

# An Extended Conversation About “Insider Movements”

Responses to the  
September-October 2005 *Mission Frontiers*



*Editor's note: our September-October cover theme, "Can We Trust Insider Movements?", prompted a lot of response, and in these pages we give you a sampler of the subsequent conversation. The September-October issue included an article by John and Anna Travis, who said, "As we have seen the resistance toward changing religions and the huge gap between the Muslim and Christian communities, we feel that fighting the religion-changing battle is the wrong battle. We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale." That comment, and others like it, prompted John Piper, Gary Corwin, and others to write responses. Listen in on the conversation.*

## Minimizing the Bible?: Seeker-Driven Pastors and Radical Contextualization in Missions

**John Piper**

*John Piper is the Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church (Minneapolis, Minnesota) and the author of more than 20 books, including **Desiring God**. This article is reprinted, by permission, from [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org).*

I have been pondering a possible relationship between the minimizing of the Bible in so-called seeker-driven churches and in some of the radical forms of contextualization that have emerged in missions. Perhaps there isn't any connection. But I wonder. The common denominator that

**The upshot seems to be the minimization of the Word of God in its robust and glorious fullness.**

I am pondering is the loss of confidence that declaring what the Bible says in the power of the Holy Spirit can create and sustain the church of Christ.

This morning I just read John 2:11, "This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and *manifested his glory*. And his disciples *believed* in him." I bowed and prayed, "O Lord, this is how faith happens. People are given eyes to see

your glory in your person and in your deeds. Please don't let me turn away from the ministry that puts all the emphasis on the 'gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God'" (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Then I was reminded of another text in John which connected the revelation of Christ's glory to the written word of God. John 20:30-31, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The signs that reveal the faith-awakening glory of Christ are not mainly new signs being done today, but the signs that are written in the gospels. These are written "so that you may believe." He "manifested his *glory*. And his disciples *believed* in him." That is the way faith comes. Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit comes "He will glorify

me!” (John 16:14). Therefore we declare the fullness of the glorious Person and Work of Christ in history. That is how the church is created and sustained.

It seems to me that a growing number of pastors and missionaries have lost confidence in this truth. They have concluded that the gap between the glory of Christ and the felt needs of their neighbors, or between the glory of Christ and the religion of the nationals, is simply too great for the fullness of God’s Word to overcome. The upshot seems to be the minimization of the Word of God in its robust and glorious fullness.

This is on my front burner just now because in recent weeks I have received a steady stream of testimonies from aching saints who say in so many words, “Our pastor doesn’t proclaim to us what the Bible says and means. The messages are not revelations of the glory of Christ. They are advice-talks with a religious twist.” And then I have been reading about certain kinds of gospel contextualization in missions that seem to minimize the fullness of the biblical revelation which converts should share with others. So I have been pondering whether there are connections.

I have no desire to naively equate the cultural conglomerate of western Christianity with the true, spiritual body of Christ. I can appreciate avoiding the word “Christian” in a missions context where it signifies degenerate, materialistic, immodest western religion. And I realize that most of the ways we “do church” are culture-specific rather than biblically mandated. But there are other questions that trouble me:

1. Are the essentials of biblical faith embraced by new converts to Christ, and do they make them known in love to others? For example, do they

embrace and make known that the Bible is the only inspired and infallible written revelation of God, and that Christ is God and was crucified for sin and raised from the dead above all authority?

2. Are the former religious behaviors of converts to Christ, which they may retain, communicating regularly a falsehood about what the convert means and believes?
3. Are words being used by converts that mislead people rather than make the truth plain? Are missionaries and converts following Paul’s commitment to candor: “But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s Word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2)?

I may be wrong about a Bible-minimizing connection between seeker-driven pastors and radically contextualizing missionaries, but it is hard not to see a loss of faith in the power of God’s Word when I hear that the Bible is not preached at home, and when I read from the frontiers: “We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our context such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale.”

Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to come in power in our day for the sake of powerful displays of the glory of Christ in the declaration of the Word of God where those glories are revealed with infallible and converting authority. 🌐

*Editor’s note: later in this conversation (see pages 21–22) John and Anna Travis offer their response both to John Piper and to Gary Corwin.*

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## Reviewing the September-October *Mission Frontiers*

**Gary Corwin and Ralph Winter**

*Gary Corwin is associate editor of **Evangelical Missions Quarterly** and missiologist-at-large for Arab World Ministries, on loan from SIM-USA. Ralph Winter is General Director of the Frontier Mission Fellowship and editor of **Mission Frontiers**.*

**Corwin:** As a long-time reader of *MF* who has always looked forward to its arrival, I have to express my disappointment with your September-October 2005 issue. Some of the content seemed highly misleading or clearly wrong on the subject of Insider Movements.

**Winter:** I have read with care your two-page letter on our Insider Movement issue. I can honestly say

that I completely agree with your concerns. But at the same time I honestly don’t believe we intended them to arise from the text.

**Corwin:** [Your own commentary] seems clearly intended to leave the impression that only inexperienced or ignorant mission leaders have a problem with this concept as it is currently being advocated.... While most would acknowledge that

a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist might come to faith in Christ yet remain in their religious context for a time of sorting things out and sharing their new-found faith, the vast majority of highly experienced mission leaders today would reject the idea that remaining in one's worship context as a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist is a viable response for true followers of Christ.

**Winter:** Include me. I also reject, totally, "the idea that remaining in one's worship context" is viable. I don't think anyone in our issue said anything like that!

**Corwin:** Believing Gentiles of Paul's day hardly represented an Insider Movement within a competing faith system. Rather, they represented new believers whose continuing cultural practices were hard for many believing Jews to swallow.

**Winter:** Again, I completely agree. Insider Movements are by definition not "within a competing faith system" but represent merely, as you say, "cultural practices ... hard for (the source faith) to swallow."

**Corwin:** Most troubling of all, however, is the admission by Charles Kraft that the primary task of contextualization teaching (and by implication, cross-cultural ministry teaching more generally) will need to be on how to change the Christianity we find around the world rather than how to introduce the Gospel among the peoples where it doesn't currently have root. On page nine we read, "Any discussion of this topic needs to take into account the fact that the situations most cross-cultural workers are working in nowadays are seldom pioneer situations. Thus, we who teach contextualization are dealing primarily with those whose major concern will have to be on how to bring about

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change in already existing situations rather than on how to plant culturally appropriate churches."

**Corwin:** At one level this radically changes the focus from least-reached peoples, contrary to all that MF has always stood for. On an even sadder level, it advocates – in the name of cultural appropriateness (as the writer envisions it) – a new form of western missiological imperialism into contexts where local believers are already believing, living, and applying the Gospel!

**Winter:** Please don't let this trouble you. Kraft is not de-emphasizing unreached peoples. He is merely noting that most of the current discussions about contextualization are occurring in and among national church movements. What he might better have said is that, say in Japan, without troubling the existing Japanese churches it is urgent and important to develop churches that are far more Japanese. I visited one there recently that had been meeting in a missionary's living room for 46 years and still had only 12 members. They could only sing psalms, and no piano, although before the service they practiced singing with the help of a piano – but not in the church service that followed. It was the precise image of its US counterpart....

**Winter:** Actually, speaking of a focus on unreached peoples, you may be interested to know that as far back as the Singapore 2002 consultation on unreached peoples I presented a paper (not well understood, I'm afraid) to the effect that countries like Japan still lack a completely indigenous form of our faith. My paper was thus entitled "From Mission to

Evangelism to Mission”, meaning that we settled too soon for a cessation of mission in Japan and went to evangelism from a highly Westernized base, and that we need to begin again in pioneer-mission thinking if we are ever going to win Japan.

**Corwin:** There are other things that could be mentioned, such as John and Anna Travis’ sad comment that “We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our contexts such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale.” I would encourage them and others to look closely on the remarkable things the Spirit of God is doing in our day to build His church in the dynamic cultural, political, and religious contexts of places like Algeria, Iran, and Iraq, before concluding that such change is unlikely in their own context.

**Winter:** I think they are saying that if we expect a billion Muslims to begin calling themselves Christians, there is “little hope in our lifetime” of winning masses of Muslims. If that is what they were saying, then it would be like the situation in Japan. We are not going to win Japan in our lifetime with a Western-form church.

**Corwin:** In response to the assertion that “today’s proponents of either insider movements or church-planting movements are building on foundations laid by pioneers such as Keysser, McGavran, and others in the first half of the twentieth century”, I would simply remind each of us that any strategy that advocated remaining in the religion of one’s birth while embracing Christ is one which all these pioneers would never have endorsed.

**Winter:** Again, I am puzzled. No one I know is saying people are to remain in the religion of their birth but merely in the language and culture of their birth. If they want to become accepted as British in culture (lots of luck), that is their freedom in Christ to seek. If they want to be Western Christian (as apparently many Dalits would gladly be), fine. I don’t recall Paul saying that Greeks could not become Jews (lots of luck) if they chose to. But he vehemently opposed that as an expectation or requirement. The current stress on Insider Movements is very Pauline in its insistence that Muslims and Hindus do not need to divest themselves of their language or culture in order to be believers in Jesus Christ with equal standing to any Western believer. To require themselves to do that as a condition of following Christ is exactly what Paul so vehemently opposed in Galatians.

**Corwin:** Thank you, Ralph, for your expeditious and thoughtful response.... Our primary difference appears to be regarding what the term “insider

movement” conveys, and on whether the MF issue has included material which reinforces the definition with which we both apparently take issue. My own acquaintance with the term comes primarily from the sphere of discussions of Islamic contextualization. In that context it is used pretty much as a synonym for C5 contextualization, which includes not only accommodation to language and culture but to actual religious practice (which, of course, is so intertwined with culture in most Islamic contexts). Advocates of this view argue that continuing to call oneself a Muslim, and long-term participation in mosque worship, including recitation of the creed (*shahada*) and performance of the ritual prayers (*salat*), are appropriate. It is this kind of thinking with which I strongly disagree.

**Corwin:** While I am greatly pleased and relieved that this is not your own understanding of insider movements, I do believe that this is a common understanding. I also believe that there are sections in the MF issue which are clearly written with this view in mind. You say, “Again, I am puzzled. No one I know is saying people are to remain *in the religion of their birth* but merely in the language and culture of their birth.” This, I find puzzling. For example, John and Anna Travis are asking “From a biblical perspective, can a person be truly saved and continue to be a Muslim?” And again, “Can a Muslim follower of Christ retain all Muslim practices, in particular praying in the mosque toward Mecca and continuing to repeat the Muslim creed?” They go on to articulate ten premises in support of answering those questions yes.

**Corwin:** Further on, John and Anna Travis write, “If Bosch had it right that faith in Christ wasn’t meant to be a religion, could it be that we are witnessing some of the first fruits of vast movements where Jesus is causing the Gospel to break out of “Christianity”? *Where those who know Jesus remain as a sweet fragrance inside the religion of their birth*, and eventually the number of adherents grows so large that a reform movement from inside that religion is birthed?” [Emphasis mine.]

**Corwin:** Two more items, this time from Frank Decker, will suffice to make the point. While the statements here may simply reflect a loose usage of language rather than intent (as the actual practice of the individuals is not discussed in any detail), what is said is still what is said. Of Salina, a recent believer, we read, “She told us that in order to share Christ with her family, *she now identifies herself as a Muslim rather than a Christian.*” And again, of Asif and other Muslim-Background Believers it is written, “*These are Muslims* who walk with Jesus and openly share

with their Muslim friends about the Lord....” [Emphasis mine.] Whether these individuals are simply making appropriate cultural accommodations here, and the language being used in the article is simply too loose, or they continue to actually practice the religion of their birth in addition to believing in Jesus, I don’t know. But coupled with the final two paragraphs of admonition in the article, it certainly looks like an endorsement of what is being said.

**Winter:** Once again, I have to say that you have brought out a blind spot in my reply to you, and I agree with your concern. Let me give one example. You are concerned by someone continuing to call himself a Muslim, fearing what this could mean. I on the other hand, recognize that concern but at the same time feel strongly that the use of the word is in itself not necessarily a bad thing. The Muslim cultural tradition, including much of the religious aspects of their culture, constitute a sturdy and in many ways fine tradition, as human social traditions go. However, I will admit that calling one’s self a Muslim could cloak a good deal of syncretism. I just don’t feel that to quarrel over the word is central to the dangers you (and I) fear.

**Winter:** The main thing with Muslims (as with

people who call themselves Christians) is to know Jesus Christ more intimately, and to continue to love and respect their own people and to respect at least their cultural (as opposed to faith) traditions. After all, it is not whether calling oneself a Muslim or a Christian could cloak syncretism, since both words are all too capable of that. It is the fact that neither the word *Muslim* nor the word *Christian* necessarily hides syncretism. Paul himself, in a voluntary case took a Greek, Timothy, through circumcision – which in Galatians he had so strongly declared unnecessary. Note also, that while to us the label Muslim may fearfully imply a jungle of objectionable religious rituals, the daily reality may in many cases be quite otherwise. Perhaps 30% of the people in Turkey pay no attention to at least the first four of the five pillars of Islam and yet insist they are Muslims.

**Corwin:** Thanks for the feedback once again on this, Ralph. A believer calling him/her/self a Muslim may indeed be less troubling in many ways than some of the other practices being approved, simply because it can be, and perhaps often is, nuanced with accompanying explanations – “Muslim follower of Isa,” for example. But even this potentially mitigating factor is not mentioned in the article sections I pointed out.

Beyond that, though, are the more serious issues of continuing to perform Muslim ritual worship: things like reciting the creed, and lining up to say the required prayers in the mosque. It is a significant disservice to the Christian public, I believe, to give the many advocates of this more radical view a free pass, including it under the banner of a more benign definition of “insider movements.” Whether this was the intention of *MF*’s editors, or not, its readers should be made aware of the difference. Thank you, *MF* editors, for making that possible.

**Winter:** We truly believe it is in fact a service to our readers to know what earnest and faithful Evangelical missionaries are discussing, whether or not they have reached a common perspective. 🌐



**Chuck Davis**  
Professor of  
Intercultural Studies

## Who I am becoming matters as much as what I am doing...

I left for Mali, West Africa as a missionary with great intercultural communication theory. But theory was like an unsharpened machete: I found I needed the experience of interacting with people from cultures and social structures different than my own. Mali became my laboratory, and I began to imagine a preparation process that encompassed both theory *and* practice.

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# Maximizing the Bible! Glimpses From Our Context

John and Anna Travis

*John and Anna Travis, along with their two children, have lived in a tight-knit Asian Muslim neighborhood for nearly 20 years. They are involved in contextualized sharing of the good news, Bible translation and the ministry of prayer for inner healing. They are also the creators of the “C1-C6” spectrum, a tool for defining six types of Christ-centered communities found in Muslim contexts; within that spectrum, “C5” believers are those who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior and who remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. John and Anna Travis utilize “C5” and “insider movements” as synonyms.*

**T**wo respected Christian leaders (John Piper and Gary Corwin) took exception to the following statement we made in a recent *Mission Frontiers* article:

We have little hope in our lifetime to believe for a major enough cultural, political and religious change to occur in our contexts such that Muslims would become open to entering Christianity on a wide scale.

We hope the full meaning of our statement here will be clear in light of the rest of our article. To make sure this comment is not removed from its context, we quote the very next sentence in the *Mission Frontiers* article:

But we do have **great hope**, as great as the promises of God, to believe that an “insider movement” could get off the ground – that **vast numbers** could discover that salvation in Isa the Messiah is waiting for every Muslim who will believe.

To further clarify what we meant by “little hope”, we see little indication *in our contexts* (we are not speaking for the whole Muslim world) that Muslims will *enter Christianity* (that is, join the religion which Muslims associate with Western materialism, moral decadence, the brutality of the Crusades and current armies in Muslim lands) on a *wide scale* (that is, numbers in keeping with the will of God for “everyone to come to repentance” – 2 Peter 3:9, and Paul’s desire that “as many as possible” be won – 1 Cor. 9:19).

But deeper questions are being asked by Piper and Corwin. Piper wonders if C5 movements minimize both the glory of Christ and the Bible. Corwin contends that C5 should only be transitional; in time, people who accept Christ from non-Christian backgrounds must in time leave the religion of their birth. In response to these important concerns, let us share briefly what is happening right now in the area where we live, where the great majority are Muslim.

Over the years, by God’s grace, we have seen numbers of Muslims come to Christ. Some of these decided to “leave Islam” and “enter Christianity”;

others have remained within the Islamic community living out their faith as Muslims who follow Jesus (*Isa*). Though we rejoice, we have not sensed the momentum of a “movement.”

However, in recent months in the part of town where we live, we are just beginning to see what might be the momentum we have longed for. Extended families are becoming committed followers of Christ without becoming “Christians.” They meet in at least four separate meetings on various days of the week to read the New Testament and pray together. The groups include both men and women from a lower-middle-class background who have found (to quote Billy Graham), “peace with God” through Christ. Some of the people in these groups have been witnessed to and prayed for by us and others for many years, but it is just now they all seem to be coming to faith. The human agent most responsible for this has been a jovial Muslim woman we call Fatima, who has been five years in Christ and is a natural communicator, organizer and avid reader of the Word (a Wesley on a tiny scale).

Of those we know in these groups, true evidence of the good news is seen: they are admitting their sins to each other, they are forgiving each other, they are at peace, they pray for the sick in Jesus’ name, they actively share Christ with their neighbors and relatives, there is no financial incentive to believe, they meet together in their small groups and they are giving to the poor (though they themselves are quite poor!). New leaders are being naturally raised up. We hear of similar situations in nearby areas as well. We are having virtually nothing to do with this, except that we keep praying for it.

In our context, this is feeling like something that could move faster through the masses than the usual process where there is the added step of leaving Islam and entering Christianity after salvation. These extended families are simply getting saved and not adding the extra step. To be sure they are spiritually different from the many unsaved Muslims around

**The handprints of Christ and His kingdom are all over this little outbreak of the gospel.**

them. They approach other Muslims saying, "Come, brother, sister, look at this beautiful thing God has revealed to us in his Word about Jesus." It has not entered the minds of those in these groups to go through the cultural and political change required to switch religious institutions. We wish all could see and hear what we are seeing and hearing. The

**What is clear is that at the moment a vibrant faith is being lived out by many in the environment of another religion.**

handprints of Christ and His kingdom are all over this little outbreak of the gospel.

In response, then, to Piper's comment that the glory of Christ is minimized or slighted in C5 movements of God, we in fact believe just

the opposite is true: our Lord receives incredible glory and honor (not to mention joy!), when he hears one Muslim share with another Muslim how Christ has changed his life. Concerning "minimizing the Bible", we think nothing could be further from the truth, at least among the C5 groups we know of. In fact you might say that these C5 groups are *maximizing*

*the Bible!* In contrast to traditional churches which normally enjoy regular preaching, worship services with theologically rich hymns, the recitation of creeds and any number of other beneficial activities, these C5 believers have no materials to study other than the Bible. Their growth depends almost solely on inductive Bible study, prayer and small group interaction with other C5 believers.

In response to Corwin's main point, that all non-Christians who accept Christ as Lord and Savior must eventually leave the religion of their birth, we would simply say that this is not so in our context. We and many others on the field are seeing examples like the one just described above. How these Gospel networks will label themselves in twenty years, God only knows. What is clear, though, is that at the moment a vibrant faith is being lived out by many in the environment of another religion, similar to Messianic Jews, who are religiously Jewish yet have received Jesus (Yeshua) as the Messiah. Interestingly, it would appear that the largest movement to Christ among Muslims in the world today is C5 in nature, occurring in Asia. 🌐

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## Sharing the Gospel Through Open Networks

**R. Lewis**

*R. Lewis spent eight years in Morocco on a church-planting team. She wrote a recent article in the **International Journal of Frontier Missions** on God's use of women's networks to establish the Kingdom in some contexts. Note that, in contrast to the previous article, she advocates that C5 movements and insider movements should be differentiated.*

**S**ome may fear that the discussion about "insider movements" is a new missiological theory promoted by those who have given up on traditional mission methodology. However, it is instead an attempt to discern and explain what God is actually doing today, and has done repeatedly throughout history, when spreading the gospel rapidly

**The pre-existing network becomes the believing community or "church."**

through new people groups (particularly in socio-religious contexts antagonistic to perceived forms of "Christianity").

I think it is important to remember two things about insider movements:

1. Insider movements are *not* primarily about becoming more "contextualized" and therefore should probably be distinguished from any point on the C1-C6 continuum. Instead, insider

movements *are* about the gospel spreading inside *pre-existing relational or identity networks* (communities or families) and letting it grow up in whatever form those networks choose under the authority of Scripture and the Holy Spirit. *The pre-existing network becomes the believing community or "church"*, while expatriate workers avoid pulling people into new, artificial networks, no matter how contextualized (e.g., Muslims into Jesus mosques), or into foreign structures (e.g., Gentiles into synagogues). As an illustration, we see in Acts that believing Jews kept going to the Temple, not isolating themselves from their non-believing Jewish neighbors – they stayed "insiders." Meanwhile, Paul asserted that Gentiles didn't have to become circumcised (which would have marked them as "outsiders") and that they could even continue to eat meat, which usually had been previously offered to idols, if their conscience was clear, despite the dismay of Jewish believers and the specific prohibition of such by

the Jerusalem council (see Romans 14, Acts 15: 29, Acts 21:25).

2. God has used “insider movements” throughout history, but He has also used other means. To commend the value and validity of insider movements is not to say that other types of church-planting are invalid – this is not an “either/or” prescription. In most cultures there are many people – maybe whole sectors of society (like the Dalits of India) – who are *dissimilating*, trying to move away from their traditional identity. These people are seeking, as individuals or groups, to move *out* of their traditional cultural identity or relational network and into something foreign. That is fine! However, let’s not use these examples to obscure our recognition

of the thousands (if not millions) who would believe if they did not have to align themselves with a powerful foreign religion (“Christianity”) instead of Jesus himself.

Insider movements are as old as James of the Jews and Cornelius of the Gentiles. This is *not* a new phenomenon but a reaffirming of a New Testament pattern, explained clearly as the use of “open networks” by Rodney Stark in his book *The Rise of Christianity*. He explains how the gospel spread through “open networks” – networks of predominantly non-believers – in the fast-growing first 300 years of the early Church. 🌐

**The gospel spread through “open networks” in the fast-growing first 300 years of the early Church.**

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## Read More in the *IJFM*

**Darrell Dorr**

*Darrell Dorr is the managing editor of Mission Frontiers.*

**A**s you can see from the responses above, part of the challenge is identifying clear and consistent definitions of insider movements. If *Mission Frontiers* readers would like to read more, one good place to continue is with our sister publication, the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* ([www.ijfm.org](http://www.ijfm.org)). In particular, the back issues of 17:1 (2000) and all four issues of volume 21 (2004) may prove especially helpful. There you’ll find other authors as well as overlapping definitions of insider movements, including the following:

- Popular movements to Christ that bypass both formal and explicit expressions of the Christian religion (David Garrison).
- Movements to Jesus that remain to varying degrees inside the social fabric of Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or other people groups. This faithful discipleship will 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. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and through his people, will also begin to transform his people and their culture, religious life, and worldview (Kevin Higgins).
- Numbers of Muslims who become followers of Christ without changing either their self-perception or their communal identity as Muslims. In such movements, “church planting” is not the introduction of a specific form of organization (no matter how “biblical” it may

be) but merely describes the pattern of believers’ relationships that naturally follow existing social structures (Harley Talman).

To read more, go to [www.ijfm.org](http://www.ijfm.org). 🌐

