

A Few Thoughts and Proposals Regarding **Insider Movements**

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The Existential Reality

Our evangelical community across the world is debating, as we should, the limits and connections between cultural identity and faith in Christ. This is especially intense in those cultures where religion plays a dominant role in framing one's identity. In almost every mission focused on unreached people I have found a healthy and intense dialogue going on concerning what it means to be a follower of Jesus within these cultures, where the Holy Spirit is drawing people to Himself in historically unprecedented numbers. New communities of those who follow Christ and honor God's Word are adopting many new forms. And many of us seem to feel compelled to define what obedience looks like for others who accept the Lordship of Jesus.

As evangelical missionaries, we once insisted that following Christ required a complete break with one's culture because it was steeped in an un-redeemable "heathen" religious system. In some places followers of Jesus were even required to take new westernized Biblical names, while we seemed unaware of the degree to which our own Biblical understanding was compromised by extra-Biblical and cultural accretions.

As a result, many of the Christian churches we helped birth around the world are seen by locals as the embodiment of foreign and western culture. In their view, Christianity is an expression of a corrupt western "modernity" that seeks to subvert what they see as morally superior in their own national/religious identity. This perception obscures the truths of God's grace.

Thus many of Christ's followers (missionaries and locals) are questioning the necessity of leaving the dominant culture, and even its religious expression, to follow Christ.

In these ongoing discussions the debate is often heated and the tensions quite fierce.

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The Challenge

Missionaries and nationals on both sides of this question are appealing to those of us outside their reality for theological legitimization, and in the West we seem quite ready, even anxious, to try to arbitrate a dispute that is not really ours. Rather than bringing peace, we are stoking the flames of strife and division in their world.

My Personal Reflections

People frequently ask me what my theological position is on the "insider movements," or the use of "dynamic equivalents" in Bible translation. Several reflections have led me to hold lightly my positions on these issues. You may consider this a good old fashioned cop-out, and you may be right, but here are my reflections.

System Thinking and Sin

Years ago I was introduced to "systems thinking." My "personal system" is the circle I draw around things I influence or control. The inference for a dispersive person like me is that I shouldn't waste time and energy worrying about the things outside that circle, but carefully manage the things in my personal and corporate system.

As I have gotten older, I have recognized that I don't draw the circle; rather, I recognize and accept it. It is the Holy Spirit who—through God's Word, brothers and sisters in Christ and even circumstances—creates the boundaries around the system He entrusts to my stewardship.

When I ignore those boundaries—and get involved with things outside my system that I feel necessitate my urgent intervention, or that I am sure absolutely require my astounding and unique gifts—disaster is not far behind. I have come to recognize that my presumptive boundary-jumping really comes from my dual sins of pride and unbelief.

My prideful nature tells me that God speaks more clearly to me—or, at the very least, I understand Him more clearly—than my brother or sister. My sin of unbelief leads me to doubt that the Almighty can get His point across to those who may lack my dedication, intellect or training,

even though He has also called them to be a part of His family and His Spirit also resides within them.

Pride and unbelief exercise a strong magnetic attraction to draw my attention away from my own system and calling. My presumptive intervention in the systems of others takes away from what God wants to do through me in my own system, and also interferes with what He desires to do within the “system” I illicitly invaded.

Good Theology and Obedience are Contextual

The best theology comes through interaction with the Scripture in a specific context. Because God seeks worshippers among all peoples, additional peoples are always searching the Scriptures to understand how God’s Word speaks to their culture, identity and worldview.

Throughout church history and across diverse cultures, the Holy Spirit seems to have applied varying facets of His comprehensive revelation about God, man and redemption. Obedience to God’s Word rather than mere knowledge is what counts with the Creator, obedience which is always specific and concrete.

Recognizing My Limitations

My father, now with the Lord, was a wonderfully wise and godly minister of the gospel. When I left home to prepare for the ministry, he gave me some awesome advice: “Son, when you see great and godly men arrayed on opposite sides of any major biblical truth, don’t think you are going to resolve that issue.”

In terms of the “systems thinking” mentioned above, he was saying “Paul, you should study and come to your biblical theological positions, but leave those outside your system to the Holy Spirit.”

I have found that my father’s admonition was good advice. Still, pride and unbelief tend to lead me to dogmatic conclusions that I feel compelled to apply to those outside my system. I am often unwilling to grant to others the grace that our Father seems to extend to me.

Conclusion

I have never worked nor lived in a Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu culture. There are sincere, knowledgeable and biblically obedient brothers and sisters on each side of this issue, and at various points on the continuum. They are sincerely attempting to follow the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit’s leading in these matters. They all seek to extend Christ’s reign in their cultures and countries. I must trust the Holy Spirit to guide them. God has not placed these issues within my system. I must be a peacemaker rather than a partisan in this conflict.

It took hundreds of years for the early followers of Christ to develop the theological formulations we now accept as normative. It has taken generations for us in the West to discover the weaknesses of our former mission patterns. So years—even generations—may pass before we see the full fruit of these various efforts to follow Christ more contextually and completely. I must exercise patience and not make precipitous value judgments as to the right or wrong conclusions of my brothers and sisters.

Such patience is definitely not natural for me; I come from a rather ego-centric culture and generation that tends to believe that history really starts with us.

The world of the Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist follower of Christ is outside my system, experience and calling. I have never lived or worked in those regions of the world, nor have I faced the tensions and pressures my new brothers and sisters in Christ face every day. Thus I feel called to practice several disciplines amid the tensions to which I have alluded.

My Proposed Steps of Obedience

1. I will hold my own positions on these important issues tentatively and share them carefully and in a spirit of love.
2. I will leave the judgment as to who the true followers of Christ are to Him. It is He alone who calls and imparts life according to His will and purpose.
3. I will grant my brothers and sisters time for their views to mature and their practices to be further shaped by the Holy Spirit’s leading as they pursue a growing understanding of biblical truth and obedience in their context.
4. I will actively seek to promote peace among followers of Christ as they seek to be faithful followers of Jesus as Lord under the authority of His Word, accepting that my brothers and sisters may practice obedience in very different ways.
5. I will oppose those here or in the field who promote strife and division within Christ’s Body.

A Final Thought

In my pilgrimage the Holy Spirit has made me much more aware of my theological compromises with my own culture. I often fail to see the degree to which I allow my own culture to shape my understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. I thus aim to be more discerning and obedient as I follow Christ and obey God’s Word within my own culture, and as I interact with those who have experienced His grace in very different cultural/religious settings.^f