

Insider Movements and Ekklesia:

A Response to Selected Portions of the PCA Report Regarding Insider Movements:

["A Call to Faithful Witness"](#)

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One of the major expressions of concern about insider movements in recent years has come from the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). While they are certainly not the only church body with such concerns, they are perhaps the one that has given the most time and attention to articulating their critiques. This has taken major form in a report that covered a number of topics. My purpose in this article is to focus specifically on some of the concerns raised by the committee relative to insider movement thinking about the church.

I think it would be fair summarize the PCA concerns in general terms as two-fold:

First, the report states a number of times that IM thinkers do not address the subject of church enough. And second, there are concerns about the nature of what IM thinkers do say.

I will focus on a number of quotations, and my responses and comments follow the order which those come in within the document itself. There is therefore no real outline to my comments here.

After making comments on the selected quotations, I have elected to conclude with an extended portion from an article I wrote for IJFM several years ago, because it is a clear description, at least in summary form, of what I see to be the biblical nature of the church.

IM and Ecclesiology

The general concern about insider movement ecclesiology is expressed in "Section A. Abridged Committee Report" (page 2125):

"...IM understandings of the church fail to evidence serious interaction with historical Christian reflection on the doctrine of the church and, back of that, the biblical testimony to the church. Discussions of such basic or fundamental matters as the marks of the church, the invisible and visible church, and the means of grace require considerably more attention than IMP [*Insider Movement Paradigm*] proponents have generally afforded in their writings."¹

This is an understandable impression. References to ekklesia and related matters have been only scantily addressed thus far in the literature. I agree with the committee's opinion that this is an important area to address, biblically and in conversation with the various ecclesiological positions that churches and denominations have arrived at in history. I know of other IM proponents who would say the same.

There are reasons for this lack of attention thus far. Initially the needs addressed in public writings by insider thinkers have been determined by a motivation on our part to outline what we see to be support for the insider paradigm generally. Then as controversy grew our writing was often driven by responding

¹ By "the four marks of the church" the PCA means the classic descriptions of the church, found in the Nicene Creed, as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

to the critiques leveled at insider thinking. Most of the earlier critiques were not based on ecclesiological questions until more recently.

The committee goes on to say, in Section 1 B. The Declarations: Affirmations and Denials page 2128

“4a) We affirm that the church of Jesus Christ is one body, holy, catholic, and apostolic, and that a local expression of the biblical church exists where the true marks of the church are present...4b) We deny that a biblical church exists where any of these marks, which manifest the vital connection to the universal church, are absent.”

In many ways there is nothing here to argue with. However I would want to qualify a few points, such as the statement that “the biblical church exists where the true marks...are present.” I would qualify it by a minor edit that the true marks would indicate a fully mature, biblical church. That is, I would leave room for the reality that as disciples are made and churches planted there is a process of “becoming” mature churches. At what point in that process do we say “yes this is a church?”

Must all four marks be there *first*? And whose definitions of the marks should we apply?

Indeed the reality is that major Christian traditions do not in fact agree on what the words mean, and thus do not agree with each other about which churches truly or fully bear all of the marks of the church. A Roman Catholic or Orthodox or high church Anglican understanding of the words one, holy, catholic, and apostolic are very different than a PCA understanding. We could cite Pentecostal, Anabaptist, Lutheran, Wesleyan and other traditions as well.

I want to be clear about what my critique truly is here. I am not suggesting, in fact, that the PCA report is wrong to call insider thinkers to account for a fuller ecclesiology. We who advocate for IM need to be clearer about our ecclesiology. I also fully understand why these four marks are central in their statement. They have history behind them and are enshrined in creedal formulations.

My concern however is that we not hold insider ecclesiology to a standard which in fact Christendom has not met. Or at least, that if we do so we do it fully aware that we are doing so. If various Christian traditions deny that other traditions share these marks, then what does it in fact mean to “manifest the vital connection to the church universal”? And if our current denominations find it so difficult to actually live in any sort of meaningful fellowship, why do we demand IM must do so visibly and publically (which is not always the demand but frequently has been).²

But here is why I think the PCA document is important and indeed helpful at this point. Perhaps by calling attention to this issue in connection with insider movements, we are being given yet another opportunity to recognize and repent of our much wider ecclesiological weakness. “Church” was not a topic fully worked out in the creeds, it received more thought in some reformation confessions (but no uniform agreement has emerged), the western mission movement has largely been anemic in our ecclesiology, and, yes, we proponents of insider movements have not thought deeply enough about the church. In other words, ecclesiology as a theological topic is actually in need of a lot of attention from a lot of quarters, not only from IM proponents.

² By visible fellowship I do not mean here the fellowship of believers meeting together as ekklesia. IM literature fully supports the need for this. I am referring to the visible meeting together of IM believers with believers from Christian denominations. I am not saying this is not a worthy goal, but that the reality within Christendom does not meet the standard some ask IM’s to meet.

IM on Church and Kingdom

Next, on page 2129 the reports states “5a) We affirm that the visible church is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ (*WCF* 25:2). “

I will not dwell long here except to say that this simple equation of visible church with Kingdom is a reductionist statement that would not meet acceptance universally or without serious qualification and editing from other evangelicals. I cannot delve fully into this issue, but in as much as many IM proponents do speak of the Kingdom a lot, and in as much as one of the BtD pre-readings deals with the so-called Kingdom Circles, it seems important to at least touch this issue. I will focus on the relationship of Kingdom and church.

I will refer here to two fairly standard works on the relationship of Kingdom and church, the works of G. E. Ladd and John Bright.

Ladd’s definition of Kingdom is “that the Kingdom of God in the New Testament is the redemptive work of God active in history for the defeat of His enemies, bringing to men the blessings of the divine reign” (Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, page 107). Taken alone this statement could suggest there is no necessary link between church and Kingdom but Ladd makes it clear that in fact there is a very tight connection. “The Kingdom of God...created the church and works through the church in the world” (page 115). And in fact Ladd points out that in Matthew 16 right after declaring “I will build My church” Jesus tells the disciples He is giving the “keys to the Kingdom” (page 109 to 110).

But Ladd does not agree that the two can be equated as stated in the PCA report. Ladd states unequivocally that “the Church therefore is not the Kingdom of God” (page 117). Ladd does affirm the church as the primary *agent* of God’s Kingdom rule, but that is not the same thing as suggesting that they are coterminous as the PCA report does.

John Bright’s position is similar, but he expands a bit further on language I noted in Ladd about the “blessings of the divine reign” in defining his vision of the Kingdom. Bright says “...the Kingdom of God is not only the goal of all human history and the reward of all believers, not only the norm by which all human behavior is judged, it is a new order which even now bursts in upon the present one and summons men to be its people” (Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 223). And, “the Kingdom of God moves on to its inevitable triumph: the unconditional surrender of the Foe, the restoration of all creation under the divine domain...and the submission of all powers in heaven and earth to the Name of Christ” (p. 233). All of that language points to something much bigger than “the church”.

And so for Bright, as for Ladd, there is no equation of church and Kingdom. Bright concludes that there is “not the slightest hint” that the visible church is the Kingdom of God (p. 236).

Bright does not directly speak of the church as the main instrument of the Kingdom, as did Ladd. But he does mention two other relationships between Kingdom and church.

First, the church is a witness to the Kingdom. There is a missionary relationship between church and Kingdom. But, the church witnesses to a “Kingdom that is already set up” and distinct from the church that witnesses to it (p. 233).

And second, the church's citizens are "the people of the Kingdom" (p. 231). To be in the church is to be in the Kingdom, as a citizen or "member" if you will. Neither Ladd nor Bright ask the question the other way around: whether one can be in the Kingdom but not the church. And that seems to be part of the critique aimed at IM: that IM proponents speak of being in the Kingdom without being in the church, though it is expressed in the terms of visible and invisible church.

On page 2206 the PCA states, "Although the memberships of the invisible church and visible church overlap, there is no category for an individual who professes membership in the invisible church but not in the visible church." (again, here the language in the report has used "invisible" and "visible" church to address the nearly identical concern about Kingdom and church).

First, I wholeheartedly agree with that statement in the PCA document. I would venture to guess that based on the discussion of the marks of the church above, we would have differing views as to what constitutes the visible church. But this would be true of discussions between the PCA and high church Anglicans as well.

So, to address this concern I want to make just a few comments. Some of us who talk in support of the insider paradigm have written about the Kingdom and church in such a way that we seem to have given the impression that one can be in the Kingdom, and not be in the church. For example, I have sometimes discussed whether "so and so is in the Kingdom, or not", rather than "in the church."

This probably gives the impression, indeed has given the impression, that we diminish the importance of the visible church. Probably even the term "insider movement" subtly contributes to this impression as it implies something akin to "invisible."³

In fact, insider movements do produce and encourage and multiply churches. Visible churches which meet together. Two major research projects I know of which examined the dynamics of such movements in the field have borne this out clearly. One project was done in 1990's and I played a part in it. I also think of the East Africa data presented two years ago to BtD. Both research projects produced data showing the regularity of believer gatherings as well as some data about what these meetings included.

Having said that I will repeat a prior point. I and others have not as yet produced a full descriptive or theological portrait of the ecclesiological elements of these churches in anything like a complete sense. The report points this out and it is a fair analysis. However the report jumps to a conclusion that churches are not important to us, and that is a false assumption.

IM and Church Unity

This leads to another observation in the report related to the visible church, its unity: page 2208 "At every point in redemptive history, then, God gathers the individuals whom he redeems through his Son into a single and distinct people, divinely created and divinely preserved—the church" and, "the visible church "is one and the same in all ages" (BCO 1-2)."

I agree, but again there is a lot hidden in these words. What does the report mean by a "single" people? What does "one and the same in all ages" mean? I can't think of any denomination that would disagree

³ For the record most of my colleagues would prefer not to use the term "insider," and this impression of invisible is just one of several reasons.

with the statement, and yet some would disagree about which other denominations can be included. And it is hard to speak about a single body as the report does in anything other than theoretical terms.

My point is that affirmation of definitions of church such as the classic marks, and statements about unity do not necessarily mean that we agree. I would venture to add that a lack of the use of the four classic marks in insider writings does not imply a lack of awareness or even agreement about the essential elements they point to. I prefer to describe my views of the church in more directly and explicitly biblical terms (which I will seek to do at the end of this article).

In saying this I am not suggesting that what the classic words for the marks of the church are pointing to is not biblical. Using them is fine, but again I prefer to stay closer to biblical vocabulary in my own thinking.

IM and Historic Church Functions and Structures

Returning to the Report's critique of IM views of church, on page 2214: "IM proponents are reticent in using classical theological terminology and categories to reflect upon the church. Explicit discussions, for example, of such ecclesiological matters as an ordained ministry, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline are rare. IM proponents have insisted that C5 believers do and ought to gather publicly for "prayer, worship, and reading of the Christian Scriptures." It is not true to say, therefore, that there is no corporate dimension to the church in IM writings. It is fair to observe, however, that a robust exposition of many dimensions of the government, discipline, and worship of the church is a striking lacuna in IM writings." (Author's note: in this case a "lacuna" means something missing, so the PCA is saying that discussion of church government etc. is a missing element in IM writings)

In as much as I have already addressed the reasons for the lack of ecclesiological material in IM literature, I won't repeat those comments here. Yes, there is a lack of reference to these issues in much IM writing (though not all). The Report goes on...

"Some may say that new believers must work out the structure of government, discipline and worship in their own culturally appropriate way, drawing from the Scripture, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To propose any robust exposition on these topics on our part, the argument continues, would result in the imposition of our culturally determined beliefs and practices on these believers. Such a rationale, however, presupposes that these topics are culturally determined rather than biblically legislated. Because the Scripture is concerned to set forth normative principles regulating the church's government, discipline and worship, it is not a cultural imposition to encourage believers in Muslim countries to order their lives according to these principles."

Here the Report makes a strange argument. On the one hand IM proponents are criticized for suggesting that believers should search the scriptures and apply them to the development of church government, discipline, and worship. But at the same time we are told the scriptures set these forth. Surely, if the latter is the case, it is appropriate to encourage emerging leaders to discover these in the scriptures and apply them appropriately?

I suspect the Report is simply not clear here. I would suspect that what the Report is really concerned about is not that IM movements are encouraged to seek to derive ecclesiology from the scriptures, but rather that IM proponents are not more directive in determining the outcome of that search.

I have two comments. First, I admit that my own writing and speaking in the past may have *sounded* as if I am suggesting that we simply hand believers a Bible and say, “go to it.” In fact (as I have tried to describe within BtD especially) the reality is more complex and I do encourage emerging leaders to look at the various answers Christians have discovered and developed in history relative to church government, practices, and worship.

However, I do also encourage the principle that the decision making process be ultimately left as the responsibility of those emerging leaders, not myself. I feel confident doing so because I trust the Spirit to teach His people in and through the Word, and because we develop an ongoing process to revisit such decisions in the light of new experience, and new biblical learning by those leaders as they grow.

My second comment related to this issue is that it seems to me that perhaps the PCA assumes there is only one right answer to be found in scripture relative to, say, church government. In fact, these are issues that godly students of the bible and history have differed about for generations.

IM and Church Membership

From questions of form and structure and practice, the Report moves to a more specific critique of some of my comments related to what it means to be “in” the church. Page 2224-2225:

“Higgins’s definition of the church as ‘only those born from above and incorporated by the Spirit in his Body’ not only neglects the covenantal nature both of the church and of membership in the church, but fails to address both the sacramental dimensions of church membership (baptism) and the governmental dimensions of church membership (e.g., examination by the church’s elders; reception by profession of faith). It addresses, in other words, inward and invisible dimensions of church membership, but it neglects to address certain outward dimensions of church membership—dimensions that the New Testament does not regard as unimportant or dispensable to a well-ordered church. It is not that Higgins sees no place for government within the church. We have noted above that he does. It is that he is not concerned to relate the functioning of the church’s government to his understanding of church membership.”

The Report is correct in pointing out that the article they are citing does not spell out the relationship between church government and church membership. That is because I was addressing a different issue in that article. I was not saying that there is no role for church leaders in the issue of church membership, but that even Christians who have been duly admitted by proper rites and leaders *may not in fact be spiritually regenerated, justified, and born again*. And, on the other hand, I would suggest that there are cases in which people are regenerated, justified and born again, are not members of any visible church, but are none the less part of the Body of Christ (though in the process of discipleship we would certainly encourage being part of a fellowship).

Saying that, however, is *not* suggesting that this is the norm, or ideal, or an end to be sought after and made a goal. It is simply a statement of fact.

Unity Revisited

Next the Report returns to the question of whether believers in insider movements do or should relate to other church bodies and if so, how. Here too the Report sees a major flaw in IM thinking. Page 2226-2227:

“a related dichotomy surfaces in some proponents’ discussions about the church. In response to the question whether ‘Jesus-following Muslims [who] do not join traditional Christian churches or denominations ... see themselves as part of the body of Christ,’ Travis and Woodberry reply that ‘the great majority of Jesus following Muslims view all people who are truly submitted to God through Christ, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, as fellow members of the Kingdom of God. The presence of the Spirit of God in both born-again Christians and born-again Muslims points to realities—the body of Christ and the Kingdom of God—that go beyond socio-religious labels and categories.’ The unity for which Travis and Woodberry plead, in other words, is invisible and Spiritual but does not necessarily have ecclesiastical dimensions.”

My own experience is that every Muslim believer in Jesus I have met and talked about this issue with has said categorically, “we are part of the Body of Christ, and so are our Christian brothers and sisters.” And I have been in numerous meetings, bible studies, and gatherings in which this unity is expressed visibly and corporately.

Here again I suspect that IM expressions of church are being held to a different standard than Christian denominations. In what sort of settings and with what frequency do Baptists and Presbyterians meet and visibly demonstrate unity? Few, irregular, and typically specially planned events. Which has been exactly my experience in terms of Muslim believers worshipping, praying, and being in fellowship with brothers and sisters from various denominations.

IM and Recognizing a “Church”

Page 2228 continues, “IM understandings of the church place outsiders in a particular quandary with respect to identifying the “Jesus-based communities” in question. On what basis might we recognize these bodies as churches? We have observed above how Reformed confessions and writers alike have pointed to the Word of God, particularly the preached Word of God as the defining mark of the church.”

In response to that statement, I point out that there are Christians whose ecclesiology would question that Reformed view. I for one have deep reservations about the sufficiency of the Reformed view that the preached Word is the defining mark of the church. This seems woefully anemic in the light of Paul’s epistles.

But to be fair, the Report is more concerned to critique IM thinking at the level of whether we are concerned in any way to develop church leadership overtly. The suggestion or criticism is that IM proponents are passive on this score. The section just noted continues:

“...it is not simply that these bodies lack officers whose calling it is to open the Word of God to them. It is that the IM understandings of Kingdom and church surveyed above evidence neither the urgency of nor even the necessity of introducing such officers into the church. IM methodology, in other words, does a disservice to these bodies by perpetuating a situation that is not conducive to outside churches’ desires to recognize, assist, and encourage bodies that may in fact prove to be sister churches.”

This is, first of all, an argument from silence. But as I have acknowledged above, I understand why. To say it again, yes IM writings have not addressed ecclesiology in anything like a fully developed way.

Second, in several cases this is simply an untrue characterization. I have outlined in my own articles the process by which an insider movement asked to be able to develop an official link with a denomination.

This is a movement that I had for a number of years helped to foster and encourage and with whose leaders I had helped to develop biblical theology. After a search and discussion with a number of denominations, a link was in fact forged and still is in place. I know of some similar instances elsewhere.

PCA's Concluding Concerns and a Baseless Claim

Later the Report repeats what seems to have been almost a refrain. Page 2229, "IM understandings of the church fail to evidence serious interaction with historical Christian reflection on the doctrine of the church and, back of that, the biblical testimony to the church. Most IM proponents are self-identified Protestants and are, therefore, heirs of a Reformation tradition that has devoted considerable attention to the Scripture's teaching on the church. But it is precisely such a tradition that IM proponents have failed to engage. This is not a complaint that IM proponents have failed to embrace and to propagate the fine points of Presbyterian polity. It is to say, rather, that discussions of such basic or fundamental matters as the marks of the church; the invisible and visible church; and the means of grace require considerably more attention than IM proponents have generally afforded in their writings. This is not to say, furthermore, that IM proponents are operating with no understanding of the church. They have, we have seen, definite understandings of the Kingdom, of the church in relation to the Kingdom, and of the progress and growth of the Kingdom. These understandings, however, require to a considerable degree more exegetical and theological articulation and exposition than they have thus far been afforded."

I too have developed my own refrain in my responses to this repeated theme. Yes, our writing has not addressed as fully as is warranted the issues of ecclesiology and the relationship of church and Kingdom that have been raised by the PCA report.

And, as I have stated in various ways elsewhere, perhaps the most glaring weakness in the Report is the standard with which the PCA measures IM ecclesiology. Though the Report carefully states it is not insisting on Presbyterian polity, its use of the marks of the church and other comments would not only leave IM ecclesiology out of the range of acceptability, but in fact many other church movements as well, Anabaptist and charismatic traditions to mention just two.

At the same time, the Report has its own weaknesses, which I have sought to point out along the way. And it has its own positions that need better exegetical foundation (for example the equation of Kingdom and church).

Having sought to seriously address a number of important issues, and after also being careful to at least attempt to ground those critiques in a discussion of actual IM thinking, I find it odd that the Report moves in the direction of a critique that can in no way be sustained by reference to the writings of IM proponents, case studies of movements, or testimonies from actual leaders of insider movements.

The Report makes the baseless claim that insider believers are hiding and afraid to face persecution:

"John Calvin spoke against the attitude of "Nicodemites" who, in order to avoid the persecutions rampant in that day, remained within the Roman Church in name and in worship while privately professing evangelical beliefs."

I challenge the authors of the Report to find any evidence that this is the reason or aim of insiders. The consistent testimony has been one of brave and forthright witness, and of remaining within specifically for that purpose. In one movement we have had reports of 74 martyrs in 2014 alone.

A Biblical Summary by way of Conclusion

In closing, having structured this “paper” primarily in the form of responses to specific excerpts from the PCA Report, I feel it is important to end by proactively stating my own convictions about the church. In this I am not reacting to a critic, but seeking to draft a summary of my own thinking. Other IM thinkers may well differ with me. Some Insider leaders may well differ with me. This is a summary of what I believe and what I teach.

The summary below is derived from Acts, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, and the letters to Timothy and Titus. I have pulled this from a prior article and modified it only slightly for this current discussion.

1. The Church is the Body of Christ, and the assembly of believers who have been saved by grace through faith. The Church is therefore a creation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. It is not a human organization or institution, although clearly forms and structures do factor in as tangible ways in which this community expresses itself visibly. No human being can “make” a church or join the Church except by being born again by the Spirit. 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.

2. Every local “church” body is an expression of the Church body. Every time believers meet together, they are an expression of the Body. Of course, not every gathering of believers contains all of the elements, or marks, of all that the scriptures teach regarding “church”. The primary marks of a mature expression of the Church include these functions from Acts 2:42-47: The church exists where there is apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking bread (both as real meals, and the Lord’s Supper), prayer/worship, the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, radical generosity in community life, intentional gathering together (publicly in the “Temple,” and as believers house to house), and the ongoing addition of new believers.

Thus, saying ‘yes’ to “insider movements” is not a ‘no’ to church. Some form of community of believers will need to take shape in an insider movement. However, the forms and degrees of maturity of such a “church” will vary. Acts 2 portrays the early members of the church being church in separate gatherings for believers, and in the religious life of the Temple (where the official leadership was opposed to their faith sided with those who put Jesus to death).

3. We can see in Acts 14:21-28 that a mature church is also marked by having elders in each local congregation, duly selected and appointed by recognized apostolic leadership. Further, in 1 Corinthians 11 to 14 we see that a mature church is marked by regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper and the use of all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, exercised under the leadership of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the Body. Some specific churches are farther along or less far along in the process of fully expressing the nature of the Church.

The functions in number 3 clearly require some form of “gathering” and a process of developing leadership. While Scripture gives examples of how and when churches gathered it also reveals a variety of forms, times, places, and models (polities) of leadership.

4. A variety of structures and forms and ecclesiological understandings have emerged through the centuries since the apostolic period and all of these should be looked to for guidance and wisdom, but the scripture is the final authority as to the nature and form and function of the church in a given context. Again, I do not hesitate to help others probe the historical developments and movement

related to church and ecclesiology. But given the variety of forms and even exegetical conclusions related to scripture, I do not see that any particular historical form must be copied or imitated. Scripture applied in the context is ultimately sufficient and a clear enough guide.

5. 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.

What I have observed and what I encourage in my own work relative to IM and "church" is a movement to Jesus in which disciples are added to the church by the Holy Spirit as they are born again, and live out that membership in forms of life that are fully biblical but culturally shaped. What makes such movements different from other forms of church planting movements is that insider movements will generally retain more of the religious practices and customs of their context in comparison.