

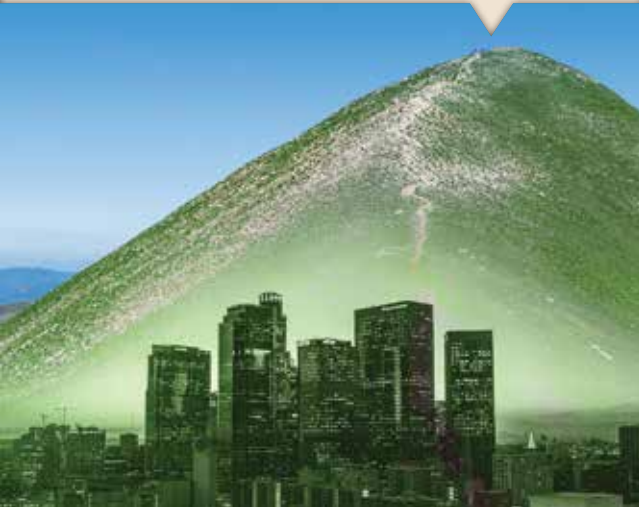
“Insider” Movements: Common Concerns

Rather than making my own list of frequently asked questions or concerns, I want to allow those to emerge from someone actually asking them.

In the spring of 2019 I reviewed the article *City Under a Hill: 5 Problems with Insider Movements* by Travis Myers (Professor, Bethlehem College & Seminary). The article is available here: <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/a-city-under-a-hill>.

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They do not hide the gospel.



I will primarily use the outline of the five points he raises, however I begin from one of his major subtitles near the beginning of his paper, *When the Gospel Hides*.

By highlighting this comment and framing it as a major section of his paper he tips his hand to an assumption he is making about insider movements: they are secretive and hiding the gospel. This is of course hinted at in his title as well (city *under* a hill).

While I welcome questions about insider movements and feel the discussions are a healthy process, I find responding to this idea that insider brothers and sisters are hiding their faith is just covering old territory in the long discussions about IM. The claim that insider movements are secretive or silent or don't share their faith is a claim as old as the discussion itself (back to at least 2004). This has been frequently rebutted, and the number of followers of Jesus, insiders, who face persecution and death because of their faith is also witness to the erroneous nature of this straw man argument.

Does every “insider” believer stand boldly? Certainly not. Does every Christian living in countries hostile to their faith do so? Does every Christian in the USA? Of course not.

The real question then is what do godly leaders in such contexts teach and encourage their people to do? In the case of insider movements, the expectation is that disciples of Jesus make other disciples of Jesus. They share their faith and they bear witness.

They do not hide the gospel.

Now to Myers' five points. I use his terms, and each of the five is followed by a direct quotation from Myers' article.

Hermeneutics

“IM is predicated on the misguided idea that faith in Jesus as Lord of one's life can “complete” and be the apex of any religious tradition or religious identity.”

First, IM is not predicated on this point. Not every IM proponent even holds this position, and in fact, if fulfillment thinking is not true it would not change anything. IM practice or approaches or principles are not dependent on this theme. IM is predicated on many other biblical principles and passages. The literature is full on this point.

Second, IM proponents have not made the case that Jesus fulfills other religions, certainly not in the way that He fulfills the Old Testament.

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At the same time, it is frequently the case that in Jesus people can and do see a number of beautiful aspects of their heritage, including their religious heritage, which now seem to find a new fullness and beauty in Jesus.

But the argument which assumes IM bases itself in fulfillment thinking is a generalization and inaccurate.

Integrity and Identity

“Core Islamic doctrine explicitly denies biblical doctrines that are central, and essential, to Christian faith.”

Myers is concerned here especially with Muslim contexts. I will try to respond more generically. It is true that official teaching of major non-Christian religious traditions run counter to, or in tension with, or deny outright biblical doctrines that are essential. No argument on this point has ever been put forward by any insider advocate or insider movement leader with whom I have worked.

There are some insider believers who follow Jesus (not all, but a number whom I know) who *do* argue that on the basis of the foundational texts of their own religious heritage, and in deeper study of the Bible, a number of core teachings in their religious traditions as typically taught are incorrect. They seek to reform those understandings, including whatever their birth religion may teach about Jesus, the Bible, salvation and more.

This is not at all the same thing as suggesting that their birth religion does not teach incorrect things. But at least some insider leaders argue, from the inside, that those teachings are wrong, and that they need to be corrected.

Discipleship

“The IM approach stunts Christian discipleship and spiritual growth.”

I am guessing, perhaps wrongly, that Myers has not met

insiders personally or directly. His conclusions certainly seem to indicate this. Perhaps an underlying question here really is, “what are IM movements doing about these issues?” Or perhaps, “how do they disciple believers?”



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The movements I have known and been involved with are all rooted in ongoing inductive study of whole books of the Bible in community. Also, I increasingly see leaders focused on reflection on the doctrinal history and themes Christ's people have wrestled with historically, as these leaders in turn wrestle with issues in their contexts.

This does not mean that every answer Christ's people have arrived at in other epochs and contexts is simply swallowed whole into such movements. I would argue we don't do so in the west either, and would add that I don't think we should do so.

Ecclesiology

“One's identification with Christ should entail identification with all of Christ's people in the world today and throughout time. That is more fundamental, ultimate, and significant than ethnic, cultural, linguistic, family, or local identity.”

I can sympathize with the intentions and heart of this concern. However, several things need to be said.

First, what is meant by identification with “all Christ’s people in the world today and throughout time? How is this even possible? How many Christians identify in this way? We have Christian denominations who do not see others as Christian, will not have communion together, do not recognize one another’s ordinations and more. We don’t even share (fully) common creeds, confessions or canon of Scripture as Christians. So, to ask insider believers to hold to a standard that the Christian church has not attained seems hypocritical. I am not suggesting Myers is hypocritical as a person, but that this standard is.

Second, even when we do pursue unity and identification as Christians with others, this happens very much on a small, personal and local scale: through relationships. And this *also* happens between insider believers and those who we would call Christians. I have seen it and facilitated it. There is no sense among the leaders of IMs which I know that Christians are not also brothers and sisters in Christ. They welcome thinking of all believers in Jesus as members of the Body.

Soils and Strategy

“Though admittedly difficult in many contexts, religious identity and ethno-cultural identity can and should indeed be differentiated. The former must be given up for Jesus and the church. We should reject the conflation of social and religious identity.”

I want to point out where I agree and disagree with Myers here.

First, where I disagree. I understand Myers’ point here but it is, from many points of view, simplistic and impossible to separate religion and culture. We think we can, in the west. And maybe in a western context this may be partly the case, with our assumptions about secular and religious life, physical and spiritual dichotomies and assumptions that religions are easily distinguished and identified.

But in most contexts, this simply is not as easy as Myers suggests. In many religious contexts something as normal to daily life as brushing one’s teeth and using the toilet are guided by religious teaching. In such cases, what would be culture or religion? Should one brush one’s teeth differently just to show one is not keeping one’s religion? If one continues to brush teeth as they have since childhood, is that keeping their religion or their culture? These are purposely “easy” sorts of examples, in order to show that the issue actually *isn’t* easy.

In the simple examples above most readers will likely be thinking, “well brushing teeth doesn’t matter so even if it is guided by religion, no problem.” This already suggests we are comfortable making distinctions about what is ok and not ok to keep, even from one’s religious heritage.

Where do I agree with Myers?

The fact is that obedient discipleship will require changes. It will require replies of yes and no to all sorts of things, cultural, religious, emotional, personal, relational, attitudinal, philosophical, etc.

Thus, for me, the point is not whether one can keep culture but must jettison religion, or even whether that is a distinction we can make. The point is how do needed changes happen, how are they identified, who makes such decisions, how do they decide and for what reasons and motivations?

This is why we have taken great care in the movements I have been involved with to cultivate processes for handling such questions (for example, the questions of should we continue to do this or stop doing that). We have never given a blanket “yes, just keep doing everything.” Neither have we given a blanket “no,” on the other hand.

What we have done is asked, “What does Scripture say on this issue? How do we obey? What does being faithful mean? How do we decide which aspect of our heritage is ‘okay’ and ‘not okay?’”

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Conclusion

I have no expectation of being able to persuade every critic of the viability of the biblical faithfulness of IM as movements. And my aim here is not in fact to persuade. But I do hope to explain and, where possible, correct misperceptions and assumptions which result in misrepresentations. I do not for a moment suggest Myers intends to misrepresent anything about IM—but at the end of the day that is the result of the five points. 