

On Religious Identity

# The Integrity of the Gospel and Insider Movements

by Rebecca Lewis

Concerns have arisen over the emergence of “insider movements” across the non-Christian world. For many of us, it seems that the very nature and integrity of the gospel is at stake in this discussion.

We have been led into this debate by the need to respond to developments on the field. Individuals, families and communities are claiming to know and submit to Jesus as their Lord and Savior, but refusing to identify themselves as “Christians” in the common sense of the word. Some of these people are Muslims, who claim to have found that Jesus Himself is the “straight path” that they have pleaded with God to show them five times each day. Others are Hindu or Buddhist, seeking a personal relationship with Jesus in the midst of cultures similar to the idolatrous pantheon of the Greco-Roman world or the stoic philosophers of the first century. Though most people in these insider movements believe in the supreme authority of the Bible and the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ, they are remaining members of their communities, including most aspects of their religious culture. If these were just a few people, they could be overlooked. However, when movements to faith in Christ of this nature develop, with followers numbering in the hundreds or thousands, some assessment is necessary.

Are these movements to Christ from God or not? Do they advance His Kingdom on earth or do they hinder it? Will they bring the power of the gospel into these cultures like yeast in the dough? Or will the gospel be diluted or contaminated to the point of ineffectiveness, overwhelmed by religious and cultural syncretism? Should we pray for, protect, and emulate these fledgling movements? Or, should we warn, correct, and if necessary, disown them?

I believe there is ultimately only one thing that matters at the heart of this debate, and it is not contextualization. The core issue is this: Is the very nature and integrity of the gospel being revealed and upheld, or is “a different gospel” being preached and believed, as Paul warns?

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To answer this question, we must turn to the Bible as the authority for our faith and practice, especially to the book of Acts and the epistles of Paul.

### *What Do I Mean by the Integrity of the Gospel?*

As Paul sought to fulfill his calling, we see two important facets in his defense of the gospel for the Gentiles. I believe that both facets are required for the integrity of the gospel to be maintained.<sup>1</sup>

1) First, Paul emphasized the unchanging content of the gospel message. Through Christ's death and resurrection, the living God was reconciling the world to Himself. Adam and Eve brought upon all mankind the curse of sin and death by rejecting God's command out of desire to become like gods. Jesus, the second Adam, turned this upside down, and "though being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6). Instead he walked Adam's path without sin, yet paying the price of sin, thereby establishing by grace a means for us to know and enjoy the living God forever. This is the unchanging message we proclaim in all contexts.

Christians who are supportive of insider movements are concerned that this message not be altered by adding additional requirements such as adherence to Christian religious traditions, thereby clouding or encumbering the gospel. Others, however, are concerned that without requiring adherence to traditional practices and theological formulations, this central truth cannot be preserved. Both sides are concerned that the gospel message is getting lost.

2) The second facet of the gospel that Paul emphasized is the unchanging scope of God's plan—the power of the gospel itself to penetrate and transform families within all cultures. Today we believe that God will fulfill His plan to "bless all the families of the earth." But, like the first century believers, we are not in agreement about *how* this is

going to happen. Again, the integrity of the gospel is at stake.

### **Maintaining the Integrity of the Gospel When It Moved from the Jewish to the Greek World**

From the time God first proclaimed the gospel to Abraham, He made it clear that His plan was to bless *all* the families of the earth through Abraham's descendents (Acts 3:25, Galatians 3:8). But what did this mean? Did this mean that they were to go out and make proselytes, cultural and religious converts, of all peoples?



Did it mean that "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" would hear and believe the Good News, then take it back home with them, as happened at Pentecost (Acts 2:5)?

In the book of Acts we read that the apostles began proclaiming the gospel with the assumption that it was only for the Jews. Evidently, they thought they that by doing so they were maintaining the integrity of the gospel. 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. So, it would have made sense to the disciples that those coming into the Kingdom of God would be Jews, saved by faith in Christ and disciplined through the God-given Jewish

religious framework within which all the disciples lived.

Therefore, the disciples began to confidently spread the message of Christ *inside* the Jewish religious community. They preached in the temple and synagogues—even though their own religious leaders repudiated Jesus as the Messiah, actively persecuted them and other followers of "the Way," and forbade them to preach. They believed their religious tradition to be the right one, and the only one acceptable to God. The result, as Acts 6 reveals, was that Hebraic Jews, Hellenized Jews, converts to Judaism and "a large number of priests" of the Jews were coming to faith, but no Gentiles. These Jewish believers remained in their Jewish communities, or fled to other Jewish communities when persecuted, taking their faith with them.<sup>2</sup>

### **But What Happened When Non-Jews Started to Come to Faith?**

The first non-Jews to turn to Christ in large numbers were the Samaritans. 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 temple or synagogues (John 4), where Jewish believers were congregating. Jesus affirms this non-Jewish version of faith in himself as "the kind of worshippers the Father seeks" (v. 24). The Samaritans themselves grasped both key aspects of the gospel, exclaiming, "We know that this man really is the Savior of the world!" (v. 42).

Jesus revealed both the power and the scope of the gospel by saving the Samaritan villagers, *without* requiring Samaritan believers to enter the Jewish religious framework. The disciples seemed to accept this inclusion of the Samaritans into God's kingdom, even though the Samaritans followed a "heretical" version of the Jewish religion. When Philip won many Samaritans to faith in Christ, Peter and John came to pray that they would receive the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the gospel in

many Samaritan villages on their way back to Jerusalem. These Samaritan believers remained in their Samaritan villages, as they would not have been welcomed into Jewish villages, but they were accepted as fellow believers by the Jewish believers and the apostles, who visited them. Perhaps it was easy for the Jewish believers to accept these Samaritan believers following Jesus, apart from becoming Jewish proselytes, because the Samaritans were circumcised, tried to follow the God of Abraham in the Torah, and had similar religious laws.

### ***Can the Gospel Transform Pagans without the Framework of the Jewish Laws?***

Unlike the easy acceptance of Samaritan believers, a heated theological debate arose over the very nature of the gospel itself when pagan Romans and Greeks began to come to faith in Christ. The message of the gospel was not in question, but the scope of its application was a matter of contention. 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 Mosaic Law) or could the gospel bring salvation to all, regardless of their social and religious context? Two events brought this question to a head:

1) God showed Peter the power of His gospel to save the Gentiles, apart from adopting Jewish identity, by introducing Peter to the Roman centurion Cornelius, and his household. Before Peter could even finish his presentation of the gospel, God's Holy Spirit came on all of them, much to Peter's shock. Though other Jewish believers criticized Peter for associating with Romans, upon hearing that the Holy Spirit had come upon Cornelius and his family, they exclaimed, "So then, God has granted even unto the Gentiles the repentance unto life!" (Acts 11:18). They were beginning to understand that there are two necessary facets of the gospel, both the message and its ability to save people in all cultures and contexts. Until then, their understanding of the gospel had been incomplete.

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2) Greeks were coming to faith as well. In Antioch the Greek believers were called "Christians"<sup>3</sup> (Acts 11:26). Although these Greek believers did not convert to the Jewish form of faith in Christ, they nevertheless felt a sense of unity with the Jewish believers and sent a benevolent donation for needy Jewish believers to the elders in Jerusalem through Barnabas and Saul. The Jewish believers seem to have tolerated a few pagans who had become believers in Christ without accepting their religious framework, but they were alarmed when it became a movement.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek believers must have seemed pagan and syncretistic to the Jewish believers whose religious traditions had been practiced by Jesus and the apostles and had their roots in over a thousand years of scripture and tradition. So some Jewish believers argued that the Greek believers must adopt circumcision, which was the distinctive mark of the covenant between God and His people, as well as the religious traditions given through Moses, which were followed by the Jewish believers.

### ***How Did the Jerusalem Council Maintain the Integrity of the Gospel?***

By Acts 15, a sharp dispute broke out between Paul and Barnabas and some Jewish believers from Judea who

came to Antioch and began teaching the Greek believers (the "Christians") that their salvation was not yet complete. Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem to resolve the matter under debate: Is conversion to the identity and religious traditions of the Jewish believers necessary for salvation for those coming out of Greek pagan background? At this juncture, it was not the content, or message, of the gospel that was under debate.<sup>5</sup> What was under debate was the scope and nature of the gospel: Did the message of Jesus Christ *only* have the 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?

By defending the power of the gospel to save believers who retain their Gentile culture and identity, Peter sought to preserve the integrity of the gospel. He made a plea to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem on behalf of the Gentiles, saying:

God, who knows the heart, showed that He accepted them [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith. Now why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the [Greek] disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers

### ***On Religious Identity: The Early Christian Fathers***

"The early Christian Fathers of the second century are truly our masters. They made the gospel their own to such an extent that it became for them a key to interpret the religious meanings inherent in their heritage, so that they could decide what to accept and what to reject. The gospel was for them also an all-encompassing reality and principle of integration that enabled them to understand themselves and their past and to face the future, because the gospel of Jesus Christ became for them the heir to all that was worthy in the past, whilst it held all the potential of the future. The study of non-Western Christianity needs to show a similarly deepening awareness of the impact of culture on Christian thought, and to pay greater attention to the contribution that the new languages of Christian experience make to the development of Christian thought."

Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, pp. 81-82

have been able to bear? No! We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are," (Acts 15:8-11).

The apostles and elders agreed that the Scriptures had predicted that God's salvation was for *all* peoples, not just Jews and proselytes. They also agreed that God had shown His acceptance of the Gentile believers by giving them His Holy Spirit. So, using these two criteria to justify their decision, they decided "*not to make it difficult for the Gentiles turning to God*" (Acts 15:19) by adding on to their faith in Christ a requirement of conversion to the Jewish religious forms. In order to promote a peaceful co-existence between Jewish and Greek believers, the council asked the Gentiles to follow a few laws given in Leviticus<sup>6</sup> to outsiders residing among the Jews: no eating of blood, strangled meat, or food polluted by idols, nor any practice of sexual immorality. However, all of these laws, except the last one, were removed before the end of the New Testament by Paul,<sup>7</sup> who reduced them to a matter of conscience (Romans 14).

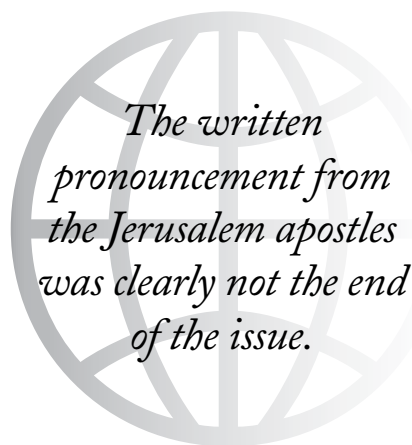
### Paul Persisted in Fighting for the Integrity of the Gospel

Paul's battle for the gospel seemed over, but it was not. The apostles had made a pivotal decision: 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. However, the written pronouncement from the Jerusalem apostles was clearly not the end of the issue. In his subsequent letters, Paul had to argue repeatedly that the gospel must move into the Gentile people groups unhindered by external religious expectations. The integrity of the gospel was at stake.

Paul was not ashamed of the gospel message precisely because he had seen its power to save, apart from religious traditions, not just the Jew but also the Gentile (Romans 1:16-17). As a

result, Paul could confidently proclaim that the gospel has revealed a righteousness that is by faith alone. So he hammered this point in through several chapters of Romans, a letter written to believers in Rome where faith in Christ was still seen as a sect of Judaism (Acts 28:22):

"God does not show favoritism." (Romans 2:11) "Circumcision is not merely outward and physical... a man is not a Jew if he is merely one outwardly. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the spirit, not by



a written code." (2:28-29) "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin." (3:9)

Before circumcision and before the giving of the Law, Abraham was made righteous by faith alone, so "*he is the father of all those who believe but have not been circumcised*" (4:11).

Paul had changed the mark of the covenant from an external mark (circumcision, Genesis 17:13) to an internal mark ("*circumcision of the heart by the Spirit not a written code*," Romans 2:29). What a shock this teaching must have been to Jewish believers! What? Abraham is the father of *uncircumcised* believers (Romans 4:11)? Abraham is the father of Gentiles refusing to adopt the Abrahamic sign of the covenant and the Laws given through Moses? Paul had declared that the mark of belonging to God's people was not external but internal—a changed heart.

Paul explained that God had demonstrated that all those who have Abraham's faith are Abraham's children, apart from any outward religious requirements. God had revealed this truth by calling Abraham "father of many nations" and by crediting to Abraham righteousness on the basis of his faith alone (Romans 4:16-18).

This message of inclusion in God's family on the basis of faith alone was good news to the Gentiles, but it was disturbing to many Jewish believers who felt Paul was dismantling their religious traditions. These Jewish believers did not understand why God would want Gentile believers to set aside the religious framework He had established for the Jews.

Likewise, it is disturbing today for Christians who value their religious traditions, to see believers arising in other cultural contexts set these aside as optional or inappropriate for their context. The message of inclusion is good news to us also as long as we are the Gentiles getting included. It starts to get more difficult to accept when we recognize that we are now in the position of those Jewish believers, with 2000 years of our own valuable teachings and traditions that we want everyone to build on.

We doubt that God would bypass the collective wisdom of our religious writings and traditions, building his church afresh in new cultures as he did among the first century Greeks. Are the foundations of the Bible and the Holy Spirit sufficient for God to build His church without going through traditional Christianity as we know it? Could it be that God is once again starting movements of true faith in Jesus Christ, making new people groups into "children of Abraham," by faith in the gospel alone?

These are questions we would rather not ask. Why would God bypass traditional Christianity? Perhaps because it would astonish the world, revealing the true power of the gospel. Perhaps

because the integrity of the gospel itself is at stake.

### *Will a Simple Gospel Result in Immature Disciples?*

A valid concern about insider movements today is that a simple faith like Abraham's, a faith in Christ and the Bible without a religious framework drawn from historical Christianity, will not give these new groups of believers enough guidance for mature discipleship. Paul spoke to this concern himself. Having shown that the gospel is powerful enough to save anyone, regardless of their religious context, Paul went on to prove that Gentile believers would be transformed even if they did not have the benefit of the Mosaic Law and the existing discipleship system of the Jews.

First, Paul showed that the religious traditions of Jewish believers had not delivered them from their sinful nature (Ephesians 2:3), nor from bondage to demonic forces (Galatians 4:3). Therefore, neither would these traditions deliver the Gentiles from sin, and could merely lead to a new type of bondage (4:9). Second, Paul delineated in Romans, chapters 6-15, that it is the gospel that is the transformative power in the life of a believer. The believer's "old self was crucified with Christ" (6:6), so he is "freed from sin" (6:7), and now he is "alive to God in Jesus Christ" (6:11), the benefit reaped "leads to holiness and the result is eternal life," (6:22), so that "...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (8:14). Third, Paul summarized the result, or fruit, of having the Holy Spirit in one's life in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These characteristics are unique signs of the Holy Spirit's work in a believer's life in any culture or context.<sup>8</sup>

Paul concluded that it is the Holy Spirit that delivers believers from their sinful nature so that the moral law of God is fulfilled—holiness without legalism. Paul was teaching that the Holy Spirit

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will accomplish in the life of a believer something no religious tradition or institution can ever accomplish.

### *What Does the "Mystery of the Gospel" Mean for Today?*

In his letter to the Romans, Paul systematically demonstrated that it is the gospel itself, apart from all the God-given traditions of the Jews, that brings the transformation of obedient faith into the life of believers from any background. He recognized that God was doing something significantly different in his day, calling it a "mystery hidden in God who created all things," (Ephesians 3:9).

When moving the gospel into the Greek world, God did not overturn His Word, but He did overturn the religious traditions His people had built upon it. The mystery He revealed to Paul was that the Greeks did not have to adopt the religious form of the Jewish believers to become joint heirs and "children of the promise" with them. Paul said: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6). Some take this to mean that the Greek believers and the Jewish believers had homogenized or fused together into a new "Christian" culture. They assume the first century believers neither had the Torah-abiding forms of the Jewish apostles, nor the cultural forms of the Greek believers so prominent in later Christianity (statues, mosaics, and endless discussions of philosophical/theological nuances).

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 their philosophy-loving hearts into theology-loving hearts, that explored the nuances of the Trinity and the incarnation. Today people of many different cultures are becoming followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. And they are claiming their biblical right to live out their faith in diverse ways that are nevertheless grounded on the supreme authority of the Bible. Are we ready to accept them as joint heirs with us if they belong to Muslim or Hindu cultures and do not adopt the religious forms and traditions we have constructed over time and do not even take on a "Christian" identity?

Paul affirmed that in spite of their different cultural and religious practices, these Jewish and Greek believers were all made one, joint heirs in Christ. The gospel had destroyed the "dividing wall of hostility," that is, their prejudice and enmity toward one another (Ephesians 2:14,16). It did not destroy their respective cultures. Having recognized that they were received by God equally, without merit, they had no right to boast over one another, or to consider their own religious expression of faith in Christ to be more salvific than the other. Therefore, we can likewise expect today that allowing radically different expressions of faith in Christ will break down walls of hostility while preserving distinct cultural identities. This humility and freedom of expression of faith are integral to maintaining the integrity of the gospel, so that the power of salvation is always clearly by faith and not by outward works.

### *Why Does Paul Forbid Them to Change Religious Expressions of Their Faith?*

It is difficult to understand Paul's teaching on these issues. It is easy to accept that he was trying to gain a freedom for the gospel to move unhindered into new cultures. That seems

compassionate. But why would he get upset if some of the new Greek believers wanted to become Jewish proselyte believers? That seems harsh. After all, conversion to Judaism had been going on for centuries. What would it matter if the Greek believers wanted to take the full step into joining the Jewish apostles in their version of faith in Christ?

Again, Paul's main concern was clearly for the integrity of the gospel. He did not want it to appear that there is more merit with God to be a believer within the religious stream of Israel than to be a believer within any other context. Therefore, Paul emphasized the importance of the gospel *not* being linked to changing cultures, even religious cultures. He said,

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. What counts is faith expressing itself in love. (Galatians 5:6) Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches: Was a man already circumcised when he was called? [already a Jew or a convert to Judaism] He should not become uncircumcised. [throw off the Jewish law and culture] Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? [a non-Jew] He should not be circumcised. [He should not convert to the Jewish religion as part of his faith in Christ] Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. Each one should remain in the situation he was in when God called him. (I Corinthians 7:17-20)

At first it appears that Paul was saying that the Lord has assigned to each of us the family and people group we are born into,<sup>9</sup> and when He calls us to Himself, He also calls us to reach out to those around us in that community and not remove ourselves from that situation.<sup>10</sup>

However, the crux of Paul's argument is actually that no one should consider one religious form of faith in Christ to be superior to another. "*What counts,*"

Paul emphasized, is "*faith expressing itself in love,*" "*keeping God's commands,*" and becoming "*a new creation.*" As believers we need to be able to look past differences in religious culture and see the Holy Spirit working in the lives of our fellow citizens of the Kingdom.

Paul considered this point so crucial to the integrity of the gospel that he laid it down as a rule for all the churches (I Corinthians 7:17). He said it even more forcefully in Galatians,

Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised [i.e.



convert to the Jewish form of faith in Christ]. The only reason they want to do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.<sup>11</sup> Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh.<sup>12</sup> May I never boast except in the cross of Jesus Christ...Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Galatians 6:11-16).

Paul considered this rule so important, he gave his signature to it, saying: "See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!"

Paul stood at a very crucial juncture in history—a critical point when the gospel could have easily become locked within the Jewish community. So Paul spoke very forcefully to ensure that the gospel was not limited to Jews, and their proselytes. He called

any "gospel" that denies the power of Christ to save those from every people group, without proselytism, "*a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all.*" He warned that those trying to add to faith in Christ a conversion to specific religious forms were "*throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel*" (Galatians 1: 6-7). In Galatians 5:2 Paul became even more vehement: "*Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves become circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. . . . You who are trying to be justified by law [outward religious expressions] have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.*" Wow!

Why was Paul so upset and so insistent that the very integrity of the gospel was at stake? Because the Judaizers<sup>13</sup> were not preaching a gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Instead they were adding the requirement of religious conversion (change of outward forms and religious identity) to the inner transformation, implying that the work of the Holy Spirit is not sufficient by itself.

### *Is This Discussion about Missiology or the Integrity of the Gospel?*

When people start turning to Christ in large numbers but refusing to identify with traditional Christianity, we should be cautious. It is important to analyze these Jesus movements just as carefully as the apostles and elders in Jerusalem analyzed the Greek movement to Christ.

We should not trivialize this discussion as a new radical contextualization<sup>14</sup> or a new missiological strategy designed to make it easy for Muslims to come to Christ.<sup>15</sup> Something much more profound is at stake: the integrity of the gospel itself.

Can we apply Paul's insights from God about Gentile believers to today's insider movements? God revealed to Paul that His promise of salvation by faith in Christ alone extends to all people. Grasping this "mystery," Paul

advocated for a Greek movement to God through Christ, spreading inside Greek culture, just as the Jewish movement to Christ was spreading inside the Jewish networks. He saw that the marvel of the gospel is that it has the power to save and transform people within any socio-religious context. That power brings far more glory to God than would be the case if God could only transform believers within a single religious construct.

Rather than simply presenting a missiological strategy, Paul was setting a template for how the gospel penetrates radically different cultures. 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. But if we demand that all believers adopt our own religious traditions and identity,<sup>16</sup> then we are actually undermining the integrity of the gospel. We are subtly communicating that Jesus Christ cannot save people and gather them into His Kingdom without using other religious traditions and institutions of godly men who have gone before. We are saying that the gospel alone is not powerful enough to save to the uttermost (Hebrews 7:24-25 KJV).

Today God is granting faith in Jesus Christ to Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in increasing numbers. They are believing in His death and resurrection on their behalf, receiving Him as their Lord and Savior, accepting the supreme authority of the Bible, and being transformed by the Holy Spirit. But they are not becoming “Christians” in name or adopting traditional Christian religious forms or identity. Could the gospel, stripped of 2000 years of godly writings and traditions, really be that powerful?

I hope we can make the same decision that the apostles did in Acts 15. They welcomed Greek pagans as followers of Christ without requiring the Greek believers to adopt their own religious expression of that faith, opening the way of faith for all non-Jewish people

## Could the gospel, stripped of 2000 years of godly writings and traditions, really be that powerful?

groups. Let us boldly affirm that apostolic decision and say: “God who knows the heart shows that he accepts Muslim and Hindu believers by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He made no distinction between us and them for He purified their heart by faith...We believe that it is by the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are...therefore, we should not make it difficult for people in other religious cultures who are turning to Christ.” **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Let me explicitly state that salvation is through the Lord Jesus Christ alone, the sole authority for our faith is the canonized Bible, and the body of Christ consists of all who put their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

<sup>2</sup> At the very end of Acts (28:17-29), Paul is in Rome talking to non-believing Jews who still view faith in Jesus as the Messiah to be a sect of Judaism.

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener in the *IVP Bible Background Commentary* on this verse notes that the term “Christian” was used not in a religious sense but a political one: “‘Christians’ occurs here as a nickname given by outsiders, and in 1 Peter 4:16, as something like a legal charge. The title is formed on the analogy of adherents to a political party: the ‘Caesarians,’ the ‘Herodians,’ the

‘Pompeianians’ and so forth.” (See reference under listing for Acts 11:26.)

<sup>4</sup> The term “Christians” was not a widespread term for Greek/Roman followers of Christ in the early centuries, with Roman historians often referring to believers as “atheists” because they did not believe in the Greek gods or the Emperor as a god. There is no indication that the term “Christians” was applied to the Jewish believers during the first century.

<sup>5</sup> Paul may have seen that the content of the gospel of grace could not be preserved apart from the scope being preserved. In his letter to the Romans (chapter 14), Paul speaks of the “weak in faith” as those who trust in God *plus* dietary and festival laws, or who lean on observance of particular customs and not on God alone. In other words, those who demanded Jewish customs and identity from non-Jewish followers of Christ were making Jewish religious rites and traditions as a condition of God’s acceptance, thus “nullifying the grace of God” (Gal. 2:21; see also Gal. 3:17).

<sup>6</sup> Fitzmeyer in his commentary on Acts notes that the rules James proposed “seek only a *modus vivendi* of Gentile among Jewish Christians and imply no salvific purpose in them. The four things that James would impose are derived from part of the Holiness Code in Lev 17-18, which proscribed certain things not only for “anyone of the house of Israel,” but also for “the aliens that sojourn among them” Acts of the Apostles, *Anchor Yale Bible*

### On Religious Identity: Theology on the Frontier of Religious Encounter

“Since African theology developed also as an African response to Western views and interpretations of African pre-Christian traditions, it may be worth exploring whether the African Christian thought that has emerged has relevance for the same process beyond Africa...What is important is the fact that Europe shares with Africa a pre-Christian primal religious heritage...The European story suggests that the primal religions of Europe quickly became a spent force. Yet Christians continued to name the days of the week after pre-Christian deities, and pre-Christian elements and notions made their way into the celebration of Christian festivals, indicating that the old beliefs had not entirely lost their hold upon people’s minds. It may be that in Africa the opportunity lost in Europe for a serious and creative theological encounter between the Christian and primal traditions, can be regained...For, having been forced to do theology in the interface of their Christian faith and the perennial spiritualities of the African primal heritage, and having to internalize that dialogue within themselves, African theologians have restored the character of theology as Christian intellectual activity on the frontier with the non-Christian world, as essentially communicative, evangelistic and missionary.”

Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, p.58-59

*Commentaries*, Yale University Press, 1998, p.557. These four laws were required in the Old Testament Law for those foreigners living among the Sons of Israel. It seems that James believed that only a few Gentiles would join the community of faith, and would be subsumed under and live among the Jewish community.

<sup>7</sup> (Romans 14, I Corinthians 8, and 10:23-11:1) The rules concerning kosher food were necessary if Greek believers wanted to eat with Jewish believers; however, they would likewise hinder Greek believers from eating with their non-believing relatives, so Paul makes it a matter of doing what least offends the conscience of the person you are eating with, noting that idols are nothing and therefore meat offered to them is not significant either. It seems clear that Paul does not consider it “syncretistic” to adapt in this way.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards argued that all religions demonstrate characteristics like mystical experiences, miracles, speaking in tongues, rules for pious behavior, etc. He pointed out that the fruit of the Spirit, in particular the ability to love your enemy, is the only religious experience that Christ alone can produce (see his works: *Treatise on Religious Affections*, and *The Nature of True Virtue*). Neither “right doctrine” nor “right practice,” apart from the rebirth through the Holy Spirit, are transformative.

<sup>9</sup> Does this mean people born into bad situations must remain there? No, because Paul makes clear that a slave should take the opportunity to become free. Today people group barriers are breaking down, and some people have lived in multiple cultures and are descended from many people groups, so the rule to remain in ones situation must be viewed in that context.

<sup>10</sup> There are exceptions, Paul himself taking on the missionary call to incarnate in another culture. Missionaries adapt to the language and culture they are entering so that those they are witnessing can understand without knowing the missionary’s language or culture. Paul became like the Greeks culturally in order to reach them. He did not spend his time denouncing the goddess Artemis (Diana) in Ephesus, the center for worship of her. Instead he lifted up Christ. Paul did not ask the Greek believers to take on any of his religious forms or culture. He knew that the power for salvation lay in the gospel message itself. The transformed life came from the power of the Holy Spirit in ones life, which was dependent on hearing and believing the truth (Romans 15:17-21). Everything else was a distraction at best, “a different gospel” at worst.

<sup>11</sup> Non-Jewish Christians were being more heavily persecuted in the Roman Empire than Jewish believers, who had an imperial exemption from emperor worship. Also Jewish believers experienced less persecution from fellow non-believing Jews if their sect was leading Gentiles to convert to Judaism.

<sup>12</sup> The Judaizers wanted to be able to boast about conversions to their version of faith in Christ as if it were better, though they were not even practicing their own rules very well. Longenecker notes regarding this verse: “Probably, therefore, what Paul means here in 6:13 is that despite the loftiness of their assertions and their rigid theology, the Judaizers, at least in Paul’s eyes, fell short of keeping all the law scrupulously themselves.” Longenecker, Richard N.: *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*. electronic ed. Dallas : Word, Incorporated, 1998 (Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary 41), S. 293

<sup>13</sup> The term “Judaizers” was used only to refer to Jewish believers who added on to the gospel that conversion to Jewish religious forms and a Jewish religious identity was a requirement for salvation. Some today similarly teach that a conversion to Christ also requires a conversion to “Christian” religious forms and identity is a requirement for salvation.

<sup>14</sup> The existing Jewish believers were focused on contextualization issues while Paul was trying to uphold the integrity of the gospel. The Jewish believers found it hard to accept it as a gospel issue. They wanted to add things on, like becoming kosher or getting circumcised, to ensure the Greeks were become true believers in their Messiah. It was hard for them to see how being better believers would undermine the gospel. They wanted to make sure that when the gospel went into the Greek culture it did not become syncretistic. They did not understand how that concern showed a lack of faith that the gospel by itself, through faith alone, was sufficient to not just save but transform those who believed it—to circumcise their hearts. Paul spends far more time warning believers about syncretism with their own perceived ideas of what “righteousness” looks like, a righteousness from any source other than faith in Jesus alone, than he spends warning about syncretism with pagan practices or beliefs. Why? Perhaps because it is this kind of ethnocentric syncretism that makes us unable to recognize and to receive as brothers those who are believing in Jesus, but staying significantly distinct from us.

<sup>15</sup> This is exactly the charge Paul faced in Galatia. Longenecker notes: “Evidently the Judaizers were claiming that Paul only presented half a gospel in his evangelistic mission in Galatia, purposely trimming his message so as to gain a more favorable response.” *Op. cit.*, S. 18

<sup>16</sup> All through history the church has tended to slip into the mode of thinking that new people groups coming to Christ need to end up joining our form of the faith and looking like us. The Reformation broke the gospel loose from the Catholic stranglehold on the religious form of faith in Christ, much to their shock. Now we Protestants run the risk of being equally convinced that all new believers must follow Jesus the way we do, be “Christians” like us. Paul essentially said to the Jewish believers, “Let’s be honest, we are not even that good at our own version of the faith.” Let’s be humble and acknowledge that even our own evangelical Protestant forms of Christianity are not free from syncretism with our cultural values. And yet Christ is able to save us in the midst of it through our faith in Him.