

**A RESPONSE TO KEVIN HIGGINS’
‘INSIDE WHAT?’
CHURCH, CULTURE, RELIGION
AND INSIDER MOVEMENTS
IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE’**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Before launching into a detailed exploration of the author’s article, I must express my gratitude for his careful, detailed justification of insider movements. Though, as we will see, I disagree profoundly with the conclusions he reaches, I appreciate the clarity of his position and desire to approach his topic in a way that opens it to analysis and criticism. So much of popular literature that supports or criticizes insider methodology is anecdotal, it is difficult to respond in one way or another other than that helps others think through it all.² In this sense, I appreciate the author’s willingness to expose his exegesis, theology and missiology to scrutiny. The quality and seriousness of his work deserves a detailed, careful response. Higgins, in his article, alluded to my earlier writing as being somewhat overwrought. I hope that this serves as a satisfactory response to his concerns.³ I must add, at the outset, that I respond fun-

¹ Bill Nikides is a minister in the International Presbyterian Church.

² Higgins, in fact, criticized me for making unsubstantiated claims. I plead guilty, but point out the following. Many of us have detailed, concrete information with which to support our contentions, but we have withheld the details in order to safeguard both insiders and the missionaries that support them. Their decision to maintain a secret existence as Jesus worshippers within Islam has exposed them to risks of being seen as traitors or hypocrites. Therefore, just as proponents of insider methods use anonymity to boost their claims, we resort to the same means to criticize them. It would seem that fairness would dictate that what is good for the goose is indeed good for the gander.

³ I must add one thing in my defense, however. I will continue to resist treating this subject as a polite discussion between evangelical academics or clergy. In my opinion, the conclusions reached by insider proponents directly threaten biblical orthodoxy as well as the historical understanding of the Church. The debate is therefore not one between two

damentally from a biblical and theological perspective. I hope this is useful to readers and practitioners alike, since so much of the discussion has heretofore been characterized by anthropological considerations. These are, of course, tremendously important, but I think they would benefit from additional theological and biblical treatment. My purpose throughout is not to find someone or something with whom I can fight, but rather to contend together for the truth.

2. CATEGORIES AND MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Higgins, usefully, provides basic definitions and descriptions from the outset. These describe what ‘insider movements’ mean of course, but also include more basic terms such as ‘church.’ This is most helpful since the rest of his proposals rest on this foundation. I found his characterization of insider movements as the development of discipleship inside the religious life of a culture in a biblically faithful way both helpful and suggestive. My question would be: What would discipleship mean when it takes place within Islam? Clearly, Jesus intended more than the gathering of decisions when he pronounced the Great Commission. At the very least, it includes the idea of maturity in the faith expressed in inner spiritual development, ethics as part of an explicit community that follows Jesus and global witness, extending the olive tree of Romans 11 as one people of God.⁴ The author’s understanding of ‘disciple’ is therefore critical.

equally acceptable expressions of evangelical Christianity. It is rather the attempt by professing evangelicals that represent a fringe minority view, not anchored within the biblical mainstream of Christianity, to persuade the Church that insider movements express mainstream, biblical values. I must, in this case, heartily disagree. I do not do so out of malice or arrogance, but with the conviction that what I say is true. If any of my earlier writing appeared as such, I am sorry. I merely wanted to stand for and safeguard the truth.

⁴ See Bill Hull’s *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1988) and *The Disciple Making Church* for the full-orbed and corporate understanding of ‘discipleship’. For the necessary, visible (as part of the distinct Church) and corporate dimension to ethics see Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Ecclesiology and Ethics in 1 Corinthians (*Ex Auditu*); *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997); Chris Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006); Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (London SPCK, 2004).

How would a disciple grow as part of a Muslim *ummah*, rather than as part of the visibly distinct community of Christ? It seems possible only if the definition of discipling is reduced to the private, interior life and some sort of generic external affability. What happens however if an insider is challenged to prove his Muslim identity? Suppose that an insider couple have a daughter of proper age to wed. What would they say if a similar Muslim couple approached them on behalf of their equally eligible son? Would the insider couple accept the arranged marriage or turn it down? What would they say in either case? Discipleship is a lived out faith. It is lived in community with other believers and it is lived in contradistinction to unbelievers. This is the drift of both the Old and New Testaments. Anything less than this understanding creates Gnostic individuals, each content with his or her spirituality, but not a biblical community.⁵

Higgins, likewise, brought together two other concepts, people movements and C5, in a way that allowed us to see how insider movements developed. At the very least, this shows the critical role played by anthropology in erecting new ideas of contextualization. He also cites Rebecca Lewis' assertion that churches can be planted in pre-existing social structures and then turns it on its head stating: 'pre-existing social structures can become the church'. This is troubling. It seems to suggest that church is nothing more than a social structure that can be inserted, removed or altered in order to tailor the gospel for a given context. Is the mosque a social structure? Higgins certainly implies as much. Of course it is, but the point surely is that it is much more than a social structure. Again and again, the author's work is shot through with the idea that 'church' and 'religion' are subsets of larger cultural constructs. They are therefore parts of culture. What then of God? Is God a cultural artifact? No doubt the author would add that God is both above and in culture, but it seems to me that this is not nearly enough.

God, the God and our God is the God of the Bible. He has an exclusive story and an exclusive people. That is the message of the Word itself. The God of the Bible is a covenant God who worked and works through one people. The fact that, with Christ, the borders of that iden-

⁵ The marriage example is a real one. In one case, it led to the forced marriage to Muslims of an insider's daughters, none of whom continued to practice the Lordship of Christ in their lives or families.

tity have been clearly expanded to include the whole world does not diminish the fact that he acts covenantally. This may be one of the greatest defects in Higgins' thought as it is in other insider proponents.

Missiologists such as Higgins fail because they become trapped within their own sociological/anthropological categories. Religion, just as church, is just another cultural expression. Of course God exists, but he merely injects himself where he likes. He can do so as easily within Islam or Hinduism as he can Christianity. The popular preacher of the Emergent Church Brian McLaren sums up the view. I quote extensively from his work, *A Generous Orthodoxy* because I believe that it reflects the same shift from orthodox biblical Christianity we now experience in the world of missions. The following come from his chapter 'Why I am Incarnational.'

Just as Jesus' incarnation bound him, not just to the Jewish people, but to all humanity, his incarnation links his followers to all people-including...*people of other religions* (emphasis his). The Christian faith, I am proposing, should become (in the name of Jesus Christ) a welcome friend to other religions of the world, not a threat. We should be seen as a protector of their heritages, a defender against common enemies, not one of the enemies. Just as Jesus came originally not to destroy the law but to fulfill it, not to condemn people but to save them, I believe he comes today not to destroy or condemn anything (anything but evil) but to redeem and save everything that can be redeemed or saved. Ah but you say, there's the problem: there's so much evil in other religions. Yes, I reply, there is indeed, but not just in other religions. There is so much evil in our own, too. To show disapproval of divergent beliefs by withholding love and acceptance may be orthodox Phariseism, and it may even be orthodox, modern, Western, colonial Christianity, but it is not the generous orthodoxy of Jesus Christ. In this light, although I don't hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians, I do hope all who feel so called will become Buddhist followers of Jesus. I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so-called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus. Ultimately, I hope that Jesus will save Buddhism, Islam, and every other religion, including the Christian religion. To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus, I would gladly become one of them (whatever they are) to whatever degree I can. I do this because of my deep identity as a fervent Christian, not in spite of it. I am more and more convinced that Jesus didn't come merely to start another religion to

compete in the marketplace of other religions. If anything, I believe he came to end standard competitive religion by fulfilling it.⁶

It is all here isn't it? We have the lumping together of Christianity with other religions as 'mere' external fabrications, tied to particular places and times but not for all places and times. We have the same moral equivalence. Sin and truth exist in every religion, so all religions must be of roughly the same value.⁷ At any rate, religions of whatever shape are just externalities. What really matters is what we have in our hearts. We have Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit. This of course connects us to all other people who have had the same conversion experience leading to the same interior divine presence. The externalities such as religion mean far less. Does it surprise us to know that our ancestors in the faith would have so vehemently disagreed? Would we be shocked to realize that such sentiment would have placed us alongside ancient Gnostics, not Peter, Paul, John or Barnabas?

This however seems to me to be the thrust of Higgins and others' insider methodology. We take salvific truth and experience and place it inside individuals who live within differing cultural expressions. Which cultural expressions matter little as long as they have the new life within them? Religions become cultural shells or artifacts housing god and bad contents. The point with this thinking is that we need to replace the bad with the good, whether that is in the church or mosque. But is it true?

Higgins notes that in the Book of Acts 'members' (believers) remained 'within the religious expressions of the people of Israel.' By members, I take it that he means Jewish individuals. These people maintain a dual identity that the author sees analogous to Messianic Muslims. They, as individual believers who manifest the Spirit, constitute the Church (in their identity as the invisible body of the redeemed) *as they attend the temple*, and at the same time maintain their 'other' identity as Jewish believers in their home meetings. Here we see the same duality Higgins advocates in Messianic Islam. People can have two faith-centered identities. In the case of the Jewish believers, they can be part

⁶ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 245-266.

⁷ A variation of this may be that biblical Christianity may have a greater concentration of truth, but is certainly not the exclusive repository of it. In that sense, we can still learn a lot from other religions. At the very least, we must not condemn them.

of the temple or synagogue on one hand (with Jesus in their hearts of course) and members of Jewish believing cell groups on the other. Is this not the same thing that insiders militate for? It is not, and the fact that Higgins thinks that it is, demonstrates the fatal weakness of the entire enterprise.

In order to understand what Higgins is saying, we need to visit his understanding of church. He states: 'The biblical definition of church does not necessarily refer to a bounded or closed set social grouping that prevents being a member of another social or religious structure.' Several things stand out in his explanation. First, he refers to church as a bounded or closed set social grouping. We see once again that he looks at church as a sociological construct, just as any other cultural artifact. Second, he justifies his finding by appealing to the presence of the Lordship of Christ which existed at the birth of the Church alongside Judaism. Third, according to Higgins, it was only a closed set in the sense that it included 'only those born from above and incorporated by the Spirit in his Body.' He apparently has no understanding at all of the covenantal identity of the Church at its inception and because he has none, he cannot exclude believers living within other religious structures.

Higgins, in another article, also provides more information concerning what he thinks is essential to what constitutes Church and what he sees as a more mature follow-on that is not essential to the idea of church itself. Consistent with his understanding of church as the incorporation of individuals who claim Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, he conceives of Church as *essentially excluding* baptism and the Lord's Supper. *In 1 Cor 11-14 we see that a mature church is marked by the Lord's Supper and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.* He comments: *Some churches are farther along than others in the process of fully expressing the nature of the church.* Fully expressing? Apparently, Higgins parrots Don McGavran's propensity for assigning sacraments and Christian ethics to the sphere of *perfecting* rather than essential discipling.⁸ Is that true? Are the sacraments practices for a later, more perfect day? This sentiment echoes the fringe radicals of the left wing of the Reformation, but

⁸ Kevin Higgins, 'Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements', in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 23.3 (July-September 2006), p. 119. See also Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (London: World Dominion, 1957), p. 15ff.

it completely contradicts the church's understanding of itself, from the earliest of the church fathers and down to the Reformers, not to mention the New Testament itself. I cannot say this strongly enough. McGavran and Higgins' view is neither biblical nor orthodox. The visible church has always been characterized by baptism and the Lord's Supper period.

We can see this most clearly by focusing on the Hebrew and Greek words translated as 'church.' *Ekklesia* is a Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Qahal*, a term used for congregation or assembly. The Septuagint translates *Qahal* as *ekklēsia* nearly 100 times. It can refer to any assembly, such as an army readying itself for battle (Isa 17:47), but more commonly it refers to the Assembly of God's people gathered together to celebrate their covenant identity in the receiving of God's law (Exo 19-20; Deut 4-6) or in corporate worship.⁹ 'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you; you who fear the Lord, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him, and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel.' (Ps 22:22-23) Interestingly, *Qahal*, the covenant expression is preferred over the more ethnically local term, *edhah*, the term used as a reference for the synagogue. We can see through this that early churches were not simply local expressions of an entirely new faith, but fulfillments of covenantal identity.

As the Old Testament people of God transformed into the New Testament Church, they still identified themselves with Israel. The Church assumes the role of the Servant of Israel (Isa 49:6), applying it to itself (Act 13:46-47).¹⁰ In this sense, the Church is always and everywhere the new Israel. During the Jerusalem Council, James quoted from Amos 9:11-12, showing that the Gentiles did not seek to replace the Jews, but so that David's fallen tent could be restored. Consider the live tree in Romans 11. New branches (Gentiles) do sprout after they are grafted into the tree, replacing many of the old dead ones (unrepentant Israel). The point not to miss however is that both are parts of one covenantal tree. Churches dominated by Gentiles, such as those of the Corinthians, are described as members of the covenant people of Israel.¹¹ Paul's use of the word *ethne* for example in 1 Cor 5:1-13 indicates that he no longer

⁹ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 469f.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 530.

¹¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), p. 16.

sees converts as Gentiles, but members of the covenant.¹² We do not have a dual religious identity. The major thrust of both Testaments is that we are all part of one religious identity, gathered up in the same covenant of grace. Likewise, both Testaments characterize anything outside of this identity as outside of God's plan for the people he created.

God made a covenant with Abraham, affirming it three times in Gen 12, 15, and 17. These are each used by Paul to illustrate his understanding of grace in Rom 4, Gal 3-4. We see in Gal 3:16 that God made his promises to his offspring, not referring to *offsprings*. It is only the line that leads directly to Christ that is the true heir to the promise. Of the children of Abraham, only those of Sarah (Gen 18), not Hagar or Keturah, inherit the promises. It is 'through Isaac shall your seed be named' (Rom 9:7). Gal 3:14 states that 'in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles'. When Paul refers to the promise, he is not referring to a generic outpouring such as that prophesied by Joel (2:28-32). He is actually looking back to the context formed by Genesis 12. Everything that receives life receives it through the fulfillment of the covenant promises.¹³ There is no legitimate dual identity.

3. EXTENDING THE OLIVE BRANCH

At the same time Higgins attempts to paint the early Christians as dual citizens, he is eager to show that insiders are not mere Muslims, but rather dual citizens as well. Therefore, he points out that insiders seek formal links with visible Christian denominations. It is not an unconditional request. First, it must be based on a mutual recognition of each others' ministry and ethos. Second, insiders must be accepted unconditionally. They cannot be asked to stop being insiders. Third, the visible church must recognize insider ministry and the ordinations of its leaders. Let us consider these in turn.

The recognition of insider ministry and ethos means acquiescing to the theology underpinning insider ministry. That would mean accepting

¹² Ibid., p. 80.

¹³ Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 191f.

the ideal of dual religious identity. This, as I have already demonstrated is unadulterated syncretism. It is opposed to the very heart of the Bible. While the Scripture in both Testaments shows that God is God of not only Israel but also of the nations, it also shows that God is God in opposition to the gods of the nations. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is, by definition, not the god embraced by other religions. He is the God who opposes any religion that does not worship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the revealed God of our fathers. Therefore, Paul *blurs the boundary between past and present and invites his readers to reimagine their lives as belonging to that story*.¹⁴ It is wholly incompatible therefore with the recitation of the *Shahādah*, the verbal acceptance of the Qur'ān, the act of *Hajj* (pilgrimage) etc. The deepest beliefs of Islam are not simply outward trappings or cultural vestiges. They are the exclusive expressions of a faith system alien to the crucifixion and resurrection.

Furthermore, what does it mean to recognize the ordinations of insiders? What does 'ordination' mean? Surely it cannot mean just accepting someone's internal sense of call. This has never been the practice of the historic faith. Calls are accepted not simply on the basis of someone's internal testimony but by the visible church as well. To put it another way, it is not a legitimate call or ordination unless the visible church recognizes it. What church could accept the ordination of people who did not completely acknowledge the unsubordinated deity of Christ, the exclusive authority of the Bible, the uncontested fact of the crucifixion and resurrection, the unambiguous identity of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the centrality of the visible Church? Accepting anything less is certainly to swallow the poison pill.

Finally, what does Higgins mean when he says that insiders desire to be linked to the Jesus *ummah*? I assume that he uses *ummah* in the classical sense of a religious community visited by a divine messenger such as Jesus or Muhammad who conveys the divine plan of salvation and certainty of judgment. There would therefore be an *ummah* of Muslims and an earlier *ummah*, the *Ahl al-Kitab*, the People of the Book.¹⁵ The *ummah* of the Muslims postdates the People of the Book just as Muhammad postdates Jesus and the Qur'ān postdates the Bible. Since Muhammad is considered the greatest and last prophet and the

¹⁴ Hays, *First Corinthians* Interpretation, p. 173.

¹⁵ See H.A.R. Gibb and J.H. Kramers, 'Umma' *Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam* Fourth Impression (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1995).

considered the greatest and last prophet and the Qur'ān serves as the final word, the very thought of Allāh in heaven, the word that makes every other word clear (Sūrah 16:89), having insiders join the earlier ummah would not mean, presumably, the earlier revelation taking precedence over the later, would it? To do so would, by definition, fly in the face of normal Muslim usage.

This would therefore lead to one of two possibilities. Either joining two ummahs does not mean giving up the theological content of either (by definition an act of syncretism) or Messianic Muslims would join themselves to the earlier ummah and accept its exclusive authority while, at the same time, *maintaining the appearance* of orthodox membership in the Muslim ummah. Maintaining the appearance under these circumstances would be tantamount to telling mainstream Muslims a lie. Are the revelations and authority of Christ and Muhammad compatible? If the special revelation of the Bible means anything at all, it must go beyond the general revelation found in nature and conscience, thereby sealing the ultimate incompatibility of the two. Higgins appears to use ummah as just a label for community without understanding fully the theological freight carried by the term.

Therefore, we have two problems with Higgins' approach. In the first place, Higgins overlooks the covenantal framework of Israel's relationship to God and its flowering in the Church. This means that he lumps Judaism, Christianity, and every other faith system into the sociological category of 'religion.' He therefore misses the completely exclusive and unique nature of the covenantal connection between Old Testament Israel and the Church. This is probably due to his failure to see the theological dimension inherent to these relationships. Second, because he lumps them together, he cannot help but extend to Islam the same sort of relationship he saw evident between Israel and the Church. To say the least, this is a false comparison. The fact that both are monotheistic is meaningless since one is an extension of the covenant and the other is not. In sum, it seems obvious that his inability to consider the covenantal relationship between the Temple and Church makes it impossible for him to avoid inclusive and even pluralist solutions. This drives his conclusions theologically closer to Rome's Vatican Two than to either the mainstream of Protestantism or of classical evangelicalism.

4. GOD AND THE OTHER RELIGIONS

Higgins notes three responses to non-Christian religions. Exclusivists view other religions as expressions of the fall's focus on self-salvation or as the result of demonic activity. He quickly dismisses this view. Inclusivists claim the Jesus works in other religions and cultures, even when people do not know it (presumably the author is referring to Rahner's 'anonymous Christians'). Inclusivists may see Christianity as fulfilling other religions. Finally, pluralists are those who view all religions as 'legitimate pathways to God.' Higgins quickly dismisses exclusivists such as Harold Netland as being extreme, opting for some sort of acceptance of the final two categories.

In order to do so, he takes the reader on a tour of the Bible. For example, the mysterious figure Melchizedek is cited as a pagan priest-king who, because Abraham gives him a tithe, has his religion and priesthood accepted. Amos 9:7 describes God's relations to non-Jewish nations in terms parallel to Israel and Exodus. Likewise, the pagan sailors that threw Jonah overboard are accepted because they prayed to and made sacrifice to Yahweh. Higgins furthermore concludes that Balaam, prophesying in a manner opposite from the wishes of Balak, had a relationship with Yahweh. Naaman in 2 Kings 5 is sent away in peace after continuing to enter the temple of Rimmon. Finally, Acts 17:27 is explained as proving that 'people in other religions can be in relationship to the true God.' As the author states: 'God is at work in the world, including the religions of the world and God is drawing people to himself beyond the confines and boundaries we normally refer to as "His people".'

Well, what exactly does the Scripture say and how does Higgins use it? First, I make a general observation. Each and every example chosen by the author involved a narrative text rather than a clear didactic one. He uses the biblical texts as analogies for the present. This is an interesting tactic. Why not refer to clear teaching that reinforces his points? The answer, I am afraid, is painfully obvious. The entire drift of biblical teaching opposes his machinations. Lest you think my response too convenient, consider the following. If there is any theme suffusing the Old Testament, surely it is the gracious way in which God's redemptive intentions work through a covenant people in opposition to every form of *idolatry and false religion*; these are set in contradistinction to the one

true faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are the recipients of singular grace (Hagar notwithstanding) marked and set off by the law for holiness as a witness to the nations.¹⁶

Since we are considering narrative, why not mention Lot's wife? As Gen 19 reminds us, she looked back at Sodom, her home, and was instantly turned to salt, just as Sodom and Gomorrah had been. Why? Is it not because her looking back 'indicated that she was more attached to Sodom for her ultimate security than God, who had commanded them (Lot and the rest of the party) to go on their pilgrimage out of the city?'¹⁷ Contrary to Higgins' eschewal of exclusivism in favor of inclusivism and pluralism, the Bible embraces exclusivism. For example, the exclusive worship of Yahweh by Israel was seen as the only means through which the nations could see God clearly. That was why idolatry was 'the first and greatest threat to Israel's mission and ours.'¹⁸ The idea of exclusive identity extended to the New Testament. 'You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Pet 2:9). Who are 'you'? In the context of Peter, 'you' refers to Christian readers, both Jews and Gentiles. Beyond that, the text extends the covenantal metaphor to include the nations. In total, the entire fabric of the Scripture points to one exclusive people in both the Old and New Testament into which sinners from all over the world are grafted. At no point is the covenantal framework jettisoned in favor of some sort of amorphous identity based on pure inward experience.

Melchizedek: Higgins cites Melchizedek as an exemplar of a pagan accepted by God. Our understanding of this figure is found in two Old Testament passages: Gen 14:18-20 and Ps 110:4 as well as in Hebrews 7:3. Old Testament scholarship is sharply divided over the interpretation

¹⁶ See G.K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008). Beale comprehensively and conclusively demonstrates the Bible's unified opposition to anything other than its own understanding of God, characterizing it as idolatry. Key texts cited include Gen 1-3; Ex 20:4-5; 32:4,8; 34:14-16; Num 25:1-3; 1Kg 12:12-32; 2 Kg 17:15-16; Isa 6; Deut 4:27-28; 28-29; 29:2-4; Ps 81; 106:19-20; 115:4-7; 135:15-18; Isa 40-66; Hos 4:7; Jer 2-3; 19:9; Ezek 12:2; 22:1-16; Mt 12; 38-45; 13:13-15; Mk 4:12; Lk 8:10; Jn 12:37-43; Act 7:46-52; 17:24-25; 28:25-28; Ro 1:20-28; 12:1-2; 1Co 10:14-22; Rev 2-3; 9:20-21; 13; 15:2; 17.

¹⁷ Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*, p. 285.

¹⁸ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), p. 381.

of the figure and his significance. This is vital since Higgins presupposes one such interpretation. It is good to know when you stand on shaky ground.

Genesis demonstrates that his priesthood predates Levitical priesthood but has little more to say about his origins or identity. The mystery extends to Jewish literature. For example, Philo saw him as an anointed high priest before Yahweh. Josephus credited him with being the founder of Jerusalem and its first king. Ken Matthews points out a significant variation on this tradition that identified Melchizedek as a priest in the temple on Mount Gerizim.¹⁹ Victor Hamilton points out that most modern scholars think that Melchizedek is a later insertion into the text, being inserted during the Davidic period in order to legitimate David's authority as a king who stands in the tradition of the pre-Israelite Jebusite priests. I point it out, not because I accept his premise, but because it shows the uncertainty of scholars concerning the text's understanding. As Matthews notes, there is no evidence of a Jebusite lineage of priest-kings. At any rate, it is hard to believe that David would have pinned his own legitimacy on the heritage of a pagan cult of priest-kings.

Some scholars concentrate on the meaning of his name. One possible meaning is some sort of correlation of the name of Melchizedek to the Canaanite god Sedeq. As Genesis reports, the king-priest served El-Elyon, God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Some scholars claim that this was the name of a Canaanite deity²⁰, but this name does not correspond to any known deity in the Canaanite pantheon.²¹ Strangely, if Melchizedek was simply a pagan priest, why did the priest-king say to the king of Sodom (v. 22): 'I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High?' This verse connects directly El-Elyon with Yahweh.

¹⁹ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* NAC (USA: Broadman & Holman, 2005), p. 152.

²⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), pp. 319-322. Wenham echoes Higgins' use (or precedes it), stating that Melchizedek is an example of a non-Jew who recognizes God's support of Israel in a similar way as Abimilech, Rahab, Ruth, or Naaman. He adds that Melchizedek may also be a forerunner of the Magi, the Syro-Phoenician women or Gentile converts in Acts 17. I would only add that some of these clearly went further in identifying themselves unambiguously with Israel.

²¹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17* NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 409f. The pantheon had a god El whose grandson was Elyon.

Moreover, why did Abram not acknowledge El-Elyon or erect an altar in his name?

The only biblical evidence offered that attempts to explain Melchizedek's identity is Hebrews 7:3. Hebrews characterizes the priest-king as 'like (*aphomoiomenos*) the Son of God.' In other words what Hebrews tells us is that Melchizedek is to be seen as a type of the heavenly priesthood of Jesus, not the other way around.²²

Well, what do we do with all of this? First, we need to point out that the Bible's only instruction is given in the Book of Hebrews, where we see that the priest-king is a type foreshadowing the Son of God. Neither Genesis nor Psalms addresses the matter of his religious devotion or loyalty. It is only when his life is juxtaposed with Jesus' that we see the significance for us. Given the Bible's overwhelming and unambiguous rejection of other religion, we clearly cannot responsibly claim that the Bible's silence concerning Melchizedek's religious practice is a license to permit non-exclusively Christian devotion now. In this case, silence cannot be assent. Referring to Melchizedek and indeed the other examples cited is simply special pleading, not biblical exegesis. You cannot justify someone maintaining a dual identity as a Muslim and Christian/follower of Jesus on the basis of this text.

Balaam and Balak: Numbers 22-24 relates the story of Balak, the son of Zippor, who was king of Moab. Balak, fearing Israel's encroachment, ordered Balaam, living at Pethaw in the land of the people of Amaw (in Mesopotamia) to curse the Israelites. Contrary to Balak's plan, however, Balaam is compelled by God to testify in Israel's favor. Even when Balaam determined to disobey God's instructions, his donkey would not allow him to. Eventually Balaam saw that it was no mere animal that stood in his way, but the angel of the Lord who corrected Balaam and set him on a path to testify to the pagan king of God's judgment on Moab and favor for Israel.

Is this an endorsement of an entente cordiale between Yahweh and pagan religion? Can we say that Balaam is a faithful follower of Yahweh, though he remains formally within paganism? Clearly he had some respect for the true God. He refers to the Lord speaking to him in 22:8 and states that he could not go beyond Yahweh's command in 22:18.

²² Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* NAC, p. 156.

Decisively, however, the Bible judges him as a false prophet, 31:16, where he caused Israel to act treacherously with Yahweh; a self-serving opportunist who sought to benefit from his disobedience to God (2 Pet 2:15; Jude 11). Jude, in fact, lumps Balaam with Cain and Korah; not the company insiders strive to keep I hope. Interestingly, it is only Origen in ancient tradition who gives his life a positive spin, seeing him as an ancestor of the magi. By contrast, most early Christian interpretation identifies him as a forefather of the Libertines and Nicolaitans.²³

All of these considerations are overshadowed by the text's principle purpose. Rather than demonstrating some strange approval of Balaam's religion, it clearly celebrates the inability of the nations to hinder God's purposes lived out in Israel.²⁴ Everything that transpired in the Book of Numbers cascades from the promises made by God to Abraham.

Naaman and the Temple of Rimmon: Higgins' treatment of this passage in 2 Kg 5 is a bit more circumspect. Naaman is presented as an amalgam of old and new religious practices. He continues to accompany his king into the temple of Rimmon and asks for some of Israel's dirt in order to sanctify an altar (in continuity with ancient Middle Eastern practice). At the same time he knows that 'there is no God in all the earth but in Israel.' In other words, he appears to be a pagan outwardly but no longer sacrifices to other gods. He seems to be a transitional figure. Is this then an endorsement for not criticizing Muslims who claim to love Jesus but retain their Muslim identity and membership in the mosque?

Since he confessed that there was only one God, and it was the God of Israel, it appears that Naaman adopted the religion of Israel as his own. Even in his act of asking for earth, he was clearly orienting himself to exclusive worship of Yahweh. We can see that he is, at the very least, not a syncretist. He did not think that worship in the temple of Rimmon was not real and seemed eager to avoid the appearance of idolatry.²⁵ He is not asking permission to worship Rimmon, but rather to accompany

²³ Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* WBC (Waco: Word, 1984) 272f. See also Dennis R. Cole, *Numbers* NAC (USA: Broadman & Holman, 2000), p. 367.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 271.

²⁵ Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings* NAC (USA: Broadman & Holman, 1995), p. 273.

his master into the temple as his aid.²⁶ It seems most likely that he is attempting to find a way that allows him to carry out his duties and worship with integrity, as a sole believer in a pagan environment. He has, therefore, no chance to worship as part of a community of believers.²⁷

There would likely be no dispute over the text if it was not for the fact that Naaman asks permission of Elisha to accompany his master, the king of Syria, into the temple of Rimmon, the storm god (Syriac version of Baal), and as the king leans on Naaman's arm and bows, Naaman bows with him. Elisha hears the request and responds with the rejoinder to 'go in peace'. What do we make of this? What is Naaman asking for? Is he asking permission to maintain some sort of superficial act of pagan worship while retaining true loyalty to the covenant God? Is he a dual citizen, at home with Rimmon and Yahweh? As with all of these texts, we only know what we are told. We know that he is transformed into an unambiguous follower of Yahweh. Verse 15 and following tells us that much. We know that he asks to accompany his king into the temple, supporting him by the arm, even as he bows. This, however, is all we know. We hear no word of patience with pagan religion. This may be nothing more than Naaman now feeling uncomfortable with his own presence in the Temple and even being seen as bowing as a way of supporting the king's balance. In other words, it seems likely that Naaman feels guilty. He is loyal to his king and has pledged his life to serve him. At the same time, however, he has committed his life to Yahweh and wants to avoid any hint of duplicity or syncretism. He is, as Nelson notes, a man of double loyalties.²⁸ This is a far cry from the sort of insider tactics endorsed by Higgins and others. It is an illustration of practical compromise by one believer and nothing more.

Amos 9:7: The text declares: 'Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel?', declares the Lord. 'Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?' Higgins sees a parallel between God's relationship with Israel and the Exodus, and his treatment of the nations in Amos. This creates the impression that just as God favors Israel so he favors the nations. As he

²⁶ Richard Nelson, *First and Second Kings Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1987), p. 179.

²⁷ House, *1, 2 Kings NAC*, p. 274.

²⁸ Nelson, *First and Second Kings Interpretation*, pp. 179-180.

says, ‘Amos 9:7 describes God’s relationship to non-Jewish peoples in terms parallel to his redemption of Israel in the Exodus event.’ Higgins draws the following conclusion from his reading: ‘God has initiated a relationship with these nations.’

Is this the point of the text; that God initiates a relationship with the nations? It is quite patently the opposite in fact. God is telling Israel that she, in her disobedience, injustice and idolatry, is no better than the nations. It is not in fact good news for the nations, but bad news for Israel.

It also has limited scope. It is not a pronouncement dissolving Israel’s unique relationship to Yahweh in favor of a general call to the nations. That is simply beside the point of Amos. ‘The Lord does not say that from now on Israel has a changed status in his sight, whereby everything formerly possessed by way of privilege has been withdrawn and the adoption of sons has been annulled.’²⁹ Rather, it is a reminder to Israel that her special status is not due to anything intrinsic. She is in every natural respect, just like the other nations. What sets her apart is God’s covenantal favor, but that favor depends on Israel’s imaging God, not the nations. Israel presumes that, just because they celebrated the Exodus every year, God would never abandon them to their sin. They were, as Amos pointed out, wrong. As Doug Stuart point out, since Israel is equated with the Arameans and Philistines, the hated enemies of God, they can be seen as being on par with their pagan neighbors, not superior to them.³⁰

Jonah and the pagan sailors: Higgins refers to the pagan sailors’ acknowledgment of Yahweh as proof of their genuine faith. His thinking rests on two references. First, as a storm lashes the boat carrying them and Jonah, he confesses to being a disobedient servant of Yahweh. The sailors, fearing this god, ‘called out to the Lord, “O Lord, let us not perish for this man’s life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you”’ (1:14). They then threw Jonah into the sea, quieting the storm. They subsequently ‘feared the Lord exceedingly’ (1:16a) and when they got to dry land (presumably) ‘they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows’ (1:16b).

²⁹ J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: IVP, 1974).

³⁰ Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah WBC* (Waco: Word, 1987), p. 393.

What does the text prove? Is it a support for Higgins' concept of a religious dual citizen? Is it a passage that can lend support to insider methodologies? Are the actions of the sailors analogous to Messianic Muslims? Let's hope not, for their sake. Consider the facts. Clearly the sailors are religious. They immediately recognize the seriousness of Jonah's disobedience and their own danger because they are on the ship with him. As Stuart notes, 'It was like being tied up to a person who was calling for lightning to strike him dead.'³¹ Therefore they called on the malevolent god to not hold them responsible for Jonah's actions or for his life.

It is easy to see that they genuinely believed in Yahweh. They demonstrated it in their sacrifice and vows. This does not, however, imply that they had suddenly become monotheists, much less that they worshiped Yahweh exclusively. There is nothing at all in the text to indicate that they did any more than add Yahweh to the number of gods to which they sacrificed. The Book of Jonah uses pagans as a way of showing how God's providence works and highlights the weak faith of covenant children such as Jonah. It is not an endorsement, ringing or otherwise, of insider methods.

Acts 17: Higgins summarizes Paul as believing that 'people in other religions can be in relationship to the true God.' His statement depends on a reading of verses 26-27:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

Paul goes on to quote Greek poets and philosophers. Higgins evidently thinks that this use of Gentile philosophy assumes some sort of tacit approval or at least an admission that genuine belief can be manifest in non-Christian religion.

This obviously is not what Paul is doing in Acts 17. We know that because the passage does not end with some sort of inclusive confession of our acceptance by God even though we represent different religions.

³¹ Ibid., p. 462.

Even though Paul proclaims the universal ancestry of humankind, he moves from that common perspective to proclaiming that this common world would be judged according to its relationship to the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In other words, Paul is not using his reference to Greek philosophy as a way of accepting people's non-covenantal religion or as a way of saying that one can be saved regardless of religious affiliation. Rather, he clearly uses a common local reference in order to communicate clearly the exclusive claim of the gospel - and it works. The Greeks clearly understand what Paul is up to. We know that because they react to his idea with either derision or genuine interest. *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this"* (Act 17:32). At the end of the day, the Greeks, their religion and their philosophy could never lead to salvation. It was always headed on the wrong road. Paul, rather than allowing these pagans to continue on their road to ruin, intercepted them at the crossroads created by his address and tried to persuade them to follow the path to life.

5. OBSERVATION

It is quite apparent that insider movements have an almost non-existent exegetical base. It relies on a loose tapestry of misapplied narrative and completely overlooks the vast array of scripture that opposes their view. Far from demonstrating a whole-Bible canonical approach, this methodology proof texts, but does so with a great deal of inaccuracy. Consider the contrast. This kind of methodology requires a disconnected hotch-potch of verses in order to maintain even a semblance of biblical support for the idea of insider movements. On the other hand, ancient Judaism, the New Testament, early Church and magisterial Reformation all relied on the built-in hermeneutic of covenant to show the continual progress of grace from Abraham to the ends of the earth. One has to wonder why the simple organic approach is overlooked in favor of something so tendentious.

6. MISSION PRACTICE

Higgins exhorts us to maintain the centrality of the gospel, but he does so by stating that God uses many things to bring people to Jesus, *even things in other religions*. At the same time, he tries to cover all of his bases by stating that the Gospel alone is unique. How could the Gospel be unique if God uses means outside of the Gospel to bring people to himself? It seems to me that he simply asserts the fact that God works through other religions and therefore *disciples can remain within their religious context*, at least potentially in any situation. The whole idea behind the Gospel, the good news that God saved us once and for all through one covenant root, the tree of life watered with the blood of Christ, is exclusive of other religions.

Again, Higgins seems to have a Gnostic understanding of what being a biblical believer means. *We need to hold firmly to a biblical understanding of 'conversion' as the reorientation of the heart and mind, rather than as an institutional transfer of religious affiliation*. Apparently, the Church, like Israel, is a disposable shell rather than how the early church saw itself, the ark that contained the truth. Insider proponents like to present themselves as improvements on McGavran's understanding of the Church Growth movement that emphasized the mass conversions of peoples rather than individuals. When we read this however, we can see that insider movements are Gnostic to the core.

He also calls on us to embrace the development of biblical theology in context. I could not agree more. This would, in his view, consist of new translations of scripture that could serve as an empowerment for local theological reflection, at least once *initial processes for critical reflection* had been established. So, you provide locals with new translations that accommodate Muslim understanding, introduce them to rudimentary processes for inductive Bible study and then free them to discover the wonder of God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In an excursus, Higgins counters an earlier objection of mine in which I stated that Bible study and theology had to contain both deductive and inductive approaches. The point I made was that purely inductive study of the Bible was not a biblical pattern. In both Testaments, believers studied the Word as part of a community and tradition. Higgins' remarks are interesting. He states: *One wonders how the church fathers ar-*

rieved at those doctrines (Trinity) if it were not for their study of Scripture over several generations. The point I attempted to make in my earlier article was that the early church fathers arrived at the doctrine by having intense interaction with the Scriptures. Any look at Irenaeus, Athanasius, Clement etc., shows a singular saturation with scripture. They also did so as part of a tradition. No church father ever claimed the authority of the Holy Spirit without also stating that what they did was in conformity with the church's tradition of biblical interpretation since the days of Jesus and Paul.

Look at the Bible itself. Remember the encounter of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch? As the eunuch read Isaiah, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading. *How can I unless someone guides me* (Act 8:31)? It was not simply a matter that the eunuch had not yet received the Holy Spirit. As Jaroslav Pelikan points out, Apollos was mighty (competent) in the scriptures, and full of the Spirit, but he needed the instruction of Priscilla and Aquila (Act 18:24-26b).³² Philip understood that the text of Isaiah that he read contained prophetic and theological content. He knew that it was describing God's redemptive plan and he was humble enough to realize that he needed help in applying it.³³ Acts from first to last describes how Old Testament passages could only be understood with competent instruction. *The Old Testament is not self-explanatory; for Luke it needs Christological Interpretation.*³⁴ Higgins seems to place in opposition the Church and the Holy Spirit. While it has often been a problem to over-identify the two, it has also been true that the Church has always been seen as the principal place within which the Spirit dwelt. The Church is the community within which interpretation in the Spirit happens and this 'happening' is not solely local; it extends in time and space. This has always been God's method of exegesis. Anything less is, as we have pointed out already, Gnosticism, not Biblical Christianity.³⁵

³² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts Brazos Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 115.

³³ Robert W. Wall, *Acts of the Apostles* Vol. X New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 143.

³⁴ C.K. Barrett, *Acts: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), p. 126.

³⁵ I use 'Christianity' here to signify that the world need not be used pejoratively, as missiologists often do, but in the sense of a realized biblical faith. Christianity is not a Western phenomenon, nor unbreakably connected to 'Christendom'.

Additionally, only heretics such as Arians claimed to use the scripture alone. The appeal to the authority of the Holy Spirit without submission to the Church has, since the birth of the New Testament Church, always been seen as a sign of hubris, not faith. Stott concludes that what we learn from Acts 8 is that God gives two gifts; the Scripture and teachers who can help us understand and apply it.³⁶ The global church is not a threat to local enculturation so long as all parties embrace a Biblical understanding of interdependence.

I also think that his methodology obscures something else that is even more insidious. Insiders rely on 'new' translations that, in their attempt to eliminate conceptual barriers with Muslims, significantly alter the language of the Bible. 'Son' and 'Son of God', 'Father' and other terms are substituted for more 'Muslim-friendly' language. The most strained reasons are given in order to justify the changes, reflecting a reliance on far less than orthodox scholarship. All of this is kept from national believers and supporters back home who fund the projects. At times, nationals say they do the work, but often they serve as fronts for the real force behind the work - expatriates. Moreover, the expats help the fledgling insiders do so by teaching inductive study methods. In other words, so often we change the Bible in order to achieve the missiological ends we seek. We then inject ourselves in the process to ensure that they think the way we think will result in church planting movements (without actual churches that is). I know that this sounds tremendously controversial and probably does not reflect the views of many honorable Christian workers. It needs to be said, however, because this is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part and parcel with much of insider progress. We promote insider movements as totally indigenous movements to Christ, but this is neither consistent with what many of us have seen and it is completely contradictory to the opinions of most of the national churches located in Muslim societies. To them, insider movements are Western inventions, just as were colonial mission stations. Perhaps it is time to move beyond both paradigms and discover the global church, united and uncompromising.

³⁶ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), p. 161.