



Beyond Christianity

Insider Movements and the Place of the Bible and the Body of Christ in New Movements to Jesus

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The following is excerpted from Kevin Higgins' plenary address at Tokyo 2010.

The title I have been given makes reference to “Beyond Christianity” and to “insider movements.” The conference organizers have thereby drawn our attention to what God is doing to draw people to Himself at or beyond the edges of what most of us would associate with Christianity. More specifically, some mission thinkers and practitioners, including myself, have experienced and advocated for what we see God to be doing to bring men and women within non-Christian religious traditions to saving faith in Christ outside of the forms and expressions of discipleship that are typical of what we would call “church.”

When we read through the Scriptures, we cannot fail to be repeatedly amazed at the surprising ways in which God Himself works beyond the borders of our expectations, whether those borders be cultural, linguistic, national or even religious. God initiated a relationship with Job long before He called into being the covenant people of Israel. It was a Roman soldier who appears to be the first in the Gospel of Mark to see in any clear way the true nature of Jesus. And we see this in many examples both before and after these two.

However, these examples neither prove nor disprove what some of us have sought to describe based on what we see “in the field.” How then do we assess such things? How do we understand them? Is this some form of pluralism or inclusivism, or are these movements truly the fruit of the Kingdom spreading like yeast in the dough? And how do we address each

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other as we seek, within the wider Body of Christ, to sharpen each other's thinking and reflection?

The subject has taken a major place in recent missiological reflection. Diverse publications have published articles from different perspectives, including *EMQ*, *Mission Frontiers*, *IJFM*, and *Christianity Today*. The body of literature is growing,¹ as have the number of conferences and seminars.

This has all served to clarify a number of the major biblical and theological issues. But it is also clear that for many the question of whether such movements are in keeping with God's intentions and ways or not is a deeply emotional issue.

Since not all agree that the emergence of such thinking is a ground for optimism, much less a Providential response to other religions, how might missionaries, missiologists and mission leaders from all perspectives continue to assess what God is doing?

Core Values: Reframing the Discussion

Much of the dialogue in the publications and events cited above has focused on either defending these new movements or questioning their validity. I have actually been writing this address while preparing for and participating in a gathering of proponents of such movements as well as followers of Jesus within various non-Christian religious traditions. Before proceeding, I would like to outline an underlying set of convictions that has been shaping our conversations. Though the words are mine, they are describing three recurring assumptions that surface over and over in our reflection:

1. The Bible is God's Word and is both supreme in its authority, and sufficient in its application,

IN SUM, I AM PROPOSING TWO THINGS: MEETING FACE-TO-FACE AS MEMBERS OF THE BODY, AND AGREEING TO AN “ETHIC OF DISCOURSE” FOR OUR CONVERSATIONS.

- for every dimension of discipleship, teaching, training and devotion in any movement.
2. The Kingdom of God spreads in and through social networks. It is like yeast in the dough. As such, we can and should expect that in many situations men and women and families and friends will come into the Kingdom together, as “pre-existing webs of relationship.”
 3. Men and women enter the Kingdom directly, on the basis of what the King has done for them and through faith in Him, without passing through Christianity. There are movements around the world taking place “beyond Christianity.” But such movements are inside the Kingdom and under the leadership of the King.

A Different Approach?

I close with two pleas to both my fellow proponents and to those who find themselves skeptical.

First, thus far the debate and discussion has largely been carried out at a distance. We need to meet face-to-face in order to hear each other’s voices, see each other’s faces, and be able to make certain we actually understand and listen well before we articulate where we differ and why. I have made this plea before.² I repeat it here. It is likely that the best way forward is to begin one-on-one or in smaller gatherings. This will be more time-consuming than a “conference,” but also more fruitful and more real.

Second, I mentioned before that the Word of God should be the authority under which we conduct our discourse, our interactions with one another as we seek to assess what God is doing. Therefore, drawing from several biblical passages, I would like to close by making a plea for a change on both “sides” in the rhetoric of our public discourse in speeches, addresses, articles and other media. Indeed, I would plea that principles such as the ones immediately below might form the basis of an agreed “ethic” for our publications, public statements, dialogues and disagreements.

1. From Philippians 1:12-18: Can we learn from Paul to delight in the advance of the gospel even through instruments with whom we might disagree?

2. From Ephesians 4:14-16: Can we learn from Paul and, even when we disagree, learn to speak the truth in love?
3. From Romans 14:1-15:13: Can we learn from Paul and seek to refrain from judging the consciences of one another?
4. And from Acts 5:33-39: Can we learn from Gamaliel and be humble enough to realize that even in our sincerest and deepest desires to follow Him and seek His truth, we still see through a glass darkly and have much to learn? Can we all affirm that we do not want to be found opposing God?

What if we who support this paradigm are wrong, in full or in part? As we seek to live under and learn from His Word, God is able to correct and deal with us.

And what if skeptics are wrong? If God is at work in the movements we are describing, if this is something poured out from Him by His Spirit, then He too is able to correct the views of those who at present are not convinced.

In sum, I am proposing two things: meeting face-to-face as members of the Body, and agreeing to an “ethic of discourse” for our conversations.

Knowing that He is Lord, and that His Spirit through His Word will teach and correct His Body, we can, in fact, relax. We can celebrate. We can embrace. May God use us all, broken vessels that we are, as He makes disciples of Jesus among all the nations. Amen. ¶

End Notes

¹ See for example, papers by Timothy Tennent, ‘Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C-5 “high spectrum” contextualization’, in *IJFM* (24:1, Spring 2007); Gary Corwin, ‘A Humble Appeal to C-5 Insider Movement Muslim Ministry Advocates to Consider Ten Questions’, in *IJFM* (24:1, Spring 2007). Kevin Higgins, ‘Identity, Integrity, and Insider Movements: A Brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent’s Critique of C-5 Thinking’, in *IJFM* (23:6, Fall 2006). Kevin Higgins, ‘The Key To Insider Movements: The Devoted’ of Acts’, in *IJFM* 21:4; Winter 2004, pp. 155 ff. There is also a variety of approaches to be found in recent editions of *St. Francis Magazine*, for example, editions 5:4 (August 2009) and 5:5 (October 2009).

² See my article in *St. Francis Magazine*, 5:5 (October 2009).