# Churchless Christianity (Movements to Jesus / Insider Movements)

An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod December 2012

# History, Beliefs, Practices

## **Identity:**

The phrase "churchless Christianity" does not represent a particular religious movement, but an approach to Christian evangelism. The approach is sometimes referred to as "movements to Jesus," and in the context of foreign missions, as "insider movements," "C5 insider movements," or "people movements." Insider movements are defined as "popular movements to Christ that bypass both formal and explicit expressions of the Christian religion." "Insiders" are new disciples of Jesus who remain "inside" the relationships and communities of their social and religious culture. Insider discipleship is said to "express itself in culturally appropriate communities of believers who will also continue to live within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful." It is hoped that new believers will remain within their religious and cultural context in order to share their faith in Christ with family and friends. In the context of American culture similar ideas are expressed in terms of outreach to people "who love Jesus but not the church."

# Founder(s):

While there are no founders for these movements to Jesus, influential writings include those by John Travis (a pseudonym, a missionary among Asian Muslims), Herbert Hoefer (missionary to India), Charles Kraft (missionary and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary), Ralph Winter (also of Fuller Theological Seminary), and Phil Parshall (a missionary among Muslims).

# **Statistics:**

There are no statistics available for "movements to Jesus," especially as insider believers may remain "hidden" within their own social and religious cultures.

# History:

As early as 1938, the Near East Christian Council, a group of Protestant missionaries to the Middle East, concluded that the best way to bring Muslims to Christ was to develop followers of Jesus who remained loyal to their Islamic social and political groups. In the decades to follow, early missionaries were sometimes blamed for encouraging converts to adopt a foreign, Western culture along with their new faith. Missionaries trained in the social sciences influenced mission work, and culture came to be viewed as a "neutral vehicle." In a 1974 conference on the cross-cultural

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> David Garrison, "Church Planting Movements vs. Insider Movements: Missiological Realities vs. Mythiological Speculations," *International Journal of Foreign Missions* 21:4 (Winter 2004): 51

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Kevin Higgins, "The Key to Insider Movements: The 'Devoted's' of Acts," *International Journal of Foreign Missions* 21:4 (Winter 2004): 156.

communication of the Gospel, speaker Charles Kraft called for a faith renewal movement within Islam, viewing "Muslim" as a cultural, rather than a religious, term. During the 1970s, mission conference leaders spoke of using the Qur'an as a bridge to lead Muslims to Christ. John Wilder, a Presbyterian missionary among Muslims in Pakistan, described the possibility of a people movement to Christ that would remain within Islam. He advocated Messianic Judaism as a model for Muslim evangelism.

In 1991 LCMS missionary Herbert Hoefer published his book, Churchless Christianity, a study of Jesus devotees in Tamilnadu in India. In 1998 missionary John Travis proposed the C1 to C6 scale of possible types of Christ-centered communities among Muslims. C5 believers remain legally and socially within the Islamic community, worship Christ under the form of Muslim ritual prayers, and continue to view Muhammad as a prophet. In American culture "movements to Jesus" do not necessarily take place within the context of a different religion. However, just as insider advocates separate discipleship from established Christian churches, movements to Jesus in American culture have been placed in contrast to the institutional church by writers such as Dan Kimball (They Like Jesus But Not the Church) and Leonard Sweet (What Matters Most).

The "movements to Jesus" approach is not without its critics. Reformed theologian Michael Horton writes, "A lot of evangelicals were raised with this contrast between getting saved and joining the church. And those seeds are now bearing fruit, disastrous fruit, in the Insider Movement." Timothy Tennet of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary distinguishes between Islamic cultural identity and religious identity, believing that Christian conversion must not be separated from visible Christian community. Reformed theologian Bill Nikides has linked insider ideas unfavorably with emergent theology, and theologian John Piper sees similarities between insider theology and "seeker driven" teaching. Responding in 2011 to Bible translations in which terms deemed offensive to Muslims (such as references to Jesus as Son of God and Messiah) were omitted, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America approved a document called "A Call to Faithful Witness." The document spoke against biblical translations impacted by the insider movement and encouraged PCA congregations "to support biblically sound and appropriately contextualized efforts to see Christ's Church established among resistant peoples." Church established among resistant peoples.

# Texts:

There are no founding texts for this approach to evangelism. Influential writings include the book Churchless Christianity by missionary Herbert Hoefer, the article, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-centered Communities' ('C') Found in the Muslim Context" by a missionary John Travis (a pseudonym) in the October 1998 Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ), and articles in journals such as EMQ, the International Journal of Frontier Missiology and Mission Frontiers. Dan Kimball, in They Like Jesus But Not the Church, describes movements to Jesus among people dissatisfied with the institutional church. Leonard Sweet, in What

on church growth and seeker-driven evangelism see the 1987 CTCR report, *Evangelism and Church Growth* at <a href="http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=419">http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=419</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Bill Nikides, "Insider Movements and the Busted Church," *Modern Reformation* 21:4 (July-August 2012), 38.

<sup>4</sup> On the emergent church, see the CTCR evaluation at <a href="http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=377">http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=377</a> and an abuse the state of the state of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> "A Call to Faithful Witness," available at

Matters Most, discusses the importance of a right relationship with God as opposed to faith "entombed" in "a declaration of adherence to a set of beliefs."

## **Beliefs and Practices:**

"Movements to Jesus" describe themselves as just that—movements to Jesus, often set in contrast to membership in an organized church body. Dan Kimball writes, "No one has ever told me that they are against becoming like Jesus or being conformed to the ways of Jesus; it's the ways and thinking of the organized church that they don't want to conform to." A missionary among Malay Muslims comments: "I ha88888d a conviction that getting [Muslims] to change their religion to 'Christianity,' join a 'church,' and adopting a Christian culture was not the mandate of Christ." Leonard Sweet writes, "To save the world we need something more biblical than higher standards. We need higher relationships...Our problem in reaching the world is that we've made rules more important than relationships." Jesus becomes a revolutionary figure who came to set people free from the organized religion of His day. Insider advocates suggest that Muslims and Hindus follow Jesus without becoming part of a religion that is foreign to them, that is Christianity.

Insider advocates note that words such as "Christian," "church," "Christianity," and "baptism" have become, in some cultures, associated with Western culture and political power. Non-Western cultures may regard "Christianity" as foreign, invasive, and even imperialist. Among Muslims the title "Christian" may be identified with Western culture, the crusades, immodest dress, sexual promiscuity, disrespect of elders, and alcoholism. Christian baptism may be equated with church membership and its foreign and Western associations, cutting new believers off from their families or causing problems in business or marriage. Non-baptized believers may not be church members, but they are considered by insider advocates as sheep of Christ's flock who "are not of this fold" (John 10:16).

Insider advocates suggest the use of new terms free of Western cultural baggage. Some favor biblical translations that use terms for God or Jesus that are less offensive in Muslim cultures, for example, calling Jesus God's Prince rather than God's Son or referring to God as Guardian rather than Father. In view of the fact that Islam means "submission to God" and Buddhism indicates "a quest for enlightenment," advocates of movements to Jesus suggest more descriptive names for Christian communities, such as "People of the Way" or "Children of the Light." Instead of "church," followers of Jesus in India, for example, might call themselves a *Jesu sanga*, or Jesus gathering. Baptized believers in the Masai tribe call themselves the *Orporor L'Engai*, "the age group brotherhood of God." 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet, What Matters Most (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Dan Kimball, They Like Jesus But Not the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 75.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Jim Chew, "Reflections on Contextualization: My Personal Journey," Connections, September 2008, www.initialmedia.com; Chew's article has been republished in Rose Dowsett, ed., Global Mission: Reflections and Case Studies in Contextualization for the Whole Church (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2011), Chapter 11.

<sup>9</sup> Sweet. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> Kimball, 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Herbert E. Hoefer, Churchless Christianity (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001), 164.

Herbert Hoefer, "What's in a Name? The Baggage of Terminology in Contemporary Mission," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 25:1 (Spring 2008): 27.
 Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 71.

The term "C5 insider" comes from the C1 to C6 spectrum developed by John Travis. The spectrum describes the extent to which the Muslim background believers remain within their social and religious culture:

- C1... A foreign church transplant, in which Christians worship according to a language and customs other than their own
- C2... A foreign church transplant that uses the local language, but not the local religious vocabulary
- C3... Christ-centered communities using the local language and religiously neutral forms of culture such as local music, dress and art
- C4... Christ-centered communities using the local language and biblically permissible cultural forms such as ritual prayer or abstaining from pork; Islamic religious terms may be used and believers are not called Christians, but followers of Isa
- C5... Christ-centered communities of "Messianic Muslims" accepting Jesus as Lord while remaining legally and socially within the community of Islam; C5 believers identify themselves as Muslim followers of Jesus and unsaved Muslims may eventually expel C5 believers from the community of Islam.
- C6... Christ-centered communities of secret, underground believers<sup>14</sup>

Insider advocates find support in stories of biblical converts who testified to Christ apart from membership in an established faith community—for example, Cornelius, the Philippian jailer, Bartimaeus, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the centurion at the cross. After the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), Gentile believers were not required to adopt all Jewish customs. One insider advocate argues, "C5 practioners insist that—even as Paul argued tirelessly with Judaizers that Gentiles don't have to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus-Muslims don't have to convert to 'Christianity' to follow Jesus." Jesus told the Samaritan woman to embrace true worship of God apart from a cultural or geographic location (John 4:21). The Syrian commander Naaman expressed belief in the God of Israel, yet asked for Elisha's pardon because he had to support his Syrian master during worship in a pagan temple. Elisha's response, "Go in peace," (2 Kings 5:15-19) is understood as permission to worship the God of Israel as an "insider" in the pagan temple. Insider advocate John Ridgway comments that "at the heart of the gospel from Genesis to Revelation is God's desire to reconcile every ethnic community through 'insiders' in those communities and through mobile apostolic leaders and their teams who would go to every ethnic community. This would not occur through organized religion but through Jesus' introduction of the kingdom of God. Jesus himself was an insider who inspired insider movements."16

# A Lutheran Response

If people move to Jesus, who is the Jesus they follow? Dan Kimball acknowledges popular misconceptions about the Savior, but sees them as a bridge: "Our role is to help them discover the biblical Jesus. But we can be thrilled that at least they are open to the pop-culture Jesus. Their respect

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> The C1-C6 spectrum was described by John Travis (a pseudonym) in his article, "The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-centered Communities' ('C') Found in the Muslim Context." Evangelical Missions Quarterly 34:4 October 1998: 407-408.

Joshua Massey, "His Ways Are Not Our Ways," Evangelical Missions Quarterly 35:2 (April 1999), 191.
 John Ridgway "Insider Movements in the Gospel and Acts" International Journal of Frontier Missions 24:2 (Summer 2007): 77.

for Jesus is a great point of entry into discussion." However, discussions such as those advocated by Kimball must continue so that people who respect Jesus as merely a social rebel or wise rabbi come to trust Him as "the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus, the Christ and Son of God, does not separate Himself or faith in His name from His Body, the Church. The confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God is the foundation, the rock, on which His Church is built (Matthew 16:18).

Insider advocates argue that disciples of Jesus can be part of the Church as His Body without being part of an established church. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession states that the Church "is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons." However, the Apology explains that this same Church "nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ." Jesus, of course, cannot be placed in opposition to the Church, His Body, but neither should He placed in opposition to the institutional church—believers who form communities around the external marks of the Gospel and the sacraments and call a pastor to administer those gifts of God among them: "Concerning church order [the churches among us] teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called." Although marked by the Gospel and sacraments, these faithful communities may not look exactly like. "Human traditions, rites, or ceremonies" may differ:

Likewise, [the churches among us] teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says [Eph. 4:5, 6]: "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all..."

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession points out that although clothing differs among cultures, righteousness before God does not:

"For if human traditions are not acts of worship necessary for righteousness before God, it follows that it is possible to be righteous and children of God even if a person does not observe the traditions that have been maintained elsewhere. Analogously, if the style of German clothing is not an act of devotion to God necessary for righteousness before God, it follows that it is possible to be righteous and children of God and the church of Christ even if they wear not German, but French clothing."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Kimball, 256.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Articles 7 and 8, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], 174.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article 14, *The Book of Concord*, 47. Author Kevin Deyoung comments, "I don't think we have to pit structure against the Spirit" and writes that a danger "with churchless Christianity is that in some instances, it might not be Christianity anymore. Churchless Christianity sometimes seems to be anti-pastor, anti-sermon, anti-doctrinal boundaries, and the mantra, 'I want Jesus, not religion." (Kevin Deyoung, "Why Churchless Christianity Doesn't Work," *Christianity Today* (August 2009), 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article 7, The Book of Concord, 43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Articles 7 and 8, The Book of Concord, 180.

Clothing and ceremonies differ, but human culture in its many aspects is not necessarily a neutral vehicle. Human beings, whatever their cultural background, "by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Romans 1:18). Because people in every culture "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Romans 1:25), culture may provide a bridge to begin communication but cannot serve as a solid foundation of faith. Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), the Savior of people from "all tribes and peoples and languages" (Revelation 7:9). Theologian and professor Lamin Sanneh writes, "The fact of Christianity being a translated, and translating, religion places God at the center of the universe of cultures . . . No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive access or advantage to the truth of God, and none so marginal or inferior that it can be excluded."22

Every culture displays its "negative baggage"—however rightly or wrongly interpreted—to the eyes of other cultures. If past wrongs paint a negative picture of Western Christianity before the world, Islamic terrorism displays an equally negative image of Middle Eastern Muslim culture. Religion is not a neutral vehicle.<sup>23</sup> Religions or faith traditions are expressed within a variety of nationalities and cultures. One opponent of the insider movement offers the warning—with bold emphasis—that while the C5 insider approach appears to be culturally neutral and, in fact, supportive of non-Western cultures, the movement itself is actually "a reflection of intentional western missiology, western training, and often a great deal of western money. Mission agencies expend a great deal of effort to promote 'Insider' methods."24

Movements to Jesus set Jesus in opposition to Baptism as well as to the institutional church. We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Theologian Edward Koehler writes, "It is unbelief that damns. Faith can exist without Baptism or without the proper understanding of its necessity and benefits." But Koehler continues, "However, faith cannot exist with the contempt of Baptism. He who rejects Baptism rejects what Baptism offers (Luke 7:30)."25 Baptism cannot be dismissed as merely the adoption of a foreign, Western religion or as a sign of membership in an "institutional church." In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes, "It is of the greatest importance that we regard baptism as excellent, glorious, and exalted. It is the chief cause of our contentions and battles because the world is now full of sects who scream that baptism is an external thing and that external things are of no use. But no matter how external it may be, here stand God's Word and command that have instituted, established, and confirmed baptism. What God institutes and commands cannot be useless."26

Is baptism only a matter of inward faith or is it incorporation into a visible community? We confess in what began historically as a baptismal creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints."<sup>27</sup> The baptized enter the communion of saints. Whatever their outward cultural dress, they receive new, inward clothing and unity: "For as many of you as were

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Lamin Sanneh, Whose Religion Is Christianity? (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 106.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Concerning Islam in particular, Scott Yakimow comments that "the C5 ideal postulates a distinction between culture and theology that, in most forms of Islam, simply does not exist. Islam is a religion that claims to govern all aspects of life, both for the individual believer and the community (umma) as a whole." Scott Yakimow, "Bridging the Gap: Sharing the Gospel with Muslims." Concordia Journal (July 2002): 287-288.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Bill Nikides, "Evaluating 'Insider Movements': C5 (Messianic Muslims)" St. Francis Magazine 4 (March 2006), 5 (bold print in the original). <sup>25</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 278.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 460.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> The Apostles' Creed, Lutheran Service Book (St. Louis: CPH, 2006), 159.

baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28) and "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The baptized remain within the culture of their birth; outward language, clothing, and customs will not necessarily change. Yet in their new and hidden life (Colossians 3:3), the baptized are brought into what is in the eyes of the world a very visible Christian community. They are born again into a new culture, an alien community, living and worshiping in ways that set them apart from the unbelieving world (Matthew 5:14-16; John 13:35; John 17:14-15; Philippians 2:14-15; 1 Peter 2:11-12; 1 Peter 4:3-4).

Insiders are said to remain within their former religion for the purpose of witnessing to family and neighbors. Is Baptism discouraged (or delayed) among insiders for fear that the baptized in another culture will suffer economic difficulties, family divisions, or deadly persecution? These are things that Western Christians generally have not had to face. Do we hesitate to ask others to suffer what we have not? That call to discipleship is neither ours to make nor ours to brush aside. The Lord of the Church Himself has already called: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:23-25; see also Luke 18:28-30).

Insider advocates point to biblical figures who testify to Christ apart from established, believing communities (Cornelius, the Ethiopian eunuch, and others), but we are not told if these newly confessing Christians later joined new or existing faith communities. Elisha sent Naaman away in peace (2 Kings 5:18-19) yet it must be remembered that the prophet Elijah had earlier warned Israel against "limping" in two directions of belief (1 Kings 18: 21). Although Jesus dismissed geographic certainties in worship, He definitely made a cultural distinction in His conversation with the Samaritan woman: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). The earliest believers struggled with that cultural distinction. Was the Jewish Messiah also the Savior of Gentiles? As God worked through the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 and the events preceding it, early believers came to understand that the covenant with Abraham and his descendants is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, in whom "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3).

Human beings once enjoyed a unity in language and culture that led them deeper into sinful rebellion. In judgment God "confused their language" and "dispersed them over the face of all the earth" (Genesis 11:7-9). Now in Christ Jesus, we see the people of God standing together before His throne, robed in righteousness—a new creation—and crying out with one voice:

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10)

## For Further Reading:

Hoefer, Herbert E. Churchless Christianity. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001.

Kimball, Dan. They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.

Nikides, Bill. "Insider Movements and the Busted Church." *Modern Reformation* 21:4 (July-August 2012).

Sanneh, Lamin. Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2003.

Sweet, Leonard. What Matters Most: How We Got the Point But Missed the Person. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2004.

Yakimow, Scott. "Bridging the Gap: Sharing the Gospel with Muslims." *Concordia Journal* (July 2002): 270-290 (this article discusses Muslim beliefs about Christ and ways in which Christians can faithfully witness to Muslims).

#### Links and Websites:

The People of The Book, an organization that supports the C5 approach to mission work among Muslims.

(www.ThePeopleOfTheBook.org)

An evaluation of Islam from a Lutheran perspective <a href="http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=382">http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=382</a>

Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR): Biblical Revelation and Inclusive Language (1998)

http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=314

CTCR Staff Opinion on Inclusive Language in the New International Version (2011) http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=1935