

**INSIDE WHAT?
CHURCH, CULTURE, RELIGION
AND INSIDER MOVEMENTS
IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion about so called ‘insider movements’ has become more and more an item on the agenda of missiologists and practitioners and has attracted an understandable degree of controversy. This brief paper addresses three major elements in the ongoing conversation: church, culture, and religion. I will address those by exploring five questions which form the outline for the paper:

- What are insider movements?
- What is church?
- Can we separate religion and culture?
- What is religion?
- What does this mean for mission practice?

2. WHAT ARE INSIDER MOVEMENTS?

The years between 2004 and 2007 saw a great increase in the volume of discussion concerning insider movements. A number of significant articles on both sides of the issue, including some published in several editions of the International Journal of Frontier Missiology, were dedicated to the topic of insider movements. An entire gathering of the International Society of Frontier Missiology was devoted to the consideration

of how the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 applied to the subject. The results of that discussion were also published.¹

This process has served to refine the way insider movements are described, and also produced two published attempts at definition. I developed a longer definition:

A growing number of families, individuals, clans, and/or friendship-webs becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture. This faithful discipleship will express itself in culturally appropriate communities of believers who will also continue to live within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and through His people will also begin to transform His people and their culture, religious life, and worldview.²

A shorter definition has recently been put forth by Rebecca Lewis:

Insider movements are best defined as any movement to faith in Christ that remains integrated with or inside its natural community. They have these two distinct elements:

- 1) The gospel takes root within pre-existing communities or social networks, which become the main expression of 'church' in that context.
- 2) Believers retain their identity as members of their socio-religious community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.³

I would suggest that the main insights shared by both definitions might be summarized as follows:

Insider movements combine the insights of people movement or mass movement thinking concerning the church with the point of view often referred to as C5.⁴

¹ See especially the papers by Tennent, Timothy, '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/InsiderMovement 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).

² Higgins, Kevin, 'The Key To Insider Movements: The Devoteds' of Acts', in IJFM 21:4; Winter 2004, pp. 155 ff.

³ This is an unpublished version submitted for comment to the author.

While the religious assumptions are clearly the most open to debate, the understanding of church described in both definitions is not without controversy. This leads to the second question in the outline.

3. WHAT IS CHURCH?

The insider definition suggested by Lewis includes the concept that churches can be planted into pre-existing social structures, or, putting it another way, that pre-existing social structures can become the church. While this concept has generated discussion⁵ it is not new to missiology. Mass movements and people movements in missiological literature are described in similar ways, seeing existing structures (families, villages, clans) coming to faith as groups.⁶ Frequently cited as biblical background are the famous cases of group conversions in the New Testament: Cornelius, Lydia, the jailer in Phillipi, the village of Sychar.

However, the ecclesiology of insider movement thinking is questioned, rightly, in at least two directions. One line of questioning addresses the contention by insider movement advocates that not only are insiders now members of a new entity or reality called 'church', but being so does not necessarily imply that they must separate from other social identities, including religious ones. The second line of questioning concerns the relationship of believers in insider movements to the wider church, and thus the nature of the Body of Christ and its unity.

⁴ The C-Scale is described in John Travis, 'The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Guide for Defining Six Types of 'Christ-Centered Communities' ('C') Formed in Muslim Contexts' in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34(4): 1998, pp. 407-408. Most practitioners are moving away from the C-Scale, including Travis himself, or at least distinguish between C-5 and 'insider movements'. I refer to C5 here as a convenience.

⁵ For a particularly aggressive critique see Bill Nikides, 'Evaluating Insider Movements', St. Francis Magazine Number 4, (March 2006). Nikides addresses Lewis' viewpoints directly on p. 11.ff. A more sober critique is that of John Piper in discussion with John Travis and others in *Mission Frontiers*. See John Piper, 'An Extended Conversation About Insider Movements: Responses to the September-October 2005 Mission Frontiers', in *Mission Frontiers* (January-February 2006).

⁶ See for example, McGavran, Donald A., *The Bridges of God* (New York, Friendship Press, 1955); Pickett, J. Waskom, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York, Abingdon Press, 1933)

I will turn first to the question of identity in the Body and identity in the prior religious context. Here I do not want to anticipate the later discussion concerning religion, but merely offer some comments concerning the possibility of multiple identities.⁷

First, the Church is made up of believers who have been saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-10). In one sense it is true to say that no one can join the Church. People are spiritually born into it by God. Every believer is a member of the Church and, as such, is called to live out their membership in the Body of Christ, the Church, as a full time lifestyle in every venue of life.

Therefore, one's identity as a member of the Church can and does and, indeed, should overlap with one's identity in other spheres of life. This is what is behind New Testament injunctions to work with our hands, do everything as unto the Lord and, in Ephesians, the instructions for slaves and masters.

Second, the Church's ultimate purpose is to participate in, and be the first fruits of the transformation of the universe under the headship of Jesus Christ. The Church's primary strategy' to fulfill its purpose is to multiply itself through functions such as those listed in Acts 14:21-28: evangelizing the lost, discipling those who believe, strengthening/encouraging the disciples, selecting and training and appointing elders in every church, and connecting with and participating with other churches in the ongoing expansion of the Gospel. I have intentionally left traditional language in place, but those same biblical functions can take place as an insider movement albeit with altered forms and vocabulary.⁸

Third, we see in Acts that although the Church developed the kind of structures we just noted in Acts 14, members also remained within the religious expressions of the people of Israel, continuing to attend the

⁷ I have attempted to address in more detail and from other perspectives the question of the church in relationship to insider movements. Kevin Higgins, 'Identity, Integrity, and Insider Movements: A brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent's Critique of C5 Thinking'. Kevin Higgins, 'Acts 15 and Insider Movements Among Muslims: Questions, Process, and Conclusions', in IJFM (24:1, Spring 2007).

⁸ In my view, insider movement does not imply that no form of church takes shape. I addressed this subject in my replies to Tennent's paper, see Higgins, IJFM (Fall 2006).

Temple and synagogues.⁹ They also met in homes and in public places such as the Temple courts for gatherings designed apparently for believers in Jesus.¹⁰ The believers did not cease to be members of the church in the Temple worship, and they did not cease to be part of the Jewish religion in the home meeting.¹¹ There was a dual identity.¹²

Related to this we should note that the separation of Jewish followers of the Messiah (the Way) from the Temple and synagogue was apparently precipitated by the rise of active persecution, excommunication, and the introduction into the synagogue liturgy of curses aimed at followers of Jesus.¹³ The break was instigated, then, by the other members of the prior religious community, not by the believers. It took time for the break to take place, and even when it did occur it was not instantaneous.¹⁴

⁹ Tennent acknowledges that they did so for a time. Where he and I disagree is primarily over the question of what or who initiated the eventual separation, why it took place, and whether the church only came into being as a result of the separation (Tennent) or had been birthed prior to that (my view) while still also remaining within Judaism.

¹⁰ See Acts 3:1 and also 9:2 where Paul clearly expects that in Damascus he will find followers of 'The Way' in the synagogues. This is why he seeks letters to recommend him to the synagogue leaders. Later, in Acts 21:17ff., Jewish leaders (who follow Jesus as Messiah) express their concerns about the large numbers of Jewish believers who have heard that Paul no longer keeps the Law. So they urge Paul to make a public expression of his Jewishness.

¹¹ Luzbetak describes groups within cultures that function within the society but as alternative structures. This needs to be explored further. See Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D., *The Church and Cultures* (New York, Orbis, 1988).

¹² It is important here to address the question of whether the 'Jewish Religion/Follower of Jesus' link we have been discussing is actually a parallel to the 'Islamic Religion/Follower of Jesus' connection that insider advocates argue for. There is not room in this paper to treat this in detail. I refer the reader to a subsequent footnote in this paper (note 15) and to an earlier article where I seek to address this more fully, *The Key To Insider Movements: The Devoteds' of Acts*, IJFM (21:4; Winter 2004).

¹³ See the discussion of this development in Whitacre's commentary on John's Gospel (in the IVP series). On page 244 Whitacre concludes that the separation from the synagogues took place in the second half of the 1st century. That is, about one generation following many of the events of Acts

¹⁴ Whitacre indicates that a number of scholars feel John's Gospel was addressed to a mixed community including some who had been excommunicated or had left the synagogues, as well as some who still remained within. Both groups were followers of Jesus. Rodney Whitacre, *Johannine Polemic* (SBL Dissertation Series 67, 1982), p. 19. See also Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (Paulist Press, 1979).

Fourth, the disciples remained in the structures of the Temple in spite of theological differences. It is sometimes suggested that the insider approach encourages dishonesty because remaining within the structure communicates agreement with the religion and theology of the structure.¹⁵ The theological differences that certainly emerged and intensified between Jewish followers of Jesus and Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah were present within Jesus' own ministry, and indeed resulted in His death on the Cross. We see these differences clearly articulated in the earliest sermons of Acts. And yet, for 50 years or more a total separation did not occur.¹⁶

Finally, what I am suggesting here is that the biblical definition of Church does not necessarily refer to a bounded or closed set social grouping which prevents a member of His Body, the Church from also being a 'member' of another social or even religious structure or expression.¹⁷ We will return to the religious question below.

The second line of questioning concerns the unity of the wider Body. Acts 15 asks a very important question concerning unity and fellowship 'between movements'. When we seek to apply this passage from Acts 15 two 'simple' answers to the unity question could be posited.

One possible position is that since God was working among Jews and gentiles to create one new Body, then we should not seek the development of separate movements among insiders. Certainly some texts point to this. (see Eph 2, Gal 3)

¹⁵ See for example, Nikides, 2006.

¹⁶ I agree that in many respects Judaism is a different case from Islam. However, the fact is that at a very practical level, the early Jewish followers of Jesus faced much the same situation as do Muslim followers of Jesus today. Some who object to insider approaches cite the fact that new believers will not receive true teaching if they attend the mosque and in fact, will hear things in direct opposition to the Gospel. This is certainly true, but it was also true in the Temple of the 1st century A.D. and, yet, the early movement did not stop attending for that reason. It is also worth noting in this connection that Paul refers to the Corinthians' continued participation in the act of 'dining in an idol's temple' as an activity he seems to assume is taking place (1 Cor 8:10). His correction of the behavior is due to its potential affect on another, weaker, believer and not, apparently, because of actually being at table in a pagan temple.

¹⁷ Clarification is needed lest I be misunderstood. In one sense, I do see Church as a closed set: only those who are born from above and incorporated by the Spirit in His Body are members. However, they are not thereby excluded from living in and among other social and religious structures as yeast in the dough.

On the other hand, some argue for two totally separate movements. Passages such as Paul's self description in 1 Cor 9:19 ff. might be cited to support such a position, though Acts 21:17 ff. with its description of Torah observant Jews who follow the Messiah is more directly applicable. Acts 15 can be read as support for either position: one new movement in which Jews and gentiles are granted freedom to live as Jews and gentiles, or two separate movements that each recognized the other as a valid work of God.

However, clearly there were cases where gentile and Jew, followers of Jesus, met together not only occasionally but in the same fellowships. Rom 14 and 15 provide an extended discussion of solutions to the difficulties posed by this reality.

Thus, at a bare minimum, insider advocates need to recognize that a good deal of material in the Epistles of the New Testament, especially Paul's letters, continues to address the problem created not by the separateness of these movements but by how they should interact with each other. How they do so is open to question, but doing so seems biblically assumed.

Given the security issues prevalent in so many contexts in which insider movements are reported, there will need to be careful thought about the context in which true, living unity might take expression. I know of at least one annual gathering that includes insiders from various countries and outsiders from multiple denominational backgrounds, meeting together for a week of bible study and discussion.

In another context I know of an insider movement that intentionally sought out quiet, low key but formal links with an international Christian denomination. The nature of the link was mutual recognition of each others' ministry and ethos. The insiders were not asked to stop being insiders. The denominational leadership recognizes the ministry and 'ordinations' of the insiders. There was no financial dimension to this link.¹⁸ This seems to me a fruitful way forward, and a viable expression

¹⁸ While it may seem odd to add this point, I felt it important to make clear that the incentive of the insider leadership was a desire to be linked in some official and recognized way to the historic, global people of God.

of a more faithful ecclesiology of the ‘glocal’ church, a church that is at once and in essence both local and global, both particular and catholic.¹⁹

I have surveyed the questions concerning church from the viewpoints of identity and unity. My sketch suggests that insider movements express a paradigm of church that is a complex blend of local, incarnational identity in the Body and in the religious and cultural life of their context. At the same time we see a need to think more carefully and practically about the biblical theme of unity. This still leaves us needing to address the religious question.

4. CAN WE SEPARATE RELIGION AND CULTURE?

It is generally assumed among mission practitioners that encouraging new disciples to remain within their cultures, balanced with critical application of biblical truth,²⁰ is sound practice. For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to repeat in depth the particular theories about this assumption and the history of discussions about accommodation, indigenization, enculturation, and contextualization.²¹

Since it is not as widely accepted that remaining in one’s culture involves remaining in the religious aspects, or some religious aspects, of that culture, and since this difference of views is due to differing viewpoints as to the relationship of religion to culture, I need to address the culture/religion link before looking at religion exclusively.

There are nearly as many definitions of culture as there are anthropologists. One simple definition sees culture as ‘the tradition of a particular human group, a way of living learned from, and shared by, the

¹⁹ A term that seems to have been first applied to the church by Leonard Sweet. Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsumani: Sink or Swim in the New Millennium Culture* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1999). A helpful discussion of the need for keeping the church catholic in view in missiological reflection can be found in a brief article surveying the life of David Bosch.

Timothy Yates, ‘David Bosch: South African Context, Universal Missiology – Ecclesiology in the Emerging Missionary Paradigm’, in *IBMR* (Vol. 33, Nr. 2, April 2009), pp. 72ff.

²⁰ Hiebert’s critical contextualization model has become a standard reference point, for example: Paul Hiebert, ‘*Critical Contextualization*’, in *IBM* (11(3): 1987), pp. 104-111.

²¹ For helpful discussions from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, see Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York, Orbis, 2007). And from a Protestant perspective see Andrew J. Kirk, *What is Mission?* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 2000).

members of that group.²² This definition is focused primarily on behavior. A more cognitive orientation to culture is seen in Spradley's definition, 'Culture is the acquired knowledge people use to interpret experience and generate behavior.'²³ Such broad pictures are typically further categorized into sub-systems. This is done in several ways, but includes categories such as customs, economics, social-structures, values, world-view, and more.²⁴ These two views are not mutually exclusive as there is clearly an inter-relationship between behaviors and the cognitive frameworks that produce and interpret them.

Where does religion fit in this discussion of culture? Not every language has a word for religion. In the English language and in European languages generally, the word religion comes from Latin and refers to binding one to the gods. Yet, in many languages there is no distinct word. If we agree with Lamin Sannch in seeing language as the 'intimate, articulate expression of culture,'²⁵ then the lack of a distinct word for 'religion' suggests that in at least some worldviews religion and culture are in some sense inseparable.²⁶

Although religion and culture may be inseparable in at least some worldviews, it does not mean that we can not distinguish them. Malefijt, in a section entitled 'Religion as Culture', defines religion as 'systematic patterns of beliefs, values, and behavior acquired by man as a member of his society.'²⁷ In this view, religion is certainly intimately intertwined with culture, and yet the fact that Malefijt's book is entitled 'Anthropology of Religion', leads one to assume that the author sees religion as a distinct enough reality to warrant a book of its own rather than addressing religion as a chapter of a book entitled merely, 'anthropology.'

Daniel Shaw outlines several sub-systems of culture including economics, ideology, kinship, social structure, and political organization. Ideology is defined as 'a system of beliefs and observances relating to

²² Annemarie de Waal Malefijt, *Religion and Culture* (New York, Macmillan, 1968), p. 3.

²³ James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation* (New York, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980), p. 6, quoted in Daniel, R. Shaw, *Transculturation* (Pasadena, William Carey Library, 1988), p. 25.

²⁴ As one example, see Shaw, 1988.

²⁵ Lamin Sannch, *Translating the Message* (New York, Orbis Books, revised edition, 2009), p. 3.

²⁶ Kirk, *What is Mission?*, 122ff.

²⁷ Malefijt, *Religion and Culture*, p. 6.

origins, present conditions, and the future.²⁸ Further, while ideology includes expression in religious beliefs, practices, and structures, these peculiarly religious forms of ideology are extensions of an underlying cultural reality.²⁹ Thus, we may speak of religion as a sub-system (religion) of a sub-system (ideology) of culture. Let us look more carefully then at religion as a cultural sub-system.³⁰

Both Malefijt and Shaw describe religion in cognitive and behavioral terms. Shaw adds another element: social structure. For ease of discussion, I will summarize these three aspects of religion as beliefs, behaviors, and belonging. My purpose in doing so is to highlight the fact that the question, ‘Can a disciple remain in their religion?’, needs to be asked with all three aspects of religion in view. Does ‘remain’ mean at the level of belief, behavior, belonging, or some combination? And to what degree can one remain?³¹ First I turn from the question of culture and religion to the question of religion itself.

5. WHAT IS RELIGION

Many evangelicals make use of a three-fold typology to discuss other religions: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist.³² I will present definitions

²⁸ Shaw, *Transculturation*, p. 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁰ Kraft suggests another way to describe the overlap but distinguish-ability of religion and culture in his discussion of religion and worldview. In Kraft’s view, religion is more and less than worldview. It is more than worldview because it includes behaviors and rituals not included in worldview. But religion is less than worldview because it includes some but not all of the beliefs and assumptions providing basic perspectives for life. Charles Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (New York, Orbis, 1996), p. 199. Hiebert offers a viewpoint that sees religion and culture as less separable. Paul Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1983), pp. 371ff.).

³¹ Van Engen takes a different approach to the religion and culture question by speaking instead of faith and culture. The shift is not insignificant, for it enables Van Engen to speak of the Gospel and faith as separable from culture and thus as contextualizable in any culture. Following Charles Kraft, Van Engen agrees that God uses culture like a vehicle, a vehicle that can then carry faith as a passenger (1995, p. 192ff.)

³² Van Engen traces the history of this typology and offers a modification by adding a fourth category in which he seeks to balance the best insights of each and which he terms the ‘evangelist’ paradigm. Kirk suggests changing the terms to particular, general, and universal, but follows the same basic typology. Bosch sees two major paradigms that seem to reflect the exclusivist on the one hand and a combination of the inclusivist and pluralist

of each, with specific interest in their respective approaches to other religions:³³

Exclusivist: tends to see all non-Christian religions as either mankind's rebellious attempt to find their own way or as the result of demonic activity.³⁴

Inclusivist: tends to assume that since Christ is Lord of all and is the light that gives light to all, He is at work in other religions and cultures even when people do not know it is Jesus. Christianity is sometimes seen as 'fulfilling' the best insights of other religions.³⁵

Pluralist: sees all religions as equally legitimate pathways to God. For some pluralists, Christianity can be said to be the unique path, but only 'for me'.³⁶

It is tempting to proceed by asking simply, 'Which of these three is the biblical position?' This assumes that one of the three does adequately articulate what the Bible says. But is this a fair assumption?

First, we find biblical evidence that religion is seen as the rejection of the truth of God, a rebellion masked within the form of 'religion'. This is part of the argument in Rom 1:18ff. The prophets bore witness to idols as man-made artifacts and as such they are the objects of worship only for the foolish (Isa 40 as an example).

on the other (though he does not use those terms). Bosch suggests a third option that would balance the two. Hans Kung adds a fourth paradigm to the typology which I would title the atheist paradigm, and while the exclusivist and pluralist paradigms are evident in his writing (though his terminology is not exactly the same), where one might expect to see inclusivism he suggests the idea of all religions participating in the truth of the one religion. See Van Engen, *The Uniqueness of Christ in Mission Theology*, in Edward Rommen and Harold Netland, eds., *Christianity and the Religions* (Pasadena, CA, William Carey publishers, 1995); Kirk, *What is Mission?*, pp. 118ff.; David Bosch, *Witness to the World* (Eugene, Oregon, Wipf and Stock, 1980). Hans Kung, *Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York, Doubleday, 1988), esp. pages 230 and 235.

³³ As opposed to also examining the equally important and related theological perspectives of Christology and soteriology and revelation that each position implies. Van Engen's discussion provides a good overview of these other topics (1995: 183ff.). See also Kirk, *What is Mission?* pp. 118ff.), and Smith, (1995: 9ff.).

³⁴ With the exception of Van Engen, this seems to be the dominant position of the contributors to *Christianity and the Religions*, cited above.

³⁵ See the discussions in Van Engen, and Kirk in particular.

³⁶ An excellent example of this position is expressed by Kung, *Theology for the Third Millennium*, p. 254.

Second, in some passages religion is said to involve the activity of demons and demonic bondage. 1 Cor 8-10 builds the case that although idols themselves are nothing, idol worship involves the worship of demons. In Gal 4, Paul argues that the Galatians had previously been under the bondage of 'those that are not gods'. (vs. 8) Paul's evaluation of Jews under the Law is also spoken of as bondage under the elemental spirits (v. 2). Eph 2 opens with an evaluation of all humanity living under the control of the prince of the power of the air, seen as forces at work among the disobedient gentiles, and describes these forces as those 'among whom we (Jews) also walked'.

Third, the Bible describes ways in which God is at work in other religions, and suggests in at least some cases that members of other religions are in relationship with God Himself. Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek (a pagan priest of 'God Most High') shows us that the author of Genesis sees El and Yahweh as the same Being.³⁷ The fact that Abraham offers a tithe suggests an acceptance of the validity of Melchizedek's priesthood and thus, religion. This acceptance is confirmed by the New Testament view of Melchizedek as one of the crucial precursors of the Messiah. This is an astonishing acknowledgement of God's work in another religious tradition.

Amos describes God's relationship to the non-Jewish peoples in terms parallel to His redemption of Israel in the Exodus event (Amos 9:7). God has initiated relationship with these nations.

The pagan prophet Balaam used omens and divination as a seer but communicated directly with, and heard directly from Yahweh (Num 22 through 24). He is in relationship with Yahweh, and this relationship is actually facilitated by his practice of divination (Num 23:1ff).³⁸

In the book of Jonah it is ironically not the Hebrew Jonah who hears and obeys God. In addition, it is the pagan sailors' prayers that are heard by Yahweh. When they cast lots, it is Yahweh who directs the answer. They are in relationship with Yahweh.

³⁷ See the discussion in Ed Mathews' contribution to *Christianity and the Religions* in his article, *Yahweh and the Gods*, p. 33. Mathews draws a different conclusion, but shows the background to El and the Melchizedek event nicely.

³⁸ I am in no way suggesting that every act of divination is a means of relationship with Yahweh, only that it was so in Balaam's case.

The pagan Magi, in Mat 2, follow a star and are correctly led by it to people who can consult the scriptures and guide them more accurately to the place of Christ's birth. But we should note that the star led them accurately.

Acts 17 describes God's sovereign design of the times and places in which humans are born. The intention of God behind this is that men and women would seek after Him and actually find Him (see 17:27). This implies that people in other religions can be in relationship to the true God.

My conclusion from the above biblical material is that none of the three positions in the common typology of religions actually fit the biblical perspective.³⁹ I will first summarize my understanding of the biblical position and then evaluate each of the three standard positions.

First, humans do rebel, distort, and reject the revelation of God whether that is found in 'general' or 'special' revelation. This is true of pagan religions and, according to Paul, it is also true of those claiming to be biblical (this is the force of his argument in Rom 1 through 3). The fact that people in other religions may potentially be in relationship with God, and the fact that some actually are in such a relationship, does not mean that all people are.

Second, there is a spiritual enemy who is a living and deceiving force. This deceptive and corrupting influence is at work in the world, including in the religious dimension. These first two points suggest that although people in other religions may potentially be in relationship with God, and some actually are in such a relationship, we can not therefore assume that all people are in relationship with God.

Third, the texts above also show us that 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'.

Fourth, several of the texts suggest that acknowledging that God is at work and in relationship with people beyond the borders of Israel and the Church, does not necessarily imply that such a relationship is a saving relationship. In Matthew 2 the Magi are rightly led by the star, but they

³⁹ Gordon Smith also questions whether the three standard categories are asking the right question or helpful in approaching the subject. See his opening chapter in the *Christianity and the Religions* volume, especially p. 16.

are led to a place where the Bible is used to guide them further. Cornelius' prayers are answered by God sending Peter to explain the Gospel.

I would summarize this description of the biblical data by calling it a Kingdom Paradigm' for understanding God at work in the religious life of mankind. The Kingdom of God includes the Church, but is bigger than the Church. The Kingdom refers to the whole range of God's exercise of His reign and rule in the universe. This includes religions. The Kingdom paradigm acknowledges there is another kingdom as well, and takes seriously the battle for the allegiance and hearts and minds of people.

How does this Kingdom paradigm compare with the three-fold model that has become typical in the discussion of other religions? What aspects of the three fold model fit and do not fit the biblical data?

The exclusivist model rightly acknowledges the unique place of Jesus Christ as the only path to salvation and as the ultimate revelation of God. But it typically fails to address adequately the affirmations in the third biblical perspective above, and might also fail to see the potential for human rebellion and satanic bondage within the so called 'true religion'. (Galatians is important for us here.)

The inclusivist paradigm rightly acknowledges the way that God and the Risen Jesus Himself may be at work visibly and invisibly in the religious life of human beings beyond the contours of the covenant people. But it can fail to take due note of the fact that frequently in the Bible such examples as the Magi and the interaction in Acts 17 conclude with an explicit encounter with the Gospel and the Person of Jesus.

The pluralist position can point to examples such as Melchizedek in which the Canaanite 'El' and the Jewish 'Yahweh' are recognized by Abraham as the same Being. However, the pluralist conclusion that therefore all religions are leading in the same direction breaks down on the wealth of biblical material we have also cited to the contrary. This position tends to underestimate the power of human sin and the reality of spiritual evil.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Van Engen suggests a different way to bring together the best insights in each paradigm, which he calls the evangelist paradigm: faith particularist, inclusivist in ecclesiology, pluralist in our approach to cultures. Van Engen, 1995, 197ff.

My contention is that in most cases, the particular religious expression we will encounter in mission will require a response that acknowledges some combination of all three elements we have discussed. Each specific religious context will vary. No template can be applied to every situation in the same way.

This will also affect our answer to the question, ‘Can a disciple remain within his prior religion?’ The discussions above suggest that the answer to this will need to be nuanced by both a thorough evaluation of the specific religious context, and also by the fact that “remaining in” implies at least three dimensions: believing, behaving, and belonging.

6. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR OUR MISSION PRACTICE?

I will seek to apply the preceding discussion by suggesting several implications for our practice of mission:

6.1 Maintain the Centrality of the Gospel

None of the discussion above diminishes seeing evangelism’s central place in mission practice. Indeed, our entire discussion leads to a reaffirmation of the conclusion that Jesus is the only way of salvation. God uses many things to bring people to Jesus, even things in other religions, but the Gospel is unique.

6.2 Engage in Concrete Critical Reflection

If God is at least potentially at work in other religions, then the contention of insider movement advocates that disciples can remain within their religious context is potentially true in any situation. Whether it is actually true in a given situation, and to what degree, will depend on the unique context and the degree to which there is evidence of rebellion, bondage, or God’s direct self-revelation. If God is active in other religions, then to at least some degree His truth can be found and responded to within the context of those other religions. In some cases, along with ongoing biblical input and appropriate forms of fellowship, this will en-

able disciples to remain within their religious context.⁴¹ Discerning all of this will require critical reflection on and in the actual context.

6.3 Keep Conversion in Perspective

The preceding discussion leads to an important reminder. We need to hold firmly to a Biblical understanding of ‘conversion’ as the reorientation of the heart and mind (e.g. Rom 12:1ff.), rather than as an institutional transfer of religious affiliation.

6.4 Encourage ‘Glocal’ Expressions of Church

Encouraging practical and meaningful ways for leaders of insider movements to develop relationships of mutual blessing is in keeping with biblical descriptions of church. Finding ways to do this securely, and finding non-insiders with whom to relate who will approach such encounters with respect and brotherly humility, are challenges worth trying to overcome.

6.5 Develop Biblical Theology in Context

In accord with my own definition of insider movements cited at the outset of this article, our missionary practice will need to include clear thinking regarding helping ‘insiders’ to develop the capacity for developing ongoing biblical theology in the context of their culture.⁴² Such efforts involve adequate translations of the scriptures, intentional processes for critical reflection, and the empowerment of insiders themselves in such a process. Biblical theology in context will provide the means by

⁴¹ Even in such cases, I assume a great deal of reorientation and even re-interpretation of their prior religious worldview and beliefs will be required. I attempted to address this in prior articles. See *The Key to Insider Movements*, and, *Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements*, cited above.

⁴² A number of possible models exist for this. Hiebert’s critical contextualization model is perhaps the best known. A more complex and extensive model is developed in the work of Shaw and Van Engen. See Paul Hiebert, ‘Critical Contextualization’, in *IBMR* (11(3): 1987), pp. 104-111, and Daniel Shaw and Charles Van Engen, *Communicating God’s Word in a Complex World* (Boulder, CO, Rowan and Littlefield, 2003).

which the Spirit of God will continue to shape and correct His people, and is the safeguard against syncretism.⁴³

6.6 View Religion as a Matrix of Belief, Behavior and Belonging

I have referenced this three-part taxonomy several times. I want to conclude with a brief outline of how it might be applied. As a biblical example, I will take just one text commonly cited by insider advocates, the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5.⁴⁴

Beliefs: Naaman clearly changes at least some of his beliefs. He now acknowledges that there is no God in all the earth except 'in Israel'. (v. 15) Yet, some of his old ways of thinking remain: since there is no God except in Israel, he asks for some of Israel's dirt that he might take it with him to Aram (v. 17). The Prophet allows him to remain in this belief about the connection between the dirt of Israel and the God of Israel. The process of change in an insider's belief system will be a dynamic one. However, there is a clear and fundamental change of Naaman's belief about God.

Behavior: Insider advocates tend to make much of the permission Naaman receives to continue attending the temple of Rimmon (v. 18, 19). This is indeed behavior, and does speak to the issue of remaining in the religion. However, there is also a change of behavior. Naaman states clearly he will no longer offer sacrifices to any other gods (v. 17). This too is behavior, and speaks to the fact that not all behaviors will be kept.

⁴³ Nikides argues that without the deductive teaching of doctrines such as the Trinity, believers will not arrive at the truth with the study of the bible alone, 'The use of Manuscript Bible Studies and other inductive tools without the instruction of the church is no way to learn these' (2006, p. 8). While the proper place of inductive and deductive approaches in discipleship is a valid question, Nikides overstates his case. One wonders how the church fathers arrived at those doctrines if it was not from their study of scripture over several generations as they reflected on culture and did so in the heat of clarifying heresy as new teachings clamored for attention.

⁴⁴ Naaman is not the only example. The woman of Samaria is another example. See Stuart Caldwell, 'Jesus in Samaria: A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims', in IJFM, (17:1, Spring 2000). For more on Naaman see Higgins, *The Key to Insider Movements*, cited above.

Belonging: Naaman remains an Aramean, certainly. He does not become a Jewish proselyte by remaining as one of the aliens for whom the Law made provision. He goes back to Aram (v. 19). He goes back to being the commander of the Army of Israel's enemy (clearly implied in v. 18). What of specifically religious belonging? On his return to Aram and to the temple of Rimmon, the other Arameans will certainly still see him as 'belonging' to the people who belong to Rimmon.

In Naaman we see a complex situation. Some of his beliefs and behaviors change while others remain the same. At the level of belonging, he seems to have continued just as before. This should sensitize us to the possibility that our wisest response in some situations could be the same as that in 2 Kings 5:19, 'Go in peace.'

7. CONCLUSION

Charles Kraft tells the story of a Nigerian Christian's words to him evaluating a prospective group of new western missionaries. The Nigerian was from a traditional, tribal religious background. He referred to the older missionary view that emphasized the difference between the God of the Bible and the God of the Nigerians and then went on to say that he and his people came to realize that '*our* God had brought the missionaries to add to our understanding and commitment.'⁴⁵ His hope was that the new missionaries would come to realize this as well.

What is truly at the heart of the insider movement paradigm is the God Who is at work directly among the nations, including their religions, to make in each a people for Himself. These are His movements, and He is the true Insider.

⁴⁵ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (New York, Orbis, 2005), p. 16. Emphasis in original.