

"Beyond Christianity" 10 Years Later

BY KEVIN HIGGINS

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My plenary messages at Tokyo 2010 addressed one of Ralph Winter's classic 12 "frontiers" of mission, one that he referred to as "Beyond Christianity." This frontier comprised movements towards Jesus taking place outside the borders of widely recognized, authentic, biblical Christianity. Winter's examples included African independent (or indigenous) churches, Jesu Bhakta (Jesus devotees in India), and later, followers of Isa among Muslim peoples.

By 2010, these phenomena had been observed for some time but remained off the radar for many mission leaders. However, since then, awareness, controversy, books, articles and conferences have increased. And, the number of such movements has grown (as have the movements themselves in many cases).

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When Winter first discussed these phenomena, the term "insider movement" was new, and tools such as the C-Scale were emerging. My 2010 paper landed in a period when insider movement controversies sparked.

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Handling Controversy



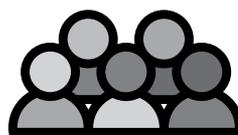
In my 2010 paper, I mentioned the painful conflicts surrounding **insider movements**. I suggested that those on different sides should meet, pray together, hear one another's voice and see one another's faces.

Completely apart from my paper, others brought people together for that purpose. In 2011, the first "Bridging the Divide" consultation was held at Houghton College, New York.

BtD's purposes include encouraging fruitful discussion of contentious Muslim outreach issues in a relationally safe forum which fosters honest conversation. This enables participants to wrestle with strong differences in convictions and concerns, while diminishing misunderstandings, attacks and false reports.

The BtD Network's ongoing consultations since 2011 reveal a wide *spectrum* of ideas, attitudes and practices. While a divide between individuals and groups holding to these diverse positions remains, the emergence of BtD is a positive development which far exceeded my vision in 2010!

The Church



Ten years ago, I focused primarily on the point that believers in Jesus in movements outside of mainstream "Christianity" are brothers and sisters in Christ and part of His Body. This raises questions about the nature of the Church, the kingdom, the relationship of the two and more.

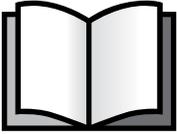
A full missiological treatment of ecclesiology still needs to be developed. More written and ethnographic material exists for such work, but the research and reflection needed is still in our future.

For some this will center around gaining a better understanding of biblical and historical material related to church/ecclesia. This answers the question: "If we want to plant churches, how do we know when we have one?" A fascinating moment in the BtD conversations was when we realized that views of the church were hard to classify by our insider movements positions. People on different sides of the insider movement divide also differed among themselves about the nature of the church.

For others, the research priority will be on barriers for new believers created by current ways of “being and doing church.”

Questions about church continue to emerge, and I would recommend some take up the task of pressing into this further moving forward.

The Bible



At the Tokyo event I focused on the place of the Bible in movements and asserted that “the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to teach and correct the people of God.” I still believe that and have witnessed its truth. However, ten years later there have been two important and related conversations.

One focuses on the relative position of Scripture to that of the early pioneer as teacher. A simplistic comparison might be, how much should be left to more inductive approaches, versus more deductive (and directive) approaches when passing on the inheritance of biblical truth.

I value inductive approaches: trusting the Spirit to use whole books and large sections of scripture to shape the worldview and character of believers over time, forming the doctrinal, moral and spiritual fabric of movements and movement leaders. Others have emphasized the importance, if not mandate, for teachers to select and emphasize certain truths in Scripture rather than assuming people can discover those.

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One of my main realizations is that both are important. In many cases, those of us who advocate for the priority of one over the other approach do so based on our own experiences.

The second development has been the crucial, and frequently vitriolic, controversies surrounding Bible translation, especially in the Muslim world. I do not have space to adequately review this, but I will say that the issues run deeper than just translation process or specific decisions about how to translate key terms in certain

contexts. There are related themes about the nature of the biblical revelation and the need for a biblical theology of translation itself. The latter might be rooted in the discovery of what the Bible might have to say about how to translate itself.

Again, as with church, there is a lot of research to be done and potential for new insights as we do so.

Conclusion

A decade ago, I suggested three core values to understand and evaluate the health of movements Ralph Winter referred to when he spoke of “Beyond Christianity” as a frontier.

In re-reading those now, they still ring true to me:

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

If I were to edit anything above, it would be here, “... on the basis of what the King has done for them and through faith in Him, without *necessarily* passing through Christianity...” and here, “...such movements are inside the kingdom, *in the Body of Christ*, and under the leadership of the King.”

I noted areas where the future may call for and benefit from further research, thinking, and biblical digging. And I recounted developments in positive ways we as believers might engage more fruitfully and faithfully around controversies. I pray that such ongoing work and engagement grows and continues. I also pray for the continued growth of movements to Jesus of every type, whether clearly within, or clearly beyond Christianity as we know it. 