

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

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

In an extremely ambitious exercise, Kevin Higgins seeks to answer some of the most profound questions of missiology, such as ‘What is the Church?’ and ‘What is Religion?’ in a single article. Then he proceeds to draw implications from the answers that he has given to these questions. The first implication he mentions is to ‘maintain the centrality of the gospel.’ I doubt that there could be a missiological statement that would be more widely and deeply affirmed among evangelicals than this one. Yet Higgins, and the Insider Movement in general, uses these words in a manner that is at odds with historical Christianity and the Scriptures. I will attempt to uncover from Higgins’ article and other related material what Insiders understand by this statement. I will attempt to compare this with what ‘centrality of the gospel’ means in Scripture and in the context of the historic church. I believe that addressing this issue will actually inform all missiological questions, including those that Higgins asks and responds to in his article.

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Julius Kim<sup>2</sup> tells the story of the creator of a software package that translates back and forth between English and Russian. In order to test his design he typed in the English phrase, 'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak'. Not being able to read Russian, he then had to do a back-translation into English. The following phrase came back, 'The whisky is stronger than the beef.' We face a similar issue with Insider thinking. We are equipped by familiarity and context to understand 'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.' Similarly, we may think we understand what Higgins means by 'centrality of the gospel'. Let us test the back-translation and see what emerges.

## 2. THE GOSPEL CORE

The Scriptures themselves affirm that there is a core to the gospel. It can be stated simply and in few words. It is a part of our tradition to speak of an 'unadorned gospel', a message that is presented without fanfare or manipulation. 'Jesus is Lord' is perhaps the quintessential statement of the gospel. There is a difference, however, between speaking of a gospel 'core' on the one hand and a 'stripped down' or reduced gospel on the other. If the gospel is indeed central, then it is also central to the questions of 'What is a church?', 'What is religion?' and 'What is culture?' Higgins' brief paragraph under this heading is illuminating:

**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.

Note two things regarding these brief comments: First, there seems to be the assumption that the gospel's place in missions' practice is located exclusively in evangelism (we will return to this later). Secondly, Higgins' affirmation of the 'centrality of the gospel' would give the appear-

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<sup>2</sup> Julius Kim, 'Mission and Missions: Evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'; paper read at the Missional and Reformed Conference, 2008. See [www.wscsl.edu](http://www.wscsl.edu).

ance of being equivalent to affirming that ‘Jesus is the only way of salvation’.

It would be unfair to assess Higgins’ entire understanding of the gospel based on this one paragraph, but I find the paragraph to be consistent not only with the rest of the paper but also with his other writing and with Insider thinking in general. The gospel that Higgins is referring to here is not the same as the gospel ‘core’ in the traditional sense but rather a reduced gospel.

By making use of familiar language Higgins maintains his place in the Evangelical camp and secures an Evangelical audience. But is this reduced gospel a biblical one? Is it indeed ‘the old, old story of Jesus and his love’?

### 3. FOUNDATIONS OF THE GOSPEL

Christianity is rooted in objective truth. It is not the sum of all of its propositional statements – it is much more – but without propositional statements it is entirely void of substance. Who is Jesus?<sup>3</sup> What did he do? Why did he do it? What does this mean to me? All of these questions must be answered truthfully in order for the gospel to hold together. These answers are not only for the academy but have profound implications for the soul of a Christian. Our confidence is founded on the Truth of the Gospel so that we are able to declare, ‘Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.’ Without this truth we are without hope and have no basis for peace or comfort.

As the God of all truth, He created the order that fills the gospel with meaning. Much of this, though not all of it, He has revealed to us.<sup>4</sup> As finite creatures we may know these things truly even if we don’t know them exhaustively or omnisciently.<sup>5</sup> He has not only given us a clear and simple gospel message but also revealed to us the historical and theo-

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<sup>3</sup> ‘The problem is that very often when the Lordship of Christ is restated - the identity of Jesus is not clear- they do not have a ‘theology’ which undergirds a LORD.’ (Roger Dixon, veteran missionary among the Sundanese Muslims, from personal correspondence.)

<sup>4</sup> Deut 29:29.

<sup>5</sup> D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2005), p. 116.

logical context that expands the sphere of the gospel into every part of life.

Which leaves me with the question: If the gospel is indeed to be central in the missionary practice of Insider practitioners then what are the truths that constitute this gospel? What is the set of propositional truths that shape its definition of the gospel? Recognizing that there are many varieties of Insider thought out there we would not expect to see a single confession that all would agree to, but a few examples would indicate that there at least is an effort in this direction.<sup>6</sup>

There are many churches in the West that lack a formal confession. Many are satisfied with a simple statement of faith.<sup>7</sup> But the situation in the West is usually quite different than that on the frontiers of Christianity. Christianity has deep roots in most of our Western societies and although many of its modern forms are not confessional their roots are confessional. The Trinity is often taken for granted, for instance, even if it is little comprehended. The deity of Christ and His pre-existence, although disputed in some circles, are widely understood to be essential historic Christian doctrines. His crucifixion, if not his resurrection, is an accepted historical event. In brief, our common Christian heritage often functions as a de-facto confession, woefully inadequate as it is.

Now let us move to a predominantly Muslim context and observe how these essential elements of Christianity are challenged. The nature of God is now mono-personal rather than a relational Trinity. Christ is nothing more than a great prophet who never died. Particularly in this context a stripped down gospel is no gospel at all because the essential truths of the gospel remain unchallenged. Without clear teaching on the distinctives of the Christian Christ there remains little substance to the gospel message and everything about the Christian worldview falls apart. Unlike most Insider proponents who, like Higgins, at least attempt some sort of a theological foundation, on the field there often is none. Teaching in Insider circles takes the form of discover-for-yourself Bible study

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Parsons in *Unveiling God* (William Carey, Pasadena, 2005) does make this attempt but the approach is a process parallel to historic creeds rather than building on them. It is a process that imposes the constructs of Fuller missiology on Christological formulations.

<sup>7</sup> I recognize that there is also a fairly significant anti-confessional movement, such as some strands of Emergent thinking.

methods and how-to-use-the-Qurān-to-talk-about-Jesus. Leaders are forced by Western ideologues who pay their salaries to continue to pray in the mosque and deny affiliation with Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The outcome is that even leaders are confused about who Jesus is and what he accomplished. Some accept the Qur'ān as authoritative alongside the Bible. There are tragic results from a 'stripped down' gospel.

One such tragedy is the proliferation of Insider thinking among Bible translators.<sup>9</sup> A translation of the gospels in the Bengali language eliminates all reference to 'Son of God' and all other filial language within the Godhead.<sup>10</sup> I was told by Lebu<sup>11</sup> in Dhaka in September, 2007, that all the older converts from Islam under his care recognize that Jesus is the Son of God. The younger generation, which is being fed Insider ideology and reads the Insider translation of the gospels, is no longer clear on the identity of Jesus.

Christianity is rooted in a truthful Story. Perhaps even more than its propositions, it is this Story that lends meaning and definition to the gospel. In fact it is from a right understanding of the Story that truthful propositions are derived.<sup>12</sup>

Some Insider material appears to honor the Story. Often propositions are presented as 'Western' and disposed of in favor of more 'Eastern' narrative. This is a tricky business and often the Story ends up being badly abused. Extracting individuals like Melchizedek and Naaman from the Story, as Higgins does, is one form of abuse. Melchizedek played a role in the Story, a crucial role that prefigured Christ. To misconstrue his role to be proof of that God approves other religions is untenable. Naaman likewise had a precise role to play, both instructive as well as a display of God's pervasive mercy.<sup>13</sup> And the list goes on. Taking char-

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<sup>8</sup> Numerous reports that I have heard personally by those who have suffered this kind of employment in Bangladesh convince me that this is standard procedure, at least in that context.

<sup>9</sup> Wycliffe/SIL, the premier Bible translating agency, is sharply divided among some who are thinking and writing about this. For the Insider perspective read Rick Brown.

<sup>10</sup> See also Dixon, *Identity Theft: Retheologizing the Son of God*, EMQ (April, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Lebu at that time was a senior leader under Milton Coke's *Global Partners for Development*, an agency that funds the propagation of Insider ideology.

<sup>12</sup> A radically different approach than mere proof-texting. Demonstrated well by Geerhardus Vos and Herman Ridderbos in the early organization of Biblical Theology and since then both carried forward and distorted in a variety of directions.

<sup>13</sup> Luke 4:27.

acters out of the context of Redemptive History and using them as normative models for a methodology is unwise at best.

Typical of Insider literature, Higgins appeals to the early church.<sup>14</sup> These appeals are a thinly veiled declaration of autonomy. Every Insider that I have known or read appears to claim independence from the creeds and formulations of the Church. The clarity and exactness of the Nicene Creed, for example, is a threat to their fuzziness. Here again they are missing the Story as it is carried on in the life of the Church.

So there are two components to Gospel foundations: The Story (factual redemptive history), and the body of propositional truth informed by it. Insiders like Higgins have done injustice to both.

#### 4. Pervasiveness of the Gospel

Let us assume for the moment that we are talking about the same Jesus<sup>15</sup> and the same historic events that constitute the gospel message.<sup>16</sup> These areas of agreement would constitute what we could call 'Redemption Accomplished'. This is an incomplete picture without 'Redemption Applied'. So John Murray has brilliantly entitled his book on soteriology, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.<sup>17</sup> This fills out more completely the biblical picture of the gospel.

So what does 'Redemption Applied' consist of? Is it a profession of faith? Baptism? Indwelling of the Spirit? Certainly it is all of these and so much more! It is being united to Christ, and in being united to Christ being united to His People. This is a union that first requires death.<sup>18</sup> This is a union that gives us a completely new identity. Not only does it

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<sup>14</sup> I will not go into the validity of these appeals here but claiming, as Higgins does, a parallel between the 'dual identity' of the early Jewish church, as it transitioned from a Jewish identity to a Christian identity, to that of Muslim followers of Jesus is an abuse of the Redemptive Story.

<sup>15</sup> This is not always a safe assumption with Insider proponents – eg. Massey, who is uncertain about the preexistence of Christ in 'Misunderstanding C-5: His Ways Are Not Our Orthodoxy', in EMQ (July 2004).

<sup>16</sup> These historic events consist of the entire body of Scripture leading up to the life, death and resurrection of Christ as well as the interpretive history that follows after.

<sup>17</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1955).

<sup>18</sup> Gal 2:20-21.

change the way we view ourselves – as ‘in Christ’ – but also the way we view the world. To live in this union is to live in the gospel. To view the world around us rightly is to grow in the gospel. There is a recognition of this richness in the traditional Dutch daily prayer, ‘Lord, convert me, that I may be converted.’<sup>19</sup>

Reflecting on Psalm 104, especially v. 24 (O LORD, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches. KJV), Murray comments:

The provision which God has made for the salvation of men is even more strikingly manifold. For this provision has in view the manifoldness of man’s need and exhibits the overflowing abundance of God’s goodness, wisdom, grace, and love. This superabundance appears in the eternal counsel of God respecting salvation; it appears in the historic accomplishment of redemption by the work of Christ once for all; and it appears in the application of redemption continuously and progressively till it reaches its consummation in the liberty of the glory of the children of God.<sup>20</sup>

The gospel changes everything forever. It is not a ticket or a badge by which one gains access to a home beyond the sky. ‘Redemption Accomplished’ makes union with Christ possible and ‘Redemption Applied’ unites us to Christ. Nor is the gospel a ‘religion’, in the sense that Higgins uses the term, rather it is real, objective change.<sup>21</sup>

Nabeel Jabbour describes a process of ‘unwrapping the gospel’ in which he seeks in his evangelism to dissociate true Christians from the nominal Christians who have given Christ a bad reputation among Muslims. Similar to Higgins (and Rick Brown<sup>22</sup>), his objective is to identify ‘the *minimum essentials* for a person to enter the kingdom of God’.<sup>23</sup> He proceeds to illustrate this point by unwrapping and peeling a tangerine until finally the true gospel is exposed and experienced. Christianity becomes the wrapping that must be disposed of in order to discover a true

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<sup>19</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Why I believe in God*, see <http://www.reformed.org>.

<sup>20</sup> Murray, *Redemption*, p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> In all his discussion of religion, Higgins speaks of it as a subjective sociological phenomenon rather than a biblical religion.

<sup>22</sup> Rick Brown, ‘What Must One Believe about Jesus for Salvation?’, in *IJFM* (Vol. 17:4)

<sup>23</sup> Nabeel Jabbour, *Unshackled and Growing – Muslims and Christians on the Journey to Freedom* (Dawson Media, Colorado Springs, 2006), p. 22. Emphasis is the author’s.

Jesus who lurks somewhere beneath. If he were describing justification by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone I would agree wholeheartedly. But this is not the Insider argument. Rather it is the moralistic idea that Christians offend but Christ does not: that Christ can be offered without Christian community; that Jesus can be loved and the Church despised; that salvation is a private affair. The aim of evangelism is to identify and cross some minimal threshold while salvation in all its grandeur must remain hidden from view. The Insider gospel is threadbare.

## 5. UNIQUENESS OF THE GOSPEL

### 5.1 *Swapping a Western Jesus for a Muslim Jesus?*

David Aikman tells the story of Yu Jiade, a Christian artist in China. ‘Yu’s story has the epic, tragic tone that is virtually the hallmark of China’s best creative minds of the past fifty years.’ He was subjected to intense government sponsored persecution:

‘In 1985,’ he said, ‘I had a strong desire to paint secretly, to depict the stories in the Bible. [...] Chinese Christians wanted the Jesus of history, but some foreigners wanted me to paint a Jesus that looks Chinese.’<sup>24</sup>

One of the central concerns of Insiders is that the church in the West has painted a Western Jesus and should not impose this Jesus on Asian Muslims, for instance. Their response has been to paint a Muslim Jesus. So although their critique is justified their solution is worse.

Higgins affirms that ‘Jesus is the only way of salvation’ and ‘the Gospel is unique’. What is he saying and what is he not saying? The words cannot be taken at face value in the traditional sense. He intentionally uses traditional language to describe the purpose of the church in commenting on Acts 14:21-28, but when these same ideas are translated into the Insider world they are hardly recognizable. Higgins argues that the translation only alters form and vocabulary. The literature and my experience argue otherwise. I will not go into the details of the extent of

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<sup>24</sup> David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Regnery Publishing, Washington, DC, 2003), p. 257.

playing with language here but it is prevalent enough in the literature. The category of ‘Muslim followers of Jesus’ as a Christian believer is among the better-known anomalies.

### ***5.2 ‘Grace Alone’ is unique***

The uniqueness of the gospel can be expressed in the language of the *Sola’s* of the Reformation. ‘Grace alone’ is the unique claim of the gospel. Every other religion is opposed to it. No other religion, as a construct, ‘leads’ to it. The only way to perceive otherwise is to misunderstand the essence of the gospel. Insider advocates are playing a deadly game with respect to the central tenant of the gospel: Justification by Faith.

### ***5.3 The power of the gospel is unique***

Sadly, it is not a new thing for Christians to magnify methodologies over the inherent power of the gospel itself. This trend seems to have accelerated since the revivalism of Finney, the Church Growth Movement of Fuller Seminary, and now the Insider Movement.<sup>25</sup> American pragmatism leads the way. Take, for example, a Muslim who comes to Christ and, declaring himself a Christian, is ostracized from his family and perhaps even his society. Generally Insiders would accept this profession of faith as genuine but would castigate the believer as a failure. The value of ‘remaining in community’ as a means of living out the ‘believing’ life is raised so high that it diminishes the power of the gospel itself. Often there is even confusion between whether it is the ‘remaining in community’ that is the power of salvation or the message of the gospel. This is one of the most serious charges against the Insider Movement, in some respects analogous to Paul’s charge against the Judaizers.

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<sup>25</sup> The Insider Movement was 10 to 15 years ago a dodgy affair on the fringe of Missiology. Today it is emboldened as a self-proclaimed ‘movement’ and center stage in mission circles. It is gaining ground in the West and in some places in the East, like Singapore and S. Korea. It is backed by scholarship out of Fuller and other mainstream seminaries and agencies, particularly the US Center for World Missions and the international arm of the Navigators.

### *5.4 The realm of the gospel is unique*

Not every reader will necessarily agree with my Augustinian understanding of two realms - or two cities - that occupy the cosmos. The inclination of man's rebellious heart and mind is to downplay the severity of the lost-ness of mankind, even before Pelagius came along. We have a craving to be our own saviors and masters – which requires some innate capability. Denying any such capability, as Augustine does, highlights the distinction between the two realms. But even if you were to take the Arminian position, the two realms remain distinct in some clear manifestations. What distinguishes these realms is not only invisible, internal, and spiritual, but also visible and tangible. Ethics, affections, and identity are three intertwined distinguishing elements. Just as the gospel is central to the distinction between the invisible components of the two realms so it is central to these visible distinctions.

Higgins' 'salvation' is individualized and privatized in the paradigm of modern anthropology and revivalistic evangelicalism. Just as he and other Insiders have a reduced gospel so they also exhibit a reductionistic approach to its uniqueness. The border between the two 'cities' becomes so blurred<sup>26</sup> that believers are uncertain about what their true identity is and who their true community is.<sup>27</sup> Again, this is not an issue for the academy but rather the struggle of every Christian who is viciously opposed by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

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<sup>26</sup> There are two movements within Insider thinking that are blurring the edges between Christianity and Islam: *A Common Word* and the *Common Ground Training* sponsored by the Navigators. John Piper offers a helpful critique of the former ([www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org)). So far I have not seen anything published that critiques the later but it is aggressively promoting Insider ideology among youth and practitioners in the US. A similar movement within the International Missions Board is promoting evangelism of Muslims using the Qur'an, known popularly as *The Camel Method*, suggesting that Muslims can become 'completed Muslims' by trusting Christ. Discussions among Southern Baptists have been raging on the Internet.

<sup>27</sup> The Kingdom of God is a theme that is particularly abused by Insiders. For more balanced teaching on the Kingdom of God readers are referred to NT scholars Vos, Ridderbos, Gaffin, and Kidd.

### ***5.5 The Promises of the Gospel are unique***

A unique Gospel is founded on unique promises which create a unique community. God in covenant with His people is the Story of Redemption. Where is the Covenant in the Insider reading of the Story? Where is Covenant in its ecclesiology? Where are the signs and seals (sacraments) of the Covenant in its practice?<sup>28</sup> These are serious concerns that have yet to be answered at any depth, as far as I know. Converts, particularly from theologically oppressive Islam, need to know that Jesus loves them. What could be more central to the Gospel? The only source of confidence in this love lies in the promise, the Covenant, which we must feed on regularly together with the Covenant Community.

The Church is being split (again) by Insider teaching as believers are forced to dissociate from the Covenant Community - the Christians in their own neighborhoods and the global/historical Church. How is the Body and Bride of Christ being built, honored, and beautified by this parochialism?

## **6. SOURCE OF THE GOSPEL**

The most striking thing about Higgins' comments is the perspective from which they examine anthropology, sociology, and, in effect, the gospel itself. The entire construct is anthropocentric. He addresses every single question from the perspective of mankind using modern constructs. The picture would look quite different if it were painted from the perspective of God as He has revealed Himself in Scripture.

In this, Insiders share a great deal of philosophical common ground with postmoderns. They are philosophical pluralists,<sup>29</sup> denying that any system offers a complete explanation. They are pietistic in the dualism of internal spirituality and external deception. Thus they are inclined to

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<sup>28</sup> Baptism is widely practiced by Insiders but its meaning is twisted beyond recognition and there is no coherent theology of the Sacraments that I am aware of.

<sup>29</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, p. 31. Carson has much more to say about how postmoderns are inclined to interpret the text of Scripture, which is relevant for how Insiders also approach the text.

a great deal of skepticism regarding historic Christianity<sup>30</sup> and are open to a variety of sources and influences as guides, including other religions.<sup>31</sup>

The chief claim to Insider validity is its success. Interestingly the measure of success is a bit hard to identify. How does one measure a 'movement' that is by definition unidentifiable? The answer is, of course, anecdotal evidence – which no-one can either deny or affirm. Success attracts American donors and money purchases more anecdotes. It is symbiosis at its worst. In contrast, there is the visible church: the growing community of Muslim converts, for example, who are identifiable personally and by their communities.<sup>32</sup> In Bangladesh these visible convert communities are frequently being persecuted by Insiders because they are a threat to the Insiders' reason-d'être.

In the West this skepticism opens the door to secular anthropology and sociology steeped in pluralism and relativism. These influences are pervasive in modern missiology and vividly seen in Insider literature and practice. Anthropocentrism represents the deepest and most fundamental flaw in Insider thinking and it is foundational to Higgins' article.

## 7. CONCLUSION

I have translated 'Centrality of the Gospel' from Insider-speak back into Christendom and shown that what comes out is a garbled message. 'Centrality' is located in a narrow sphere that is defined by Western

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<sup>30</sup> Insiders typically perceive the demise of Christianity into Christendom, roughly coinciding with the conversion of Constantine. This is a subtext lifted from the Anabaptists (radical reformers) which now is one mainstream Evangelical view of history. For example, Jonathan Bonk, 'Salvation, Other Religions, and Asian Mission', in *Asian Missiology*, Vol. 2/No. 1 (2008).

<sup>31</sup> Mazhar Mallouhi in *Pilgrims of Christ on the Muslim Road: Exploring a New Path Between Two Faiths*, by Paul-Gordon Chandler, claims that 'Gandhi [whom he expects to see in heaven (p. 123)] has taught me more about the spirit of Christ than perhaps anyone else' (p. 83) and many of his Muslim friends are 'a million miles closer to God' than he is (p. 193).

<sup>32</sup> This is not a jab at secret believers, who will always exist in every society and represent a different category altogether. Secret believers don't believe in secrecy. They are not ideologically Insider in that sense. The underground church in China, for instance, is always pushing the envelope in the struggle for visibility and legitimacy (Aikman).

theorists. Even 'Gospel' is fuzzy due to the lack of clarity on who Jesus is and the implication of Redemption History on the Covenant Community.

Readers of Insider-speak are cautioned. You may not be hearing what you think you hear. And if what you hear sounds unorthodox, it probably is.