

Additional Perspectives

Insider Movements: Honoring God-Given Identity and Community

by Rebecca Lewis

All movements to Christ are amazing works of God! But not all movements are the same.

How Is an “Insider Movement” Different from Other Movements to Christ?

Three distinct types of movements to Christ among unreached peoples have been described in the last century: “insider movements,” “people movements,” and “church planting movements.”

Insider movements can be defined as movements to obedient faith in Christ that remain integrated with or *inside* their natural community. In any insider movement there are two distinct elements:

1. The gospel takes root within *pre-existing communities* or social networks, which *become* the main expression of “church” in that context. Believers are not gathered from diverse social networks to create a “church.” New parallel social structures are not invented or introduced.
2. Believers *retain their identity* as members of their socio-religious community while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible.¹

In contrast, people movements—identified by J. Waskom Pickett (1933), then analyzed by Donald McGavran (1950)—are mass movements in which whole communities decide as a group to leave their former religious affiliation in order to become Christians. People movements, like insider movements, keep the community intact, but unlike insider movements, the community’s religious affiliation and identity are changed. Believers in the third type of movements, church planting movements (CPMs), as described by David Garrison, also “make a clean break with their former religion and redefine themselves with a distinctly Christian identity.”² CPMs promote movements by simplifying church structure and empowering local leaders, but they do not require³ either of the two key elements of insider movements. Usually CPMs consist of newly created fellowships with a clear Christian identity, which tends to associate them with Western Christianity.

In all three types of movements, those coming to Christ share a new spiritual identity as members of the kingdom of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. But

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in the case of insider movements alone, this new spiritual identity is not combined with a change of socio-political-religious identity. The Scriptures seem to indicate that this identity, and the community a person is born into, were determined in advance by God. For example, Paul declares to the Athenians that God “made every nation of men ... and determined the times set for them and the exact places they should live” (Acts 17:26). When we encourage believers to remain in their families and networks, and to retain their birth identities, we honor these God-given relationships. Let us examine more closely the two elements of an insider movement, as well as their biblical basis.

1. Pre-existing Communities Become the Church

How can the gospel take root within pre-existing communities, in such a way that the community or network becomes the main expression of “church” in that context? To understand why this factor is important in insider movements, let’s contrast *planting* a church with *implanting* a church.⁴

Typically, when people “plant a church” they create a *new* social group. Individual believers, often strangers to one another, are gathered together into new fellowship groups. Church planters try to help these individual believers become like a family or a community. This pattern of “aggregate church” planting (also termed the “attractional model”⁵) can work in individualistic Western societies. However, in societies with tightly-knit communities, the community is undermined when believers are taken out of their families into new authority structures. The affected families frequently perceive the new group as having “stolen” their relative, and the spread of the gospel is understandably opposed. Even if the new fellowship group is very contextualized to the culture, the community feels threatened and the believers feel torn between their family and the group.⁶

By contrast, a church is “implanted” when the Gospel takes root within a

pre-existing community and, like yeast, spreads *within* that community. No longer does a *new* group try to become like a family; instead, the God-given family or social group becomes the church. The strong relational bonds already exist; what is new is their commitment to Jesus Christ. Believers within the pre-existing family or community network gradually learn how to provide spiritual fellowship for each other and testimonies and praise arise within their everyday interactions (as in Deuteronomy 6:6-9). The joy of the believers begins to infect the whole group.



This type of church (also termed the “transformational model”⁷) was birthed in many households in Acts, such as those of Cornelius, Lydia and the Philippian jailer. The redemption of pre-existing communities is a fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3, 28:14). When the gospel is implanted in this manner, the families and clans that God created are *redeemed and transformed*, instead of broken apart. The larger community and society are also blessed in significant ways, as believers mature spiritually while remaining within their relational networks. The gospel is not seen as a threat to the community, and an insider movement develops as the gospel flows into neighboring relational networks. Because believers *remain* in their families and networks, insider movements honor God-given community.

2. Believers Retain Their Socio-Religious Identity

In many countries today, it is almost impossible for a new follower of Christ to remain in vital relationship with their community without *also* retaining their socio-religious identity. In these places, the term “Christian” does not mean a sincere believer in Jesus Christ. In India, for example, “Christian” has become a socio-religious-political category (like Muslim, Hindu, Tribal, etc.) written on one’s identity card at birth. Though the categories may vary, similar practices exist in other countries as well. Changing one’s identity from “Muslim” or “Hindu” to “Christian” is often illegal or is viewed as betrayal by one’s family and friends. However, the gospel can still spread freely in such places when insider believers gain a *new spiritual identity*, living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible, but *retain their socio-religious identity*.

Retaining Identity: Is It Biblical?

Does one have to go through Christianity to enter God’s family? The New Testament addresses a nearly identical question: “Do *all* believers in Jesus Christ have to go through Judaism in order to enter God’s family?” It is important to realize that, for both questions, the nature of the gospel itself is at stake.

The woman at the well in John 4 at first refused Jesus’ offer of eternal life because, as a Samaritan, she followed an Abrahamic religion that the Jews reviled as corrupt. As a result, she could not go to the temple or become a Jew. But Jesus distinguished *true faith* from *religious affiliation*, saying God was seeking “true worshipers who worship the Father in spirit and truth” (v. 19-24). Realizing that Jesus was “the Savior of the world” (v. 42), *not just of the Jews*, many Samaritans in her town believed. Later in Acts we see that Samaritan believers remained in their own communities and retained their Samaritan identity (Acts 8:14-17). But at first the disciples did not understand that just as they could *remain Jews* and follow Jesus, the Samaritans could also *remain Samaritan*.

Then the Holy Spirit revealed to the apostles that even the Gentile believers from pagan backgrounds did not have to go through Judaism in order to enter God’s family (Acts 15). In Antioch, Jewish believers were telling Gentile believers they must become Jews to be fully acceptable to God. Paul disagreed and brought the issue to the lead apostles in Jerusalem. The issue was hotly debated because the Jews had believed for centuries that conversion to the Jewish religion was required to become part of the people of God. But the Holy Spirit showed the Jewish apostles they should not “burden” Gentile followers of Christ with their religious traditions and forms (Acts 15:19, 28).

Two Criteria

To make this decision, the apostles used *two criteria*: the *giving of the Holy Spirit* to the Gentiles coming to

Christ, and the guidance of *Scripture* (Acts 15:5-19). First, they heard that the Holy Spirit had descended on believers from a pagan background who were not practicing the Jewish religion. Second, they realized the Scriptures had predicted that this would happen. These two criteria were sufficient for the apostles to conclude that *God was behind this new movement of believers who were remaining Gentile*. Therefore, they did not oppose it or add on demands for religious conversion. If we use the same two criteria today, insider movements affirm that people do not even have to go through the *religion* of Christianity, but only through Jesus Christ, to enter God’s family.

Paul wanted people to understand that this truth has been part of the gospel from the beginning. He pointed out

that God promised Abraham that all people groups would receive the Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ *alone* (Galatians 3:8-26). As a result, Paul publicly rebuked Peter and Barnabas for “not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel” when they “forced Gentiles to follow Jewish customs” (Galatians 2:11-21). Paul warned that to *add* religious conversion to following Christ would *nullify* the gospel. He also affirmed that not through any religion but “through the *gospel* the Gentiles are made heirs together in the promise of Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6).

Thus, the gospel reveals that a person can gain a new spiritual identity *without* leaving one’s birth identity, and without taking on a new socio-religious label or going through the religion of either Judaism or Christianity. The “Kingdom Circles” sidebar below

Kingdom Circles

This diagram distinguishes between two kinds of identity: *spiritual* and *socio-religious*. The center circle represents the Kingdom of God. People gain a new *spiritual identity* by entering God’s Kingdom through transforming faith in Jesus Christ. The other circles represent various *socio-religious identities*.

Figure 1 shows that many Jews in the book of Acts followed Jesus as Lord and thus entered the Kingdom of God (A). These early disciples gained a new spiritual identity but retained their Jewish socio-religious identity, continuing to follow the Jewish law and worship at the temple alongside non-believing Jews (B).

Figure 2 likewise shows that many Gentiles in Acts followed Jesus as Lord and entered the Kingdom (C), though most Gentiles remained non-believers (D). In Acts 15, some Jewish believers insisted that non-Jews had to join the socio-religious system of Judaism to be saved (E). Paul disagreed and brought the issue before the apostles in Jerusalem. The apostles became convinced, by both the Scriptures and the fact that God gave the Holy Spirit to these Gentile believers, that non-Jews did not have to “go through” Judaism to enter the Kingdom of God.

Figure 3 shows the situation we face today. Over the centuries, “Christianity” has become a socio-religious system encompassing much more than simply faith in Christ. It involves various cultural traditions, religious forms, and ethnic or political associations. While many people who call themselves Christians have truly believed in Christ and entered the Kingdom of God (F), others have not, though they may attend church (G). The Acts 15 question is still relevant today: Must people with a distinctly non-Christian (especially non-Western) identity “go through” the socio-religious systems of “Christianity” in order to become part of God’s Kingdom (H)? Or can they enter the Kingdom of God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ alone and gain a new spiritual identity while retaining their own community and socio-religious identity (I)?

Figure 1

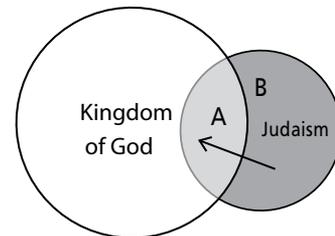


Figure 2

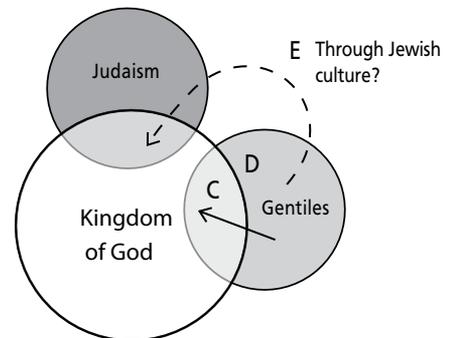
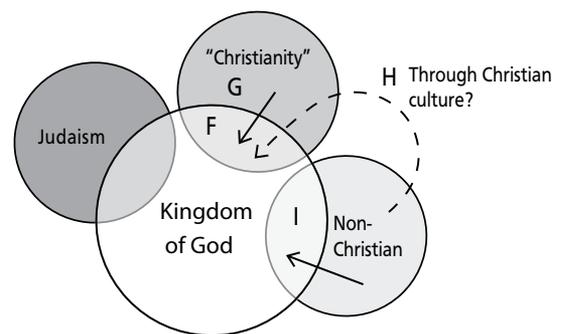


Figure 3



illustrates this issue. Because believers *retain* their birth identity, insider movements honor God-given identity.

A New Creation in an Old Environment

So, what do we do when working in unreached people groups with strong community structures? Can we see that the Muslims are like our Samaritans, with their Abrahamic religion, and the Hindus are like our Gentiles, with their idols and temples? Yet, like the Samaritans and the Gentiles, through the gospel alone they can be made heirs together with us in the promise of Christ Jesus. So how can we emphasize the gospel, not religious conversion? How can we encourage the gospel to take root within their God-given communities, redeeming and transforming them? Here are some suggestions:

1. When entering a community, look for a person seeking God who wants to invite you into their family or community to talk about Jesus. Invest in those people as a group. “Do not move around from house to house.” (Luke 10:7)⁸
2. When witnessing, tell people they do not have to join a “Christian people group” in order to be saved. Instead, point them directly to a relationship with God through Christ. Many have been taught that Jesus is only the Savior of the “Christians,” instead of the Savior of the world. Help them understand this idea is not true, like Jesus did in John 4:23.
3. If well-meaning Christians tell seekers that they must come to God not just through Christ but also through Christianity, help the Christians understand this requirement is “not in line with the truth of the Gospel” (Galatians 2:14-21, 3:6-9,14, 5:6, 6:12-16; Ephesians 3:6; I Corinthians 7:17-19; Colossians 2:16-23, Acts 10 and 15).

4. When discipling, encourage believers to remain within their God-given communities. Show them that Jesus said they will be like “yeast in the dough” or “a light that illumines the whole household.” Help them become the church within their own pre-existing communities, instead of isolating themselves by joining a group outside their community for fellowship. Encourage believers to study the Word together within their communities and to seek guidance from the Holy Spirit (John 16:14, Acts 20:32). Trust the Holy Spirit, as the apostles did, to guide the new believers and to redeem their pagan or heretical religious practices as He chooses, which may vary from one insider movement to another.

Let the nations be glad that they too have direct access to God through Jesus Christ! This is the power of the gospel! **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Lewis 2007, “Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities,” p. 75, *IJFM* 24:2

² Garrison 2004, *Church Planting Movements vs. Insider Movements*, p. 154, *IJFM* 21:4

³ Garrison points out that using family networks to spread the gospel is a *common*, but not *universal*, factor in CPMs. See Garrison (2000), *Church Planting Movements* booklet, Office of Overseas Operations, International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, pp. 37-38. Note however that in CPMs, the formation of *new structures* is assumed.

⁴ In both cases, the assumption is being made that “a church” is not a building, institution, or meeting, but a functional local community of mutually supportive believers under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

⁵ See Andrea Gray and Leith Gray, “Paradigms and Praxis: Part I: Social Networks and Fruitfulness in Church Planting,” p. 20, this issue of *IJFM*.

⁶ Some people equate C5 churches with insider movements. However, not all C5 communities result in insider

movements. For an insider movement to occur, C5 believers must remain genuine members of their family and community networks, not creating odd or competing religious institutions or events.

⁷ See Gray and Gray, p. 20, this issue.

⁸ Frequently in insider movements, an individual will believe first and then invite the “outsider” witness into their community, as happened in John 4. Sometimes, however, the insider believer will spread the gospel through their networks by themselves, and the outsider will never enter their communities.