary been taken off the pedestal, but the very necessity of sending traditional missionaries and the concept of the "missionary call" are being questioned. Just as the term *mission* has in recent decades been redefined, so too the term *missionary* is being redefined. The number of long-term missionary candidates in North America is falling (Moreau 2004; 2007). According to a survey of 250 students at a Christian liberal arts college, one reason for this trend is the lack of clarity about the nature and necessity of the missionary vocation (Thornton and Thornton 2008).

Like the word *mission*, the term *missionary* does not occur in most English Bibles. Nor has the concept of "missionary" ever been consistently defined throughout the history of the church (Beyerhaus 1969). Like most words its meaning is a matter of convention, which can evolve over time. Nevertheless, our understanding of a missionary as one sent by God on God's mission cannot be considered arbitrary, for the Bible has much to say about such concepts, even if the exact terminology does not appear in the English Bible.



themelios

*An International Journal for Students of
Theological and Religious Studies*

Volume 37 Issue 2 July 2012

EDITORIAL: The Beauty of Biblical Balance <i>D. A. Carson</i>	178
OFF THE RECORD: The Right to Ridicule? <i>Michael J. Ovey</i>	182
Bonhoeffer as Bible Scholar <i>Robert W. Yarbrough</i>	185
Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism <i>David Gibson</i>	191
Response to David Gibson <i>Martin Salter</i>	209
Telling the Story from the Bible? How Story Bibles Work <i>David A. Shaw</i>	211
High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel <i>David B. Garner</i>	249
Some Reflections on Enns and <i>The Evolution of Adam</i>: A Review Essay <i>Hans Madueme</i>	275
Book Reviews	287

THE GOSPEL COALITION

themelios

DESCRIPTION

Themelios is an international evangelical theological journal that expounds and defends the historic Christian faith. Its primary audience is theological students and pastors, though scholars read it as well. It was formerly a print journal operated by RTSF/UCCF in the UK, and it became a digital journal operated by The Gospel Coalition in 2008. The editorial team draws participants from across the globe as editors, essayists, and reviewers.

Themelios is published three times a year exclusively online at www.theGospelCoalition.org. It is presented in two formats: PDF (for citing pagination) and HTML (for greater accessibility, usability, and infiltration in search engines). *Themelios* is copyrighted by The Gospel Coalition. Readers are free to use it and circulate it in digital form without further permission (any print use requires further written permission), but they must acknowledge the source and, of course, not change the content.

EDITORS

General Editor: [D. A. Carson](#)

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
2065 Half Day Road
Deerfield, IL 60015, USA
themelios@thegospelcoalition.org

Managing Editor: [Charles Anderson](#)

Oak Hill Theological College
Chase Side, Southgate
London, N14 4PS, UK
charlesa@oakhill.ac.uk

Contributing Editor: [Michael J. Ovey](#)

Oak Hill Theological College
Chase Side, Southgate
London, N14 4PS, UK
mikeo@oakhill.ac.uk

Administrator: [Andrew David Naselli](#)

Grace Bible Church
107 West Road
Moore, SC 29369, USA
themelios@thegospelcoalition.org

BOOK REVIEW EDITORS

Old Testament

Daniel Santos
Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie—CPA
Rua Maria Borba, 15
Sao Paulo, SP, Brazil 01221-040
daniel.santos@thegospelcoalition.org

New Testament

[Alan Thompson](#)
Sydney Missionary & Bible College
PO Box 83
Croydon, NSW 2132, Australia
alan.thompson@thegospelcoalition.org

History and Historical Theology

[Nathan A. Finn](#)
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
P. O. Box 1889
Wake Forest, NC 27588, USA
nathan.finn@thegospelcoalition.org

Systematic Theology and Bioethics

Hans Madueme
Covenant College
14049 Scenic Highway
Lookout Mountain, GA 30750, USA
hans.madueme@thegospelcoalition.org

Ethics (but not Bioethics) and Pastoralia

[Dane Ortlund](#)
Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, IL 60187, USA
dane.ortlund@thegospelcoalition.org

Mission and Culture

[Jason Sexton](#)
Ridley Hall
Ridley Hall Road
Cambridge, CB3 9HG
England
jason.sexton@thegospelcoalition.org

EDITORIAL BOARD

Gerald Bray, *Beeson Divinity School*; Oliver D. Crisp, *Fuller Theological Seminary*; William Kynes, *Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church*; Ken Magnuson, *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*; Jonathan Pennington, *The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*; James Robson, *Wycliffe Hall*; Michael Thate, *Durham University*; Mark D. Thompson, *Moore Theological College*; Garry Williams, *The John Owen Centre, London Theological Seminary*; Paul Williamson, *Moore Theological College*; Stephen Witmer, *Pepperell Christian Fellowship*.

ARTICLES

Articles should generally be about 4,000 to 7,000 words (including footnotes) and should be submitted to the Managing Editor of *Themelios*, which is peer-reviewed. Articles should use clear, concise English, following *The SBL Handbook of Style* (esp. for abbreviations), supplemented by *The Chicago Manual of Style*. They should consistently use either UK or USA spelling and punctuation, and they should be submitted electronically as an email attachment using Microsoft Word (.doc or .docx extensions) or Rich Text Format (.rtf extension). Special characters should use a Unicode font.

REVIEWS

The book review editors generally select individuals for book reviews, but potential reviewers may contact them about reviewing specific books. As part of arranging book reviews, the book review editors will supply book review guidelines to reviewers.

High Stakes: Insider Movement Hermeneutics and the Gospel

— David B. Garner —

David Garner is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Pastor of Teaching at Proclamation Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.

1. Messianic Muslims and Muslim Evangelicals

1.1. What Is IM?

In June 2011, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) passed an overture entitled, “A Call to Faithful Witness.”¹ This overture, while sounding alarms on biblical translations that render the familial terms for God (Son, Father) with less offensive terms in the target language, also brought ecclesiastical attention to increasingly popular approaches to missions described as Insider Movements (IM).² Called now Jesus Movements by some,³ these controversial methods have gained traction in regions

¹ Overture 9 of the PCA General Assembly 2011. As instructed in this overture, the 2011 General Assembly moderator of the PCA appointed a study committee to produce an analytic report on Insider Movements. Published in May 2012, Part One of this report focuses on Bible translation and divine familial language. The report also includes the full text of the final version Overture 9. See “A Call to Faithful Witness, Part One—Like Father, Like Son: Divine Familial Language in Biblical Translation,” <http://pcaac.org/Ad%20Interim%20on%20Insider%20Movements%20Report%205-17-12.pdf> (accessed May 21, 2012).

² There is not just one version of the Insider Movement, and some prefer the language of Insider Movements. For our purposes IM represents both the singular and the plural. Extensive explanation, defense, and debate about IM can be found in numerous issues of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* [EMQ], *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* or *International Journal of Frontier Missions* [IJFM], and *St. Francis Magazine* [SFM]. For a sympathetic look at IM, see the articles at <http://www.thepeopleofthebook.org/strategyInsiderArticles.html> (accessed May 28, 2012); see also, Kevin Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoted’ in Acts,” *IFJM* 21:4 (2004): 155–165. A recent 18-author critique of IM comes in *Chrislam: How Missionaries are Promoting an Islamized Gospel* (ed. Joshua Lingel, Jeff Morton, and Bill Nikides; Garden Grove, CA: i2 Ministries, 2011). For a simpler but insightful introductory critique of IM, see Jeff Morton, *Insider Movements: Biblically Incredible or Incredibly Brilliant?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012). For direct interchange between proponents and opponents of IM, see the entire issue of *St. Francis Magazine* 5:4 (2009).

³ See Kevin Higgins, “Discipling the Nations and the Insider Movement Conversation,” *Mission Frontiers* 33:1 (January–February 2011): 26–27. Other identifiers include, “Movements to Jesus within Islam (Buddhism, Hinduism),” “kingdom movements to Jesus,” “Jesus movements that multiply disciples obedient to the Bible within different religious traditions,” “the Kingdom paradigm,” and “incarnational movements.” Cf. Morton, *Insider Movements*, 5.

where the Christian gospel has historically encountered harsh opposition. Motivated by the perceived scarcity of measurable fruit in places like Bangladesh and other predominately Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu countries,⁴ evangelical missionaries have employed IM techniques since the 1980s. In the 1990's, IM popularity expanded around the globe as many missionary practitioners became enamored with its tactics.⁵ Since these two formative decades, various forms of IM practice have entered the mainstream, crossed organizational and denominational boundaries, and now shape much of evangelical missions.

To their credit, IM-ers have sought to address certain missiological blind spots and have implemented greater methodological self-consciousness, seeking to halt unwittingly importing Western culture under the banner of Christianity.⁶ Measuring the success of that rectification to cultural imperialism is not our present concern. Rather we attend here to the more controversial facets of IM thinking. Many IM proponents insist that Muslims who convert to Christ should hold fast to various Islamic practices and avoid the identity of "Christian" altogether. This avoidance exceeds the realm of labels, as converts are called to *remain* inside Islamic religion and *retain* their Islamic cultural and religious identity. It is fair to say that most IM advocates intend that these *remaining* and *retaining* insiders not simply carry on their cultural and religious practices unthinkingly, but do so with an eye toward recasting these religious traditions and exposing their fellow Muslims to *Isa-Masih* (Jesus the Messiah).⁷ Some IM-ers assert that Christian missionaries should get "inside" the social and religious boundaries by public *conversion* to Islam, and some western missionaries have become practicing Muslims to deliver the message of Jesus.⁸ Still others assert that genuine Islamic perspective affirms that the "religion revealed by all the prophets

⁴For the sake of expediency, we will focus our attention primarily on IM in the Muslim world.

⁵Closely aligned to IM is C-5 on the C-Scale taxonomy, created by John Travis ("Must All Muslims Leave Islam to Follow Jesus?" *EMQ* 34 [1998]: 411–15). The C-scale presents a spectrum of "expressions of faith by MBBs [Muslim background believers]," where the "C" represents a different type of "Christ-centered community." For a gentle yet formidable critique of C-5, see Timothy C. Tennent, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'High Spectrum' Contextualization," *IJFM* 23:3 (2006): 101–15.

⁶IM advocate John Travis argues that Christian terms and Christianity bear liabilities antithetical to the gospel. "In the Muslim context, the word 'Christian' . . . connotes Western culture, war (the Crusades), colonialism and imperialism." Muslims "associate Christianity . . . [with] negative aspects of present day Western culture like immodest dress, sexual promiscuity, disrespect of elders, indulgence in alcohol, Hollywood violence, narcotics and pornography" (John Travis, "Messianic Muslim Followers of *Isa*," *IJFM* 17:1 [2000]: 53–59). Cf. J. T. Smith, "How Islamic Can Christianity Be?" <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/05/14/how-islamic-can-christianity-be/> (accessed May 28, 2012).

⁷For more discussion of these tactics, see also Phil Parshall, "Danger! New Directions in Contextualization," *EMQ* 34:4 (1998): 404–10; Stan Guthrie, *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century* (rev. ed.; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 130–35; Warren C. Chastain, "Should Christians Pray the Muslim Salat?" *IJFM* 12:3 (1995): 161–63; Basil Grafas, "Insider Movements: An Evangelical Assessment," http://www.i2ministries.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=120:insider-movements-an-evangelical-assessment&catid=27:articles-category&Itemid=72 (accessed May 26, 2012).

⁸This fact has been confirmed by direct correspondence with missionaries in secure areas; these particular tactics are also affirmed, albeit guardedly, in John Travis, "Messianic Muslim Followers of *Isa*," 55. Tennent ("Followers of Jesus," 108) notes that some C-5 advocates, including Travis, have moved away from calling westerners to become Muslim for the sake of evangelism. Cf. Roger Dixon, "Moving on from the C1–C6 Spectrum," *SFM* 5:4 (2009): 14; republished in *Chrislam*, 96.

(e.g., Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad) was originally the same . . . ‘true Islam’ is what real Christians believe.”⁹

How have such paradigmatic changes in missions gained traction? Though causes surely vary, ultimately IM practice prevails because of conviction. Affirming their commitment to Scripture, many have grown to believe IM methods alone honor the gospel’s integrity, that these movements alone follow the Spirit of God today. In fact, IM advocates view their missiological methods as not only within the scope of biblical permissibility, but rather as *mandated* by how Scripture portrays apostolic patterns. Is this so? Has IM unearthed the buried jewel of historic missions, recapitulating the first-century successes recorded in Acts? Is IM’s interpretation and application of the interface of apostolic method and first-century religion rich *rediscovery* or radical *redefinition*?

Piloting IM thinking is a set of determinative *hermeneutical* commitments, and it is these hermeneutical features that will serve as the focus of our analysis. Professing converts and missionary practitioners could surely be found to defend IM practice and proclaim evidence of its fruit. However, neither a battle of anecdotes nor listings of alleged successes and failures adequately reckon with IM practice. IM *thinking* needs addressing according to Scripture, and IM-ers themselves have discerned this need. As criticism has mounted, IM advocates have openly defended IM practices, producing not only anecdotes and statistics, but also arguing from Scripture itself. Such defenses have come primarily from missiologists and missionary practitioners, most with strong ties to Fuller Seminary’s renowned innovative missiologists, such as Donald McGavran. So integral to IM is this Fuller foundation that before we can adequately address its hermeneutical contours, we must understand the historical and conceptual impetus for these contours—that is, the cultural anthropology and missiology of McGavran and his colleagues.

1.2. A New Map for Missions

At the end of his influential life, McGavran cried out, with all of his missiological gravitas, for a “giant step” of prayerful deployment of frontier missionary societies to “focus on the unfinished task of world evangelization!”¹⁰ In this forceful plea, McGavran claimed that missiological zeal for the unreached masses would succeed only if combined with deliberate, tactical mobilization. Emotion without strategy is empty, and as he assessed his contemporary landscape, existing missions structures appeared woefully deficient to the monumental task. “Unless here in America literally thousands of new frontier missionary societies are founded, in thousands of local churches in most Churches (denominations), the ‘unreached peoples’ will not be reached.”¹¹ Notwithstanding the exaggerated American-centric dependence for worldwide evangelistic success, one can only appreciate McGavran’s vision and zeal.

McGavran proved himself a fearless maverick and strategist, a perpetual advocate for creative cultural analysis and attendant missiological corrections. In a fashion similar to and openly sympathetic to the controversial formulations of fellow Fuller professor Charles Kraft, McGavran paradigmatically relied upon cultural anthropological and sociological research.¹² Assessing his ardor and analysis, one

⁹ Bernard Dutch, “Should Muslims Become ‘Christians’?” *IJFM* 17:1 (2000): 17. One of the issues debated between IM advocates is the true prophethood of Muhammad.

¹⁰ Donald A. McGavran, “A Giant Step in Christian Mission,” *Mission Frontiers* 1:3 (1985): 31–33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹² See, for example, Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), vii–xviii, 93–95. See Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Theologizing in Cross-Cultural*

should also note here his foreboding definition of unreached peoples. Tucked neatly in the rallying call to mobilization lies a striking distinction between reached and unreached peoples, an underlying sociological concept that has birthed a powerful impetus for IM. McGavran asserts,

An “unreached” ethnos or segment of society is one in which individuals who are Christ’s followers are perceived by their fellows to have “left their own people and traitorously gone off to join another people.” Putting it positively, a people is to be considered reached when its members who become Christians are perceived by their fellows as “still our people who are pointing the way to what they believe as a good path for us all to follow.”¹³

The so-called traitorous departure of Christians, which McGavran bemoaned as early as *The Bridges of God* in 1955,¹⁴ generated early rationale for missiological recalibration. Taking aim at the “problem” of converts leaving their families and their social identities, and marching in step with McGavran’s vision for the world and angst over measured missions failures in resistant cultures, missiologists such as Charles Kraft, Ralph Winter, Kevin Higgins, John and Anna Travis, Dudley Woodberry, and Rebecca Lewis have drawn the IM map. By extending the boundaries of McGavran’s “people groups,” they have found ways to affirm a broader range of religious and cultural neutrality.¹⁵ McGavran consistently opposed missiology shaped by Western individualism,¹⁶ and IM proponents have elevated such “people groups” and “people movements” into a decisive paradigm, asserting broader acceptability of their non-Christian religious identity and practices, and encouraging “believing families . . . [to] remain inside their socioreligious communities.”¹⁷ Capitalizing on McGavran’s categories IM advocates have advanced extant socio-religious identity to a place of functional stasis and prominence,¹⁸ so that following Jesus means appropriating him within the boundaries of existing religions.

Perspective (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) and Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996). For points of sympathy and critique regarding Kraft, see Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 149–50, 167–76, 329–38.

¹³ McGavran, “Giant Step,” 31–32 (emphasis original).

¹⁴ Donald McGavran asserted, “To Christianize a whole people, the first thing *not* to do is to snatch individuals out of it into a different society” (*Bridges to God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* [New York: Friendship, 1955], 10). McGavran, responding to the rugged individualism that still dominates western evangelicalism, argues for “people movements” that seek to advance the Christian faith in a way that “the social life of the individual is not destroyed” (16).

¹⁵ IM advocates, in keeping with Fuller missiology, define religion in terms of cultural norms. See, e.g., Charles H. Kraft, “Is Christianity a Religion or a Faith?” in Charles H. Kraft, ed., *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 83–97.

¹⁶ McGavran, *Bridges*, 16, 34, 68–99.

¹⁷ Rebecca Lewis, “Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities,” *IJFM* 24:2 (2007): 76 (italics original).

¹⁸ We would be remiss here to neglect the contemporaneous and correlative theological changes at Fuller Seminary. Having established itself with explicit commitment to biblical inerrancy in 1947, Fuller openly abandoned its commitment to full biblical inerrancy by 1965. As reliance upon cultural anthropology and sociology increased, trust in Scripture correspondingly diminished. This shift in authority represents an entirely different epistemological, hermeneutical, and methodological (missiological) paradigm. See George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; repr. 1995); Nor-

Thus, according to IM missiological cartography, the best route toward creating a growing body of Jesus followers is to insist they (1) remain in existing cultural, social, familial, and religious networks and (2) retain their unique religious identity and practices. Asserting that much of what Westerners discern as *church* are truly “man-made ecclesiastical structures,”¹⁹ IM strategists call us to accept and promote such non-Christian communities of those who *follow Jesus*. All roads may not lead to Jesus, but the Spirit of Jesus surely blazes redemptive trails in non-conventional, *non-Christian*, ways.²⁰

1.3. God and the Apostles: The First Insiders?

The conviction of the IM promoters, self-consciously *evangelical*, is resolute: “What is truly at the heart of the insider movement paradigm is the God Who is at work directly among the nations, including their religions, to make in each a people for Himself. These are His movements, and He is the true Insider.”²¹ To IM theorists and practitioners, proclaiming the gospel to the unreached peoples of this age *requires* these correcting methods, methods that, they argue, emulate the behavior of the apostles. IM missiologists effectively see themselves as restoring *biblical* missions. With an eye to emulating courageous apostolic method, IM advocates ask, what did Jesus really do? What did the apostles do? What did the early church do? And what would they do today to reach peoples whose cultural and religious identities are thoroughly non-Christian? What would they do to reach people whose identities, relationships, and existence center in and survive only in these non-Christian, even anti-Christian contexts?

Reflecting on Paul’s missionary-zealous “I would become” words in 1 Cor 9, J. Dudley Woodberry, Professor of Islamic Studies at the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, raises the question about twenty-first-century emulation/application of apostolic method:

If Paul were retracing his missionary journeys today, would he add, “To the Muslim, I became a Muslim”? . . . Would he and the Jerusalem Council endorse Muslims being free to follow Jesus while retaining, to the extent this commitment allows, Muslim identity and practices, just as these Jerusalem leaders endorsed Jews being free to follow Jesus while retaining, to the extent that commitment allowed, Judaic identity and practices?²²

man L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 17–24.

¹⁹ Rebecca Lewis, “Can the Kingdom of God Break Out of Christendom? Expecting the Unexpected,” *Missions Frontiers* 33:3 (May–June 2011): 15.

²⁰ Some IM proponents make explicit the *temporary* nature of “Messianic” Islam, where practices like “mosque attendance may only be a transitional part of some C5 believers’ spiritual journey” (John Travis, “Messianic Muslim Followers of *Isa*,” 55). This transitional feature of IM or C5 practice is neither shared by all nor made explicit by most.

²¹ Kevin Higgins, “Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion, and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective,” *SFM* 5:4 (2009): 91.

²² J. Dudley Woodberry, “To the Muslim I Became a Muslim?” *IJFM* 24:1 (2007): 23. Cf. Brian K. Peterson, “The Possibility of a ‘Hindu Christ-Follower’: Hans Staffner’s Proposal for the Dual Identity of Disciples of Christ within High Caste Hindu Communities,” *IJFM* 24:2 (1988): 87–97. Georges Houssney provides an insightful critique of Woodberry’s thesis in “Would Paul Become Muslim to Muslims?” in *Chrislam*, 62–76.

2. Insider Movement Hermeneutics

2.1. Rebecca Lewis and IM Advocacy²³

With such questions ringing in our ears, we turn now to Rebecca Lewis, the daughter of another Fuller missiologist, Ralph D. Winter. In her writings, Lewis has attempted to rigorously defend IM and to define its legitimate parameters. In what sense can or *should* religious and cultural identity remain unchanged when trusting Jesus Christ? In what sense can we properly “assert that Christ calls people to change their hearts, not their religions”?²⁴ Not only a theorist, but a seasoned practitioner among the Berbers of North Africa, Lewis self-consciously reflects upon her own mission undertakings. Her growing corpus of publications, most of which is accessible on the Internet, has also elevated her influence for promoting and practicing IM.

Before addressing her thought directly, let me commend Lewis for her clear writing, general hermeneutical consistency, and energetic presentation. Her McGavran-*esque* vision for worldwide evangelism combined with a refusal to accept humanly constructed boundaries for kingdom work is at a formal level commendable. “We’ve never done it that way before” is an unconscionable, disastrous posture, one that finds no turf in Lewis’s thought. In addition, though it is an all too common practice to isolate the gospel message from the method of its proclamation, Lewis rightfully asserts the indivisibility of the two.

Employing a hermeneutical and methodological approach typical of the prevailing IM thinking, Lewis’s crystallized defense of IM appears in an article entitled, “The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements.”²⁵ This particular article will henceforth serve as our primary, though not exclusive, point of reference for analysis since it usefully distills key theological and missiological arguments that expose prevailing IM hermeneutics. Those either curious or concerned about IM will find here an accessible exposition of its interpretive and theological underpinnings, as well as a window into its practical implications. Attuned to IM critics, Lewis appeals that we revisit both how we understand the Christian gospel and assess IM. While her article renders nothing fundamentally new to IM discussions, its numerous engagements with Scripture, its comprehensive claims, and its disarmingly simple appeal beg a response.²⁶ Moreover, while Lewis has written other pieces on sociological factors in missions²⁷ and

²³ I am grateful to Rebecca Lewis for her responses to an earlier version of this analysis. Her comments have helped refine this article for its final form.

²⁴ Guthrie, *Missions*, 132–33. The sharp distinction between religion and relationship serves paradigmatically in IM, reflecting the religion vs. faith categories espoused by Charles H. Kraft. Cf. Tennent (“Followers of Jesus,” 111) also highlights the “trap” of yielding to the false dichotomy of “personal” versus “propositional.”

²⁵ Rebecca Lewis, “The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements,” *IJFM* 27:1 (2010): 41–48, available at http://www.ijfm.org/PDFs_IJFM/27_1_PDFs/27_1_Lewis.pdf (accessed 11 July 2012).

²⁶ Dick Brogden, a seasoned missionary to Muslims in Africa, critiqued an earlier article by Rebecca Lewis (“Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community,” *IJFM* 26:1 [2009]: 16–19), where he challenges numerous IM presuppositions. See Brogden, “Inside Out: Probing Presuppositions among Insider Movements,” *IJFM* 27:1 (2010): 33–40. This article is particularly useful, as the author has allowed a running commentary of response from Lewis to his critique.

²⁷ See, for example, Rebecca Lewis, “Underground Church Movements: The Surprising Role of Women’s Networks,” *IJFM* 21:4 (2004): 145–50.

other IM-related subjects,²⁸ in this article she explicitly attempts to build her most compelling *biblical* case for IM philosophy and methodology.

Honing in on selected Scripture texts, Lewis explicitly and ambitiously argues that IM is not simply *a* biblical position but *the* biblical position. Another prominent IM advocate, Kevin Higgins, shares this clarion ambition, owning a grand sense of IM's historic significance:

I believe the debate about Insider Movements actually is a debate about the gospel, one as potentially earth-shaking as the Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Anabaptist reform movements of the 16th century. Those movements were driven by the recovery of basic, foundational biblical truths such as justification by faith, a gospel of grace, the priesthood of all believers, and the place of the Bible in the life of the church and of the believer. And they forced church leaders to re-evaluate church practice and doctrine.²⁹

Highlighting the increasing numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists to whom “God is granting faith in Jesus Christ” yet who are not “becoming ‘Christians’ in name or adopting traditional Christian forms or identity,”³⁰ Lewis suggests that Insider Movements are actually not a *creation* of missiologists at all, but spontaneous activities that require us “to evaluate if they are biblically legitimate.”³¹ The role of missiologists is rendered passive and investigative, rather than persuaded and promotional. Regardless of how we might treat this interpretation of the *origin* of IM,³² as the growing publications make obvious, perpetuation is hardly passive. Description has openly become prescription, and commensurate with Higgins’ analysis, Lewis’s argument raises prescriptive questions about both *practice* and *doctrine*.

2.2. The IM Stakes

One of the pervasive challenges of interacting with IM argumentation is clarity. Definitions, identifiable theological parameters, and even clarifying applications of IM assertions remain elusive. IM argument characteristically delivers broad affirmations that posit trajectories but leave the explicit nature of those trajectories fluid. *Non*-definition is surely intentional, as IM paradigms align with Paul

²⁸ See, for example, Rebecca Lewis, “Strategizing for Church Planting Movements in the Muslim World: Informal Reviews of Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity* and David Garrison’s *Church Planting Movements*,” *IJFM* 21:2 (2004): 73–77; idem, “Promoting,” 75–76; idem, “Honoring,” 16–19; idem, “Can the Kingdom,” 15; idem, “Possible Pitfalls of Jesus Movements: Lessons from History,” *Missions Frontiers* 33:3 (May–June 2011): 21–24.

²⁹ On this basis, Higgins elevates the seriousness of the IM proposals: “Similarly, I see Insider Movements as fueling (and being fueled by) a rediscovery of the Incarnation, of a thoroughly biblical approach to culture and religion, of the role of the Holy Spirit’s leading God’s people to ‘work out’ the gospel in new ways, and of an understanding of how God works in the world within and beyond his covenant people. And we may be forced to re-evaluate some widely held ideas and practices of our own” (Higgins, “Devoted,” 155–56). That Higgins emphasizes Christ’s incarnation as missiological exemplar rather than Christ’s redemption as substitutionary underscores a thoroughgoing theological misalignment.

³⁰ Lewis, “Integrity,” 47. See also Lewis’s development of an alleged historic basis for the spread of the gospel “along pre-existing social networks” (“Strategizing for Church Planting Movements,” 75; “Honoring,” 17–18).

³¹ Rebecca Lewis’ response in Brogden, “Inside Out,” 33, note *a*. IM frequently emphasizes that IM and C-5 thinking are descriptive, not prescriptive.

³² Even if it could be shown that IM movements have been spontaneous (a debated assertion), that assessment does not warrant turning analysis into system, description into prescription. Spontaneity does not inherently signify divine blessing.

Hiebert's "centered set" paradigm in which *movement* defines following Jesus.³³ Belief in Christ is not about doctrine ("bounded set") *per se*, but about orientation; it is not about adherence to particular beliefs according to defined boundaries, but instead about process toward the center, Jesus Christ ("centered set"). Lewis marches in lock step with this thinking. While she surely would not deem all religious practices acceptable for a Christ-follower, the rigorous commitment to undefined boundaries compels avoiding specific contemporary examples or tools for analyzing such questions; to do so would establish improper boundaries when the very notion of such boundaries derails the paradigm. With exquisite irony, however, such centered-set orientation is *bounded* by a commitment to no definitive boundaries.³⁴

In 2007, Lewis described IM trajectories in terms of their diverse, non-Western, non-traditional communal character: "insider movements' consist of believers remaining in and transforming their own pre-existing family networks, minimally disrupting their own pre-existing families and communities. These believing families and their relational networks *are* valid local expressions of the Body of Christ."³⁵ Lewis and other IM advocates deem divergent religious structures sufficiently neutral, so that they speak of "Messianic" or "biblical" Muslims, and "Hindu Christ-followers."³⁶ Accordingly, whether Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist, extant socio-religious structures should serve as suitable expressions of believing in Jesus.³⁷ Lewis calls us to rethink our categories and, with no express bounding qualifications, to legitimize the non-Christian communities of those who follow Jesus. Scripture endorses, she contends, such a posture toward these religious forms: "Just like in the New Testament, He [Jesus] does not seem to be concerned that religious structures or forms be established in His name."³⁸

To be sure, Lewis describes insiders as "remaining in and transforming"³⁹ these networks; however, the effectiveness of such transforming influence is both highly suspect and actually impossible to

³³ For an explanation of bounded and centered set paradigms, see Paul G. Hiebert "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," *Gospel in Context* 1:4 (1978): 24–29.

³⁴ While influential in missiological discourse, Hiebert's bounded-set versus centered-set distinction fails to satisfy conceptually or practically. Bounded sets necessarily possess centering features, and centered sets necessarily operate within certain boundaries. Moreover, any claims that these paradigms are mutually exclusive or that one is inferior to the other cannot be biblically defended. Charles Van Engen (*Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 183) builds his "Evangelist Paradigm" around centered-set assumptions. He claims, "The major question is not to what religious system a person belongs. Rather, the crucial issue is one's center. The ultimate question is the question of discipleship, of one's proximity to, or distance from, Jesus the Lord."

³⁵ Lewis, "Promoting," 76 (emphasis original).

³⁶ Rick Brown, "Biblical Muslims," *IJFM* 24:2 (2007): 65–74; John Travis, "Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa," 53–59; Peterson, "Possibility of a 'Hindu Christ-Follower,'" 87–97; <http://www.jesusinthequran.org/> (accessed May 26, 2012).

³⁷ Lewis insists on two distinct characteristics of IM: "1. The Gospel takes root within *pre-existing communities* or social networks, which *become* the main expression of 'church' in that context. Believers are not gathered from diverse social networks to create a 'church.' New parallel social structures are not invented or introduced. 2. Believers *retain their identity* as members of their socio-religious community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible" ("Honoring," 16, emphasis original).

³⁸ Lewis, "Can the Kingdom," 15.

³⁹ Lewis, "Promoting," 76.

measure objectively.⁴⁰ But even more fundamentally, the way in which such networks and their practice are to be “transformed” reveals that IM thinking is predisposed to accept other religions’ traditions and practices. Such alleged neutrality of religious activity, which governs the IM paradigms, must receive fullest biblical scrutiny. For opposing reasons, both proponents and opponents trumpet that it is critically necessary to expose IM thinking. Notwithstanding the vital missiological questions, one must appreciate the theological and ecclesiological import here, a point that Lewis herself extends without ambiguity and with redundant refrain: at stake is “the integrity of the gospel itself.”⁴¹

In keeping with these high stakes, we must consider this integrity question. Is the IM “gospel” of which Lewis speaks truly the *biblical* gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God? Does the IM approach to Scripture faithfully present Jesus Christ as risen *Lord*, with all that attends him cosmically, redemptively, hermeneutically, ecclesiological, and missiologically?

2.3. Foundations of IM Hermeneutics

In “Integrity,” Lewis delineates core principles: the gospel’s *unchanging content* and *unchanging scope*. Concerning the latter, Lewis underscores the universality of the good news for all peoples. Concerning the former, she avers in words that formally echo Paul’s commendation of gospel purity (Gal 1:1–9): we must not distort the gospel “by adding additional requirements such as adherence to Christian traditions.”⁴² By overtly affirming gospel purity and universality, the initial formulation sounds promising. Such hopefulness grows in her cursory framing of biblical history, as she evidences a grasp of the organic character of Scripture, seeing the gospel as a realization of the Hebrew Scriptures:

Since circumcision was the sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham, and Pentecost was the celebration of the giving of the law on stone tablets to Moses, the gospel as a new covenant, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, were the fulfillment, not the abrogation, of all God’s promises in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴³

Digging beneath the presenting structure of Lewis’s formulations, however, we discover some woefully wobbly footings in the interpretive paradigm. The assertion of organic biblical fulfillment is tempered by her insistence that the Jewishness of the gospel was a matter of a “religious framework.” Old Covenant practices were culturally specific, and as such they are not matters of the gospel (spiritual), but matters of religion (human).⁴⁴ Even the fact that the OT “religious framework” was “God-given”⁴⁵ evidently means only that its content, which called for certain practices, was just for the Jews *as a nation, a culture, a people group*. In the NT age, the gospel’s unchanging content came to these Jewish people in their context first, but their context of religious practice is ethnically theirs, and the Jewishness of the gospel is dispossessed of significance beyond that of its historic foray into their communities.

⁴⁰ This difficulty is exacerbated in view of identity confusion. Are insiders Muslims? Are they Christians? Are they Muslims *and* Christians? What really does “Messianic Muslim” mean?

⁴¹ Lewis, “Integrity,” 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ In keeping with the Fuller analysis (see note 15), religion, for Lewis, stems from a people group, defines their context, and functioning primarily as a feature of cultural identity rather than bearing spiritual or moral significance.

⁴⁵ Lewis, “Integrity,” 42.

Accordingly, to Lewis, this “Jewish religious community” is effectively a cultural and non-theological entity of which certain members in the first century appropriated Jesus into their religious life and forms. The practices in this religious community are spiritually insignificant in an ultimate sense, entirely disconnected from the real substance of the gospel. Thus, the gospel’s meaning transcends these cultural phenomena, *not in a way of radical transforming but of gradual reinterpreting*. It is here for the first time that the critical substructure of her thought surfaces—that is, the driving commitment for Lewis, in harmony with McGavran and Kraft, is cultural anthropology.

Under such a cultural-anthropological mindset, *temporality proves cultural assignability*; that the Jewish religious forms had a terminus indicates that they lack(ed) divine authoritative mandate or, at the very least, they lack(ed) spiritual import in a way necessary for spiritual life. Lewis claims, “Paul showed that the religious traditions of Jewish believers had not delivered them from their sinful nature (Ephesians 2:3), nor from their bondage to demonic forces (Galatians 4:3).”⁴⁶ She then concludes, “Neither would these traditions deliver the Gentiles from sin, and could merely lead to a new type of bondage.”⁴⁷ On the surface, this language may seem compatible with Pauline thought. Paul indeed calls believers in Christ away from dependence upon religious activity to full dependence upon Jesus Christ. As Lewis reiterates, “Paul’s main concern was clearly for the integrity of the gospel.”⁴⁸ What she *means*, however, by “religious traditions,” gospel integrity, and dependence on Christ we must consider further.

The primary religious form Lewis raises is circumcision. With her governing cultural orientation, Lewis insists that Paul “had changed the mark of the covenant from an external mark (circumcision, Gen 17:13) to an internal mark.”⁴⁹ This external mark of the covenant to Lewis is one of those religious traditions, and as such it possessed no real, spiritual value in its Old Covenant expression. Immediately we face a problem. This conclusion fails to uphold Scripture’s presentation of circumcision,⁵⁰ and it defies both the thoroughgoing spiritual character of this sign and the integrated way in which Scripture (in the OT and NT) presents redemption, faith, and obedience. While some in Israel errantly treated it as such, it was never merely an ethnic sign (Rom 4:11), making any such external rendering of circumcision morally culpable, not religiously neutral.⁵¹

Questions about circumcision invariably draw us to the Pauline epistles, such as Romans, Galatians, Philippians and Colossians. We comment briefly here on Col 2:11–12. Interpretations vary on this

⁴⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁰ For more on the biblico-theological character of circumcision, see John Fesko, *Word, Water, and Spirit: A Reformed Perspective on Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), and Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

⁵¹ Our point here does not force a decision concerning paedo- or credo-baptism, but rather insists upon the inherent *spirituality* of circumcision as both Testaments attest. [Editor’s note: Cf. David Gibson’s article in this issue of *Themelios*: “[Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism](http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/sacramental-supersessionism-revisited-a-response-to-martin-salter-on-the-relationship-between-circumcision-and-baptism),” available at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/sacramental-supersessionism-revisited-a-response-to-martin-salter-on-t>.]

text,⁵² but what is clear in any reasonable exegesis is that Paul discerns the spiritual significance of circumcision to find its fulfilled theological meaning in Christ's redemption. The spiritual weight Paul gives to circumcision is no NT *creation* (Rom 2:28–29; 4:11–12), but rather a NT *fulfillment*. Paul *did not change* circumcision from an external to an internal reality. Circumcision had always been a spiritual mark (Deut 10:12–16). Indeed, it was a matter of explicit covenant command by God himself to his covenant people for their obedience (Gen 17; Lev 26:40–42; Rom 2:25–29; Eph 2:11–14).

Paul repeatedly and harshly rebukes those who seek redemptive efficacy in circumcision (Gal 5:2–6), but even in his rebuke, his treatment of the subject defies any purely cultural interpretation of the sign itself. Contrarily, while circumcision was neither an end in itself nor a means of earning right standing before God (cf. Gal 6:15), the Apostle Paul builds upon its organic spiritual significance throughout the OT, expressing how the sign culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In summary, that physical circumcision was mandated only in the OT age does not make its true meaning cultural or mere religious custom; such a conclusion is at best a naïve interpretive *non sequitur*. The change in the NT, in its laying to rest the obligation of circumcision, was not due to circumcision's cultural negotiability, but to the conclusion of its prior covenantal function (Eph 2:12). Accordingly, the OT-to-NT transition discloses movement from spiritual promise to spiritual fulfillment, rather than cultural forms creatively appropriated or interpretively hijacked by the apostles.⁵³

Lewis's culture-centric rendering of circumcision then exposes the structural footings in her interpretive method. Determining that abrogating circumcision evidences that it is spiritually negotiable manifests a determinative epistemological reliance on culture as the driving force for biblical interpretation. Cultural primacy in Jewish practice flows seamlessly to the conclusion that other religious practice is also culturally neutral and thereby no inherent concern of the gospel. That such a determinative cultural grid drives Lewis's IM interpretation comes into full view when we see how she analyzes other biblical passages through her circumcision-paradigm.⁵⁴

2.4. John 4 and Samaritanism

Capitalizing on a text often referenced by IM proponents, Lewis contends that Jesus's dealings with the Samaritan woman (John 4) disclose a gospel message that extended beyond the Jewish religion.⁵⁵ According to Lewis, "Jesus had given Samaritan believers the freedom to worship '*in spirit and truth*' without requiring them to become proselytes or to come to the Jewish synagogues."⁵⁶ This conclusion is

⁵² While it is not the majority view, this author concurs with O'Brien's interpretation that the circumcision of Christ is the eschatological judgment borne in his own body (Col 2:11–12). Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1982), 117–18.

⁵³ John Murray wisely reminds us, "Our knowledge of the Bible, if it is to be really adequate, must be knowledge of the Bible as it is, and must reflect . . . [its] organic character We must understand that the whole Bible stands together and that fibres of organic connection run through the whole Bible connecting one part with every other part and every one truth with every other truth" ("The Study of the Bible," in *Collected Writings*, vol. 1: *The Claims of Truth* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976], 5).

⁵⁴ Though Lewis comments especially on John 4 and Acts 15, other favorite IM texts include Num 22–24; 2 Kgs 5; 1 Cor 7; 1 Cor 9; and the book of Jonah. See Bill Nikides, "The Insider Story: Theology," in *Chrislam*, 12–22; idem, "Lost in Translation: Insider Movements and Biblical Interpretation," in *Chrislam*, 44–61; Tennent, "Followers of Jesus," 105–9.

⁵⁵ See Lewis, "Integrity," 42. Lewis also treats John 4 and Acts 15 in "Honoring," 17–18.

⁵⁶ Lewis, "Integrity," 42.

true, but not in the manner Lewis infers from this passage. Jesus is not proclaiming cultural ambivalence, that is, that Jewish tradition/custom is acceptable and Samaritan tradition/custom is acceptable. He does not preach ambivalence about socio-religious identity. Rather he proclaims that he fulfills the revelation that came through Abraham and Moses and that he has arrived to usher in the promised new age.

The historico-transitional cast of the passage shines brightly: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father” (John 4:21).⁵⁷ Christ’s message about worship “in spirit and truth” is laden with this temporal—or better, eschatological—significance.⁵⁸ Strikingly, the particularity of his Jewishness sustains this historic, eschatological point. When Jesus says, “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22), he argues for the broad scope of his theological significance on the *basis* of his narrow identity as a Jew. In other words, what makes his salvation efficacious to the Samaritan woman is his OT-fulfilling incarnate identity as the promised Jewish Messiah (“I who speak to you am he,” John 4:26) breaking into history in Palestine. His soteric value resides precisely in fulfilling special revelation, a revelation that moves from particularity (Jewish) to universality (Samaritans, Gentiles, etc.) in keeping with the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1–3). In short, his universal relevance springs forth from his eschatological particularity.

Loaded then with decisive theological significance, Jesus’s instruction to the Samaritan woman simply cannot be squeezed into affirming cultural neutrality! Instead, identifying himself as the genuine fulfillment of biblical revelation and as the eschatological Messiah, Jesus called her to a radical and new allegiance, commensurate with the theological weight of the historic moment. His ontological and eschatological identity beckoned a categorically different understanding and practice of worship—“spirit and truth” worship defined by faith in the Son of God, *not by Samaritanism*. Of course, following Jesus does not delegitimize the Samaritan woman’s cultural identity, but faithful following also cannot be properly construed as affirming her religious identity and practices in a way that makes worship in “spirit and truth” culturally rendered rather than eschatologically transformed. Proper interpretation of this event requires bringing all dimensions of Samaritanism under the theological authority of Christ’s identity, rather than in any way yielding Christ’s authority to Samaritan cultural or religious hegemony. At the very least, Lewis’s construction fails to reckon with the text’s permeating eschatology and thereby eclipses its central meaning and mistakes theological substance for cultural diversity.

2.5. Acts 15 and Redemptive History

After discerning certain cultural/religious affinities of Samaritans and Jews, Lewis turns to what she considers the more difficult case of the Gentiles, their culture and their religion. Summarizing her analysis of the first-century expansion of the gospel, she asks a couple of formative questions:

Did the gospel message bring grace only to those who join the family of faith as it was then construed (the circumcised believers who kept the Mosaic Law) or could the gospel bring salvation to all, regardless of their social and religious context? . . .

⁵⁷ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁵⁸ Fortifying the already explicit eschatological contours of the passage is the emphasis on the *Spirit*. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 224–26.

Did the message of Jesus Christ only have power to save those who also accepted the religious framework in which Christ himself was incarnated, or could the gospel save those in an alien context as well?⁵⁹

Initially, these questions seem innocuous enough. After all, who would deny that the gospel did not and does not require Gentiles to become Jews? Who would deny that the gospel defies works-religion? In turning to the Acts 15 dispute, Lewis discloses what she fully intends by her questions. She describes faithful Jews in the Old Covenant as practicing “religious traditions,”⁶⁰ and then concludes that Peter’s speech in Acts 15 intended to defend “the power of the gospel to save believers who retain their Gentile culture and identity.”⁶¹ Moving directly to the Apostle Paul, she concludes that he likewise argues “repeatedly that the gospel must move into the Gentile people groups unhindered by external religious expectations.”⁶² Lewis accordingly concludes that to make religious practices a matter of the gospel is to pervert the gospel’s purity. In addition, religious traditions of the Jews already proved themselves impotent to save,⁶³ and “it is the gospel that is the transformative power in the life of a believer,”⁶⁴ not his religion. Therefore, as Lewis sees it, one’s religious practices are not the turf of the gospel, as the gospel surpasses—or better, does not concern itself primarily with—one’s religious identity or practices.

This cultural wrapping of first century Jew-Gentile relations comes quickly unraveled. According to Scripture, real faith introduces the believer to an entirely new identity in Jesus Christ (Col 3:1–17) and to a brand new familial identity in communion with others distinctly called as God’s children by faith (Rom 8:16–17; 1 Cor 12:12–31). Christ’s lordship transcends religion and culture, not in the sense of ignoring it, but in rebuking its ungodly practices and in calling redeemed Jews and Gentiles to biblical, Christ-shaped community, with its divinely revealed ethical and religious forms. The divine gift of faith vivifies dead and unbelieving hearts (Eph 2:1–10) and combats all rebellious moral and religious practices (Jas 2:14–26; 1 Cor 6:1–20)—whether they are distortions of revealed religion or humanly (or demonically) created false religion. One’s core commitments and practices receive comprehensive and radical recalibration according to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Heb 10:19–39; 1 Cor 15:1–58).

The best of IM advocacy surely concurs with the *principle* of the gospel’s confrontation with unbelief, but with IM commitments to the autonomy of those in other religious cultures, *what* the gospel combats and *how* it does so remain both unbounded and inadequate. Discernment about the gospel’s authoritative impact upon cultural and religious practices becomes hopelessly obscured when one’s paradigm for interpretation is cultural rather than redemptive-historical. Lewis’s exposition here unavoidably suffers from such obscuring, as she assesses the situation through a fluid cultural paradigm rather than a decisive theological/eschatological one. Below we explore more specifics concerning the gospel’s power and calling. But for now we should state simply that for understanding the Jew and Gentile context, the organically and theologically rich contours of biblical revelation simply will not be

⁵⁹ Lewis, “Integrity,” 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 44.

⁶³ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

squashed under cultural analysis that indiscriminately affirms religious identity and practice or in any way minimizes the spiritual antithesis between belief and unbelief.⁶⁵

Before proceeding with Lewis's argument, a word here regarding biblical interpretation is in order. Critical to biblical hermeneutics is the organic nature of redemptive events typified, anticipated, and fulfilled. From Scripture's redemptive-historical perspective, Jesus was the embodiment of biblical (Jewish) promise, and thus the eschatological thrust in John 4 actually characterizes biblical revelation. Jesus's Jewishness matters then for *theological* reasons, as it was to the Jews that divine revelation had come and to the Jews that the promise of Messiah had come (Gen 12). Moreover, Christ's fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12), for example, is as relevant to the *Gentiles* as it is to the Jews; Abraham is called the father of all who believe—Jew and Gentile (Rom 4:11–12; Gal 3:7–9, 27–29). While divine revelation comes *through* the Jews, its authoritative, redemptive message was not only *for* the Jews! As anticipated in the OT (Gen 12:1–3; cf. 1 Pet 1:10–12), the first century marks the hinge point of the ages (Heb 1:1–4) when Jesus Christ the Protagonist of all history brings the unfolding of revelation to its dénouement in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The spiritually dynamic revelation of the NT is grounded in the spiritually alive, yet anticipatory, revelation of the OT. The sub-eschatological restlessness (anticipation) of the OT revelation is, in fact, embedded in the revelation itself.⁶⁶

As presented by the apostles, the first century A.D. was a unique, unrepeatable period of redemptive history. It is epochally transitional; the work of Jesus Christ inaugurates the promised new age (Acts 2:17; Heb 1:1–2; 9:26; cf. Matt 12:28; Paul's use of "first fruits" in Rom 8 and 1 Cor 15). The entire NT organically connects to the OT, as it climactically presents the incarnate Son of God as the substance of all OT anticipation (see, e.g., Luke 24:13–49; Rom 1:1–7; Heb 1:1–4; John 5:39–47). Accordingly, it must be understood that the primary events about which the NT concerns itself—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—are, at their very core, *eschatological*.⁶⁷ Hence, Acts and the epistles of the NT must be seen first in view of these historic, christological events. As Paul has put it, his entire ministry centers upon the Scripture-fulfilling life, death, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 2:2; 15:1–3); Christ's person and work exhaustively shapes his interpretation of Scripture (2 Cor 1:20); and Christ's

⁶⁵ Such ambiguity and truncation have become common in much missiological argument. For example, Van Engen (*Mission on the Way*, 183–87) proposes three missiological implications of his "Evangelist Paradigm": (1) faith particularism, (2) cultural pluralism, and (3) ecclesiological inclusivism. While we appreciate the unambiguous assertion of salvation in Christ alone, this model fails to consider adequately critical epistemological questions, clouds the relationship between faith and culture, and by a truncated definition of the church, effectively distances personal faith from Scripture's determinative teaching on ecclesiology. "As Paul declares in Romans, and we see modeled in Acts, to confess with one's mouth and believe in one's heart that Jesus is Lord—that is all there is. Nothing else really matters. All else is to be held lightly. Everything else is negotiable." (184)

⁶⁶ David B. Garner, "Did God Really Say?" in *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture* (ed. David B. Garner; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2012), 154–59.

⁶⁷ All too often eschatology is improperly relegated to speculative charts and graphs seeking to depict the chronology of *future* events. Scripture presents eschatology in an unambiguously different sense, connecting the OT and NT in a historico-genetic, two-age fashion (cf. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994). A building anticipation of the coming Messiah in the Last Days characterizes the OT age. The NT presents Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of that anticipation and explicitly exposes his first coming in terms of its epochal significance (see, e.g., Heb 1:1–2). In short, Jesus launches the Last Days; he inaugurates eschatology. Historically and theologically speaking, we are not awaiting the Last Days; since the first century A.D., we have been *in them*.

historic triumph defines his method of proclamation (Eph 3:8–13).⁶⁸ The interpretive presupposition of apostolic ministry is the accomplishment of redemption in Jesus Christ; this eschatological center shapes all reflection upon redemption accomplished, applied, and proclaimed.⁶⁹

In the historically unique period of transition in the book of Acts, the church is growing into its understanding of this cosmically significant meaning of Jesus Christ's work and the unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit. While cultures surely felt a jolt at this critical historical point, this is not a period merely of cultural upheaval. It is foremost a period of *theological* upheaval in which the OT worship forms are replaced by the substance of those forms—Jesus Christ himself. The apostles faced the challenge of guiding the church to move from these spiritual typological forms (OT) to understanding and applying their antitypical realities (NT). Again, this transition is not primarily a matter of cultural adaptation but of organic theological realization. The Old Covenant shadows had given way to the glorious christological light. The reason the apostles handled things in Acts 15 the way they did, when they recognized “the movement to Christ among the Greeks was from God and the Greek ‘Christians’ should not be required to adopt the religious traditions of the church in Jerusalem,”⁷⁰ was *not* cultural neutrality. Rather they acted because of the epochal transition that Jesus Christ the Son of God inaugurated, attested by the outpouring of his Spirit. Christ's work, in fulfillment of the promise made to Abram (Gen 12), marked the dawn of the new age in the gospel. This historic, theological reality changed *everything*.

2.6. Eschatology and Identity in Christ

To summarize then, the argument in Acts 15 is decidedly *not* a defense of “the power of the gospel to save believers who retain their Gentile culture and identity.”⁷¹ Such a conclusion betrays a reductionistic and theologically anemic interpretation of the work of Jesus Christ! Old Covenant Jewish practices had been divinely given, possessing real spiritual significance, a significance culminating in the once-for-all work of Jesus Christ. Now OT faith in its old forms truly had come to an end; it attained fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Thus because of Christ, to return to Judaism in its Old Covenant forms was eschatologically retrogressive, and to obey the covenant God through the Old Covenant spiritual signs was no longer necessary.⁷² Such termination of Old Covenant practice indicated God's faithfulness to his spiritual promises (Gen 12; Gal 3:8)! Of course, we do not find the apostles calling their hearers to repudiate their cultural identity indiscreetly; rather we find them consistently calling their hearers to a faith that produces obedience (Rom 1:7; 16:25), in which their union to Jesus Christ now comprehensively defines their identity, and due to this identity, they are called to submit all of their lives, cultural habits, and religious practices to the explicit authority of Jesus Christ. Solidarity of faith

⁶⁸ See, for example, Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 198–238.

⁶⁹ See John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

⁷⁰ Lewis, “Integrity,” 44.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷² Isolated apostolic instruction (e.g., 1 Cor 7) for continuing circumcision should be understood according to the transitional age of the first century. “The one mark of sociological distinction formerly did have religious significance but does so no more—circumcision” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 311).

and confession within ethnic diversity manifests a rich component of the single eschatological people of God (Heb 2:10–18; Rev 7:9–12).⁷³

Yet just as she does with Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Lewis renders the Acts 15 cultural context supreme, and in her hermeneutical paradigm eclipses the redemptive-historical. In Lewis's IM schema that both elevates culture as interpretively primary and neutralizes religion's spiritual significance, salvation in Christ saves one not *from* false religion, but *in* false religion. This critical theological mistake manifests itself not only in the way in which Lewis interprets the ancient Scriptures, but also the way in which she presents Scripture's teaching for IM's contemporary practice in people groups around the world.

3. IM Hermeneutics: Christian Life, Church and Missions

To address the modern mission context, Lewis reflects back to her interpretation of the Jew-Gentile relations. To put it in her own language,

It is more accurate to recognize that in the first century there were in existence at least two radically different religions based on Jesus Christ. There was the Jewish version, breathing life into the Laws of Moses and Jewish ritual holy days, and there was the Greco-Roman version, turning philosophy-loving hearts, that explored the nuances of the Trinity and the incarnation.⁷⁴

With this ancient analysis in view, Lewis insists we should recognize that "Paul was setting a template for how the gospel penetrates radically different cultures."⁷⁵ Besides the historical inaccuracy of asserting "radically different [Jewish and Gentile] cultures,"⁷⁶ these striking statements and other supporting ones beg further consideration. As Higgins promised, IM does indeed force "church leaders to re-evaluate

⁷³ While arguing consistently for unity of the body (in identity and spiritual obedience), Paul does not deny the presence of differences between the Jew and the Gentile (Gal 2:15). In fact, in 1 Cor 7:17–24 (cf. Lewis, "Integrity," 46), he urges the first-century Jews and Gentiles to pursue New Covenant obedience, while not concerning themselves with their circumcised or uncircumcised status—a vital matter of obedience under the Old Covenant (cf. Gal 2:3). Paul here very practically evidences his understanding how the eschatological age brings the spiritual obedience of circumcision to an end. "Paul's concern . . . is not that they *retain* their present social setting, but that they *recognize* it as a proper one in which to live out God's call. . . . Thus he tells them that being in Christ does not negate their present situation; but neither is he arguing that it absolutizes it. . . . The gospel absolutely transcends, and thereby eliminates altogether, all merely social distinctions. In Christ Jew and Greek together, whether slave or free, make up one body" (Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 309, 311–12). Though IM advocates seek to find a contemporary parallel in Islam, Jay Smith demonstrates the falsity of the parallel: "The problem with *saying like* or *remaining in* Islam is that Islam is both a religion and a culture. Staying in Islam means to take on all the religious connotations, as well as its spiritual power. In these verses [1 Cor 7:17–24] Paul does not suggest Gentiles stay as pagan worshippers in their local temples" (Jay Smith, "An Assessment of IM's Principle Paradigms," in *Chislam*, 286). Cf. Tennent, "Followers of Jesus," 107.

⁷⁴ Lewis, "Integrity," 45.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁶ The vigorous cultural distinctions presented here simply do not withstand scholarly analysis regarding the Hellenized Jewish world of the first century. See, e.g., Martin Hengel, *Jews, Greeks and Barbarians: Aspects of Hellenization of Judaism in the Pre-Christian Period* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); James D. Newsome, *Greeks, Romans, Jews: Currents of Culture and Belief in the New Testament World* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992). Even if, as Louis Feldman contends, Hengel's Hellenization thesis is overstated, history

church practice and doctrine,”⁷⁷ and accordingly, Lewis’s conclusions deliver formulaic and, as we will see, relativizing assertions concerning faith and faithfulness. We will present three interrelated applications of her IM hermeneutic for contemporary *practice* and *doctrine*.

3.1. Relativized Religious Practice

With unfettered clarity, Lewis’s summary statements reiterate the IM view of religion’s cultural relativity. According to IM thought, Jews take their ancient traditions and add new “gospel” meanings; Gentiles take their own religious proclivities and imbue them with fresh meanings, establishing their own religiously and culturally practiced “gospel.” Since the OT came to Jews in their cultural context, we must interpret it first on the basis of that human context. Therefore, seeing the OT in its NT fulfillment is essentially cultural; such interpretation was good for the Jews but unnecessary for the Gentiles. Even NT commands must be read through the cultural lenses required by IM hermeneutics.⁷⁸ Ironically, Lewis’s idea of the unchanging and transcendent power of the gospel obscures the fact that her version of the gospel changes according to the culture in which it goes; its transcendence becomes transience, its power, acquiescence. Gospel appropriation takes shape according to the *norma normans* (norming norm) of the religious culture.

This IM rendering of religious practices—whether biblical or extrabiblical—moves Lewis in two directions. On the one hand, concerning the Jews, it relativizes the gospel fulfillment of OT promise. By squeezing Old Covenant practices into non-spiritual, non-theological matters, Lewis makes NT interpretation of them unique to Jewish believers. In like fashion, this cultural determination facilitates turning pagan religious practices into spiritually neutral, negotiable matters. While she does not get explicit about what specific religious practices she advocates the Gentiles of the first century to maintain, by her extrapolation to the contemporary implications, we can discern with little doubt the scope of religious relativism in view. Muslims stay Muslim, Buddhists stay Buddhist, and Hindus stay Hindu. Why? Because these “families and communities are claiming to know and to submit to Jesus as their Lord and Savior” while living “in midst of cultures similar to the idolatrous pantheon of the Greco-Roman world” and “remaining members of their communities, including most aspects of their religious culture.”⁷⁹

In one critical way, Lewis is correct: followers of Christ often should remain in their cultures, their workplaces, and their familial networks, serving as both salt and light (Matt 5:13–16). But the IM paradigm illegitimately extends the boundaries for such remaining and retaining, and it unavoidably attenuates the gospel’s authority. By proffering the gospel according to cultural constraints, cultural hegemony relativizes the magisterial quality of the gospel. In this regard, Lewis asserts, “no one should consider one religious form of faith in Christ to be superior to another.”⁸⁰ To Lewis retaining Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu religious practice is not only okay; it is *the only way in which the integrity of the gospel is maintained*. The unchanging gospel according to Lewis is a centered-set gospel, one allegedly

defies any *radical* difference between Jewish and Gentile culture (Louis H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* [JSJSup 107; Leiden: Brill, 2006]).

⁷⁷ Higgins, “Devoteds,” 155.

⁷⁸ Lewis, “Integrity,” 45.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

uncluttered by boundaries of shared identity and uniform religious activity. Yet this cannot be. The cost is too high. When cultural anthropology frames hermeneutics, culture and faith undergo unbiblical conflation, the antithesis between belief and unbelief suffers eclipse, and the lines between believing practice and unbelieving practice enter an impenetrable fog.

Of course, Lewis views her own thinking on these epistemological and methodological points as *biblical*, yet she unwittingly reframes her assessment of scriptural authority by a Fuller-fed irreducible cultural diversity: “Today people of many different cultures . . . are claiming their biblical right to live out their faith in diverse ways that are nevertheless grounded on the supreme authority of the Bible.”⁸¹ In Lewis’s thinking, biblical authority functions by leaving the right of decision-making for gospel obedience in the hands of the people group and even with the *individual* in question.

Matters of church practice immediately surface. While Lewis does not raise baptism *per se*, her hermeneutical approach raises the question of the necessity of baptism as an act of insider obedience. In fact, some IM sympathizers have determined that baptism is a negotiable form and not a biblical mandate.⁸² For our discussion here, let it suffice to say that the interpretive paradigm of cultural primacy leads to disturbing vicissitude on such essential ecclesiological questions.⁸³ IM hermeneutics inverts culture and revelation; it brings the authority of biblical revelation under the authority of religion and culture, rather than religion and culture under the full authority of biblical revelation. Again, the propriety of contextualized gospel appropriation should surely be appreciated; but the *manner* in which it is affirmed here eloquently begs the meaning of Christ’s authority.⁸⁴

In addition, according to Scripture (e.g., Exod 20:4–6; Deut 4:2; Mark 7:6–9), worship activity—even zealous worship activity—not revealed by God for his people is false religion.⁸⁵ It is idolatry. As Paul himself notes, zeal without knowledge is wholly deficient (Rom 10:2). Moreover, if idolatry is not defined by what one does (religion), then what identifying features are there? Idolatry of the heart is

⁸¹ Ibid., 45.

⁸² See Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization* (2d ed.; Colorado Spring: Biblica, 2003), 199–210. See also, H. L. Richard, “Unpacking the Insider Paradigm: An Open Discussion on Points of Diversity,” *IJFM* 26:4 (2009): 180; Higgins, “Inside What?” 74–91. Bill Nikides critiques Kevin Higgins and Donald McGavran for their relegating sacraments to something less than central church practice. Bill Nikides, “A Response to Kevin Higgins’ ‘Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective,’” *SFM* 5:4 (2009): 98n8.

⁸³ “The theological framework and analysis present in C-5 writings has been overly influenced by Western individualism and the privatization of faith which tends to keep the doctrines of soteriology and ecclesiology at arms’ length” (Tennent, “Followers of Jesus,” 111).

⁸⁴ The authority of Jesus (“the Lord of glory,” Jas 2:1) singularly shapes the *gospel-defined religion* that is “pure and undefiled before God, the Father” (Jas 1:27a), and unites his church (1 Pet 1:22–23). Biblical religion “must be in harmony with the divine standard (*para tō theō kai patri*, ‘before the God and Father’), and so acceptable in his presence—acceptable religious observance related to ‘God our Father’” (D. Edmond Hiebert, *James* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 126).

⁸⁵ For treatment on the authority and teaching of Scripture for worship (i.e., the “regulative principle”), see Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed according to Scripture* (rev. and expanded ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, J. Ligon Duncan III, eds., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003), 17–105; Terry L. Johnson, *Reformed Worship: Worship That Is according to Scripture* (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic, 2000); G. I. Williamson, “The Regulative Principle of Worship,” <http://www.nethtc.net/~giwopc/documents/RPW.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2012).

an idolatry of the life; the practice of the life manifests the faith commitments of the heart. Imagine, if possible, Elijah calling the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18) to worship Jehovah God and encouraging them to do so in their temples, at their altars, and according to their familiar pagan practices. Such a proposal sounds preposterous. Yet the idea of a converted Muslim practicing the Five Pillars of Islam is *IM gospel*.

Such relativism affects not only matters of corporate practice, but also of personal integrity and morality. For example, IM-ers' concerns to preserve Muslim identity have provided grounds to equivocate about the spiritual significance of saying the *shahada* ("There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet"). Some have argued that since Messianic Muslims do not really believe it or mean it in the way of a sincere Muslim, repeating this conversion formula for Islam is acceptable. Responding to allegations of integrity violations, Rick Brown attempts to distinguish dishonesty from dissimulation;⁸⁶ others, like Brother Yusuf, insist, "saying the *shahada* does not harm the believer's witness to Jesus. On the contrary, it gives him a hearing."⁸⁷ The decision about the right to affirm—with or without sincerity—this most vital component of the Five Pillars of Islam derives from the cultural context, pragmatism, or the personal preferences (fears?) of the individual. With palpable irony, in its over-reliance on culture, people groups, and religion, the IM paradigm ironically sustains a stubborn western *individualism*.⁸⁸ The determination about the way in which the gospel confronts one's religious habits resides with the new follower of Christ, and not at the end of the day, with the authoritative voice of God in Scripture *or even with the community* of Jesus followers.

Manifestations of such IM thinking then are unsurprisingly diverse, as the conclusions about cultural and religious variance are as innumerable as are the interpreters themselves. Relativity reigns, as each IM conclusion underscores the epistemological and interpretive malfeasance of the IM hermeneutic. IM effectively turns Scriptural authority, Christian doctrine, Christian morality, and the explicit teaching of Scripture about the church on their heads.

3.2. Relativized Holiness in a Relativized Church

Making a case for a pure and powerful gospel, Lewis writes, "Paul delineated in Romans, chapters 6–15, that it is the gospel that is the transformative power in the life of a believer."⁸⁹ Indeed this is true, but unlike Lewis, Paul never removes the gospel from its overarching covenantal context in biblical revelation. Grace is gracious because the Law objectively and divinely condemns. Guilt before God is in the context of this good and holy Law (1 Tim 1:8; Rom 7:12) so that real, biblical grace extends to one under real, biblically defined guilt. Real biblical grace comes to one corrupted by real, biblically defined sin. As Paul presents the gospel, it is by vital, Holy Spirit-produced union with Christ—the one who has obeyed the Law in full (John 6:38, 15:10; Rom 5:19; Gal 4:1–6)—that the believer enjoys resurrection life. By the grace of God then, every believer's resurrection life (1 Cor 15:1–58) is lived by the power of

⁸⁶ "Some Messianic Muslims say the *shahada*, but not all of them are true believers in it. Nominal Muslims say the *shahada*, but they are not true believers. Some of them are engaging in dissimulation—masking one's inner thoughts and intentions. That is not the same as deceit, which involves the manipulation or exploitation of others rather than mere social conformity or self-protection." Rick Brown responds to Gary Corwin in Gary Corwin, "A Humble Appeal to C5/Insider Movement Muslim Ministry Advocates to Consider Ten Questions," *IJFM* 24:1 (2007): 12. This article includes responses from five proponents of IM.

⁸⁷ Brother Yusuf also responds to Corwin in Corwin, "A Humble Appeal," 12.

⁸⁸ Because of its localized autonomy, relativism moves irresistibly to individualism.

⁸⁹ Lewis, "Integrity," 45.

the Spirit of Christ for obedience to God's revealed will (Rom 13:8–14; Gal 5:1–26; 1 Tim 1:8–11; Jas 1:8–13) “in accordance with the glorious gospel” (1 Tim 1:11a).

By contrast, Lewis articulates a notion of the moral transforming power of the gospel in a way that abstracts transformation from explicit biblical mandate. To Lewis gospel transformation occurs internally and mysteriously, but her culturally driven IM paradigm deprives the gospel of its fullest implications to one's life, culture, religious practice, and identity. For Lewis, it is in this formal (religious and cultural) indifference that the gospel retains its essential purity and integrity. For Lewis, gospel integrity requires external practices to remain culturally defined. With this formulation, Lewis effectively bifurcates heart and life, disconnecting gospel belief from gospel practice as defined by the divine Word—“the law of liberty” (Jas 1:19–25). For at least two reasons OT and NT revelation will simply not withstand this divide.

First, as we see in Paul's formulaic summary in Rom 1:1–7 (cf. Gal 3:8), the gospel of the NT is the gospel of the OT. Gospel reality is trans-testamental. The epoch differs—one is of anticipation and the other of realization; but gospel essence organically prevails in all ages of history. In view of the thoroughly gracious revelation from Genesis to Revelation, the heart/life integrity of the NT is the heart/life integrity of the OT, or as the Reformers noted, salvation has always been by *faith alone* but never by a *faith that is alone*. According to both Testaments, working faith is the only real, living faith (Ps 1; Jas 2:14–26; Eph 2:8–10; Gal 5:6). These works of faith find their basis in the revealed will of God, and his Word serves as the basis for understanding and obeying his voice by faith. Identity, faith, and obedience organically interpenetrate in the biblical gospel—in both its OT and NT stages. For believers of all ages, the gospel tethers heart and life inextricably together, as faith in the Redeemer calls for life and practice shaped by the Redeemer's revealed will (cf. Exod 20:1–17; Rom 12:1–2).

Second, Lewis's expression of “two radically different religions based on Jesus Christ,” while utterly confusing in terms of how to speak of a united body of Christ in such terms (cf. Eph 4:1–6), betrays a failure to receive the full implications of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection for a people of God who by the Holy Spirit are fully united to Christ and thereby to one another. A predominant thrust of the NT is ecclesiological unity—a unity grounded in our union with Christ and manifest in the shared identity, faith, and practicing fellowship of Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:11–22; John 17:1–26; 1 Cor 1:18–31). The Apostle Paul is as exercised as he is explicit:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Eph 2:14–21)

Theological unity accomplished by Christ Jesus prescribes functional, relational, moral, and ecclesiastical unity. United in Christ, the people of God—Jew and Gentile—are irrevocably joined by Christ's Spirit in purpose and worship, faith and practice, identity and community (Eph 4:1–6). Eschatological reality

in Christ compels a practiced ecclesiological unity of God's people—recognized, realized, relished, and retained.

As noted already, Lewis forthrightly extols the autonomy of the local people group to discern how to appropriate Jesus. Hence, IM boundaries remain fuzzy, and even IM's centered set trajectory becomes blurred by its paradigmatic commitment to cultural hegemony. Yet it is incomprehensible to speak of Christ's Lordship, biblical authority, and spiritual transformation in him apart from the explicit life demands that Jesus and the apostles expound—demands that norm our religious and worship practices. Culturally determined religion produces inevitable disunity; divided religions produce a divided church, something that defies the entire thrust of divine revelation.

While it is true that genuine conversion is a matter of faith and of the heart (John 3), it is thereby also unavoidably a matter of new identity (2 Cor 5:16–21). True followers of Christ enter the pathway of discipleship, a pathway that is narrow (Matt 7:13–14) and costly (Luke 9:23).⁹⁰ Christian identity in the church and its New Covenant forms are not optional for followers of Christ (Eph 4:1–6). The church is radically more than a committed community of those in a pre-existing social or religious network, who find the message and identity of Jesus compelling and seek to draw him into their preexisting religious constructs.⁹¹ The King of kings, in whose kingdom true believers belong, defines the believer's identity. The Bridegroom who is the Head of his church defines this identity. The Chief Shepherd of the sheep, in whose fold true believers belong, defines this identity. So it distorts the gospel to accept a conversion of the heart that fails to include the clarion call of vital *in Christ* identity (Col 3:1–17; Eph 1:3–14, 4:17–5:21). “In short, one's religious identity with Jesus Christ creates a necessary rupture with one's Islamic identity, or our identity in Jesus Christ would mean nothing. It is unethical to pretend this discontinuity does not exist or to act as if it is merely a matter of cultural forms.”⁹² When Muslim (or Buddhist or Hindu) identity is retained upon following Christ, *personal identity* suffers a divorce from one's ultimate *identity in Christ*, creating an inescapable religious schizophrenia.⁹³

That the Spirit of God can and does work in unexpected ways is without question (see John 3). That he works without consideration for Christ's church as biblically defined is, well, simply unbiblical. After all, Scripture makes abundantly clear that Christ's headship is linked directly to his church (see, e.g., Eph 1:22–23; 5:23), and the Holy Spirit works in absolute solidarity with the will of the Father and the Son (John 14:15–17, 25–31; 16:4–15; Rom 8:9–11). Moreover, the teaching given through the apostles, which underscores the centrality of the church over which Jesus is Lord, also *reveals* unique, non-negotiable characteristics of that church, including biblical organization (Titus 1:5); regular assembly (Heb 10:24–25); baptism (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 2:38–39); the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17–32); and preaching, fellowship, and prayer (Acts 2:42; 2 Tim 4:1–2).

⁹⁰ Lewis insists (“Honoring,” 18) that insider movements properly “affirm that people do not have to go through the *religion* of Christianity, but only through Jesus Christ, to enter God's family.”

⁹¹ See Tim and Rebecca Lewis, “Planting Churches: Learning the Hard Way,” *Mission Frontiers* 31:1 (January–February 2009): 16–18.

⁹² Tennent, “Followers of Jesus,” 113.

⁹³ Lewis frequently juxtaposes the constant (extant social structures as the context for the expression of faith) and the dynamic (the *becoming* and *transforming* influence of faith on the existing socio-religious structure). The unexplained interface of these constant and dynamic elements issues a dissatisfying obscurantism. See Lewis, “Honoring,” 16.

Summarily, through his apostles he has defined the marks and attributes of his church, matters that simply cannot with biblical integrity be reduced to cultural adaptability. Yet the IM mantra sounds from the missions minaret: Jesus “does not seem to be concerned that religious structures or forms be established in His name.”⁹⁴ As far as Lewis is concerned, the shape of ecclesiology is in some sense optional; its form is a *culturally* determined entity.⁹⁵ While it is true that the West has infused certain cultural patterns into its forms of worship⁹⁶ and that entering God’s family transcends *human* institution, it simply does not follow that all ecclesiology and body dynamics are culturally determined. Scripture as God’s revealed Word will not allow for such an anthropocentric construction of a relativized, disunifying, would-be ecclesiology.

3.3. Relativized Mission

As demonstrated already, according to the IM interpretive paradigm, the ultimacy of culture shapes a proper understanding of the Scriptures. Such cultural primacy also must, according to the IM paradigm, comprehensively fashion our understanding of the contemporary context. Why? Because the only proper way to engage contemporary cultural analysis is to recognize cultural parallels between our current context and the biblical one. IM’s cultural construct view of interpreting Scripture drives unswervingly toward seeing apostolic activity as primarily *exemplar* activity. In fact, to honor Scripture’s authority is to discern the parallels and to find ways to emulate them in missional enterprise. This culturally driven New-Testament-as-Model hermeneutic permeates Lewis’s IM argumentation, and is highlighted by the oft-employed formative analogy made between current “movements of faith to Christ” and “the first century believers.”⁹⁷

In view of perceived cultural parallels and a superficial interpretation of the actions of Jesus and the apostles as repeatable phenomena, missiological conclusions are drawn. Having already determined that religious practice in the Scripture is neutral and negotiable, IM theorists insist that we must treat contemporary religious practices with the same “gospel” ambivalence. What is the result? The Bible becomes a how-to manual, and its message is eclipsed behind the cultural interpretive edifice. Unrepeatable and incomparable events in redemptive history become paradigms; and sadly yet disastrously, with equal and opposite force, theologically critical matters become culturally negotiable ones. In such IM method, the cultural *how* of missions effectively replaces the authoritative *whom* of missions. The lordship of Jesus Christ submits to the lordship of culture, making religious identity turf beyond the scope of Christ’s redemptive and reigning authority and creating an endless array of mistaken trans-contextual comparisons and conclusions.

The parallels that Lewis draws here are as clear as they are biblically naïve.⁹⁸ Acknowledging how some western Christians resist other religious traditions, Lewis pushes us to see how our context parallels that of first-century Jews, wherein like those early Jewish believers, we have “2000 years of our own valuable

⁹⁴ Lewis, “Can the Kingdom,” 15.

⁹⁵ Cf. Lewis, “Promoting,” 76.

⁹⁶ Other cultures have done the same.

⁹⁷ Lewis, “Integrity,” 41, 42.

⁹⁸ Lewis is explicit about this transcontextual parallel elsewhere: “Can we see that the Muslims are like our Samaritans, with their Abrahamic religion, and the Hindus are like our Gentiles, with their idols and temples?” (“Honoring,” 19).

teachings and traditions that we want everyone to build on.”⁹⁹ Employing the relativizing hermeneutic that facilitates drawing contextual and methodological parallels, she invokes gospel integrity once again. Just as Paul and the other apostles modeled, “Today we have the opportunity to reaffirm the power of the gospel to move into other cultures and other religious frameworks, and transform them from the inside out.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, to Lewis and other IM advocates, our responsibility is to discern how the apostles refused to force religious practices on the Gentiles, to accept that other religions are acceptable, and to emulate the apostles in allowing religious activities innate to other cultures to provide the parameters for new religious identity and “gospel transformation.” If we do not, “we are actually undermining the integrity of the gospel.”¹⁰¹

IM missiologists and practitioners express a sincere desire to spread the news of Jesus Christ. On one very crucial level, we appreciate their vital and oft neglected focus upon kingdom expansion. How often the western Christian has become comfortable going to church but disinterested in going away from church to the world’s unreached. To be sure, Acts and the epistles boldly expose gospel growth and expansion and call the church throughout the ages to action (Acts 1:8–9; cf. Matt 28:18–20). The work of fearless, tireless, and expansive gospel preaching exposed in the work of the first-century believers under the leadership of the apostles provides a compelling and *convicting* model for the twenty-first-century church.

Dennis Johnson wisely warns, however, against two extreme positions in interpreting the Acts of the Apostles. On the one hand, some see Acts functioning as a precedent; all of Acts is reproducible for the church today. On the other hand, some try to force Acts effectively into irrelevant history, where “although Acts accurately describes the church’s infancy, this description is not supposed to guide our lives today.”¹⁰² Seeking to honor the rich and relevant theology of the NT, the inimitable realities of the first-century church, and the historical genre of Luke-Acts, Johnson wisely presents a *via media*. Luke writes history that “*must make a difference to our faith and life*, just as his mentor, Paul, describes the purpose of Old Testament history as ethical instruction (1 Cor 10:11) and teaching (Rom 15:4; see also 2 Tim 3:16).”¹⁰³ Put succinctly, the application of Acts (and for that matter the entire NT) must be done with a view to the decisively unique events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ *in history*. “Caution is needed . . . lest we . . . think that simply because the author records how some people responded to certain events in the course of the narrative we ought to have the same response today.”¹⁰⁴ Application and emulation are critical; but they must grow out of appreciating the cosmically significant and unrepeatable events. This revelation of Jesus Christ consumes the writers of the NT, exhaustively determines their radical message (1 Cor 1:18–31), and thoroughly directs their seemingly

⁹⁹ Lewis, “Integrity,” 44.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), 4. Johnson urges readers to read Acts in view of Luke’s purpose to show what God *has done in Christ*; to read Acts with a view to the theology of the NT epistles; to read Acts in a way that honors its deeply rooted OT thought structures, Hebraistic styles, and theology; to read Acts in coordination with Luke; to read Acts in view of its structural signposts (5–13).

¹⁰³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁴ Walter L. Liefeld, *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Guides to New Testament Exegesis; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 58.

unsophisticated methods (1 Cor 2:1–5). It is on the basis of the unrepeatable acts of God in Christ and the faithful Christ-centered preaching of the apostles that we now proclaim Christ’s comprehensive lordship over the nations (cf. Phil 2:5–11).

Thus, as resurrected and exalted Lord (Phil 2:1–11), Jesus Christ authoritatively defines everything (Matt 28:18), including our ecclesiology and missiology. For this reason, even for professed missiological motives, we are in no position to neutralize culture or to promote movements that lack the decisive clarity of the full biblical gospel, the teaching of Scripture about its own authority, and the nature and practice of the church, including its sacraments. These are divinely ordained doctrinal and ecclesiological matters, not cultural, “man-made ecclesiastical structures”;¹⁰⁵ the church and its ordinances of Christ are matters of the gospel itself.¹⁰⁶ And to uphold gospel purity, proclamation of that gospel must involve uncompromised expression of such Christ-centered, apostolic teaching—for the *practice, doctrine, and advance* of the church universal.

4. Conclusion

For the newcomer, IM teaching and practices often elicit shock. To be sure, these inventive methods have generated virulent responses, not only from alerted westerners but even more so from Muslims who have trusted Christ. Muslim convert and pastor Edward Ayub of Bangladesh anguishes over IM practices in his homeland: “Not only do some of these people counsel people to remain Muslim rather than confess Christ openly, they counsel those who have left Islam, having become Christians, to convert back and join mosques.”¹⁰⁷ Another Muslim convert, Abdul Qurban, dispassionately depicts IM practice he has witnessed:

Christian missionaries encourage Muslims to embrace Jesus as their Savior but remain Muslims by continuing to read the Qur’an, profess the shahada [“There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet”], and participate in mosque activities. They keep their faith in Christ a secret, only to be revealed (somewhat) if another Muslim asks them about Jesus. By maintaining their Muslim identities (and even their beliefs), yet purportedly believing the Gospel, those Muslims remain inside in their communities, waiting for the potential to provide a witness to their fellow Muslims.¹⁰⁸

No longer in incubation, IM has hatched into a mature, practiced, sanctioned conviction. Its pervasive practice around the world by untold numbers of missionaries, mission agencies, and persuaded nationals has created a missiological, ecclesiological, and existential crisis. Its powerful presence is why Christians around the world like Edward Ayub of Bangladesh implore the western church to face and combat the practice, begging the provocateurs to cease and desist. What then must we say to IM advocates about their message and their methods?

We return in closing to the substance of Lewis’s warning that “we should not trivialize this discussion [about people turning to Christ without identifying themselves with Christianity] as a new

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, “Can the Kingdom,” 15.

¹⁰⁶ “A new convert not only *has* faith, he or she is brought *into* a common faith” (Tennent, “Followers of Jesus,” 111).

¹⁰⁷ Ayub Edward, “Observations and Reactions to Christians Involved in a New Approach to Mission,” in *Chislam*, 256.

¹⁰⁸ “Flirting with Frankenstein: Insider Movements from the Inside,” in *Chislam*, 238.

radical contextualization or a new missiological strategy designed to make it easy for Muslims to come to Christ. Something much more profound is at stake: the integrity of the gospel itself.”¹⁰⁹ I agree. The gospel *is* at stake, and we must not trivialize it. But herein lies the problem: *Lewis’s working definition of the gospel and its contemporary expression are trivializing.*

Scripture is clearly written *to* and *in* a cultural context; God’s redemptive acts and interpretive words occur in real history.¹¹⁰ Hence, we affirm the presence of cultural factors in Scripture, even those that present challenging interpretive decisions (e.g., head coverings in 1 Cor 11). However, because Scripture organically centers on Jesus Christ, its divinely orchestrated theological substance must determine the parameters of culturally transient factors. Therefore, culture must be viewed according to Scripture’s self-interpreting authority rather than Scripture according to the interpretive authority of culture. Submission to scriptural authority means allowing Scripture to define its own hermeneutic rather than (consciously or unconsciously) imposing a foreign hermeneutic upon it.¹¹¹ In short, the divine canon transcends and trumps any cultural canon.

With all humble diligence, students of missions must not read the NT through the lenses of cultural anthropology, even if the motivations for doing so are self-consciously missional. Rather, anthropology must submit to the scrutiny of Scripture and Scripture’s Christ. This distinction is a matter neither of tactics nor semantics; it is a matter of upholding gospel integrity. Any method that wittingly or unwittingly blends the Lord Jesus into unbelieving religious practice is not biblical missions; it is syncretism. Aware of the risk of syncretism, Lewis concludes that this worry can be alleviated by providing “*effective and accurate*” Bible translation, by infusing “*local cultural practices and even religious rites*” with “*new meanings*,” by refusing to pressure other Christians to conform to particular religious forms, and by resisting the temptation to control “Jesus movements” in cultures other than our own.¹¹² These remedies are inadequate, however, as the embedded cultural IM hermeneutic governs the proposals themselves. Moreover, assessing syncretism through the lenses of an already syncretized theology corrupts the analysis.

Ultimately, assessment of IM must occur according to Scripture’s authority and Scripture’s *own* definition of the gospel in its rich theological, eschatological, and ecclesiological contours. Lewis’s IM interpretive paradigm muffles the full voice of the gospel and fails to pass the test of careful biblical scrutiny. Imposing its culturally framed NT-as-model hermeneutic upon the Holy Scriptures, IM theory as Lewis presents it fails to read the Bible biblically, robs God’s Word of its organic unity centered in the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, and draws conclusions about the gospel and its proclamation that unavoidably obscure biblical practice and doctrine. In bequeathing ultimate authority to cultural analysis, IM advocacy has redefined the *content* and the *conduct* of the gospel, *as well as* the means to *advance* this “gospel.” And in it all, this redefinition has made such “gospel” biblically unrecognizable. In answer then to the prevailing question of this essay, we lament that the “gospel” that such IM construction

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, “Integrity,” 46.

¹¹⁰ See Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 3–24.

¹¹¹ The Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9 states well Scripture’s final interpretive authority: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”

¹¹² Lewis, “Possible Pitfalls,” 22–24.

preaches is not the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, but “a different gospel—not that there is another one” (Gal 1:6b–7a).¹¹³

Of course, our coming Judge, the Lord of the harvest, will himself perfectly separate the wheat from the tares. But it is this pressing fact that compels us to believe, practice, and proclaim his gospel in its biblical purity and according to its biblical integrity.

¹¹³ See David B. Garner, “A World of Riches,” *Reformation 21* (April 2011), <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/a-world-of-riches.php> (accessed May 20, 2012).

Boundaries for Gospel Contextualization in Muslim Contexts for Use by Bethlehem Baptist Church

Affirmed by Bethlehem Baptist Church Elder Council 4/15/2014

Introduction: It is our hope and prayer to bless the nations in Jesus and to hear families of the earth confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead so that they may be saved. In our efforts to share the gospel in love among Muslim peoples, we are pursuing clarity in best practices for evangelism, discipleship, and church planting that will help instruct our church in its urban context and assist our global partners around the world. To the end of presenting everyone mature in Christ, we offer to those laboring in Muslim contexts some key questions for discussion (see Biblical Considerations in Gospel Contextualization) as well as these boundaries tempered with a “timetable of grace” as the Lord leads through the guidance of the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of those who love Jesus. Many courageous men and women are taking their first steps of faith to follow Jesus, and we join them in prayer to move forward in the sanctification process in the timing and the strength that God provides.

We realize that Muslim contexts can vary widely from place to place, and we will consider those differences and listen to the input of others, especially to those in our midst who have served faithfully among Muslims for many years. We proceed with a spirit of learning, but the leaders of our church are also committed to act and to faithfully guide our people in Jesus, especially on controversial and complex issues facing the church. We believe that the contextualization issues around the world are calling us to take a biblical stand to provide clarity and leadership. So, it is our desire that those in our church ministering among Muslims will not encourage certain practices related to the three boundaries given below.

We believe that those serving with our church among Muslims should not model, teach, or affirm that followers of Jesus:

1. Recite the Muslim creed (*Shahada*): “There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger;”
2. Participate in ritual prayers (*Salah*) in the mosque;
3. Alter, hide, or obscure familial terms used in reference to God and/or Jesus in the main body of the text when translating Scripture. (We also affirm the four standards for divine familial terms in Bible translation proposed by the World Evangelical Alliance and adopted by SIL International.)