

Session Four: Session Four: Practical and Social Theology II
 IDENTITY AND BELONGING FOR A BMB¹
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Introduction

Since many Muslims are flooding into Europe from Syria and other Middle Eastern conflicts, it is incumbent on the church to ask some critical questions. We see many Muslims coming to Christ these days, but now we must face the question what is the role of the church in assisting these Muslims? Particularly what can the church offer in terms of belonging and identity?

In the Muslim world, in general and in the Lebanese tribal shame-honor society in particular, the strength and the unity of the Ummah or Muslim community plays an organic role in the lives of individuals and in forming and reforming their personal identity.² Thus, exploring the dynamics of the relationship between identity and community will help us better comprehend the challenges that the Muslim undergoes when she or he turns to faith in Christ. I will argue in this paper that to be a Christian after the likeness of the Triune God is to be part of a community, both socially and theologically. Thus for BMBs (believers from Muslim background), belonging to the community of faith insures their true Christian identity.

This will also naturally touch on the identity of the church as a community/family of followers of Christ from “Christian” and “Muslim” backgrounds. Accordingly, the first part of the research will touch on the basic social aspect of identity and belonging. The thrust of the study is in the second part of the paper which will deal with the theological aspects of identity and belonging, personally and as a community.

Community is the larger home where Muslims, and everybody else, find security, acceptance, and identity. Hence, for a BMB it entails great sacrifice if one turns away from her or his community. J. Dudley Woodberry, says that “in most Muslim people groups, the determinants of peoplehood are drawn from a wide range of social domains, including religion, language, culture, politics, nationality, ethnicity, and family. Apostasy, then, may be viewed by the community as a renunciation of all these determinants of their peoplehood and worth.”³ A new (re)search of personal identity starts for BMBs while they are (be)longing for a community: church, Ummah or somewhere in between.⁴

¹ Believers from a Muslim Background (BMB).

² L. R. Burke speaks of the three primary control emotions; guilt and innocence, fear and security, and shame and honor. David Greenlee, *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 2741, Kindle.

³ J. Dudley Wooderry, “The Jerusalem Council Applied: To the Muslim I Became a Muslim?” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 24:1 (Spring 2007): 25.

⁴ David Greenlee, *Longing for Community*, 1837, Kindle.

We are all in constant search of identity in modern pluralist societies. Identity is a major issue in every human culture within time and space, whether Western or Eastern, and is especially an issue for first-generation believers of any background. In addition, in the Second Temple Judaism period of the Greco-Roman Jewish context, identity was a vital quest for early Christians; this is for example what the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was all about: identity for Jews and Gentiles as followers of Christ.⁵ In a Middle Eastern context, the religious identity (i.e. nominal Christian or Muslim) is the dominant identity, and in the Northern American context people allowed for gender and sexual identity to be the one core identity. What if the answer to the question of who we are in Christ as persons and communities determines our very identity? Wrestling with this question of identity and belonging (while constantly visiting John Wesley's theology about the subject at hand) as the paper unfolds will hopefully suggest some insights in order to better serve the church; particularly in a Middle Eastern setting where BMBs are flourishing.

The Social Aspect of Identity

When dealing with the issue of identity, theology and the social sciences (like psychology, sociology and anthropology) come from different angles to tackle the subject but complement each other, for God spoke to and through real people in real social contexts. When we ask the question "who am I?" people who come from individualistic cultures will respond "I think therefore I am" (e.g. the West since Enlightenment) and people who come from collectivist cultures like the Lebanese culture will reply "We are therefore I am" (most cultures in most of history) though people vary and cultures change.⁶

In the context of identity crises that followers of Christ from a Muslim background face, Tim Green speaks of the three layers of personal identity;⁷ the core identity that probes the question, who I am in my inner self, and the social identity that asks the question, who I am in my relation to groups I am part of, and the collective identity that asks the question, who are we as a group in the eyes of other groups. Green says that the core identity "is the inner heart of a person's self-awareness and worldview, first formed as young children subconsciously internalize their parents' values and outlook."⁸

According to Erik Erikson's influential theory, "the young individual must learn to be most himself where he means most to others—through others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him."⁹ In addition,

⁵ J. Dudley Wooderry, "The Jerusalem Council Applied: To the Muslim I Became a Muslim?", 23.

⁶ Greenlee, 1343-49, Kindle.

⁷ Due to the narrow scope of this paper, I will not explore the postmodern social reflections on identity, which is more fluid in nature than Green's tripartite "template."

⁸ Greenlee, 2015-33, Kindle.

⁹ Erikson speaks of early childhood, where my values and worldview are absorbed from 'significant others,' and school age, where I may start to be exposed to different values and worldview, depending on my context, and late teens/early twenties, which is a time of 'identity

a person's social identity concerns his or her actual social relationships, while the collective identity is a label for the whole group. A person's core identity and social identity develop throughout life through a close and constant dialectic between these two levels, which we can see in this way: this interplay between the internal and external aspects of a person's identity means that we should not think of the private 'self' as immune from whatever happens at the social level. The inner is affected by the outer through internalization, and in turn contributes to the outer through externalization.¹⁰

Green speaks of various kinds of transitions taking place on the level of the core identity that shakes one's assumptions and worldviews. Still, Green says "societal trends challenge my whole culture's assumptions; adult learning theorists say that 'biographical shocks' wake people up to other possibilities. People respond either by retreating to the old ways or by considering change or 'transformative learning'."¹¹

In the Lebanese context, religious conversion is one example of identity transition. On the one hand, this transition happens at the core identity level. Nonetheless, it needs to be articulated at the social identity level. On the other hand, transition can start at the social level when people attach to a group they like, and then it progressively infuses to the core.¹²

On the level of social identity transitions, Green speaks of coping strategies that are created because of transition tensions, where people living in the twenty first century can juggle multiple social identities.¹³ This might create dilemmas of dual belonging, especially when one's loyalties or core values are challenged.¹⁴

confusion' and self-questioning and experimentation (where I either embrace, adapt or reject worldviews and values). Erikson speaks also about the later life stage; settling down, living with paradox, and accepting the grey areas, but wanting to leave a legacy; On a similar note, James Fowler speaks about stages of faith, and he argues that in general faith's stages follow life's stages. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest of Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 119-21 and 269-76.

¹⁰ David Greenlee, *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 1227-1339, Kindle.

¹¹ Tim Green, "Discipleship and Belonging in the light of Identity" (paper presented at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary, Mansourieh, Lebanon, June 2015).

¹² Green notes in one of his lectures that the "new core identity does not completely eradicate the old, but is overwritten on the old."

¹³ In one of his lectures, Green states that "migrants and their children use strategies including switching to and fro as social chameleons, suppression of one culture in favor of the other, or synthesis with a mix-and-match approach."

¹⁴ Loyalties are challenged when either social group does not tolerate dual belonging, and core values are tested when social switching requires behaviors irreconcilable with one's core identity.

Furthermore, and on the level of collective identity transitions (i.e. ‘our’ identity as a group and not ‘my’ identity as a person), where identity markers, stereotyping, and tensions regarding inter-group relationships appear, the members of one group are inevitably labeled with the characteristics of the group. Moreover, when one individual belongs to two or more groups, dual belonging becomes a problem.¹⁵ Besides, group labels of religion, ethnicity and nationality are often fused in such cultures, thus to betray one category is to betray all categories!

Accordingly, and due to dual belongings of liminal people, the possibility of a new group to emerge at the border zone between the two groups becomes high.¹⁶ This general framework could relate to BMBs in many ways. Muslim societies strongly stress Islamic identity as a group label and as a social belonging or a way of life, which as a result, reinforces core Muslim identity internalized in childhood. Hence, for a BMB this would cause a ‘biological shock’ that reverberates at the three levels of identity.

New values and worldviews come into conflict with the old and gradually overcome them with a prolonged struggle at core identity level. Here, the support of the new community and mentors is much needed. At social identity level, BMBs join the new Christian community without totally leaving the Muslim one, and therefore solutions for this dilemma of dual belonging are also needed. A BMB might be rejected by the Muslim community because of shame and disgrace she or he could bring upon the whole group, and at the same time a BMB might also be treated with suspicion (or elevation) by the Christian community. Furthermore, it goes without saying that at the collective identity level, a BMB becoming a member of the Christian group is labeled automatically by Muslims as an infidel and as an apostate.¹⁷

BMBs could easily and naturally find themselves in between two communities. In addition to their natural tendencies to connect to other BMBs at the same liminal space, they also nurture the ability of expressing their Christian faith in new creative contextual ways. The new community of BMBs after its formation becomes stronger when the number of its members increases, where the community starts creating its own group labels. However, believers’ children will grow up

¹⁵ For example, when tensions increase between Sunnis and Shias, especially in collectivist cultures like in the one in the Middle East, a married couple from both religious backgrounds (i.e. mixed marriage) will bear the tension. Another clear unfortunate modern example would be the brutal religious and ethnic cleansing that the “Islamic State” and the like are committing against Christians, Shias, Alawites and even Sunnis in the Middle East.

¹⁶ Jens Barnett says that this new group occupies over time a ‘third space’ which either will form a long-term community (usually happens through marriage within the group, thus passing on identity to next generation) or will be reabsorbed back into the preexisting community. David Greenlee, *Longing for Community*, 949-1088, Kindle.

¹⁷ It is beyond the scope of this research to speak about the “insider movement,” where BMBs stay in their Muslim communities while remaining faithful followers of Christ but not secretly. Such a group is culturally insider to the Muslim community but theologically an outsider with respect to the Muslim community. For further discussion on this topic see especially David Greenlee, *Longing for Community: Church, Ummah, or Somewhere in Between?* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013), 1465-1776, kindle.

with a mixed identity particularly if one parent remains as a Muslim. At both levels, the social and the collective, BMBs may be absorbed into the Christian community, or absorbed back into the Muslim community, or be part of a BMB community.¹⁸ Still, a deeper theological identity ought to be found in the Triune-like community of the church for BMBs.

The Theological Aspect of Identity

In this second part of the paper, the thrust will be theologically oriented towards some main aspects of identity and belonging of BMBs as persons and as communities.

We are by grace what the Triune God is by nature, and no amount of our posturing or preconceived socio-political-theological notions (like ‘social Trinity,’) of identity can make us to truly reflect the Holy Trinity. Consequently, the rest of this paper will further explore the renewed being of BMBs and that of the church as a restored community based on the being of God. To be a Christian after the likeness of the Triune God is to be part of a community, both socially and theologically. Thus for BMBs, belonging to the community of faith, by God’s grace, insures their true Christian identity.

The image of God is revealed in the resurrected-crucified Christ. For a BMB suffering is highly probable and naturally expected¹⁹ and helps for the renewal of the person who becomes more like Christ by God’s grace. Alexander Schmemmann says: “Christ’s suffering is not ‘removed’; it is transformed into victory. The defeat itself becomes victory.”²⁰ Jürgen Moltmann writes: “The death of Jesus on the cross is the center of all Christian theology. . . . All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death . . . about history, about the church, about faith and sanctification, about the future and about hope stem from the crucified Christ . . . the incarnation of the Logos is completed on the cross.”²¹ In becoming like the resurrected crucified Christ we become like the Triune God, and we avoid a socialization of the Trinity.

According to Theodore Runyon, John Wesley locates the heart of Christianity and holiness in the renewal of the creation through the renewal of humanity according to the image of God.²² Based

¹⁸ David Greenlee, *Longing for Community*, 1465, Kindle.

¹⁹ However, due to unwise apologetical approaches, BMBs could suffer unnecessary persecutions, which in turn could result of leaving the faith especially for new believers. For more reading on the topic, see David Greenlee, *Longing for Community*, 1785-1992 and 4745-4899, Kindle.

²⁰ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments & Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 103.

²¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 204-05.

²² Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 8 and 44. Blevins, Dean G, "Practicing the New Creation: Wesley’s Eschatological Community Formed by the Means of Grace," *Asbury Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 and 58, no. 1 (Fall 2002/Spring 2003): 81-104. Blevins shows that for Wesley, the renewal of humanity according to the image of God is achieved via the personal and (mostly) the communal practices of the means of grace. Thus, this community becomes liturgical, characterized by customs

on a theological reading of the high Christological text; Philippians 2:6-11, Michael J. Gorman speaks of God as a suffering God by his very nature in Christ, thus *theosis* or *theoformity* becomes *cruciformity*, and justification for Paul becomes co-crucifixion.²³

Becoming like Christ brings about hope in the new creation. After posing the question of the Christian ultimate hope, N.T. Wright proclaims that if salvation is only about "going to heaven" and escaping from this world, then the question of Christian hope will always be unrelated. Trusting in Jesus' resurrection "suddenly ceases to be a matter of inquiring about an odd event in the first century and becomes a matter of rediscovering hope in the twenty-first century. Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible."²⁴

Justification in the light of new creation creates as well "a community of Jews and Gentiles with a new heart, by virtue of internal rather than external circumcision, who enabled by the Holy Spirit, live faithfully toward God and lovingly toward others, thus fulfilling the 'just requirements of the law.' The very purpose of Christ's incarnation and death was to create such a community." Wright also marks that "Cruciform holiness is inherently other-centered and communal... It is public participation in the story of God in Christ by the Spirit." After Paul witnessed the resurrected Christ on the Damascus road, his ethnic, even tribal, identity and violent personality was radically transformed into what Miroslav Volf calls a "catholic personality," that is, a "personality enriched by otherness" and which needs a similar catholic community for its substance.²⁵ Thus to become like the Triune God is to become like Christ by grace.

To be like Christ as a community, we ought to live out God's Story with all what it entails about theosis, suffering, and hope. Lesslie Newbigin points out that "the way we understand human life depends on what conception we have of the human story."²⁶ Moreover, according to Alasdair MacIntyre: "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question, 'of what story do I find myself a part?'"²⁷ According to Stanley Hauerwas, the narrative of the church is the scriptural story of Jesus, and as the church lives out Jesus' story, the church's

suitable to it through the process of becoming the New Creation. Blevins states that the Eucharist as an eschatological practice is central to Wesley as it transforms the Eucharistic community from liturgical to doxological.

²³ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, Publishing, Company, 2009), 33, 52, 63 and 105.

²⁴ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 5, 29 and 75.

²⁵ N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 80, 126 and 142.

²⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 15.

²⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 215.

character is formed. The church does not do ethics; the church is ethical by its very narrative and nature\character.²⁸ God's story is His people's as well.

As members of God's Kingdom living in a restored community, we live out God's universal story missionally, since God is a missional Being. Christopher Wright says that Yahweh was not only Israel's God, but above all gods, thus He rules over all of history, and this is how the people of God are enveloped into God's mission in His Kingdom, thus Israel was redeemed for the sake of the world.²⁹ Wright relates Abraham's covenant to Christ's cross, with all its implications on how we understand the nature of God's mission as including evangelism and social action. Wright argues that what Christ did on the cross "goes far beyond (though of course it includes) the matter of personal guilt and individual forgiveness," and that God's mission is cruciform and holistic by its nature as the cross had cosmic implications.³⁰

This mission is communally incarnational. Scott McKnight speaks of Kingdom mission as always related to specific people as they "live out Jesus' kingdom vision in our world" in a specific context which is subversive to the "powers of the age" in that certain context.³¹ Jesus himself declared the nearness of God's kingdom, as he formed communities and used metaphoric language that evoked fellowship and community for people characterized by salvation and justice. Paul also understood the church as Israel expanded, and therefore, kingdom mission becomes church's mission. As McKnight himself puts it: "Churches are the politic of Jesus in this world... a local church embodies—or is designed by God to embody—the kingdom vision of Jesus in such a way that it tells the kingdom story."³²

In addition, God's story forms His people's identity. Coleman Baker states that Christian identity has the story of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah as its focal point, and accordingly distinctions based on traditional cultural boundaries become indifferent.³³ "Identity is formed in the interaction between text and audience." Still, Paul Ricoeur reasons that "narrative identity is constructed, and reconstructed, during the interaction between the audience, whose present identity has been constructed by its social memory or seeks to counter and reform identity and memory."³⁴

Applying Ricoeur's literary theory on Acts, Baker suggests that to reconstruct the readers' prefigured memory of Peter and Paul; to examine how the text is composed so as to reshape that memory; and to consider how the readers' response would result in a reconfigured memory of

²⁸ Stanley, Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 68 and 109.

²⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 88, 189 and 219.

³⁰ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 314.

³¹ Scott McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 23, 41-44.

³² Scott McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 74, 90-91, and 100-101.

³³ Coleman A. Baker, *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity: Peter, Paul, and Recategorization in the Book of Acts* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 5072, Kindle.

³⁴ Coleman A. Baker, *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity*, 568, Kindle.

these two leaders as prototypes of the group's social identity. Baker writes; "Acts seeks to develop [Christ's] common superordinate identity among Christ followers divided over the inclusion of non-Judeans through its characterization of Peter and Paul as prototypical Christ group members.... Luke presents them as co-workers who both follow God's direction to incorporate non-Judeans into the Christ movement."³⁵

John Flett also relates the missional identity of God's people to who the missional God is; mission is located in the essence rather than the economy of the Triune God, thus the church is a missionary community by its very being, oriented towards the Kingdom of God and sent by a missionary God to participate in God's renewal of the whole of creation.³⁶ On a similar note, John D. Zizioulas argues that "the Church is not simply an institution. She is a 'mode of existence', *a way of being*. The mystery of the Church, even in its institutional dimension, is deeply bound to the being of man, to the being of the world and to the very being of God."³⁷ The very being of the Triune God is communion; hence the church as the body of Christ formed in the Spirit cannot exist without the preexistence of relationships and fellowship between the members of the Body.³⁸ Therefore, a move to the heart of God passes through and journeys with a restored community.

Miroslav Volf convincingly claims that "the church is divinely designed as a plurality of persons united in fellowship to reflect the tri-personal relationship of the Godhead itself. Invited by the Holy Spirit through the work of Christ, the church is called to enter into the divine tri-personal fellowship. Just as the Godhead itself evinces equality of persons yet distinction of roles, so the church should manifest equality among its members while recognizing distinct leadership roles imparted by the Spirit."³⁹

Thus, community is substantially formative to identity because of the missional, narrative, and the theoformity-cruciformity aspects of community.

Conclusion

For BMBs all over the world and particularly in the Middle East, and as much as it shows a paradox, suffering is usually inevitable. Still, necessary suffering is a sign of hope, a further step towards holiness by becoming like Christ the sufferer.

³⁵ Coleman A. Baker, *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity*, 5053-59, Kindle.

³⁶ John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, Publishing, Company, 2010), 248 and 286-98.

³⁷ John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15.

³⁸ John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 110-14.

³⁹ Roy Yabuki and J. Scott Horrell, review of *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* by Miroslav Volf, *Bibliotheca Sacra* / April-June 2000, 236-38.

Furthermore, this hope in the new creation as the kingdom of God unfolds brings much hope to BMBs when thinking of their families. Dealing with justification by faith alone, I resonate with Wesley's "conviction of God's universal graciousness [which] led him to a more positive evaluation of the 'good works' of the unevangelized than the traditional Reformed view that works prior to justification were simply 'splendid sins.' The unevangelized will be saved, Wesley hopes, for "his conviction of the unfailing justice and universal love of God made it impossible for him to believe that people who lacked knowledge of Christ through no fault of their own (invincible ignorance) would be automatically excluded from heaven."⁴⁰

In addition, N.T. Wright says that Paul perceived Israel's story as a narrative "in search of an ending."⁴¹ I allow myself to think of Islam as a narrative in search for an ending (and Christ is that telos), rather than approaching Islam strictly apologetically as being a dark religion without any glimpse of hope.

When it comes to leadership positions and the unfortunate marginalization and suspicion BMBs face sometimes from the church, I find Zizioulas notes helpful; "In the first place it must be stated that there is no such thing as non ordained persons in the church... The theological implication of this is that ordination, i.e. assignment to a particular 'ordo' in the community, appears to be not something that follows a pre-existing community but an act constitutive of the community."⁴²

Hence, there are many remaining intricacies yet to be researched in this growing narrative of Muslims becoming Christians. However, we find ourselves coming back again to the centrality of identity and belonging in the Triune-like community of the church, a place where the BMB can find both her/his true identity in Christ through. Indeed, community is important to identity because of the missional, narrative, and the theoformity-cruciformity aspects of community.

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⁴⁰ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 585 and 3203.

⁴¹ N. T Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1318.

⁴² John Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 215-16.

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