

Preface by Dave C:

One of our BtD group recently observed: “Doug Coleman's new dissertation sets a solid Christ-like bar for what constitutes acceptable dialogue in the midst of disagreement” on these topics. While we can't send his dissertation as pre-reading

[see http://www.amazon.com/Theological-Analysis-Movement-Paradigm-Perspectives/dp/0865850380/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1337465082&sr=1-1],

this series of blog posts reflects a substantial sample of critique and differing perspectives in the spirit of BtD. In these posts, Dr. Coleman focuses significantly on interaction with Kevin Higgins and his writings. So I thought you would enjoy seeing Kevin's response to the idea of sharing these posts as a BtD 2012 pre-reading:

“Doug did set a bar....he did what we at BtD promise to do when committing to the ethos. He reached out to me prior to writing his dissertation, multiple times during it, and also after. I count him a friend and respected brother, who at least tried to be sure he understood me before disagreeing publically. He made changes in accord with our dialogue, and the discussions helped me see ways I wish I could re-express a number of points in older articles.

I'm happy to have this sent as a BtD pre-reading. Of course, Doug and I continue to disagree, but we do so as brothers and with mutual respect. I wish that were the tone throughout the Body in these days.

Kevin Higgins”

Looking at Insider Movements

By Doug Coleman

From “Between the Times,” used by permission

<http://betweentheimes.sebts.edu/index.php/category/series/insider-movements-series/>

(1): Introduction

March 19, 2012 by administrator

[Editor's Note: Doug Coleman is a SEBTS alum who lives and works in Central Asia. His SEBTS dissertation was recently published as *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena, CA: WICU Press, 2011). We asked Dr. Coleman to publish a critique of the Insider Movement here at BtT, in the form of a six-part blog series.]

Unless you're a missionary, missions professor, missions pastor, or spend a lot of time with weirdo's like us, you're probably not so familiar with the latest missiological debate: Insider Movements (IM). After a recent [book notice](#) at Between the Times and a [subsequent post](#) by Dr.

Ashford on IM and theological method, I thought it might be helpful to offer a fuller description, along with what I see as some of the key issues and problems. So, Bruce graciously accepted my proposal for a series of posts.

In this first installment, I'll provide a little biographical info about my own motivations for studying IM, comment on the status of the current debate, and mention a word or two about some terminology. Subsequent posts will describe the main lines of IM, briefly examine key issues, and the final post will list some resources for those who might be interested in further reading on the topic.

While studying in the SEBTS 2+2 program under Dr. Eitel, I became acquainted with the topic of contextualization. Around that time, John Travis published his now well-known C-Scale^[1] and the discussion took on a new focus. After spending six years in Central Asia ministering in Muslim contexts, I began PhD studies at SEBTS while on furlough. During some of my reading and research for seminars I became aware of this new thing called "Insider Movements."

The more I read, the more intrigued I became. I was faced with some questions I had never before considered, saw some interesting interpretations of biblical passages, and decided to dig deeper to develop my own thinking and reach my own conclusions. Along with a growing concern that some critical biblical and theological questions were not being addressed, I also wanted to offer something that might be useful to others facing the same questions. Thus, a dissertation topic was born. But this is more than an academic or theoretical exercise for me. I have served in the Muslim world for more than a dozen years now, and I long to see many more of them come to faith in Jesus and live as faithful disciples.

I also want to suggest that this is not just a debate for those of us across the water from North America. Proponents are encouraging the IM approach among minority populations in the U.S. as well. And missionaries are introducing these concepts to churches when they return on furlough. So this conversation may concern you more than it seems at first glance.

Unfortunately, the IM debate has often been anything but brotherly. I've attended conferences both promoting it and denouncing it, and rhetoric on both sides has often not followed Dr. Keathley's excellent [advice](#). While I have developed strong views on the topic, and I disagree with IM proponents on many key points, those I have met I believe to be brothers in the Lord and genuinely desirous to see Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others come to know Jesus truly. I'm not on a crusade, and this series won't be a rant against my IM-advocating brothers and sisters. But I do intend to give my honest critique, and I hope it will be helpful, irenic, and faithful to Scripture.

Before concluding, I want to briefly mention a word about terminology. Some IM proponents prefer a term like "movements to Jesus" rather than "Insider Movements." Perhaps the terminology will change in the future, but the term "Insider Movements" is currently in common use, so it will be preferred here. Also, the literature can sometimes be confusing because

“Insider Movements” refers both to the methodology-or paradigm-as well as specific “movements” in specific geographic locations. In these posts, the capitalized form (Insider Movements) will refer to the former while the lowercase alternative (insider movements) will refer to the latter.

Finally, while IM can be applied to various religious settings, most of the literature has focused on IM among Muslims. Because of this emphasis in the literature and my own personal experience among Muslims, these posts will not discuss other religious cultures.

[1] John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-centered Communities’ (‘C’) Found in the Muslim Context,” *EMQ* 34 (October 1998): 407-408.

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So exactly what is this IM thing? I often find that a simple description or definition causes audiences to jump to conclusions before understanding what IM really is, and isn’t. Before I get to a description, we need to be aware of the field realities motivating the IM approach.

IM proponents often note the challenges and barriers to conversion among Muslims. Frequently cited are Muslim misunderstandings about Christians and “Christianity.” For example, many Muslims assume that Christians worship three gods, read a corrupt book, and believe God had a son via a physical relationship with Mary. Furthermore, many Muslims assume Christians are as morally decadent as Hollywood films and MTV videos produced in the “Christian” United States.

As you can imagine, the terms “Christian” and “Christianity” don’t usually generate warm fuzzies for Muslims. Couple this with an often explosive reaction against changing religions, as well as really close family and community ties, and it’s not hard to understand how humanly difficult it can be for Muslims to become “Christians.” Furthermore, when a new believer announces he has become a “Christian” and stops attending the mosque, he is often cut off from his community and his opportunity to share the gospel is gone, or at least severely hindered. By the way, IM advocates react quite strongly to the accusation that the methodology is driven by an attempt to avoid persecution. In response, they cite the martyrdom of a number of Insider believers, killed not because they turned away from “Islam” but because they wouldn’t stop talking about Jesus.

In response to these realities, IM claims that salvific faith in Jesus does not require a change of religion or religious identity, even though biblical faith will require one to abandon or reinterpret certain beliefs and practices of his pre-faith religion.[1] In other words, a Muslim does not have to stop being a “Muslim,” although he may have to change or reject some of his beliefs and practices. So a “Muslim follower of Jesus” might continue to go to the mosque and perhaps

even participate in the prayers with others there while internally changing some of the content or meaning. He also might continue to affirm Muhammad as a prophet in some way, and might even participate in the Hajj, again transforming the meaning. At the same time, these “Muslim followers of Jesus” join together separately, away from the mosque, for worship and Bible study.

The most succinct summary of this comes from Kevin Higgins, probably the most prolific IM advocate. Using Naaman as a biblical paradigm for IM, Higgins suggests Naaman returned to his pre-conversion religious community, but some of his beliefs and practices changed. In other words, in regard to his *beliefs* and *behavior* Naaman evidenced some change, but in terms of *belonging* he remained vitally connected to his prior *religious* community.^[2]

So besides Naaman, what other biblical support do IM proponents cite? I’ll mention a few points here and then finish describing the most commonly mentioned evidence in the next post.

First, the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is highly significant for IM advocates. In this landmark decision, the Apostles determined that God was now doing a new thing, meaning Gentiles did not have to “go through” Judaism in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Similarly, today Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and others do not have to go through “Christianity” in order to enter the Kingdom of God. In fact, according to Paul each one must “remain in that condition in which he was called” (1 Cor 7:20, 24). For IM advocates, this “remaining” includes the old *religious* community as well, albeit with some modified beliefs and behaviors.

On the flip side, early Jewish believers continued to attend the Temple and synagogue while meeting separately in homes for Christian worship, teaching, and fellowship. Advocates acknowledge the discontinuity between Islam and Judaism, but continue to see the analogy as significant and valid. After all, the first-century Jewish institutions were led by unbelieving priests and elders who rejected Jesus as the Messiah, issued condemnations against Christians, and ultimately pronounced judgment against them. Yet the Jewish Christians remained “inside” the Jewish religious community for decades.

In the next post I’ll finish describing the key characteristics and supporting arguments offered by IM proponents.

[1] For a description of three possible options, see Kevin Higgins, “Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements: A Brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent’s Critique of C-5 Thinking,” *IJFM* 23 (Fall 2006): 121.

[2] Kevin Higgins, “Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective,” *SFM* 5 (August 2009): 90-91.

Kevin Higgins, whom I mentioned in the previous installment, has made the most significant attempt by any IM proponent to offer a biblical and theological rationale for various aspects of the methodology. For example, in a brief discussion of six biblical characters or passages, Kevin suggests the Bible contains evidence, or hints, that God is at work within the religions of the world, and that some individuals in other religions are “in relationship with God Himself.”^[1] These examples include Melchizedek, Balaam, Amos 9:7, the pagan sailors in Jonah, the Wise Men (Matthew 2), and Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17).

According to Higgins, while all non-Christian religions evidence both human and demonic rebellion, they also reflect the activity of God. Therefore, because “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.”^[2] Furthermore, just as Paul found altars and poets in Athens, intentionally placed there as “fingerprints of God within the religions of the world,” we will find in the Qur’an, *hadith*, mosque worship, and even the pilgrimage to Mecca, “altars to an unknown god” and “poets” that we can quote.^[3]

For Higgins, the religions are not only vehicles of God’s activity and potential structures within which followers of Jesus can live as faithful disciples, but they are also part of the Kingdom of God, which Higgins defines as “the whole range of God’s exercise of His reign and rule in the universe.”^[4] This does not mean Higgins holds an [inclusivist](#) position, but it does mean that, for him, conversion to Christ does not require an institutional transfer of religion. In other words, a Muslim is not required to become a “Christian” and join a “Christian” community.

When addressing the question of Islam specifically, Higgins distinguishes between “Islam as it is” and “Islam as it was.”^[5] According to Higgins, Muhammad’s original intent (“Islam as it was”) was to unite the people of his region in the faith of Abraham. The Qur’an affirms the previous books from Allah. Furthermore, the style of the Qur’an suggests Muhammad assumed his audience was familiar with the content of these books. Therefore, says Higgins, the Qur’an should be categorized as a kind of “[midrash](#)” on the Bible, and should be interpreted through the lens of the Bible rather than through the lens of the *hadith*. Further still, while Higgins does not believe the Qur’an is the “word of God,” and it does contain errors, he also suggests Muhammad received some of it directly from God via “direct inspiration.”^[6] All of this (and more which I don’t have room to relate here) leads Higgins to posit a “Jesus Key” hermeneutic of the Qur’an. Muslims may reject interpretations reached via this approach, but early unbelieving Jews also rejected Christian interpretations of the Old Testament as well.^[7]

Higgins’ interpretation of “Islam as it was” leads him to the conclusion that remaining within Islam, albeit a reinterpreted Islam, is a biblically viable option for disciples of Jesus. The unbelieving Muslim community may discover these aberrant beliefs and dispel the “Muslim followers of Jesus,” but Higgins believes these followers should remain inside the Muslim religious community as long as possible. Here again, Higgins cites the early Jewish background Christians who did not leave the Temple and synagogue until driven out by the Jews.

Finally, one other *possible* example of an IM in the Bible suggested by Higgins is 1 Cor 8:10.^[8] Paul writes, “For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?” According to Higgins, the dining in a pagan temple is actually occurring, not hypothetical, and Paul does not condemn the action for the thing in itself, but because it negatively affects a weaker brother. Therefore, Higgins concludes this is a “possible example of a Gentile believer who is still ‘inside’ part of their religious heritage.”^[9]

In the next two posts I’ll offer some brief analysis of these claims.

[1] Kevin Higgins, “Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective,” *SFM* 5 (August 2009): 85.

[2] Higgins, “Inside What?” 88.

[3] Kevin Higgins, “The Key to Insider Movements: The ‘Devoted’s’ of Acts,” *IJFM* 21 (Winter 2004): 162.

[4] Higgins, “Inside What?” 87.

[5] Higgins’ thoughts on this are explained in an unpublished document he graciously supplied to me and allowed me to include as an appendix to my dissertation. See pages 256-308 of Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2011).

[6] See Coleman, “A Theological Analysis,” 121 fn. 182.

[7] Kevin Higgins, “Acts 15 and Insider Movements among Muslims: Questions, Process, and Conclusions,” *IJFM* 24 (Spring 2007): 38.

[8] Higgins, “Inside What?” 79 fn. 16.

[9] Higgins, “Acts 15,” 37.

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So what do we make of the biblical and theological arguments of IM proponents? This was the sole purpose of my entire dissertation, and even still I feel like more could have been done. So, a couple of blog posts will be terribly inadequate to offer anything but a number of summary statements. But here are a few brief thoughts.

First, while I appreciate Kevin Higgins' effort to provide some biblical and theological rationale, I find claims about God working *within* the non-Christian religions biblically unconvincing. After closely scrutinizing the six characters or passages he cites, I do not find biblical indications that God is working *within*, or *via*, these non-Christian religions. God is certainly calling out to, drawing, and convicting *individuals* (and perhaps even groups) within these religions, and He is certainly "in relationship" with those individuals (albeit it sometimes an adversarial one). But I do not see biblical indications that God ordained these religions as preparation for the gospel or that He is using them as vehicles of communication.

For example, regarding the sailors of Jonah, Higgins makes three brief claims: (1) their prayers are heard by Yahweh, (2) Yahweh directs the answer when they cast lots, and (3) therefore, they are in relationship with Yahweh.^[1] In one sense, all three claims can possibly be affirmed. The sailors clearly cast lots (Jonah 1:7) and it seems that God directed. Furthermore, the text indicates the sailors prayed on two occasions, the first time each man praying to his own god (1:5), the second time specifically to Yahweh, Jonah's God (1:14). Their second prayer was answered (they were spared), but the text nowhere establishes a cause and effect relationship between their prayer to Yahweh and the outcome. In fact, Jonah had already informed them they would be saved if they cast him into the sea (1:12).

The sailors, as with all individuals who have ever lived, are certainly in *some* kind of relationship with Yahweh, but the text gives no indication that their prayer was anything other than an egocentric concern for their own safety. Furthermore, the text nowhere suggests that God used their religion as a means of communicating or relating to them. God appears to have directed the casting of lots, but lot casting was a common practice among the Israelites and the ancient Near East, so the sailors' actions are not surprising. But again, how could this support the conclusion that God was working *within* a non-Christian religious system, or that He intended to affirm such a religion? The other biblical examples Higgins cites are equally problematic.

Similarly, this claim that God is working within the religions of the world-or the possible implication that He ordained them as a means of preparation for the gospel-cuts against the grain of repeated biblical judgments on other religions and the biblical emphasis on the covenant people as the means by which God intends to bring salvation to the nations.

This is not to suggest that non-Christian religions are entirely devoid of any kind of true statements. In fact, I believe there are biblical and theological reasons to expect that most, if not all, non-Christian religions will contain elements of both general and special revelation. However, I am *not* suggesting that God inspired Muhammad in the way that Kevin Higgins believes He did. Historical evidence suggests that biblical content was available to Muhammad, possibly from multiple human sources. He also had access to general revelation, as do all humans. Therefore, it is not surprising to find true statements within Islam. But this does not mean that God inspired Muhammad, that He is working *within* Islam to bring Muslims to Christ, or that He ordained Islam as some sort of preparation for the gospel. The latter claim would be troublesomely anachronistic since Muhammad was born almost 600 years *after* Jesus.

Therefore, it seems misguided to place the religions within the Kingdom of God, as Higgins does. Ultimately, God does reign over all (however you want to work out the tension between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility). But as George Ladd points out, the Kingdom of God is primarily a soteriological idea, and it has come in the person and activity of Jesus, the King.^[2]

In the next post I'll make a few comments on several of the key passages cited by IM proponents, and mention the analogy between early Jewish believers and Muslim Insiders.

[1] Kevin Higgins, "Inside What? Church, Culture, Religion and Insider Movements in Biblical Perspective," *SFM* 5 (August 2009): 85.

[2] George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1952), 81-91.

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The previous post dealt mostly with the issue of theology of religions, although it touched on the issue of possible revelation in non-Christian religions. In this post, I want to briefly comment on a few key passages frequently referenced by IM advocates.

Proponents often note the watershed decision of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. They rightly note that Gentile believers were not required to "go through" Judaism (i.e., be circumcised) in order to be saved. Therefore, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and others should not be required to go through "Christianity" today. I can only offer two extremely brief responses. First, if by "Christianity" IM advocates mean a *Western cultural form* of the worship of Jesus, I agree. But IM on the one hand, and Western cultural Christianity on the other, are not the only alternatives. Second, IM advocates are making Acts 15 answer a question that was not being asked. The early Gentile believers were not saying, "Can we remain in our Gentile pagan *religious* system and community if we modify some of our beliefs and behavior?" No, they were saying, "Must we *take on* circumcision?" In other words, the Acts 15 discussion was not about what must or mustn't be *put off*, but about what must or mustn't be *put on*.

Regarding Paul's statement in 1 Cor 7:20, 24-that each man should remain in the state in which he was called-I think IM advocates fail to interpret this in light of Paul's instructions later in the same letter. IM advocates rightly note that the immediate context of 1 Cor 7:20-24 does involve some religious matters (after all, Paul mentions circumcision in 1 Cor 7:19). However, Paul strongly and unequivocally prohibits continued participation in pagan *religious* activity in 1 Cor 10:20-22. Therefore, unless Paul is hopelessly self-contradictory or schizophrenic, his exhortation to "remain" in 7:20 cannot refer to remaining in pagan religious activity.

This brings me to the suggestion that 1 Cor 8:10 refers to a former pagan, now turned follower of Christ, who is at least in part remaining within his pagan religious community. In other words, he's still dining at the pagan temple, but Paul doesn't condemn the practice in itself, only because it harms a weaker brother. I'll note a few possible interpretations here (you'll have to read the dissertation if you want all the background). (1) The situation in 8:10 is not actually happening, but is hypothetical. (2) The dining is actually occurring but it is a social-not religious-occasion, so the stronger brother is free to eat if he can do so without causing a weaker brother to stumble. (3) The dining is actually happening, and it is wrong, but Paul doesn't outright condemn it outright in 8:10, only later in chapter 10 (because he is mainly concerned with brotherly relations in chapter 8 and/or he employs a rhetorical strategy that saves the stronger condemnation until later).

The key point to note here is that none of these interpretations are compatible with an Insider approach. Again, in 1 Cor 10:20-22 Paul clearly and unequivocally condemns participation in anything that constitutes idol worship. So, do Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other non-Christians worship idols? As much as I would like to, I don't have space to fully address that here. In short, I think the answer is "yes." If you're really interested, you'll have to read at least a few pages of my dissertation.[\[1\]](#)

Finally, I need to say a few words about the analogy between early Jewish believers and Muslim Insiders. First, while there is no clear consensus on exactly when all Jewish believers completely separated from the Temple and synagogue or from the Jewish religious community, history indicates that many of them did stay closely connected for a lengthy period, for various reasons. However, while IM proponents acknowledge some discontinuity between Judaism and Islam, I think the discontinuity is overly minimized. I think Scripture portrays a much more radical discontinuity between the faith of Judaism/Christianity and all other faiths, however politically incorrect such a view may be today.

I believe the exhortation of Hebrews 13:13 ("let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach") is particularly important for this discussion, especially in light of this analogy. Again, if you're really interested you'll have to check the dissertation for all the supporting documentation and discussion (pp. 210-223), but I believe the author of Hebrews was calling Jewish background followers of Jesus to make (or maintain) a decisive break with the *religious* community and system of Judaism. If this was essential for first-century Jewish believers, how much more so for those who come to faith from non-Christian religions today?

There's so much more to say, but that's why I wrote a dissertation.

[\[1\]](#) Doug Coleman, *A Theological Analysis of the Insider Movement Paradigm from Four Perspectives: Theology of Religions, Revelation, Soteriology, and Ecclesiology* (Pasadena: WCIU Press, 2011), 59-61.

In this final installment I'll point to some resources for further study and make a few summary remarks about the Insider Movement debate.

Publications by proponents exist almost exclusively in the form of journal articles. The majority of these have appeared in just a few journals, several of which are freely available online. Most of the positive articles have been published in the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* (www.ijfm.org) and *Mission Frontiers* (www.missionfrontiers.org).

Critics have offered a number of responses via articles published in *St. Francis Magazine*, which can also be accessed free of charge online (www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/). Also, the web site Biblical Missiology (biblicalmissiology.org) was founded to address concerns about IM methodology (yours truly is not the founder or a participant, by the way). Most recently, the folks there have focused on issues related to Bible translation, particularly controversy related to translation of Sonship and familial terminology.

I have previously mentioned my own dissertation available either from the SEBTS library or for sale [here](#), or in [Kindle version](#). It focuses solely on biblical and theological issues. However, another excellent dissertation critiquing selected missiological elements of IM was completed and submitted at Southern Seminary last year. It also gives an excellent description of the development of IM. You can access it for free [here](#).

Finally, [i2 ministries](#) has sponsored conferences critiquing IM, and has published a book as well: [Chrislam: How Missionaries Are Promoting an Islamized Gospel](#). **I have not yet read the book because it was released after I returned to the field last year and I have not been able to obtain a copy.** See a review and lengthy discussion in the comments section [here](#).

At the beginning of this series, I noted that the tone of this debate has often been less than charitable. I do believe this is worth debating, even vigorously, because the consequences of the outcome are potentially quite serious. But the debate doesn't require *ad hominem* arguments or presupposing motives. Furthermore, participants in the debate should work hard to avoid misrepresentations or mis-characterizations, unintentional or not. Unfortunately, I almost always find myself issuing qualifications when I recommend resources from both sides, often not because I disagree with the content, but because I find the tone or other comments objectionable.

I don't claim that my own writing navigates the waters perfectly, but I can say that fairness, charity, and accuracy have been my highest secondary objectives. I've enjoyed the opportunity to share some of what I've learned and interacting in the comments section. I hope it's been helpful.