

An Inside Look at Insider Ecclesiology: The *Jamā ‘at Al-Mu’manīn* or “Assembly of the Believers” in the Thought of Mazhar Al-Mallouhi

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INTRODUCTION

Mazhar al-Mallouhi is a self-ascribed Arab Muslim follower of Christ. He has published a number of Arabic novels as well as contextualized Arabic renditions and commentaries on Genesis, the Gospels, and Acts. His aim in all of these works is to make Jesus and the message of the Bible understandable to Arab Muslims.¹ He speaks of “naturalizing” Christ and presenting the Scriptures to Muslims in a manner they can fully understand and accept.² Mallouhi sees a high degree of continuity between Arab-Islamic culture and

his faith in Christ. He argues that a follower of Christ need not separate from the Muslim community in order to obey the teachings of Christ. Mallouhi has been associated with Frontiers since at least the early 1990s and his Arabic books, commentaries, and articles are advocated by that organization in their church planting practices.³ Commenting on his influence, Greg Livingstone, the founder of Frontiers, notes, "... Mazhar Mallouhi has been my primary mentor in the Arab world since 1968. This Syrian Muslim, my shepherd, has been more committed to seeing me demonstrate Christ among Muslims than anyone else."⁴

In what follows, I begin by briefly surveying respected works of evangelical theology regarding the dual notions of the "localness" and "universalness" of the church. Expounding how these notions are understood in the New Testament and in evangelical theology is important for the analysis of Mallouhi's views on nature of the church or *jamā'at al-mu'manīn*⁵ in the second section of the essay. It will be demonstrated that while Mallouhi sees a high degree of continuity between his Islamic culture and his faith in Christ, there are certain aspects of his views on cultural and religious identity, as well as his soteriology, that lend themselves towards a devaluation of the local church as a visible manifestation of the body of Christ. And while the focus here is solely on Mallouhi, this trend is apparent among many who advocate Insider Movements as a means of seeing the gospel spread among Muslim peoples. The conclusion will discuss the implications of this tendency on church planting efforts among Arab Muslim people groups, whether by Westerners or others.

THE CHURCH LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PARAMETERS

In his examination of Baptist ecclesiology, John Hammett notes that the word *ekklēsia* appears 114 times in the New Testament, 109 of which refer to the church. Of these 109 occurrences, only three are in the Gospels. Additionally, there are primarily two senses in which the word *ekklēsia* is used in the New Testament--the local sense and the universal sense. Though there are key references to the universal church by the New Testament authors, the overwhelming majority of the 109 occurrences of *ekklēsia* refer explicitly to a local church or a group of local churches.⁶ Indeed, the predominance of the

local church in New Testament usage warrants “assuming the local church meaning and then noting the exceptions when it has the universal meaning.”⁷

Local churches are oftentimes considered visible manifestations in the present of what is sometimes referred to as the invisible church (or the universal church if considered historically). The invisible church is “the church as God sees it.”⁸ It is invisible in the sense that only God truly knows those who have trusted in Christ for their salvation—only he can see their hearts. This is contrasted with the visible church, which is “the church as Christians on earth see it. In this sense the visible church includes all those who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives.”⁹ Granted, not all those in the visible church are true believers; however, this fact does not detract from the church’s unity which is rooted in her spiritual union with Christ and not in the church’s organizational unity. Thus, while only God truly knows the hearts of people, individual believers and local churches are wise to consider all those who profess Christ and live in accordance with his teaching as members of the true church.

The distinction between the visible and invisible church is important and has been understood in different ways by different groups. The Reformers distinguished between the visible and invisible church largely due to their conception of the church’s unity as primarily “spiritual” over and against the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of the church’s unity in institutional terms. This enabled them to affirm the existence of a true church apart from the visible institution. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church gives priority to visible nature of the institutional church, thereby denying the existence of an “invisible church.”

At the other end of the spectrum are those who hold to what Millard Erickson has termed a “pietistic approach” to the church. They emphasize one’s individual salvation experience and relationship with Christ as determinative of their “membership” in the church. This is the sole basis on which one is considered a true Christian or follower of Christ. Erickson explains that “those who are savingly related to Christ made up the church, whether or not they are assembled into any visible group. Membership in a visible group is no guarantee whatsoever of justification in God’s sight, so the visible organization is relatively unimportant. In fact, some deny the necessity of being a part of an organized body. Informal fellowship on a voluntary basis is all that is needed ... Church membership, as a permanent commitment to

a given group of believers, is minimized in this individualistic approach.”¹⁰ Erickson goes on to note that, “Parachurch organizations or house churches may take the place of the organized church” by those who espouse this view of salvation and ecclesiology.¹¹ Proponents of this view have a very individualistic understanding of soteriology which feeds into their ecclesiology and emphasis on the universal church at the expense of the local church.

A mediating position between the Roman Catholic view and the pietistic view is the “parish view.” Here the individual’s saving experience with Christ is emphasized as a prerequisite to their entry into the church; however, the church itself is marked by certain objective criteria that “are not merely qualities of the individuals making up the group, but of the local assembly quite apart from the spiritual condition of the individuals within it.”¹² The two that are commonly referred to are the true preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments; i.e., baptism and the Lord’s Supper.¹³ Those holding to this view believe there is something about the local assembly that distinguishes it from a group of individual believers associating together in an informal manner. Faith is given the priority, nevertheless, one cannot “minimize the importance of the visible form of the church.” As Erickson notes, “It was apparently the standard procedure for the believer to become a part of the fellowship (see, e.g., Acts 2:47) ... We should therefore emphasize the importance of every believer’s becoming an integral part of a group of believers, and making a firm commitment to it. Christianity is a corporate matter, and the Christian life can be fully realized only in relationship to others.”¹⁴

Thus, the issue of the church’s visibleness has a direct bearing on one’s understanding of the church’s localness and universalness. The local church is a present-time gathering of the invisible church (assuming those who assemble have a proper understanding of the gospel). And as noted, it is a visible manifestation of the invisible church. Therefore, the extent to which the visible church is composed of true believers, it is also part of the universal church—the redeemed of all ages, past, present, and future.

This should not however detract from the fact that the New Testament is overwhelmingly preoccupied with the local church. This is the primary sense of *ekklēsia* found both in biblical usage as well as in personal experience. It is not possible for someone to experience the universal church as it is the local church. Thus, according to Hammett, this view has three practical implications worth quoting at length:

First, Christians who belong to no local church but claim to belong to the body of Christ, referring to the church universal, are living contrary to the biblical pattern, which gives priority to the local church. Second, those who work in or with parachurch groups are not thus exempted from their need to be involved in a local church, both to serve others and to be served by the fuller ministry of the church. Third, we need to recognize the dignity and honor given to the local church. When Jesus says, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18), or when Paul says, “Christ loved the church” (Eph. 5:25), or prays, “To him [God] be glory in the church” (3:21), these passages may well refer to the universal church. But how is Christ’s building of the church seen in the world today? Where do we see Christ loving his church? Where is God being glorified today? The answer in each case is in local churches. Despite all their obvious flaws, God loves real, local churches, not some invisible ideal.¹⁵

When the evidence is gathered it appears that the parish view best accounts for the two senses of the church as revealed in Scripture. But how does one go about encouraging the formation of this type of faith community within the complexities encountered in contexts like Arab Muslim ones where socio-cultural and religious identity are tightly intertwined?

MALLOUHI’S VIEW OF THE CHURCH

Religious and Cultural Identity

At the heart of high-end approaches to contextualization, or “C5” as it is sometimes referred to, is the view that one’s religious and cultural identity are nearly impossible to separate.¹⁶ Participation in the community necessitates participation in religious rites, rituals, and even prayer. It is argued that unlike in the West where religion is an individual choice, in the Middle East being a faithful member of one’s family means one must continue to identify with the *umma* (“nation,” “people,” or “community”).¹⁷ As Chandler notes, “The foundation of Arab society is not the individual, but the community; first, the family, then the extended family or clan, then the religious community, and sometimes then the nation. Arab society does not culturally function with the belief that the individual is free to make his or her choices. All important decisions are made within the family or community.”¹⁸ Though somewhat of an oversimplification, Chandler’s point is valid. For this reason, he and

Mallouhi argue that in order for Muslim background believers to maintain relationships with family, friends, and the broader community, they must be allowed to follow Christ from inside their socio-cultural and religious communities, hence the notion of an “Insider Movement.”

At the beginning of Mallouhi’s personal faith pilgrimage he felt the need to separate wholly from his familial and religious connections. He associated himself with Arab Christian churches that were, according to him, very Western in their approach to the faith, even going so far as to attack Islam and support Israel.¹⁹ For years he struggled with reconciling his commitment to Christ with his cultural and religious past. He identified himself as a “Christian” and felt that it was dishonest for someone from a Muslim background to continue calling themselves a “Muslim” after that person had decided to follow Christ. Chandler explains:

When Mazhar became a follower of Christ, Arab Christians told him that he needed to leave his cultural past behind, so he dislocated himself from his Islamic culture (family, community, etc.) and attempted to take on a “Christian culture.” They encouraged him to change his name (to take a “Christian” name), to stop socializing in cafés (the primary meeting place for Arab Muslim men), to stop attending his family’s religious celebrations, to keep his distance from mosques and Muslims, to cease fasting, to pray in a different posture (not bowing or prostrate), to use “Christian” as opposed to Islamic Arabic greetings and words when speaking (such as “good morning” instead of “peace be upon you”), and even to eat pork to prove he was converted.²⁰

Chandler goes on to note that Mallouhi became a “churchian,” associating himself with westernized Arab Christian churches.

Over time and under the influence of a number of different individuals,²¹ Mallouhi came to the realization that he need not deny his past in order to follow Christ. His identity as an Arab and as a Muslim is a part of his true identity in Christ:

Mazhar believes the core issue is that we all too often confuse spiritual identity with cultural identity. Within the complexity of this cultural and religious tension, Mazhar and his life experience teaches us a great deal about how someone from a Muslim background may follow Christ without having to leave his Arab and Islamic

culture and community. He is an example of someone who has kept his Islamic culture *and* Christ as his Lord, presenting us a distinctive example of a Muslim following Christ—remaining culturally fully “Arab” and not dislocating from his “birth” culture. As both a committed follower of Christ for four decades and also an insider in Islamic circles, Mazhar’s approach is not one of radical discontinuity from his Islamic Arab culture. Mazhar, who calls himself a “Muslim follower of Christ,” says, “Islam is my heritage. Christ is my inheritance.” As it is almost impossible to separate Islam and Arab culture, he is therefore instinctively Muslim.²²

For Mallouhi, one’s spiritual identity in Christ is something that transcends cultural and even religious affiliations. He “rediscovered his roots” and came to call himself “culturally” a Muslim and “spiritually” a follower of Christ.²³

Since that time Mallouhi has been highly critical of Western missionaries and others who have sought to extract new believers from their context. “During the past thirty years Mazhar has been able to embody a new approach that encourages followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds not to leave their families, people, or culture. Increasingly, he has difficulty with the methodology of Western missionaries, and jealously protects Muslims who were following Christ from cultural ‘contamination’ by them. He has worked to help them become disciples of Christ without having to join the ‘Christian’ West.”²⁴ Chandler summarizes his new approach:

Today Mazhar is very proud of his heritage and identifies himself as a Muslim according to his family, people, and culture, and enjoys breathing that air. Yet he also openly shares that he loves and follows Christ. He enjoys praying and meditating in the quiet reverent atmosphere of the mosque, where he sits on the carpeted floor and reads his Bible and loves to talk with people about his and their faith. While there, he often visits the sheiks and imams, who are his friends. He has kept a lot of the Muslim practices, from using “Muslim” greetings and prayers, to fingering his Islamic prayer beads, to reciting the character of God [i.e., the ninety-nine names of God in the Qur’an, which are oftentimes said to be representative of God’s attributes] ... to spending a lot of time in Arab cafés ... He leads most of his studies of the Gospels with others in the Arab cafés or in mosques. Mazhar, after all these years of following Christ, still feels the pull of the culture when he hears the call to prayer or the Qur’an melodiously chanted.²⁵

Chandler goes on to say, “Some Westerners might incorrectly assume that Mazhar’s return to being an insider in Islamic circles is a means of becoming contextualized to more effectively share his faith in Christ with his fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. Yet for him it is not a means to an end, but rather a ‘coming to rest in his true identity,’ discovering who he really is, a finding of his way home.”²⁶ Mallouhi advocates a similar approach for all Muslims who desire to follow Christ. Chandler’s book provides numerous examples of Muslim religious leaders as well as common people who have had contact with Mallouhi and have adopted an approach similar to his.²⁷

Part of the complex picture of human identity is not only how people define themselves but also how others identify them. Commenting on Mallouhi, Jalal al-Mokh, a Tunisian author, says, “Mazhar is someone with Christian faith that is culturally Islamic.”²⁸ Professor Ahmad Meshraqi of the Zeitouna University in Tunis, who participated in editing one of Mallouhi’s first volumes on Genesis,²⁹ states, “He is theologically Christian, but culturally Muslim.”³⁰ These examples demonstrate the difficulty some have in separating “Muslim,” with all its religious connotations, from its cultural connections.

For Chandler, the word “Arab” is near synonym for “Muslim.” The following excerpts from his book are illustrative:

Instead of trying to bring Muslims to Christianity, Mazhar tries to bring Christ to where Muslims are. And he looks for ways in which Arabs can stay culturally Muslim while following Jesus as their Lord.³¹

The situation is made all the more complex because in the Muslim mind, to be an Arab means to be Muslim. Islam is not just a religious faith separate from ethnicity, cultural tradition, and social, economic, and political aspects of life ... In their thinking, to use the term “Arab Christian” is like speaking about an air-breathing fish, or dehydrated water.³²

As it is almost impossible to separate Islam and Arab culture, he [Mallouhi] is therefore instinctively Muslim.³³

Despite these examples, there are questions surrounding how well Chandler has represented Mallouhi’s views. There is evidence that Mallouhi himself distinguishes between “Arab” culture and “Islam” as a religion. For example, Chandler writes, “There is a sense that Mazhar appeals to Arabs

more on the basis of Arab culture than on the basis of Islamic faith.”³⁴ In another place he says, “While it is difficult or nearly impossible to separate Arab culture from Islamic culture, Mazhar would say that he attempts to put the emphasis more on his being Arab as opposed to Muslim. He sees Arab culture more as his bridge and cultural foundation than the Islamic religion.”³⁵ On page 112, Chandler words it this way, “It is critical that the culture and heritage of new followers of Christ from Muslim backgrounds be honored and that they be assisted to find ways to stay rooted in their Arab society.”

Part of the problem is Chandler’s (and probably Mallouhi’s) frequent interchanging of the terms “Muslim” and “Arab” when they discuss culture and contextualization. For most people, the term “Muslim” has a religious connotation, whereas “Arab” is a term more associated with a particular ethno-linguistic cultural group. This is true not only in the West but throughout much of the Middle East where there are large populations of indigenous Arab Christians.³⁶

Whatever the case may be, religious identity has been a key issue for Mallouhi in determining how he has come to reconcile his faith in Christ with his Muslim upbringing. It is also the key issue between the proponents of C5, of which Chandler and Mallouhi are representative, and the proponents of C4. As Tennent summarizes:

The crucial difference which separates C-4 and C-5 is that of *identity*. All of the major proponents of C-5 agree on this point ... There are, of course two sides to the question of identity. There is how *others* (in this case, Muslims) identify you and then there is your own *self-identity*. Admittedly, there is considerable contextual ambiguity about how Muslims may identify followers of Jesus in the Muslim world ... The point is, all of the “foreign-type Christians,” (C-1 and C-2), the “contextually sensitive Christians” (C-3) and the “followers of *Isa*” (C-4) which form the spectrum of C-1 to C-4 are identified by Muslims as *not* a part of their religious community ... [This] does not necessarily imply the positive corollary that they will always identify them as being part of *some* kind of Christian community ... The crucial issue at stake is *self-identity*. C-5 believers are fully embedded in the cultural and religious life of Islam. That is why their presence in the Mosque is referred to as an “insider movement” ... Therefore, the real “bottom-line” question before us is whether or not there is a solid case to be made for encouraging a C-5 “Muslim” to continue to identify himself or herself

as a Muslim, fully part and parcel of the religious and cultural life of Islam, even after they have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.³⁷

Part of the problem is semantics. For most Muslims, “Muslim” implies a person who believes in the finality of Muḥammad’s prophetic career, the sufficiency of the Qur’ān over all previous (corrupted) revelations, the denial of the Incarnation, Trinity, the atonement, human depravity, and other doctrines. Those who like Chandler and Mallouhi seek to retain a believer’s religious identity (and affiliation) with the Muslim community are only able to do so by reinterpreting this and other Islamic theological terms in order to accommodate faith in Christ within the Islamic religious system.³⁸ Obviously, faith in Christ requires a *separation* from many of the particular tenets of Islam. The question is whether a Muslim can remain a Muslim and still be a disciple of Christ with minimal ritual and doctrinal adjustments (e.g., by adjusting the *shahāda* by replacing “there is no God but Allah and Muḥammad is his prophet” with “*Īsā* is the Eternal Word of Allah,” by acknowledging the Bible as the only true Word of God, and by affirming the Trinity). Tennent’s assessment of this is apt:

The answer is most certainly not. These three [doctrines] strike at the heart of Islamic *religious* identity; namely, the prophethood of Muhammad, the sacred perfection and superiority of the Qur’an and a rejection of Allah’s Triune nature. The moment a Muslim discovers that someone claiming to be a Muslim has these particular beliefs in these three areas then they will automatically see that “Muslim” as someone with a religious identity in discontinuity with their own. Furthermore, the Muslim believer (MB) who is seeking to maintain his self-identity as a Muslim must also sense the profound ethical burden of living a life of integrity while knowing that his central core confession is in profound discontinuity with the core confession of Islam.³⁹

Chandler and Mallouhi’s criticisms of the westernization of Christian faith are actually criticisms of poor contextualization—poor contextualization in the West as well as in the Arab world. Yet their solution in the area of ecclesiology leaves much to be desired. What is needed is to distinguish between the religious aspects of a culture and how they relate to human identity and those aspects which are more purely cultural. God has ordained that such

cultural exegesis and critical reflection on one's identity in Christ take place within the context of the local church. This is one of the primary roles for the community of faith. The church is necessary in order to assist these Muslim background believers in developing a healthy identity.

Obviously, Mallouhi's use of the term "Muslim" as a self-ascription has been reinterpreted (in his mind) to refer to culture and, in a religious sense, as one submitted to God. The problem with this is that the sense of the word "Muslim" has been fixed by centuries of usage and has certain irreducible theological connotations associated with it. Clearly, Mallouhi's desire to remain attached to his family and culture is understandable and commendable. However, the conflation of religious and cultural identity has made matters complex. The solution is to be found in the creation of a new religious identity rooted in Christ.

Some would counter this argument by noting that Jews were not required to stop being Jews when they placed their faith in Christ—so why should Muslims be required to do so? They appeal to texts like Acts 15 and others in order to support these arguments. However, there are problems with those who seek to find an exact parallel between first century Jews who became followers of Christ and Muslims who desire to follow Christ within Islam. Tennent explains:

[It] is difficult to fully compare the situation of Jews (who have the "Old" Testament) hearing the gospel with Muslims (who have the Qur'an) hearing the gospel because of the more profound continuity between Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, ... if the vast majority of Muslims were to miraculously recognize the true deity of Jesus Christ, such that the Mosque became a place where Jesus was truly worshipped, then there would be no reason for a Muslim believer to seek a new religious identity, because the very religious identity of Islam would have changed. However, since this did not occur then there must inevitably be a separation at the level of religious identity, which is precisely what happened with the early Jewish believers. It should be noted that encouraging a separate religious identity (*contra* C-5) does not mean that there are not points of *continuity* between one's former religious identity and their new religious identity ... The point is simply that the unique person of Jesus creates a new identity.⁴⁰

The notion that this new identity can be created within the sphere of the mosque is very misguided. As Parshall notes, "The mosque is pregnant with

Islamic theology. There, Muhammad is affirmed as prophet of God and the divinity of Christ is consistently denied.⁴¹ Thus, (eventual) separation at some level is necessitated if believers are to form the type of community modeled in Scripture which can nurture their new identity in Christ. Unfortunately, it is the creation of this new identity in the church that Chandler and Mallouhi seemingly repudiate in the Muslim context. Underlying their approach is a particular view of soteriology that lends itself towards the devaluation of the church as the place where one's new faith and identity are cultivated. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that Mallouhi and Chandler are battling against Western forms of ecclesiology which manifest themselves in particular religious and cultural rituals contrary to Arab Muslim culture. Many of their criticisms on this point are valid. Their solution however does not give enough weight to how the church is conceived in the New Testament as a new, "called-out" community composed of individuals united by their faith in Christ.

Soteriology and Ecclesiology

In an edited book distributed by al-Kalima, Mallouhi's publishing house the authors offer a new "reading" (i.e., translation) of all four Gospels and Acts. The book, *The Meaning of the Gospel and Acts in Arabic*,⁴² opens with thirty very helpful articles addressing a number of issues that have traditionally been misunderstood by Muslims. Additionally, each of the four Gospels and Acts opens with a book introduction. There are also numerous comments on the biblical text, which elucidate theological issues and provide cultural and religious background information for those unfamiliar with the New Testament. At the end of the book there is a glossary of terms in order to assist Muslim readers who might be unfamiliar with the biblical and theological terminology presented in Scripture. And while it is unclear who the exact authors of each article in this book are, clearly they represent positions advocated by Mallouhi and the works edited and published under his supervision by al-Kalima.

One of the thirty articles at the beginning of the book is on *jamā'at al-mu'manīn*, or the church.⁴³ The article does a solid job at clarifying the difference between a "church" building, the institutional "church," and the body of Christ. In commenting on the word *ekklēsia* in Greek, the article states:

In the Greek language, which is the original language of the Noble Gospel, we find that the word *ekklēsia*, which corresponds to the word *kanīsa* [“church”] in Arabic, was sometimes used to refer to any group of believers that met to worship God in the name of the Honorable Messiah. Afterwards it came to refer to anyone who associated themselves to God’s *umma* [“people” or “nation”], which is all people from different ethnicities, languages, and cultures who believe in the one Lord Creator who was manifest in majesty in the person of the lord Messiah.⁴⁴

The article goes on to describe the semantic range of the word as used prior to the time of Christ by Greek-speaking Jews to refer to an “assembly” and to translate the Hebrew *qahal* (קהל). Jews used this word to refer to the whole of the people of God (i.e., the “sons of Jacob” as he labels them). The article notes that in order to fully grasp the meaning and significance of the word *ekklēsia*, it is important to begin with the concept of the people of God. Only then “will we see how our lord Jesus brought to this word a new dimension developed later by his disciples.”⁴⁵

Thus, there is a sense in which Mallouhi, as represented in the writings of al-Kalima, recognizes a correlation between the people of God in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. He also reveals an understanding that what Jesus did in founding the “church” was new. Interestingly, when translating (or interpreting) Jesus’ statement in Matthew 16:18 about establishing the church, the article translates *ekklēsia* as *umma* (“community,” “people,” or “nation”) not *jamā’at al-mu’manīn* (“assembly” or “gathering of the believers”). On the other hand, of the twenty-two uses of *ekklēsia* in Acts to refer to the church, the article never refers to it as the *umma*, only *jamā’a* (singular) or *jamā’āt* (plural). A possible conclusion that can be drawn from this is that when Mallouhi and al-Kalima use *umma* they are referring explicitly to the people of God in a universal sense (i.e., the universal church). This use of different terminology to translate the different senses of the word *ekklēsia* in the New Testament can be helpful in that it reveals how they understand and conceive of the church. The question is, how consistent are they in differentiating the two senses of the word, and which sense is dominant in their thinking?

The article moves on from discussing the terms used to refer to the church and the people of God to narrate some of the events from the Old Testament, such as the calling of Abraham and the choice of Israel. These two events are

shown to be foundational to God's establishment of his covenant with his people. Summarizing this brief survey of the notion of the people of God in the Old Testament, the article states:

It is possible to summarize these ideas from the Torah in that God persisted in his relationship with the children of Jacob not because they were better than other peoples, but because God wanted his blessings to reach all peoples through them. He chose them because of his love for all of humanity. Thus, when God sent our lord Jesus to be the connecting link, enabling humanity to return to the position of honor and closeness the sons of Adam had with him prior [to the fall], he allowed there to be development in the former notion of the "people of God" through the revelation of at least three new ideas.⁴⁶

The article's second idea of the three is particularly pertinent in the current context. It states:

The Lord Jesus called people to be his followers. He spoke about the establishment of a special gathering. And when he chose the twelve to be his disciples there was a clear connection to the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob. When Peter the "Rock," one of the disciples, expressed his faith that our lord Jesus is the awaited Messiah, he replied: "I give you the name "Rock" and on this rock I will establish my *umma* ["nation]. Its faith will be sure and the gates of death will not stand against it!" (Matt 16:18). Among the lord Messiah's teaching which he explained to his followers was the way to build their mutual relationship upon a solid foundation. He presented to them the salient features of the life in the bosom of their new gathering. Thus, it is important to consider the gathering of the believers as an extension of the former *umma* (i.e., the sons of Jacob). This *umma* has entered into a new era through the lord Messiah. Her duty is to demonstrate her submission and obedience to the lord Messiah as her head, just as the disciples became the fathers to this new gathering.⁴⁷

While this article's description of the church is commendable, this is the closest it comes to advocating a separation into a new community for followers of Christ in order to live out their new identity with other like-minded believers. However, there is no mention in this entire article of the *local* church—its purpose in the life of the believer or God's plan for it in

his redemptive purposes. The only mention of the church being tied to a physical locality comes in the glossary of terms under the entry for “church.”

The third idea the article mentions ties the notion of the people of God directly to the kingdom of God without explaining how kingdom expansion and the nurturing of believers is to take place. By doing this it appears as if the article is providing biblical and theological justification for advocating a non-separationist approach to religious (or church) affiliation.

The ideas found in this article correspond to those directly attributed to Mallouhi himself as recorded by Chandler: “As a Muslim follower of Christ, and *therefore free from ecclesiastical affiliations*, Mazhar’s simple desire is that Muslims experience Christ. ‘In some ways, Islam is irrelevant to me,’ he says. ‘For me, there are only people experiencing the love of Jesus and seeking to follow his way and those who are not—whatever religion they belong to.’”⁴⁸ Here it is possible to see a convergence of Mallouhi’s views about soteriology and how they impact his ecclesiology. He clearly advocates a “pietistic approach” to the visible church, thereby devaluing the role of the local church in the creation of community. And his emphasis on the kingdom of God and the universal church seemingly enable this. Howard’s comments on this phenomenon within the broader Insider Movement, of which Mallouhi is representative, are insightful:

This kingdom theme in IM literature begins with the basic assertion that Jesus did not come to found a new religion but to establish the kingdom. Therefore, the primary designation for those who express faith in Christ is citizen of the kingdom of God. For example, Rick Brown comments that both Messianic Jews and ‘Messianic Muslims’ belong to the kingdom, although the latter maintains a Muslim identity in respect to religious culture. John Ridgway asserts that the kingdom lifestyle Jesus preached was independent of any religious system and would enable any individual or family to live out the gospel in its own society regardless of the religious framework. Jesus’ message, the good news of the kingdom, was essentially spiritual and created a spiritual community (the kingdom of God) that would extend beyond the confines of the Jewish religious traditions and culture. The spiritual wine of the new covenant ‘must be poured into a spiritual wineskin, the kingdom of God, and not into physical wineskins (religious systems).’ Therefore, the gospel does not require leaving one’s community to join an alien group. The expression of the gospel is the kingdom in which the

wheat and tares grow together. One's spiritual identity, which is a product of the second birth, is totally unrelated to cultural religious identity, which is a physical identity connected with the first birth."⁴⁹

At the end of the article on the church, the following statement is found:

In this way, the phrase "assembly of the believers" [*ekklēsia*] as found in the teaching of the disciples means all the individuals of the people of God who believe in the lord Messiah as a savior throughout history, whether past, present or future. The "assembly" includes all of humanity from different ethnicities, cultures, women and men, young and old—in short, those that respond positively to the good news about the love of God as revealed through the lord Messiah.⁵⁰

It appears that Mallouhi and al-Kalima's individualistic conception of salvation has merged with their emphasis on universal nature of the church in the New Testament to form a position that devalues the local church as a new, separate community of Christ-followers. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Mallouhi himself confesses his idealization of people like Sadhu Sundar Singh, a wandering Indian holy man from a Sikh background who professed faith in Christ,⁵¹ and Mahatma Gandhi, as representative of the most Christ-like figures he has ever known. Reflecting on Gandhi, Mallouhi states:

I believe Christ spoke of people such as Gandhi in this parable [parable of the father with the two sons whom he instructed to go and work in his vineyard]. I see Gandhi as the second son, who said 'I will not' and then afterward went—by demonstrating the spirit of Christ and following his teaching as few Christians have ever done. I believe Gandhi loved Christ but could not afford to be publicly associated with 'Christianity'—being a Hindu by allegiance, but a Christ follower by affinity. And I fully expect to see Gandhi when we are privileged to enter God's presence in eternity.⁵²

Like other proponents of C5 contextualization, Mallouhi makes "community" affiliation the core of his argument against separation from one's religious and cultural affiliations. The (unintended?) consequence of the position he affirms is that he advocates a view of the Christian life in isolation from the very community that Christ died to redeem. This privatization of

the faith is something he and Chandler go to great lengths to criticize among “Western” Christians. Yet their solution is to advocate isolating individual believers away from the very community that God is establishing to assist believers like Mallouhi to form a new identity in Christ. This is the only God-ordained community that can sustain faith and witness to the very love that has transformed Mallouhi’s life. “Spiritual” unity implies unity within the “community” Christ came to establish—the church. Tennent’s conclusions about C5 proponents are applicable to Mallouhi and the ecclesiology advocated in his statements and al-Kalima’s writings:

First, C-5 writings tend towards theological reductionism by tacitly embracing a narrow, minimalistic view of salvation. If these new believers are not encouraged to unite their fledgling faith to the faith of the church, then it is unlikely these new believers will be able to properly reproduce the faith ... Second, the theological framework and analysis present in C-5 writings has been overly influenced by Western individualism and the privatization of the faith, which tends to keep the doctrines of soteriology and ecclesiology at arm’s length ... [We] must not forget that we cannot have a Christ-centered theology of mission which does not place the church at the center of Christ’s redemptive plan. To encourage Muslim believers to retain their self-identity as Muslims and not to find practical ways to identify themselves with the larger community of those who worship Jesus Christ reveals a view of the church that is clearly sub-Christian. Finally, separation of the personal from the propositional in the Muslim world can only lead to a dangerous separation of the person of Christ from the church’s proclamation about Christ. This separation fails to attend to the proper connection between our personal testimony (however thrilling and exciting) and the Apostolic proclamation of the gospel ... The unintended result of this view is that personal experience can be used to ignore the specifics of the Apostolic proclamation. Or to put it in the popular terminology of post-modernism, the Apostolic ‘meta-narrative’ takes a back seat to the personal narratives of those who come to Christ.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Mallouhi’s desire to remain among his people and influence his culture for the cause of Christ is exactly what the church in the Middle East needs. There are

far too many cases of Muslims who have made professions of faith in Christ only to subsequently use their faith as an excuse to abandon their friends, families, and communities. Unfortunately, they have usually been encouraged and aided by well-meaning but very misguided churches and missionaries from Western countries. In order for the body of Christ to sustain its faith and nurture the next generation of believers from Muslim backgrounds, people like Mallouhi must be encouraged to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the local church. This is the community Jesus came to establish, and it is the means he has given his body to assist them to meet the challenges posed by their faith in Christ and their religious and cultural backgrounds. Jesus himself promised that when this community of faith commits itself to meet regularly and study his Word, to pray and to fellowship, the gates of death and hell itself will not overcome it.

¹ For a more detailed description of his works with a bibliography, see J. Scott Bridger, *Christian Exegesis of the Qur'an: A Critical Analysis of the Apologetic Use of the Qur'an in Select Medieval and Contemporary Arabic Texts* (vol. 23. American Society of Missiology Monograph Series, Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 46, 105–110.

² For an explanation of how Mallouhi envisions this taking place see Paul-Gordon Chandler, *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road* (Lanham, MD.: Cowley, 2007), 2.

³ Mallouhi is mentioned as the “traveling evangelist” for Frontiers teams in the Middle East and the “Frontiers team leader in Cairo” by Livingstone. See Greg Livingstone, *Planting Churches in Muslim Cities: A Team Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 104, 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, iii.

⁵ The Arabic word *jamā'ah* is from the root *jama'a* and simply means “to gather,” “to unite,” or “to assemble.” Thus, a *jamā'a* refers to a group, gathering, congregation, or assembly. There is resistance among some Christians laboring in Arabic-speaking Muslim environments to using the standardized Arabic word for the church, *kanisa*, due to its association with the institutional church (i.e., Protestant denominations or one of the traditional churches of the Middle East—the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Church of the East, Coptic Church, etc.). Thus, some prefer to refer to the church using some variation of *jamā'at Allāh* (“the assembly of God”) or *jamā'at al-mu'manīn* (“the assembly of the believers”). Their concern in this regard is similar to that of many Messianic Jews, particularly those in Israel, who describe their assemblies as “congregations” (קהילות) versus “churches” (כנסיות). See the discussion below.

⁶ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005), 24–28, 70. Hammett notes that at least ninety refer to the local church.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 855.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 856.

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 1055.

¹¹ *Ibid.* It is not clear by Erickson's statement here whether he considers “house churches” to be the equivalent of “organized churches.” However, his point is pertinent in that there is a devaluing of the local church by those who hold to this view.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1056–57.

¹³ Ultimately, it is the gospel which defines whether or not a church is a true church. Commenting on the *sine qua non* of the church, Hammett notes, “If it [i.e. the church] loses the gospel message, a group of people

- is no longer a true church. It may be a religious society or club, but it is not a church, for God's called-out people are called out by the gospel and come in response to the gospel. The power of the gospel is what reconciles them to God, unites them to Christ, and allows them to be indwelt by the Spirit. *There can be no people of God, body of Christ, or temple of the Spirit without the gospel*" (Hammett, *Foundations*, 63–64, italics added).
- ¹⁴ Erickson, *Theology*, 1057–58.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70–71.
- ¹⁶ For more on the C1 to C5 spectrum see John Travis, "The C-1 to C-6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of Christ-Centered Communities (C) Found in the Muslim Context," *EMQ* October (1998): 407–08 and, "Messianic Muslim Followers of Isa: A Closer Look At C5 Believers and Congregations," *IJFM* 17:1 (2000): 53–59. Travis is the originator of the scale and a co-editor of a recent volume aimed at clarifying the nature of Insider Movements. However, after close examination it is clear the work is an advocacy project for numerous aspects of Insider ecclesiology with an unfortunate lack of dissenting voices. See Harley Talman and John Travis, eds. *Understanding Insider Movements: Disciples of Jesus Within Diverse Religious Cultures* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015). One of the central issues in the discussion between proponents of C4 and C5 is the extent to which someone can continue to identify with their parent religious community after confessing their faith in Christ. For a detailed theological analysis of C5 ecclesiology, an article which was left out of Talman and Travis's volume, see Timothy C. Tennent, "Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 'High Spectrum' Contextualization" *IJFM* 23:3 (2006): 101–15. For a criticism of the spectrum itself as a tool for gauging levels of contextualization see John Stringer, "Contextualization: Transformational Trialogue," in *Doing Mission in the Arab World* (Grassroots Mission Publications, 2008), 119–39.
- ¹⁷ The word *ummah* is used sixty-two times in the Qur'an and primarily has the sense of a "religious community" (i.e. the Muslim community), particularly in the later Medinan suras as Muslim identity became more defined. See F. M. Denny, "Umma," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, 10:859.
- ¹⁸ Chandler, *Pilgrims*, 102.
- ¹⁹ For a balanced examination of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its impact on evangelical theology from a former Muslim turned evangelical, see Abdu H. Murray *Apocalypse Later: Why the Gospel of Peace Must Trump the Politics of Prophecy in the Middle East* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009).
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105, 108.
- ²¹ Chandler records a number of different people who have influenced Mallouhi's thinking including Leo Tolstoy, E. Stanley Jones, Gandhi, Harold Vogelaar, and others. Further research needs to be done on how these people have influenced Mallouhi's theology and approach to contextualization.
- ²² Chandler, *Pilgrims*, 104.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ See e.g., *ibid.*, 110, 115, 117–18.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁹ Mazhar al-Mallouhi et al., eds., *Nash'at al-'Ālam wa al-Bashariya: Dirāsa Mu'ā ira fi Sifr al-Takwīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 2001).
- ³⁰ Chandler, *Pilgrims*, 111.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 81.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 103. This statement ignores the fact that Arab Christianity is Middle Eastern in origin. It likely begins in the New Testament (cf. Acts 2:11) and since that time Christianity has provided millions of Arabs with a viable religious identity in concert with their Arab culture. Indeed, there is a large population of indigenous Arab Christians in Mallouhi's native Syria. Most of Chandler's experience in the Middle East appears to be in Egypt, where the Coptic Christian population is much more sensitive to being identified as "Arab." This is not the case in most of the Middle East. Chandler and Mallouhi's criticisms of past missionary practice and even of certain Arab Christian churches is apropos; however, they frequently resort to characterizations and lump all missionaries together who disagree with their approach. Much of what they criticize could be classified as C1 or C2 approaches to contextualization, something most missionaries (western or otherwise) laboring among Arab Muslims would agree are inadequate approaches. Unfortunately, there are potential theological problems with the alternative as conceived by Chandler and Mallouhi.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁴ Ibid., 82.

³⁵ Ibid., 119.

³⁶ For more on the history of Middle Eastern Christianity under Islam, particularly Arabic-speaking Christianity, see, Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2008).

³⁷ Tennent, "Followers," 104. For a deeper analysis of this topic see, Fred Farrokh, "Indigenous Perspectives on Muslim Identity and Insider Movements," *Global Missiology* 2:12 (2015).

³⁸ Many of those within both the C4 and C5 camps advocate varying approaches to the reinterpretation of religious terminology and passages from the Qur'an that speak about Jesus, and there are differing opinions on this issue. For more on this topic see Bridger, *Christian Exegesis of the Qur'an*.

³⁹ Tennent, "Followers," 107.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴¹ Phil Parshall, "Danger! New Directions in Contextualization," *EMQ* (October 1998): 3.

⁴² Al-Hādī al-Jaṭlāwī et al, *Al-Ma'anā al-Ṣaḥīḥ li-Injīl al-Masīḥ* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 2008). In subsequent footnotes, this book will be referred to as "Meaning."

⁴³ *Meaning*, 105–09. All translations of this work are mine.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁸ Chandler, *Pilgrims*, 114. *Italics* added. One question that this comment raises, and that will not be addressed here is, how has Mallouhi's long affiliation with Frontiers, a parachurch mission agency, impacted his ecclesiology?

⁴⁹ Howard, "Insider Movement," 6–7.

⁵⁰ *Meaning*, 109.

⁵¹ Chandler, *Pilgrims*, 3–4.

⁵² Ibid., 123.

⁵³ Tennent, "Followers," 111–12.