

## Response to "Early Gentile Christianity, Conversion, and Culture-Shift in the New Testament,"

(by Terence Paige, Houghton College)

By Jeff Hayes, with much-appreciated input from Dick Grady, Larry Chico, Becky Lewis, and Ramsey Hayes

Much of Dr. Paige's paper provides informative and useful background of the history of the Jewish and Gentile cultures around the time of the book of Acts. We are grateful to Dr. Paige for this information.

### **Definition**

Possibly for lack of background about the term, Paige shows that he and "insider" proponents are defining the term "insider" in different ways. for example, he says, "*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.*"<sup>1</sup>

In insider movements, those spreading the gospel are "inside" or "within" the context in which they are proclaiming Christ. The Jewish followers of Christ were Jewish and thus were insiders. "Insider" movement does not imply that there is another movement outside of it.

In another place, he says, "*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.*"<sup>2</sup>

and

*"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"?"*<sup>3</sup>

In this case, Paige's understanding of "insider" seems to be that insiders do not rock the boat. Jesus was definitely a Jew and was seen as such by other Jews, so he was an "insider." See below under Criticism 2, and for breaking cultural taboos, under Criticism 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Paige, "Early Gentile Christianity, Conversion, and Culture-Shift in the New Testament," page 12.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, page 13.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*.

Rebecca Winter, along with about 20 others, has written on a definition and distinctives of "insider movements."<sup>4</sup>

She states: "***An 'insider movement' is any movement to faith in Christ where 1) the gospel flows through pre-existing communities and social networks, and where b) believing families, as valid expressions of the Body of Christ, remain inside their socioreligious communities, retaining their identity as members of that community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.***"<sup>5</sup>

## **Criticisms of "insider movements"**

Whether because of insufficient background writings about what has been called "insider methodology" or because of lack of clarity in those writings, there are several things Paige seems to criticize about insider movements that IM proponents do not assert.

### **Criticism 1: Accepting everything in Islamic culture**

For example, in his summary<sup>6</sup>, Paige says, "*it is too simplistic to assume that therefore Gentiles were allowed to retain their native culture unchanged.*" No IM proponent I know advocates retaining native culture unchanged. Nor does the definition above state such a thing. Being an insider has to do with remaining in community and living under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Bible. The Bible is the authority, not the culture. The culture is to be judged by the Bible, not to be considered superior to the Bible.

Every culture has positive customs (customs which are in keeping with Biblical injunctions or principles), neutral customs (customs about which Scripture is silent), and negative customs (customs that go against Scriptural commands or principles). As for the negative aspects, these must be rejected. Jesus' dealing with the various customs of the Jewish culture of his day is a good example of these three kinds of customs. He followed Jewish customs of standing to read God's Word and sitting to preach about it (Luke 4:16-28). However, he rejected Jewish customs of not touching lepers (Luke 5:13), avoiding "sinners" (Luke 5:29-30), and fasting to be seen by men (Luke 5:33, Matthew 6:16-18).

So in the case of Muslims, there are some customs that must be rejected by insider followers of Christ: for example, "folk Islam," which involves direct dealing with curses and demonic bondage, considering Muhammad a mediator (1 Timothy 2:5) or a savior (Acts 4:12), trusting in works for salvation (Ephesians 2:8,9, Galatians 3:10), etc. Other customs are neutral (eating with the right hand, worshiping on Friday (Romans 14:5), etc. Still others are positive: hospitality (Hebrews 13:2), lifting hands in prayer (1 Timothy 2:8), belief in one God (1 Timothy 2:5), etc.

When Muslims become followers of Christ, their rejection of unBiblical customs will be a challenge to their culture, and will indeed cause the "*massive social and political disruptions*" Paige implies they should. Proponents of such "insider" Jesus movements agree with Dr. Paige that as insiders follow Christ as Lord

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Winter, "Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities," International Journal of Frontier Missions, 24:2 (Summer, 2007), pages 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, page 75.

<sup>6</sup> Paige, page 14.

and obey the Bible, there will be conflict. As Muslim followers of Christ follow Christ and obey the Bible, they will reject the unBiblical aspects of their culture. Their life should change since they are in Christ, but they remain "in the world, but not of the world."<sup>7</sup>

### **Criticism 2: Not confessing Christ**

Paige also implies<sup>8</sup> that C-5 believers from Muslim background are "not confessing Christ as Lord" or are "ashamed of the Lord Jesus Christ" or are not persecuted. The topic we are discussing is indigenous ***movements***. A movement never even happens unless there is bold witnessing. *Movements only result from bold interpersonal or public witness, not from people hiding their faith from others.* In general, believers in these movements are quite bold, do confess Christ, and as a result do suffer persecution, far beyond what most believers in the West experience. Possibly Paige is confusing C-5 believers (groups of believers who self-identify socially and maybe religiously as Muslims but confess Christ) with C-6 believers (secret believers). Of course, it may be wise to have brand-new believers wait for a period of time before sharing their faith so they can do it more wisely.

On a personal note, I wish I had been advised to wait a while and get some wisdom before sharing my faith with my family. My enthusiastic, bold, well-meaning, but naïve witness to my parents caused decades of hurt relationships, and this was in America with nominal Christians. Proponents of Jesus movements agree with Dr. Paige that believers should confess Christ as Lord, and not be ashamed of Christ. Indeed, that is what believers in such movements do.

### **Criticism 3: Against Unity in the Body of Christ**

In Paige's conclusion<sup>9</sup>, he emphasizes the unity of the body of Christ. Once again, the implication is that proponents of "insider" Jesus movements are somehow are working against the unity of the body of Christ. This is a misperception. Proponents of indigenous movements fully endorse a commitment to this unity.

However, unity does not demand uniformity, as Paige concludes, saying, "*there can and always will be culturally distinct expressions.*"<sup>10</sup> We would be naïve if we imagined that there is unity now between all the different expressions of Christian faith in today's world. One of the most encouraging things that we have seen in our generation is a breaking down of walls between Christian expressions. The Muslim followers of Christ that I know recognize their unity with all true followers of Jesus. However they do not have a sense of oneness with those who are merely "cultural Christians" and have never put their trust in Christ. Nor they do not necessarily identify with those segments of the institutional church which venerate statues of saints, or with churches who endorse homosexuality as not only appropriate behavior for Christians but also for recognized leaders in the church. It is this type of behavior within what calls itself the "church" which greatly distresses Muslim followers of Jesus who are seeking to live out the Biblical mandate of fleeing both idolatry and immorality as demanded by the New Testament.

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<sup>7</sup> John 17:14-16, 15:19, 1 John 2:15-17

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pages 7,13,14

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* page 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, page 15, emphasis his.

On this topic, Paige says, "I will say on exegetical grounds though that to reject Christ's church is to reject Christ."<sup>11</sup> Not all that calls itself "the church" or "a church" is really a church according to the New Testament. There may be a bit of confusion about what "church" means.

Many seem to be confusing unity with the "church" as described in the New Testament and unity with the "church" as it is commonly understood today. Modern, popular understanding of the "church" would include 1) buildings where people meet, usually on Sunday mornings, 2) denominations, 3) meetings, often lasting about an hour, which may include hymns, announcements, and a sermon. None of these are what the New Testament teaches that *evkklhsi, a* (translated "church") means.<sup>12</sup>

*evkklhsi, a* is used 114 times in the New Testament and refers to people who follow Christ. It never refers to buildings or denominations. Only occasionally does it refer to meetings or assemblies. In the New Testament, all the believers in a city belong to the *evkklhsi, a*. There are never multiple *evkklhsioi* in one city. Most notably, *evkklhsi, a* occurs in phrases with *oi=koj*<sup>13</sup> (house, household, or extended family) as in *th/| katV oi=ko, n sou evkklhsi, a|* (literally, "the according-to-your-house church), or "the church in your house."<sup>14</sup>

Many institutions that call themselves "church" do not qualify as an *evkklhsi, a* of the New Testament. Some may have few or no true believers in Christ in them. Most "churches" in the U.S.A. today that have the same cultural background, and are in the same city, have little or no unity with each other. But when Jesus prayed for unity he did not pray for unity with or between those kinds of church, but prayed for those who believe in him to be one.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, I must respectfully say that Paige's statement "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)"<sup>16</sup> would be more clearly understood as a call to unity between all true believers.

"Insider" believers that I know from numerous countries and ethnic groups do indeed consider that other true followers of Christ, from whatever background, are their true brothers and sisters, and very much have that sense of unity with them.

#### **Criticism 4: Promotes Idolatry and Immorality**

Paige discusses idolatry and immorality in detail, especially in Corinth,<sup>17</sup> giving the impression that proponents of "insider" movement either promote idolatry or immorality, or don't feel it is very important. This is not what "insider" proponents believe at all. In her definition of insider, Lewis specifies "living under

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, page 15.

<sup>12</sup> See Frank Viola and George Barna, Pagan Christianity?: Exploring the Roots of our Church Practices, Barna Books (imprint of Tyndale House), 2002, revised edition 2008, pp 9-104.

<sup>13</sup> Maybe not coincidentally, *oikos* is also used 114 times in the New Testament.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 2.

<sup>15</sup> John 17:20-23

<sup>16</sup> Paige, *ibid*, page 15, emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, page 7ff.

*the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible,"* which clearly condemns both idolatry and immorality.

Everyone involved with "insider" Jesus movements agrees absolutely and unconditionally that any Muslim who comes to faith must distance himself from his cultural norms in these exact same areas of idolatry and immorality.

Idolatry is normally seen in the Muslim world through various aspects of folk Islam (magic, curses, spells, witch doctors, fortune-telling, amulets, etc.) It is for this reason that so much attention is given to spiritual warfare, the authority of the believer over the demonic world, separating from folk customs, etc. It is often those who do not know the authority of the believer in Christ who are afraid for followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds to remain in their socioreligious context and insist that they reject everything in their culture. (See criticism 1.)

As for immorality, Muslim cultures have *standards* of morality that can compare to some Biblical standards. However, few Muslims come close to living according to their own standards. It is only after they have received the indwelling Holy Spirit through faith in the risen Lord Jesus that Muslims begin to experience the inner power to live in accordance with the moral ideals of their religion and beyond.<sup>18</sup>

The "insider" Jesus movement paradigm is in harmony with both of these demands. One can continue to be considered a Muslim in a Muslim community, where the title Muslim is virtually identical to ethnic identity, and embrace both of these New Testament demands. Indeed, many Muslim communities care very little exactly what you believe, just as long as you remain part of the community. If a Muslim community demands either immorality or idolatry, the Muslim follower of Christ must reject those and face the consequences. Muslim followers of Jesus must be, as Paige says, "critically distinct"<sup>19</sup> because they follow the Lordship of Christ. Dr. Leith Anderson, former president of Denver Theological Seminary and President of the National Association of Evangelicals, visited one of the more mature movements and interviewed them in depth. His conclusion was, "These insider believers are right on. Their doctrine is as solid as the best evangelical believers in America."

### **Criticism 5: Inspiration of the Qur'an**

Paige says "*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.*"<sup>20</sup>

Proponents of the "insider" Jesus movements among Muslims totally agree with Paige. We believe in the inspiration of the Bible. We do not believe or teach that Muslim followers of Christ can "*live out their faithfulness to Jesus in light of*" the Qur'an. The Qur'an speaks positively about Jesus, but it is only in the

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<sup>18</sup> See Matthew 5:21-48.

<sup>19</sup> Op cit, page 15.

<sup>20</sup> Op cit., page 12.

New Testament that Jesus can be seen in all his glory. If a Muslim is led, from the Qur'an, to read the "previous book," the Bible, then and only then will he be able to see Christ truly.

## **Jewish Christians and Jewish Christianity?**

Eight times Paige uses the phrase "Jewish Christians" or "Jewish Christianity."<sup>21</sup> This phrase, in addition to being anachronistic,<sup>22</sup> gives a religious title to a faith issue, can be misleading, and can be used to justify the imposition of the word "Christian" on every follower of Christ, even those from Muslim backgrounds.

The word "Christianity" is never used in the Bible. Nor is the phrase "become a Christian." Even the word "Christian" is used only three times in the Bible. These three instances are as follows:

**Acts 11:26** *in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians.*

**Acts 26:28-29** *And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" And Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am -- except for these chains."*

**1 Peter 4:15-16** *But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; <sup>16</sup> yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.*

In all three instances, the word "Christian" is applied to a believer in Christ by an unbeliever. In 1 Peter 4:15, the words parallel to "Christian" are all accusations other people would use toward people. So here the believers are accused by others of being Christians.

Secondly, it seems all three instances refer to Gentiles, not Jews. The New Testament generally uses "The Way" when a title is needed to distinguish Jewish believers from unbelievers.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, I believe all three of these instances are negative. Agrippa seems to look down on the term "Christian;" in 1 Peter, the title is listed along with crimes; and in Acts 11, it seems that the unbelievers were using it to mock the disciples.

In any case, to require that Muslims who trust Christ use this term as a way of identifying with Christ,<sup>24</sup> or to use this term to describe them, seems unjustifiable from the New Testament. Not taking the name of "Christian" is not a Biblical requirement and does not have to do with being ashamed of Christ; it has to do with staying part of the culture in order to bring more people to Christ.

## **The idea of conversion**

Paige uses the words "convert" and "conversion" frequently<sup>25</sup> and explains his meaning by quoting Nock, "*For Christians one speaks of conversion from one religious system to another.*"<sup>26</sup> This gives a very wrong impression. This is not the meaning of conversion in the New Testament, nor is it what the New Testament

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<sup>21</sup> Twice each on pages 11, 12, 13 and 14.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 11:26

<sup>23</sup> Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23, 24:14,22

<sup>24</sup> See Criticism 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, in the title of the paper and 14 times on pages 1, 2, 6, 8, and 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, page 2.

calls for. Let me justify this claim. To do so, I will discuss the meaning of the Greek words, Jesus' Jewish ministry, Jesus' Jewish followers in the book of Acts, Jesus' Gentile ministries, Jesus' Samaritan ministry, and Paul's teaching and example.

### **The meaning of the words**

The Greek word for "*conversion from one religious system to another*" is *prosh, lutoj* ((proselyte, convert), and it is used only four times in the New Testament.<sup>27</sup> In every instance, it refers to conversion of Gentiles to Judaism. It is ***never*** used to mean repentance from sin, turning to God, or putting one's trust in Christ as Savior and Lord.<sup>28</sup>

In 1611, the word "to convert" in English meant "to turn" and the King James Version translators rightly translated verses having the word *evpistre, fw* (to turn), as "to convert."<sup>29</sup> However, English has changed since then, and "to convert" today generally has the meaning of "to change religious systems," as Paige uses it. However, the meaning in the New Testament has not changed, and *evpistre, fw* today still means "to turn" and should be translated as "to turn."<sup>30</sup>

In his opening paragraph, Paige refers to the "conversion of Gentiles" and references Acts 15. But Acts 15 has nothing to do with conversion (meaning change of a religious system). The word used in Acts 15 is *evpistre, fw* (to turn). It is not that Gentiles were converting, but turning.<sup>31</sup>

### **Jesus' Jewish ministry**

Next, let us look at Jesus' methodology. We are commanded to be imitators of Christ above all.<sup>32</sup> What was Jesus' methodology in his ministry? Did he "convert" people, or change their religious system?

All of Jesus' apostles and most of his followers were Jews. Did Jesus ever tell his Jewish disciples to "convert" or change religions? No. Not once in any of the gospels. Changing religions was not part of Jesus' message to Jews. However, some might object that he *could have* said they should convert but it is just not one of the things recorded in the gospels.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew 23:15, Acts 2:11, 6:5, 13:43.

<sup>28</sup> For some of the implications of the word **ku, rioj** and its use with and without the definite article, see by Rick Brown and Christopher Samuel, "The meanings of κυριος 'Lord' in the New Testament" (2002). The issue is not as simple as Paige makes it seem on page 6.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. Acts 3:19 "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;"

<sup>30</sup> *evpistre, fw* is used 36 times in the New Testament, 18 of which refer to a physical turning around, and 18 of which refer to a moral turning (i.e. from sin to God).

<sup>31</sup> In both verses 3 and 19.

<sup>32</sup> Ephesians 5:1, 1 Corinthians 11:1, 1 Thessalonians 1:6

<sup>33</sup> See John 21:25.

### **Jesus' Jewish followers in the book of Acts - part of the Jewish community?**

It should give us a fairly good idea of whether Jesus said they should convert to a different religion if we look at the book of Acts, and examine whether the Jewish disciples of Jesus ever did "convert," or "change religions", leaving the Jewish religious community. After that, we will examine what kind of relationship they had to the Jewish religion and leaders.

Acts 2:1 *"Now when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."* The Jewish disciples of Jesus were at a Jewish feast.

Acts 2:46 *"Every day they continued to gather together by common consent in the temple courts."* The Jewish disciples of Jesus were at a Jewish temple.

Acts 3:1 *"Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time for prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon."* It seems the Jewish disciples of Jesus were doing Jewish ritual prayers.

Acts 4:5-7 *"On the next day, their rulers, elders, and experts in the law came together in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others who were members of the high priest's family. After making Peter and John stand in their midst, they began to inquire, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?'"* The Jewish disciples of Jesus were on trial before the Jewish high court, and they submitted to it.

Acts 5:12 *"And they were all together in Solomon's Portico."* The Jewish disciples of Jesus were still meeting at a Jewish temple.

Acts 5:19-20 *"An angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said, 'Go and stand in the temple courts and proclaim to the people all the words of this life.'"* The Jewish disciples of Jesus were told to go to a Jewish temple. Gentiles would not have been admitted.

Acts 5:42 *"And every day both in the temple courts and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was the Christ."* The Jewish disciples of Jesus still met and taught at a Jewish temple.

Acts 6:11-12 *"Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.' They incited the people, the elders, and the experts in the law; then they approached Stephen, seized him, and brought him before the council."* Stephen is brought before the Jewish high court. They did not try Gentiles. Furthermore, he himself does not object to their jurisdiction over him as a Jew.

Acts 6:14 *"For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us."* Here Stephen is not charged with a new religion, but changing things ***within*** Judaism.



Acts 7:2 "So he replied, 'Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our forefather Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran,'" Here Stephen calls Jews of the council, who did not believe in Jesus, "brothers." They were not brothers in faith, and he refers to them as "brothers" in Judaism.

Acts 9:1-2 "Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats to murder the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem." Letters from a Jewish high priest would only have validity within a Jewish place, since a Roman city like Damascus was not under their jurisdiction in any way. The Jewish disciples of Jesus in Damascus were in Jewish synagogues.

Acts 11:2-3 "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers took issue with him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and shared a meal with them.'" The prohibition to Jews not eating with Gentiles would have been irrelevant if Peter were not still a Jew.

Acts 15:5 "But some from the religious party of the Pharisees who had believed stood up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses.'" Here Jewish followers of Christ are still not just Jews but members of the Pharisee party. They also still had Jewish distinctives of circumcision and subjection to the law of Moses.

Acts 20:16 "For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so as not to spend time in the province of Asia, for he was hurrying to arrive in Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost." Here Paul was trying to be in Jerusalem for a Jewish feast.

Acts 21:20 "When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all ardent observers of the law.'" The Jewish disciples of Jesus were still zealous for the (Mosaic ritual) law.

Acts 22:2-3 Then Paul said, "I am a Jew." Paul still saw himself as a Jew.

Acts 23:2-7 "the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him ... Paul said to him, 'God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! ...' Those standing near him said, 'Do you dare insult God's high priest?' Paul replied, 'I did not realize, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, "You must not speak evil about a ruler of your people.'" Then Paul ... shouted out in the council, 'Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead!'" Paul apologizes for insulting the Jewish high priest on the ground that he was a ruler of his people. He also still self-identifies as a Pharisee.

Acts 24:11 "As you can verify for yourself, not more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship." Paul was worshipping at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

Acts 28:17-22 "Paul called the local Jewish leaders together... 'Brothers, although I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, from Jerusalem I was handed over as a prisoner ... I have asked to see you and speak with you, for I am bound with this chain because of the hope of Israel.' ... 'We

would like to hear from you what you think, for regarding this sect we know that people everywhere speak against it." Paul calls Jewish leaders who do not believe in Jesus "brothers" because he is still a Jew. He refers to the Jewish people as "our people" and includes the Jewish unbelieving leaders with himself. The Jewish leaders consider Paul's belief a sect of Judaism, not a different religion.

It is clear that the Jewish followers of Christ still considered themselves Jews, and were also still considered Jews until the very end of the history recorded in Acts.

### **Jesus' Jewish followers in the book of Acts - relationships with the Jewish community**

However, Jesus' Jewish followers were no longer "standard" Jews who believed and acted the same way as others around them.

Acts 4:10-12 *"be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well. This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* In contrast to normal Jews, the Jewish followers of Jesus confessed Jesus as the source of healing and the only way of salvation.

Acts 5:13 *"None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high honor."* They were seen as different, and their quality of life distinguished them.

Acts 5:42 *"And every day both in the temple courts and from house to house, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus was the Christ."* The Jewish disciples of Jesus proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, which was not standard belief to the Jews.

Acts 6:11-12 *"Then they secretly instigated some men to say, 'We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.'* Their beliefs were considered by Jews as blasphemous.

Acts 6:14 *"For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us."* Their beliefs were seen as a change in the customs of Judaism.

Acts 9:1-2 *"Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats to murder the Lord's disciples, went to the high priest and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem."* They were called "the Way" as opposed to normal Judaism.

Acts 28:22 *"We would like to hear from you what you think, for regarding this sect we know that people everywhere speak against it."* Here following Jesus was seen as an undesirable "sect" of Judaism.

These verses emphasize that though the Jewish followers of Jesus were distinct in doctrine and belief, in life or morals, in customs, and were somewhat marginalized because of their faith in and obedience to Jesus. However, they were still Jews, both in their own opinion and in that of the other Jews.

### **Jesus' Gentile ministries**

In addition to Jesus' primary ministry to Jews, he also had four Gentile ministries and one Samaritan ministry.

### **The demoniac**

Jesus' Gentile ministry with the most detail in the Gospels is the Gerasene demoniac. Mark clearly presents the demoniac as a Gentile based on location,<sup>34</sup> associations,<sup>35</sup> and family connections.<sup>36</sup> This Gentile, once healed, begs Jesus to cross over to Galilee with Jesus to be with him. To follow a Jewish rabbi around in Jewish territories would have necessitated full conversion to the religion of Judaism. Jesus does not allow him. Instead, he says, "Go to your home and to your people and tell them what the Lord has done for you, that he had mercy on you."<sup>37</sup> One might say that the healed demoniac was asking to "convert," and Jesus refused. But the text explicitly says how he was changed: he was clothed and in his right mind<sup>38</sup> and he was a witness to his family and relatives.<sup>39</sup>

### **The Syrophenician woman**

Jesus' other three Gentile ministries are much more briefly covered in the Gospels. The Syrophenician woman was clearly a Gentile, as she is called a Greek, Syrian, Phoenician, and alluded to as a dog.<sup>40</sup> Jesus heals her without asking her to convert religions. But could anyone remain the same after such an encounter with Jesus?

Jesus takes the long way home, traveling north to Sidon, east to the Decapolis (modern Syria), and then south through the Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee.<sup>41</sup> All these are Gentile areas, and by the time he arrived at the Sea of Galilee, he would have had few or no Jews following him. When he arrives, he feeds 4000 Gentiles.<sup>42</sup> Do you think after the encounter with the healed demoniac and Jesus, that these people just went back to worshipping their false gods? Mark seems to be indicating that these people had been affected by the demoniac's witness. At a minimum, the demoniac's region of witness was the place Jesus had just traveled through.

### **The Roman centurion**

Jesus' encounter with the Roman centurion is brief, but it is clear enough that he is a Gentile, being a Roman centurion.<sup>43</sup> Jesus commends him for his faith<sup>44</sup> while the centurion is still in his Roman religion, and

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<sup>34</sup> Mark 5:1 mentions the location of the demoniac in the country of the Gerasenes, a Roman area.

<sup>35</sup> Mark 5:11 mentions a large herd of swine, Mark 5:14 the relationship the swineherds had with the people of the area, and Mark 5:14-17 the relationships the people of the area had with the demoniac.

<sup>36</sup> Mark 5:19-20 shows that the demoniac's household, his relatives were in the Decapolis, a Roman area.

<sup>37</sup> Mark 5:19

<sup>38</sup> Mark 5:15

<sup>39</sup> Mark 5:20

<sup>40</sup> Mark 7:26, 26, 26, and 27, respectively

<sup>41</sup> Mark 7:31

<sup>42</sup> There are at least eleven indications in comparing Mark 6:30-44 and Mark 8:1-10 that these are Gentiles, including territory, the words for baskets, the description of where they sat, the description of the land, the disciples' level of concern for the crowds, Jesus' words for the crowds, and the number of baskets and the number of loaves.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 8:5

says that he will share the banquet with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,<sup>45</sup> but never says anything that he should change religions. But the centurion did obviously not hold standard Roman beliefs. He had great faith in Jesus, and was a different man as a result.

### **Pontius Pilate**

Finally, Jesus had an encounter with Pilate, the Roman governor, obviously a Gentile by his own admission.<sup>46</sup> Jesus tells him he is a king, a king whose kingdom is not of this world, and calls him to listen to him and follow the truth. Yet he never says anything about Pilate changing religions.

In summary, changing religions was not part of Jesus' message to Gentiles either.

### **Jesus' Samaritan ministry**

Jesus considered the Samaritans to be foreigners.<sup>47</sup> They had an uncompromising belief in and worship of one God, avoided images, and had a sense of being the chosen people with attachment to the land given to the fathers (Israel/the northern tribes). They were loyal to the law given by Moses, observed the Sabbath, were circumcised, celebrated festivals, and expected a glorious destiny.<sup>48</sup>

Differences with the Jews included their own priesthood, different worship practices and rituals, different religious teachings and writings, and differences in their holy book<sup>49</sup> and religious beliefs. For instance, they believed that when God said, "Let there be light," that light was the Holy Spirit, which was the pre-existent Moses.<sup>50</sup>

Several modern books affirm that Samaritanism is a separate religion.<sup>51</sup> Though they had a version of some of the Scriptures, they had aberrant beliefs.

They wash their hands and feet before prayers, leave their shoes outside the prayer place, prostrate to the ground and hold hands open while standing in prayer, and pray in lines facing the front.<sup>52</sup>

They sound quite a lot like Muslims!

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<sup>44</sup> Matthew 8:10

<sup>45</sup> Matthew 8:11

<sup>46</sup> John 18:35

<sup>47</sup> Luke 17:15-19, see also John 8:48, 2 Kings 17:20

<sup>48</sup> Everett Ferguson, Backgrounds of Early Christianity, quoted by Shannon Batchelor for this and the following paragraph.

<sup>49</sup> The Samaritans believed only in the Pentateuch and their Pentateuch differed from the Jews' Pentateuch in about 6000 textual variants (most of which were minor).

<sup>50</sup> Reverend John Bowman, Samaritan Studies, p.303 at

<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/api/datastream?publicationPid=uk-ac-man-scw:1m1946&datastreamId=POST-PEER-REVIEW-PUBLISHERS-DOCUMENT.PDF>

<sup>51</sup> Ida Glasser, The Bible and Other Faiths, (IVP), John Bowman, The Samaritan Problem: Studies in the Relationship between Samaritanism, Judaism, and Early Christianity, John MacDonald, The Theology of the Samaritans, Everett Ferguson, Background of Early Christianity, 3rd edition, p. 534, The Samaritans, Reinhard Pummer, p.1.

<sup>52</sup> Reinhard Pummer, The Samaritans, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1987. Plates XXI, XXII, and XXIII.

Jesus' way of talking with the Samaritan woman is a textbook on witnessing, and many principles could be pointed out, but the ones relevant to our discussion are verses 9-10 and 20-24.

John 4:9-10 *The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."*

If Jesus had gotten sidetracked into a discussion of religion (Jews are better than Samaritans; we are right and you are wrong.), the conversation would never have gotten off the ground.

John 4:20-24 *"Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." "*

If Jesus had wanted to "convert" this woman, he missed a golden opportunity to say so. Jerusalem actually is the place God had ordained, not Mount Gerazim! But if he had said that, the woman would probably have left him, dismissing him as "another one of those Jews." Instead, Jesus tells her that the key is not religions but worship in the Spirit<sup>53</sup> and truth. Then, as he often did, he points the conversation to Himself.

### **Movements result**

In the case of the Samaritans, because Jesus does not talk about religions but Himself, the woman goes and tells her town, and many believe.<sup>54</sup> Then they come out to Jesus, ask him to stay longer, and many more believe.<sup>55</sup> "Many" and "many more" sound like a movement starting. And it seems that these Samaritans were solid in their faith. *"We have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world."*<sup>56</sup>

Four thousand people following and being fed by Jesus sounds like a movement starting, too.

*"How many thousands of Jews who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law"* also sounds like a movement.

What would have happened if Jesus had told the Samaritan woman she had to change religions? What would have happened if he had told the demoniac he could convert to Judaism? What would have

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<sup>53</sup> or in spirit

<sup>54</sup> John 4:39

<sup>55</sup> John 4:40-41

<sup>56</sup> John 4:42

happened if the many thousands of Jews who had believed and were zealous for the law had been told that they had to leave Judaism and convert to Christianity?

### **Paul's example and teaching**

In Acts 15:2, Paul very strongly disagrees with those who would require Gentiles to be circumcised and convert to Judaism. In Galatians, he is even stronger.

*"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel -- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed."<sup>57</sup>*

*Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the stumbling block of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!"<sup>58</sup>*

Speaking of the same people who promoted Gentiles changing their religion to Judaism, he likens it to "deserting" the faith, turning to a "different gospel" and says it leads to being cursed, severed from Christ, and falling away from grace. Circumcision, or changing religions, is not only not required, it is warned against in the strongest terms possible. Paige states the same idea when he says, "It is not to be disputed that the apostolic community eventually came to the agreement that Gentile converts were not under the Mosaic Covenant."<sup>59</sup>

Speaking of another key passage, Paige is correct when he says, "When Paul called on believers to remain in the condition in which they were called (1 Corinthians 7:24), he was stressing that spirituality was not tied to social status."<sup>60</sup> That particular verse deals with being slave or free. The phrase "remain in the condition in which they were called" occurs two other times in the passage as well. In verse 17, it refers to being married or single, and in verse 20, it refers to being circumcised or not (Jew or Gentile). Paul specifically commands the circumcised not to seek uncircumcision and vice versa.<sup>61</sup> Thus we expand Paige's comment and say that spirituality is not tied to social status, marital status, or religion. Furthermore, Paul implies that

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<sup>57</sup> Galatians 1:6-9

<sup>58</sup> Galatians 5:2-12

<sup>59</sup> Paige, page 9.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, page 15.

<sup>61</sup> 1Corinthians 7:18

this is not a local application that applies only in certain circumstances, but says it is his "rule in all the churches," i.e. a universal rule.

### **Summary on Conversion**

Thus we have from both Jesus and Paul, the two great missionaries of the New Testament, the same message: Changing religions or conversion is not the point, and is neither required nor encouraged. The point is following Jesus as Savior and Lord within the context in which you were called.

So whether Paige is correct that the Gentiles are the best model to follow for ministry to Muslims,<sup>62</sup> or whether second-temple Judaism is closer,<sup>63</sup> or whether my opinion is right and the Samaritans are closer, the Biblical conclusion is the same: conversion from one religion to another is not the issue, and adding conversion to the gospel makes it a different gospel.

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<sup>62</sup> Paige, pages 11ff. The view of religion as all-encompassing and group decisions are things that characterize Muslims.

<sup>63</sup> A very good case can be made for this:

- Both have uncompromising monotheism,
- Both reject the deity of Christ, and
- Both believe in salvation based on faith plus good works and membership in the covenant community/ the umma.
- Both reject any atoning meaning for the cross and the "Christian" interpretation of their holy book.
- Both have religious practices and rituals which are drawn primarily from traditions (Mark 7).
- Both have a religious system which is primarily in the kingdom of darkness (John 8:44, Matthew 23:15, Revelation 2:9,3:9).
- Both believe in an eternal "Word" of God in heaven from which their Holy Book is drawn (logos/ umm al kitab).
- Both fully integrate religion into every aspect of life.
- Both have religious police ensuring scrupulous obedience to the religious law (Mark 2:24, Luke 6:2, John 5:10).
- Both have fundamentalists, secularists, mystics, and those promoting violence (Luke 6:15, Acts 21:23,38).

There are also striking parallels between how God worked with the Jewish followers of Jesus and how He is working today among Muslim followers of Jesus.

- God is using visions and dreams (Acts 2:17), miracles and power encounters (Acts 5:5,10,15, 13:11),
- There is strong dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit,
- They are reinterpreting the religious community's "book" and using it as a bridge to proclaim Christ (e.g. Acts 4:11) (Although one book is inspired and the other is not, the parallel remains).
- Intensive discipleship taking place in the home as true believers gather for prayer and teaching,
- Believers continuing to participate with the not yet believing community in religious rituals
- There is persecution for not holding to "orthodoxy" within their religion of birth.