

## *Early Gentile Christianity, Conversion and Culture-Shift in the New Testament*

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Many of the discussions in the current debate about insider movements in Islam (or “C-5” or “new identity” followers of Christ) make reference to the example of the conversion of Gentiles in the New Testament (NT). The decision by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), and Paul’s teaching that Gentiles are not under the Mosaic Law, are interpreted as *cultural* decisions, forming Gentile “insider movements.” Since Muslim culture is infused with Islamic law and Islamic conceptions, it is the position of some in the modern missions movement that the Muslim analogue of the NT Gentile conversions can be a person who retains their Muslim identity, including religious facets which are inextricable from the wider culture.

This paper seeks to investigate this analogy by examining the nature of Gentile conversions, and the sort of requirements made on Gentiles by the apostles and NT writers. Along the way we will also indicate the character of pagan religion in relation to its society, for there are significant parallels to the “embeddedness” of Islam within Muslim society. First of all, a few brief notes on method are appropriate. We have to ask whether we are asking about Gentile-Christian experience of *any* sort, or looking for some sort of “orthodox” perspective. The former sort of investigation is a History-of-Religions approach. This paper will be pursuing the latter, a historical-theological approach (or normative approach) grounded in exegesis. The sort of readings of texts I do focus on historical-cultural background, sociological setting of the author and readers, and of course the literary aspects of the text itself. My own research has focused on Greco-Roman religion, philosophy, and social structure as the environment of the NT writers; and Pauline literature especially.<sup>1</sup>

Let it also be said at the outset that this paper concerns exegetical and theological matters, and does not seek to call into question the intentions or faith of any consultation participants or any writers who are cited. The effort to reach others for Christ is a brave and wonderful thing, and I

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Terence Paige, “Stoicism, *eleutheria* and Community at Corinth” in: *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*. Edited by Edward Adams and David Horrell. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004; *Idem*, “Who believes in ‘Spirit’? *Pneuma* in Pagan Usage and Implications for the Gentile Christian Mission,” *Harvard Theological Review* 95:4 (2002) 417-36; *Idem*, “The Social Matrix of Women’s Speech at Corinth: the Context and Meaning of the Command to Silence in 1 Cor 14:33b-36,” *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 12.2 (2002) 217-42; *idem*, “Demons/Exorcism”; “Holy Spirit”; and “Philosophy/Philosophies” in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph Martin and Daniel Reid. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993.

understand that it often involves venturing into territory where the familiar road markers disappear. If this paper is of any help, then may God be glorified.

### Gentile conversion and Greco-Roman Religion

In order to properly understand the challenges that the early church had to overcome in proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles, and for Gentiles to adopt it, we need to review a few things about the Gentile world. Although the expanding Christianity of the New Testament era (ca A.D. 30-100) crossed numerous ethnic and cultural boundaries (Syrian, Phrygian, Lycaonian, Galatian, Greek, Latin), it is possible to make some generalizations about the sort of religious perspective of the people the Gentile converts came out of, and among whom they had to live their discipleship. First and most obviously, it was a polytheistic world. It had major deities, who watched over empires and cities, the gods which we may learn about in history classes such as the Olympian deities for Greece and the Capitoline triad, Isis, Cybele and Hercules, and the imperial cult, which appear most often on surviving inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> And there were minor deities who watched over rivers, hillocks, thresholds, hearths, and every daily task. There were literally hundreds of gods. And attachment to the cult of multiple gods was considered normal. Never did the thought cross the mind of a pagan that giving devotion to one deity might cause another one to be jealous. Only rarely do we find instances of pagans who give exclusive, or mostly exclusive, devotion to the cult of a single deity. But this is never because they are monotheists nor because they believe worshiping other deities would be wrong. A. D. Nock's famous study differentiated the attitudes of pagans and Christians to worshiping a new god: for Christians one speaks of *conversion* from one religious system to another; but for pagans one can only speak of *adhesion* to a new cult.<sup>3</sup> There is no such thing as conversion within paganism when adding a new cult, because it does not change one's overall religious perspective, and the worship of the new god(dess) does not challenge or overthrow the continuance of devotion to other deities. In some cases, as with Mithras, the god may even be explicitly identified with other gods and host a multiplicity of other gods' images in his shrine.<sup>4</sup> Adding new gods within polytheism is, as one of my students said, like adding friends on facebook.

Second, pagan cults had no "scriptures," and by and large no creed. They had myths or cult-stories about the god. And they had cultic practices handed on orally by the priests, or in some cases

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<sup>2</sup> Ramsay Macmullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 6.

<sup>3</sup> A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Macmullen, 101.

posted on inscriptions at the cult site for the instruction of worshipers on how to prepare themselves. The main activity at pagan shrines was the sacrifice, a (usually short) prayer to the god, and sometimes a hymn to the god led by cultic personnel. Only at the mystery cults did worshippers involve themselves in more elaborate ways. There was no equivalent to the sermon, no instruction other than what sort of offerings to make to the god. The main point was to make a sacrifice and make a request. It was philosophers who gave moral instruction and life-guidance, not priests.

Third, what we call “religion” was, as anthropologists say, embedded in Greco-Roman culture, as in all Mediterranean cultures. There was essentially no aspect of life that was not religious. You could not draw a boundary and say, “this is private and here is my religion; this is public and concerns politics and business.” No such divide existed in their conceptual world. There was, in fact, no word for “religion” in Greek. If you ask a modern person “what religion are you,” she may answer from the perspective of one who has the ability to make a personal choice from among a variety of systems, for a variety of reasons, in a manner that is distinguishable from other socio-political choices: “I am a Catholic,” “I am a Muslim,” “I am a Buddhist.” But if you asked a Greek or a Roman “what religion are you,” the question would be incomprehensible and impossible to answer. The best they could probably do would be to list which deities their family venerated, though even that would not tell you the whole story.

For the Romans and Greeks what we might call “religion” was interwoven into all aspects of life. Every morning the Roman housewife made offerings to Vesta, goddess of the hearth, and the Lares and Penates, spirits of the ancestors and of the storeroom. She had to clean and care for the *lararium*, the sanctuary where the image of the *genius* was kept (a kind of ancestral spirit and guardian angel who was tied to the senior male member of the family).<sup>5</sup> The *paterfamilias* led the family in proper prayers to the proper deities on set occasions. If a Greek home, it was to the *Agathos Daimon* or “good spirit” (a kind of ancestral guardian angel) believed to watch over every home. It was the senior male in the household, normally the husband, who determined which people

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<sup>5</sup> D.G. Orr, “Roman Domestic Religion: the Evidence of the Household Shrines,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. Temporini (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978) II:16:2:1557-1591; John Scheid, “The Religious Roles of Roman Women”, pp. 377-408 in Pauline Schmitt Pantel, ed., *A History of Women in the West*, Vol 1: *From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, transl. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1992).

counted as “family,” and welcomed them to the private household worship.<sup>6</sup> Wives, children and slaves would naturally have been expected to worship the same gods as the family head:

A wife ought to not to make friends of her own, but to enjoy her husband's friends in common with him. And the gods are the first and most important friends. Wherefore it is becoming for a wife to worship and to know only the gods that her husband believes in, and to shut the front door tight upon all queer rituals, other religions and foreign superstitions (Plutarch, *Advice to Bride and Groom* 140D).

Various gods were invoked for every aspect of life: childbirth, child raising; threshold-crossing; planting; sowing; harvest; a god of cross-roads; a god of storage-cupboards; a god for every nook and cranny, every creek and hillock, every minor task or complaint. Ovid speaks of passing a party about to sacrifice to *Robigo*, the god of wheat-mould, to keep crops safe (*Fasti* 4.905-32). On another occasion he mentions the god *Terminus*, “who by his presence marks the divisions of the fields” (*Fasti* 2.639-46). Farmers on neighboring plots bring garlands to offer to his symbol, a rock or a stump.

When one was sick, one might visit a shrine like those of Asclepius, where devotees spent the night hoping the god would appear to them in a dream. If he did, it was a good omen that they would be healed. The sanctuary of Asclepius in Corinth, when archaeologists excavated it, was littered with votive offerings in the shape of limbs, breasts, hands, feet and genitals—all body parts prayed for. Or alternately, one might seek out a magician to write a charm or make a potion. Doctors existed also, but their drug modalities were extremely limited.

Then there were the civic deities, whose cults were paid for by the wealthy patrons of cities, and who watched over town and empire. These major deities had public festivals once a year which were accompanied by parades of idols, and civic sacrifices and banquets that were like free public barbeques. These were paid for partly out of private, partly out of civic monies. Work stopped for the day and people were expected to attend. Some of them became something like Mardi Gras when they involved a god like Dionysios. These festivals were under the purview of civic officials, and annual responsibility for paying for expenses for festivals and games in honor of the gods often rotated among the wealthiest set of families in an area, in obligations known as “liturgies.” These liturgies were regarded as both a financial burden and a great source of honor and prestige to a

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Pomeroy, *Families in classical and Hellenistic Greece: representations and realities* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 68-72.

family. By the time of the church's Gentile mission, many cities of the Roman East had added another major civic cult: the worship of the divine Julius Caesar and his divine family, Augustus and others. Although officially Augustus never allowed himself to be worshipped as divine at Rome, unofficially he associated himself with divinity and implicitly encouraged it elsewhere. He minted coins which had on the obverse Julius' image and the inscription DIVOS IVLIVS ("the divine Julius"), and on the reverse his own image and the inscription DIVI F(ILIVS) "son of a god." We know that there were temples to the Divine Augustus, Tiberius, and other members of the imperial family at Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, and other cities where Paul established churches. Temples to Roma had also sprung up everywhere. And this was not imposed from Rome; local cities enthusiastically constructed temples and initiated priesthoods to the imperial family, and issued coins commemorating the divine Caesars. Worship of Roma and the emperor was not simply a religious choice, but was an expression of political loyalty and gratitude.

Political affairs were initiated with the taking of auspices and prayer: every meeting of the Roman senate, important decisions, waging war, fighting battles. Sacrifices and vows were made before a battle. At the local city level, sacrifices and prayers to the civic gods and (in Greece, Macedonia, Asia Minor and Egypt) to the divine Augustus would normally accompany the business of the ruling council. The Roman senate-house itself was regarded as a *templum*, a sacred space.<sup>7</sup> All aspects of political and social activity were in some sense simultaneously "religious"; they believed the gods were interested in and watched over (and gave warnings to humans pertaining to) all these areas of life, whether law-making or plowing or sailing or going to war, public or private.<sup>8</sup>

In Greek type cities, where many of Paul's churches were founded, priesthoods were not run by professionals, but were "amateur" affairs held on a rotating basis for a period of a few years at a time. The priesthoods of the important civic cults and the imperial cults were given only to the elite families in a city or district, while priesthoods of imported religions or local hero-shrines or even some eastern mystery cults might be taken over by people of the merchant or lower classes. A few prominent priesthoods required a husband and wife pair to carry out sacred duties (such as the

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, Vol. 1: *A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22-23

<sup>8</sup> Beard, North and Price, 43.

*flamen Dialis* and his wife at Rome; the *Archon Basileus* at Athens and his wife the *Basilinna*), though this was not common.<sup>9</sup>

What is the implication of all this for our understanding of the nature of Gentile conversions in the NT era? The New Testament writings and other early Christian writings all agree that the gospel implies for Gentiles an acceptance of a (modified) monotheism, a rejection of the polytheism of the majority Greco-Roman world (e.g., Mark 12:29-31; Acts 14:15; 17:24-31; 1 Thess 1:9; James 2:19; presumed elsewhere). It also demands a confession of Jesus as “Lord” (Greek *kurios*), the same title used of God (*YHWH*) in the LXX by Jewish writers, and a title used of deities by pagans (Mark 12:35-37; Matt 7:21-22; 24:42; John 13:13-14; 20:28-29; Acts 2:36, 38; 16:31; Rom 10:9; James 1:1; 1 Pet 1:3; 3:15; 1 Clement pref.; 21:6; Polycarp, *Phil.* 12:2).<sup>10</sup> He is treated as of equal honor with God the Father, instrument of creation, uncreated Word and Wisdom (e.g., John 1:1-18; Col 1:15-20; Heb 1:1-4; Rev 5:11-14; 7:9-17; 22:3; 1 Clement 16:2; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2:1; 12:2, “our Lord and God Jesus Christ”; Ignatius *Eph.* pref., “Jesus Christ our God”).

Therefore ***any Gentile converts to Christianity were necessarily and inevitably drawn into a position where they shamed their ancestors and family; rejected the deities of their city and country; rejected the reverence of Roma and the divine emperors; and withdrew from multiple social events ranging from daily family rituals to civic festivals.*** These actions risked the Christians’ being labeled as political and social subversives. This could easily lead to Gentiles being brought up on charges before civic authorities (as happened to Paul). Where the converts were men from the aristocratic classes who participated in civil government or came from the set of families who were regularly charged with maintaining local temples and priesthods, conversion would bring immediate sharp socio-political consequences as they were unable to continue such priestly duties. This in turn could lead to Christians being ostracized by family, friends and neighbors. Women of faith were in an especially vulnerable position since they did not normally have much of an independent say in the religious choices they made. They were expected to follow their husbands in worship at household and public cults, and even (if he were an aristocratic priest) possibly support him as a priestess. A wife with irregular and socially disapproved habits which shamed her husband would likely face beatings and then divorce if she did not leave this new cult. Slaves might have

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 296; Elaine Fantham et al., *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 88-89.

<sup>10</sup> Compare the way LXX quotations originally relating to God (*YHWH*) as “Lord” are applied to Jesus as Lord in the NT: Acts 2:21 with 2:36, 38; Rom 10:9, 13; or the “day of the Lord” (= Jesus) in 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2-8; 1 Cor 1:8; 2 Cor 1:14.

slightly more freedom to experiment, since their religious beliefs did not impact the family's social honor in the same way that blood members did.

At Corinth some Christians attempted to avoid social shame and maintain contact with their pagan family, business and political interests by continuing to accept invitations to dine with them at pagan temples. Apparently they justified this behavior with their theology (or "wisdom," as Paul calls it), using the doctrine of monotheism: since there is only one God, there is not really any other god here and therefore there cannot really be any idolatry going on (1 Cor 8:4-6). Here is an early instance of believers attempting to radically identify with a non-Christian culture by going so far as to join in worship ceremonies at the *temenos* (or sacred space) of a Corinthian temple (1 Cor 8:10). Paul, however, does not accept this as enculturation of the gospel. He rebukes them twice, on two different grounds. First, they have not considered in love what their behavior is doing to those who are not as "strong" as they are (8:7-13). To cause another believer to fall into sin is in effect to sin against Christ. But Paul does not stop there, as if the "strong" really *could* legitimately visit these pagan shrines if only the "weak" were not looking. In 1 Cor 10:1-22 he attacks the behavior again, citing the example of ancient Israel's idolatry in the wilderness. What the "strong" are doing is *in effect idolatry because of the social context, regardless of the theological justification the Corinthians have told themselves* (1 Cor 10:14, 18-22). That this temptation was not limited to Corinth is clear from several references to Christians participating in, or being warned not to participate in, idolatry elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 15:20, 29; Gal 5:20; Col 3:5; 1 John 5:21; Rev. 2:14, 20; cf. 2 Clem. 17.1). Paul holds that allegiance to Christ as Lord must be *exclusive* and it must be publicly manifested in behavior (1 Cor 10:21, 28) as well as by confession (1 Cor 1:23-24, 30-31; 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5-6; Rom 10:9-13; 2 Tim 1:8). Clearly one of the main differences between the churches of Corinth and of Thessalonica is that the latter took a public stand, withdrew from pagan cults, and paid the price in persecution (1 Thess 1:6, 9-10; 2:13-14; 2 Thess 1:4-6, 11-12). The Corinthians had also apparently been badly influenced by their pagan culture in their perception of prophecy and spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1-3). It is ironic then that some have tried to use Paul's advice to the Corinthians as an example of "living out the good news of the kingdom within the religious framework of your own community,"<sup>11</sup> given that most of their problems arise from precisely the fact that they are still insisting on living within a more Greek religious-philosophical framework.

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<sup>11</sup> John Ridgway, "The Movement of the Gospel in New Testament Times with Specific Reference to Insider Movements," *AFMI-ASFM Bulletin* No 7 (Apr-June 2011), 13.

Another attempted compromise with Greek thought was that some Gentile Christians rejected the notion of bodily resurrection, which was incompatible with Platonism's view of the immortality of the soul (and its low view of the material body; 1 Cor 15:12). Paul refutes this as incompatible with the gospel and its account of Jesus' own resurrection, along with all that implies (1 Cor 15:13-58).

### Gentile members of the New Covenant community

What did the apostolic community decide was the *norm* for life lived as a Gentile who worshiped Jesus as Lord? This enormous topic cannot be dealt with in full here, but let me outline a few points that I think are pertinent to the current discussion about Muslim evangelism and Muslim converts.

1. Gentile Converts were regarded as ***fully part of the new covenant community which was called the "church."*** The term "church" comes from an OT word used for Israel when it gathered as the "*assembly* of the Lord" in the wilderness on the way from Egypt to the promised land. This term is deliberately transferred to "reformed Israel" under Messiah Jesus. It is vital to understand that the crisis spoken of in Acts 15 was not simply a crisis about Gentile food habits or culture: it was a crisis about the character of the church. If it had been resolved otherwise, we would have been left with either a single-pattern Jewish-Christian church in which the only way Gentiles could join was by becoming proselytes; or there would have been a split into two separate churches, one Gentile and one Jewish. Paul and James fought desperately not only to gain Gentile freedom, but to preserve the church's unity. This significance of the "apostolic decree" cannot be minimized (Acts 15:23-29). This is also a theme stressed again and again in Paul's letters in various ways: Jew and Gentile are *one in Christ* (Gal 3:28-29; Rom 15:7-12; Eph 2:12-22). But they are not only a "new humanity" with Christ as their new Adam (Eph 2:15; Rom 5:17-21; 1 Cor 15:45). The Gentiles have been incorporated into the promises of Abraham and the promise of the new covenant, effectively making them "Israel" through their identification with Christ (Gal 3:29; 4:6-7; Rom 4:12). And at the same time genetic Israelites (or "after the flesh" in Bible-speak) have effectively nullified their privileged position as Israel as long as they refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and seek instead to obtain the covenant promises through the law (Rom 4:13-16; 10:1-4, 12). So the theological situation is a bit more complicated than simply dividing people up into "Jews" and "Gentiles." The unity of Jew and Gentile in one new-covenant community, the church, is so significant that Paul calls it "the mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:4-6).

2. It is not to be disputed that the apostolic community eventually came to the agreement that Gentile converts were not under the Mosaic Covenant, and that as Paul put it “works of the Law” did not lead to “justification.” This is clear not only from the rhetoric of Paul’s letters but also that of other NT writers, such as the new covenant theology of the book of Hebrews, Acts, and 1 Peter. This trajectory is confirmed by statements about the Law and judaizing in the Apostolic Fathers and other early Christian writers. Gentiles did not need to be circumcised, nor keep kosher food laws, nor Jewish festival days, nor wear prayer-shawls or *tefillin*, nor keep the elaborate purity codes that the Jewish sages had cultivated alongside the Torah. Yet it would be a mistake to assert that Gentile believers were allowed to have “Gentile culture” and Jewish believers “Jewish culture” without qualification. It is not even certain whether the decision about the Law *was* a decision about culture, or whether that is an anachronistic judgment on a theological truth that had cultural implications.

Anyone working with texts in Paul should also be aware of the “new perspective” which has been in discussion for over a quarter century now and is beginning to be regarded as scholarly orthodoxy. Namely, that Paul was not combating a “merit-based” religion of Judaism. The Judaism of Paul’s day was by and large a “covenantal nomism” that regarded position within the covenant as a gift of God to the elect people of Israel, and the Law as the means by which Israel responded to their election and remained within the covenant. New perspective exegesis of Galatians and Romans sees the chief issue in Paul’s polemic about justification to be not about how to *live* the Christian life, but about *how one enters the covenant*.<sup>12</sup> The Judaizers held that Gentiles could not *become* Christians, i.e. enter “Israel,” without “works of the Law” which were chiefly the publicly recognized circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, food laws and tithing. Paul holds that *no one* is made righteous by such “works.” The very fact that God sent Messiah to die shows that law-keeping is in vain, is not an act of faith, and is opposed to God’s plan (Gal 2:21; Rom 3:21-26). This faith that saves was prefigured by Abraham, and the one God of Abraham is also the God who *justifies* and *saves* Gentiles—and Jews—by faith in Jesus (Rom 3:28-30).

Yet for Paul, justification by grace leads to a new life that is essentially a kind of fulfilling of the Law (Rom 8:4; 13:9-10). Freedom in Christ for Gentiles is not, then, understood as absolute autonomy, and certainly not as baptizing any particular culture *carte blanche* (Gal 5:13; 1 Cor 9:19-21). Put another way, freedom in Christ is freedom to say no to the slavery of sin and freedom to be

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<sup>12</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); *Idem, Romans*, 2 vols. (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, Tex: Word, 1988).

God's slave (Rom 6:17-19, 22), or freedom to "clothe yourself" with Christ, just as the new Christian put on a white baptismal robe (Col 3:12-17). Though from one perspective the Christian can be said to not be under the Law of Moses, and the old covenant is now null and void, yet from another perspective the old covenant continues to function as scripture for the Christian community. It is the church's first Bible. It gives the promises fulfilled in Christ. It gives instruction beneficial to the new covenant community, examples that believers are to heed (1 Cor 10:6, 11; Heb 3:7-19; and the many places where the OT is cited in the NT).

To put it another way, we might say that for the apostles and the early Christian community, the OT scriptures *continued to function as a guide to the moral life for both Jew and Gentile*. Exactly *how* they did this may be a matter of debate, but *that* this happened cannot be denied. New perspective scholars explain this with a more positive picture of the Torah and covenant in Paul than their immediate predecessors. But even John Calvin half a millennium ago argued that the *moral law* was the only one of three uses of the law which continue to have validity for Christians. The moral law of the OT cannot save (cannot justify us by keeping it), but it remains as a *guide* to believers to explain what it means to love and to please God.<sup>13</sup>

This has tremendous consequences for understanding what it meant to create, for the first time ever in the first century, a Gentile Christian "culture." Were these people living a life of Greek / Roman / Syrian culture? Yes and no. In some areas of life the dominant culture, or at least the better elements of it, was in harmony with certain elements of Jesus' teachings and the general thrust of the ethical tradition of scripture. Such was the case for instance with warnings against greed, admonitions to care for and respect the elderly, and warnings about the dangers of unchecked anger. But there are other behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of living which are either taken for granted, or if ever questioned by pagans yet are so common as to be regarded as normal, and these other Gentile ways are severely criticized as not befitting the life in Christ.

For example, in the Greek and Roman world sexual ethics were markedly different than for Christians. Men frequently had mistresses or concubines, and this was not regarded as adultery; prostitution was considered an acceptable trade; and slaves (both male and female) were often sexually abused by their owners.<sup>14</sup> All of the above, along with homosexuality, came under the ban of *porneia*, forbidden sexual relations, according to early Christian teaching. This was a radically

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II.7.12-15.

<sup>14</sup> Plutarch even records a slave-owner lending out his slaves for sex along with food as hospitality (*Crassus* 4).

more conservative ethic than the dominant culture had. The NT teaching on marriage and divorce was much more conservative than at least the majority culture of the first century. Divorce was easily initiated by both men and women under Roman law. Paul in particular (and the apostolic tradition in general) refused to accept these cultural practices as legitimate Christian alternatives.

In the Gentile world, slaves were not regarded as fully human. “Movable tools” Aristotle called them. In Roman Law they were the master’s property. Yet the NT speaks to and about slaves as people who are equal in Christ to their free brothers and sisters (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 7:22; Philemon 15-16), or as believers who imitate Christ in their lowly positions, enduring suffering unjustly (1 Pet 2:18-25). And the “household codes” of Ephesians and Colossians both call on Christian slave-owners to treat their slaves well, warning them that they, too, have a “Master in heaven” they will give account to (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1). I have not come across any non-Christian household code that speaks to slave-owners this way.

And while we are talking about household codes, other Greek, Jewish, and Roman household codes are concerned with who has power, who rules whom and in what way. And they mostly end up being about the rights of the *paterfamilias*, who is addressed and told what he is to make everyone else do. Yet the NT household codes are not about anyone’s rights or power. Instead they are about each person’s *duties* to others. A very different perspective. And each member of the traditional household division is addressed directly, as a responsible, thinking, spiritual person. Neither do any non-Christian household codes ever oblige the husband to love (*agapaō*) his wife, as Paul does (Col 3:19; Eph 5:25, 33). Social relations are to be re-envisaged as a means of living out one’s discipleship, or even (in the case of marriage) of reflecting the mystery of Christ’s love for the church.

### A Sidenote on early Jewish Christianity

At this point some might be tempted to answer that Muslim insider believers are really more analogous to early *Jewish* Christians.<sup>15</sup> It is sometimes asserted that because both Judaism and Islam are monotheistic religions, and because both share certain traditions or even have similar laws, that C5 believers in Islam have the same right to remain within their religious community that Jesus’ followers did in the gospels and, for those of Jewish heritage, in Acts (and the early church in general). I don’t want to double the size of this paper with an exhaustive response, so a few exegetical/theological principles will have to do here.

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<sup>15</sup> E.g., Jim Nelson, “Response to Don Little’s Assessment of CGC” *Seedbed* 24:1 (August 2010), 48-49; Ridgway, 5-9.

I would have to agree with Waterman's article that the case of Jesus and his first Jewish followers is distinctive in a way that cannot be applied to, nor imitated by, any other ethnic or religious group.<sup>16</sup> My reasons for this can be summarized in three points: *election*; *revelation*; and *salvation history*. God chose, for his own reasons, to work with and through not just Abraham and any of his offspring, but the nation of Israel (Gen 17:19; Rom 9:7). *God* chose to offer the covenant promises, to send his prophets, to reveal his law, to inspire poets, and to promise the grand restoration one day of Israel and of all the earth, along with and under the rule of Messiah. This was God's decision, not the decision of some theological seminary or church organization or even of Israel. And so we need to respect God's decision. Just as any earthly president or king is free to choose whom he will to be his ambassador, God chose Israel. And the culmination of that choosing was in the eventual birth of the Chosen One, the elect Son, Jesus of Nazareth (Mark 1:9-11; Luke 1:30-33; Gal 4:4-5). So it is really a misnomer to speak of Jewish followers of Jesus as an "insider movement," as if there were some "movement" that existed outside of the people of Israel and had snuck in. Jewish Christianity is the original item, indigenous and part of God's plan.

The scriptures of Israel were not only regarded as divine *revelation* by the majority of Jewish people in Jesus' day, but all early Christians, Gentile Christians included, accepted them as God's word also. Jesus himself attested to the inspiration of OT scripture by the fashion in which he quoted it, and the manner in which he held himself to be its fulfillment (e.g., Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 6:41-51). To this corpus Christians eventually added the works we now call the New Testament, because of the new revelation of God's saving work through his Son. It was necessary for Jesus' teaching and the significance of his life, death and resurrection to be preserved for us by his disciples. The New Testament is the witness of that first generation, under the guidance of the Spirit, and the attempt to preserve the apostles' teaching for later ages. There is really nothing else that can be equated with it. When Jewish Christians are trying to live out their faithfulness to Jesus in light of *their* scriptures—either during Jesus' incarnation or afterwards—this is a questing how to be faithful to God's genuine revelation. That is a fundamental tenet of the church's faith. One cannot simply plug in *any* culture's scriptures (say, the Baghavad Gita; the Buddhist Pali scriptures; or the Qur'an) and say that another culture is doing the same thing. It isn't.

Finally, many of the arguments fail sufficiently to take into account the fact that we are dealing with a *story* which unfolds in time and has a divinely-intended development. Jesus' apostles do not

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<sup>16</sup> L. D. Waterman "Do the Roots Affect the Fruits?" International Journal of Frontier Missiology 24:2 (Summer 2007) 57-58.

understand nearly as much about him at the beginning of his call as they do the day after his resurrection. And they apparently do not understand his mission very fully at first either (Acts 1:8), for it takes a round of persecution, a divine vision clapping Peter on the head, and a hosing of Cornelius' home with the Holy Spirit to convince the Jerusalem church that they ought to consider sharing the gospel with people who are not ethnic Jews! One cannot ignore this. And this story leads on to a church that is *both Jew and Gentile*, as pointed out above. It was only in the rarified atmosphere in and around Jerusalem that Jewish Christians could live as if they were the only sort, or as if they only had to relate to other Jews. And historically, this was to be a short-lived situation in the church's history. Within forty years the temple would be destroyed and many of those Jewish Christians would be scattered. By the time the Bar Kochba revolt was suppressed (A.D. 135), the Romans banned Jews forever from Jerusalem and converted the temple mount into a pagan shrine. God was leading his people to become a *combined* people of God, a "third race" as Tertullian so memorably put it.

Even prior to Easter, Jesus is hardly a good model for an "insider": he insults the religious leaders; he publicly shames and attacks the most powerful Jewish political figures; he openly breaks Sabbath regulations that are widely regarded as akin to scripture; he breaks cultural taboos on touching lepers, on teaching women, on helping Gentiles, and on forgiving "sinners." And he speaks of the relationship between the Kingdom of God he is bringing in and Judaism as like that between new wine and old wineskins (Mark 2:22)—suggesting that Judaism cannot contain what is about to happen. If this is your model for cultural "insiders," all I can say is you had better revise your "what not to do" list. Similarly, if space permitted we could discuss the way in which the developing church in Acts shows both continuation within certain traditions of Judaism, but also radical criticism of it and differentiation from it (e.g. Acts 2:36; 4:12; 7; 8:1-3). One cannot help but ask also, if the Jerusalem church openly proclaimed Jesus as Lord and Messiah in the temple, the holiest spot on earth for a Jew; and performed miracles of healing there; and faced arrest, interrogation, imprisonment and even execution by political leaders for their bold confession, how is this a model for "insider movements"?

Finally, we can see in Romans the direction which the Spirit of God was urging the church to move. Rome contains both Jewish and Gentile believers. In Romans 11:11-32 Paul calls on Gentiles to appreciate the grace that has saved them, not to be proud but recognize the priority of calling once given to Israel, into whom they have been grafted. Paul also expresses his continuing hope for the salvation of (more) Jews. And in Rom 14:1—15:14 Paul again deals with problems of

Jew-Gentile friction at Rome. He calls on *both sides* to compromise their cultural expectations and their pride so as to love one another and accept one another in Christ. He will not have two churches in Rome, a purely Jewish and a purely Gentile. Nor will he have one side call all the shots for the other.

## Conclusion

There were many differences between the lives of Gentile believers and Jewish believers in Palestine, perhaps fewer differences between Gentile and Jewish diaspora believers. Gentiles ate different food, might have had different days of worship, different prayers, and spoken a different language than their Jewish Christian brethren in Palestine (although the Jewish Christians of the Diaspora would have spoken Greek and probably worshipped on the same days as the Gentile believers). Certainly Jewish believers would have felt more bound by custom to the purity laws of Moses than their Gentile brethren, though the evidence of Acts and Paul's letters suggests that even here compromises were beginning to be made for the sake of church unity. And Gentiles were not bound to live as Jews to be considered full partners within the new covenant initiated by Jesus Christ.

This paper however has sought to show that it is too simplistic to assume that therefore Gentiles were allowed to retain their native culture unchanged. Even the basic confession of monotheism coupled with faith in Jesus as Lord had the potential, as shown above, to cause massive social and political disruptions to an individual's life. This is the very same social integration of religion that some advocates of C-5 seem to think make it necessary not to dissociate from the religious culture.<sup>17</sup> Yet for the NT writers and these early Gentile Christians, it was believed that the consequences of leaving their native religious practices were better than the alternative of not confessing Christ as Lord. Not ashamed of the Lord Jesus Christ, many of them were persecuted. Further, it was shown that from the beginning Christianity employed a sophisticated ethical hermeneutic that used the teaching of Jesus and the OT ethical traditions to critique society and supplement the existing social patterns. These were not a substitute for grace, but a guide for those who had already been justified and forgiven by grace and sought to follow the leading of the Spirit. This common pan-Christian ethical tradition does not seem to have been regarded as contrary to the

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<sup>17</sup> E.g., John J. Travis and J. Dudley Woodberry, "When God's Kingdom Grows Like Yeast: Frequently-Asked Questions About Jesus Movements Within Muslim Communities," *Mission Frontiers* July-August 2010, 25.

ruling that Gentiles were exempt from living by the Jewish code. As in the case of first century Jews accepting Christ, one cannot say that Gentiles totally negated nor that they totally affirmed Greco-Roman society; but certainly there was no major sphere of life that would be unchanged once the perspective of life in Christ had touched it.

Sometimes overlooked, in my opinion, in the use of the analogy of the Gentiles in the discussions about insider movements that I have read, is the effort to which the early church went to ensure that the Gentiles would remain within the orbit of the one body of Christ, one united Jew-Gentile church, co-heirs of the promises to Abraham. I confess I find it disturbing that there are those who wish to disavow any identification as Christians or with the Christian community, and believe they may substitute instead language about “kingdom” or “personal relationship.” There is no room here to pursue the theological irony here of the fact that these ideas come from Western liberal theology and German Pietism, yet are held up as suitably “Muslim.” I will say on exegetical grounds though that to reject Christ’s church is to reject Christ. And it seems a move that is hostile to the body of Christ, whatever the exegetical sleight of hand that is offered, to refuse to identify with other Christians. This is the same message I would give to believers here in America and to my students also.

I would like to suggest that if there is any analogy to be drawn from the lesson of Gentile Christianity, it is that there can be no such thing as “crypto-Christianity.” Nor is there any such lesson proffered in scripture as a Christianity which surrenders itself to a particular social or (non-Christian) religious construct. This is not what is meant by freedom from the Law. When Paul called on believers to remain in the condition in which they were called (1 Cor 7:24), he was stressing that spirituality was not tied to social status—he was not urging them to be ethically neutral in regard to their culture. There can and always will be *culturally distinct* expressions of Christianity; but they must always be *critically distinct* because of the Lordship of Christ. And these churches will have a sense of unity with all Christian churches, past and present, in the common apostolic faith and teaching (2 Tim 1:13-14; 1 John 1:1-3).