

Beyond Christianity—Insider Movements: The Place of the Bible and the Body of Christ in New Movements to Jesus

The title I have been given makes reference to “Beyond Christianity” and to “insider movements.” The conference organizers have thereby drawn our attention to what God is doing to draw people to Himself at or beyond the edges of what most of us would associate with Christianity. More specifically, some mission thinkers and practitioners, including myself, have experienced and advocated for what we see God to be doing to bring men and women within non-Christian religious traditions to saving faith in Christ outside of the forms and expressions of discipleship that are typical of what we would call “church.”

When we read through the scriptures, we cannot fail to be repeatedly amazed at the surprising ways in which God Himself works beyond the borders of our expectations, whether those borders be cultural, linguistic, national, or even religious. God initiated a relationship with Job long before He called into being the covenant people of Israel. It was a Roman soldier who appears to be the first in the Gospel of Mark to see in any clear way the true nature of Jesus. And we see this in many examples both before and after these two lives.

However, these examples neither prove nor disprove what some of us have sought to describe based on what we see “in the field.” How then do we assess such things? How do we understand them? Is this some form of pluralism or inclusivism, or are these movements truly the fruit of the Kingdom spreading like yeast in the dough? And how do we address each other as we seek, within the wider Body of Christ, to sharpen each others’ thinking and reflection?

Before I seek to address these questions, I want to set the stage by looking back in time.

Charles VanEngen summarized the reflections of the missionary, Bishop, and New Testament scholar, Stephen Neill, as he looked back at the great Edinburgh 1910 conference. VanEngen refers to a video lecture series by Bishop Neill in 1984 entitled “How My Mind has Changed about Mission.” In that presentation, Neill described “nine grounds for sober optimism” on the part of the Christian missionary movement in the early 1900’s:

1. The geographical exploration of the planet was nearly complete.
2. There was increased safety of human life in the world (keep in mind the Edinburgh conference was pre-World War I).
3. The health of missionaries was much better.
4. Converts had been won from every major religion, everywhere; every social system had yielded some converts.
5. Major languages had been learned.
6. The Bible was available in the most widely spoken languages.
7. The churches themselves had become engaged in missionary work overseas.
8. The gigantic Student Christian Movement was in place.
9. Third-World churches were already becoming missionary churches in their own right.

All of these points suggested, at the time, an encouraging future for the missionary movement. Neill also observed several impending changes, unforeseen in 1910:

1. Many lands would soon be closed to foreign missionary endeavor.
2. There would be a recovery and rise of the great non-Christian religions.
3. There was to be a decline of the church, mainly in the West, and in the most firmly established

churches. In the language of later writers, “Christendom,” or institutional Christianity was in some ways coming to an end.

Had the attendees at Edinburgh been blessed with prophetic foresight to be able to discern these three changes, I think it is safe to assume that they would not have seen them as cause for optimism. However I will outline what I see to be eight developments that have either taken place, are taking place, or were only barely on the radar screen 25 years ago. Several of these can be argued to be Providential responses to the three unforeseen challenges identified by Neill:

1. The concept of unreached peoples has fully supplanted the older, geo-political “mission fields” concept and become a major focus in mission planning and strategy. So called “closed countries” are an entirely different strategic phenomenon when we look instead for people groups, members of whom may be living next door.
2. There is far more sophisticated thinking and planning, partnership, and also significant progress, in the area of Bible translation. Not only has the number of translation projects continued to increase, but so has the quality and acceptability of them.
3. The growth of mission sending in the so-called global south has continued to increase since 1984. The missionary movement is not a western Christian movement. Among many other benefits, this also greatly diminishes the impact on missionary endeavor due to countries being closed to western citizens or missionaries.
4. The “business-as-mission” movement has taken us from the older tent-making models to new and vital ways of not only creative access to closed countries but also models of ministry in which all of life, including business, is seen as having Kingdom implications.
5. A rapidly growing “member care movement” has the potential to dramatically impact the long term effectiveness and health of missionaries in the field.
6. Though there are certainly exceptions, I see a greater proactive pursuit of strategic partnerships among and between different organizations.
7. The critical task of mobilization has gained greater acceptance and specific mobilization strategies such as the Perspectives movement have influenced thousands, if not millions, of believers directly and indirectly.
8. Finally, I mention the increasingly reported phenomena of men and women coming to vital faith in Jesus “beyond Christianity” in what have come to be known in some circles as “insider movements.” Many of us see in this growing reality a Providential response to what Neill described as the resurgence of the major world religions. It is also intriguing to observe that as mainline denominations decline, there has been rapid growth in new indigenous churches globally, as well as in these responses to Jesus among peoples who do not express their discipleship in forms that would be recognized as Christian.

This last point in my list is the topic I have been asked to take up in our gathering. The subject has taken a major place in recent missiological reflection. Diverse publications have published articles from different perspectives, including EMQ, Mission Frontiers, IJFM, and Christianity Today. The body of literature is growing, as is the number of conferences and seminars.

This has all served to clarify a number of the major biblical and theological issues. But it is also clear that for many the question of whether such movements are in keeping with God’s intentions and ways or not is a deeply emotional issue.

Since not all agree that the emergence of such thinking is a ground for optimism, much less a

Providential response to other religions, how might missionaries, missiologists, and mission leaders from all perspectives continue to assess what God is doing? My subtitle suggests two focus points: the Bible and the Body. And each of these is in fact connected to the theme and the vision for this gathering in Tokyo.

If I were to summarize my thesis as to how we might continue together to assess what God is doing I would say this: under the authority of the Bible, and as members of the His Body. I will explore the implications of this as we proceed.

On the one hand, in this gathering we are being called back to our core, the Great Commission mandate to make disciples. The Tokyo 2010 reminder that we are called to make disciples of all nations most directly echoes Matthew and this must also draw our attention then to the phrase in Matthew, “teaching them to obey all that I commanded you.” As we examine the topic of movements to Jesus beyond Christianity, or what some would call Christendom, we will highlight the foundational place of the Bible as the source of health and vitality for any movement claiming to be a movement of Jesus’ disciples, and for our own assessment of such movements.

Relative to the Body, the vision of this gathering is to “Celebrate the Past” and, “Embrace the Future,” and this points us to consider what God has done through His people, His Body, in history. It also encourages us to anticipate what He might do among and through us in the future. Regardless of where we might differ about these movements, we differ as members of that Body, as brothers and sisters in Christ. I will make the plea that we work hard to identify the core values and convictions in which we agree, and that having identified them, and without brushing aside our differences, we learn to address our differences from a foundation consisting of our common identity as members of His Body.

As should be clear by now, I have chosen to let the themes and vision of this conference guide me in this address: “Making disciples of all nations...Teaching them to obey all that I commanded...” I take this up below in the section titled: The Bible.

“Celebrating” and “Embracing.” I will take the liberty to apply those two words in a way that the conference organizers did not, perhaps imagine. It is my goal that we would all be able to celebrate and embrace not only the past and the future respectively, but each other as well, extending the right hand of fellowship.

First, I will briefly describe a foundation for unity. Then I will return to the two themes, the Bible, and the Body.

Core Values: Reframing the Discussion

Much of the dialogue in the publications and events cited above has focused on either defending these new movements or questioning their validity. I have actually been writing this address while preparing for and participating in a gathering of proponents of such movements as well as followers of Jesus within various non-Christian religious traditions. Before proceeding, I would like to outline an underlying set of convictions that have been shaping our conversations. Though the words are mine, they are describing three recurring assumptions that surface over and over in our reflection:

1. The Bible is God’s Word and is both supreme in its authority, and sufficient in its application, for every dimension of discipleship, teaching, training, and devotion in any movement.
2. The Kingdom of God spreads in and through social networks. It is like yeast in the dough. As such we can and should expect that in many situations, men and women and families and friends will come into the Kingdom together, as “pre-existing webs of relationship.”

3. Men and women enter the Kingdom directly, on the basis of what the King has done for them and through faith in Him, without passing through Christianity. There are movements around the world taking place “beyond Christianity.” But such movements are inside the Kingdom and under the leadership of the King.

Moving forward from this basis of key concepts, I want to articulate what I believe missionaries and missiologists on all sides of this issue actually share in common. Though we may differ on important issues, there is in fact much in the preceding two points around which we can or should agree.

The Bible

What is the place of the Bible in new movements to Jesus outside of Christianity? I have already stated that a common core value among those of us who have been proponents of new movements to Jesus outside of what most would call “Christianity” is a clear affirmation that the Bible is the authority and rule for discipleship, transformed lives, and the shape of the community. I have coined a phrase as an attempt to more concisely explain this core value, or assumption:

The Spirit of God uses the Word of God to teach and correct the People of God.

While all of us gathered here in Tokyo might use slightly different terms, I am sure we share this passion and heart. It is our common desire to see everyone, everywhere become disciples of Jesus. I am sure that I share this core value with every Christian missionary and mission leader, including those who are skeptical of movements to Jesus “beyond Christianity.”

However, I confess that I often wonder whether there has been a tendency in the missionary movement to equate the Great Commission statement about passing on “everything He taught” with various confessional expressions of that teaching. In such cases the confessional tradition can become the filter for evaluating obedience to the Word, rather than the Word itself. The Word stands over every human attempt to summarize or synthesize the teaching of the Word, no matter how time honored or sacred such a formula may have become within a particular Christian tradition or denomination.

Connection to institutional Christianity is no guarantee of faithfulness to the Gospel. Those of us here from mainline denominations may well attest to this in our own experience. Therefore, the Bible must take the highest place within any movement, whether that is what some are calling “insider movements” or whether it is a traditional denomination. Surely we all desire that our work, our structures, our expressions of church, our organizations, and indeed our very lives would be brought to stand under the authority and the continual reforming, transforming work of His Word.

I have seen with my own eyes the signs of the touch of God’s favor and mighty hand in several movements that are beyond what many of my hearers would recognize as Christianity. And I want to say in the strongest possible terms that the goal of the leaders of such movements is to live and grow under scripture. The role of the Bible in these movements to Jesus is then not only important, but of ultimate authority in the ongoing process of being conformed to His ways as a people. This applies equally to each of us here, as well as to the discourse we engage in as we seek to assess new movements. I return to that theme in my conclusion.

If these assumptions are true, then I believe we have things we can celebrate and embrace together. These movements are taking place beyond Christianity, but not outside of the Kingdom. We serve the same King, and we do so as fellow members of His Body.

The Body

I am convinced that there are authentic Kingdom movements to Jesus currently flowing in communities that are beyond what most of us know as Christianity. And I am convinced that such movements are something we should embrace and celebrate. Not everyone agrees that these are truly authentic. There are important questions over which sincere and godly people on both sides of this issue genuinely disagree.

My purpose here is not to persuade anyone about this. These questions and issues do need to be openly addressed and fully discussed and digested, but this is not the forum for that. However, I believe that the time has come for us to agree together on a new way for this conversation to proceed among us who are either supportive or skeptical of such movements. In the words of this conference, I believe we can find a way to embrace one another, and to celebrate what God is doing in and through us all.

For those who delight in these movements, we can and should celebrate that God has been and is at work in other situations as well. Many have sacrificed much, and for long, for the One Who saved us all. Also, this approach to Kingdom movements is not some cure-all panacea; we did not create it, nor do we own it. Indeed, if we are right, then this is not a human “approach” at all, but an act of God.

We should beware of any fallen human tendency to triumphalism or spiritual grandiosity. I know that those who find themselves more skeptical of the paradigm I have described might have authentic questions about whether God is at work in the ways assumed here. Yet at a minimum, is it not possible to celebrate the reality that there are men and women born within other religious communities expressing a deeper love for Jesus outside of traditional or familiar church forms? Can we not celebrate that Taliban are leaving violent jihad? That people are treating their families and wives differently? That lives are being changed? At a minimum can we not acknowledge the possibility that God is in fact drawing people to Himself in ways we do not fully understand?

Surely we can celebrate God’s hand among us, even if we continue to hold, on each side of the discussion, what we see to be valid and important questions about each other’s approaches? Can we not and must we not embrace each other as members of the Body?

Conclusion: A Different Approach?

I draw this paper to a close in the form of making two pleas to both my fellow proponents and to those who find themselves skeptical.

First, thus far the debate and discussion has largely been carried out at a distance. We need to meet face to face in order to hear each others’ voices, see each others’ faces, and be able to make certain we actually understand and listen well, before we articulate where we differ and why. I have made this plea before. I repeat it here. It is likely that the best way forward is to begin one on one or in smaller gatherings. This will be more time consuming than a “conference,” but also more fruitful and more real.

Second, I mentioned before that the Word of God should be the authority under which we conduct our discourse, our interactions with one another as we seek to assess what God is doing. Therefore, drawing from several biblical passages, I would like to close by making a plea for a change on both “sides” in the rhetoric of our public discourse in speeches, addresses, articles, and other media. Indeed, I would plea that principles such as the ones immediately below might form the basis of an agreed “ethic” for our publications, public statements, dialogues, and disagreements.

1. From Philippians 1:12-18.

Can we learn from Paul to delight in the advance of the Gospel even through instruments with whom we might disagree?

2. From Ephesians 4:14-16.

Can we learn from Paul and, even when we disagree, learn to speak the truth in love?

3. From Romans 14:1 to 15:13.

Can we learn from Paul and seek to refrain from judging the consciences of one another?

4. And from Acts 5:33-39.

Can we learn from Gamaliel and be humble enough to realize that even in our sincerest and deepest desires to follow Him and seek His truth; we still see through a glass darkly and have much to learn?

Can we all affirm that we do not want to be found opposing God?

What if we who support this paradigm are wrong, in full or in part? As we seek to live under and learn from His Word, God is able to correct and deal with us.

And what if skeptics are wrong? If God is at work in the movements we are describing, if this is something poured out from Him by His Spirit, then He too is able to correct the views of those who at present are not convinced.

In summary, I am proposing two things: meeting face to face as members of the Body, and agreeing to an “ethic of discourse” for our conversations. Knowing that He is Lord, and that His Spirit through His Word will teach and correct His Body, we can, in fact, relax. We can celebrate. We can embrace. May God use us all, broken vessels that we are, as He makes disciples of Jesus among all the nations. Amen.