Looking Beyond 500 Years of Reformation

On this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation we offer a rather un-Protestant theme: the household. This summer I sat listening as Mark Noll, the preeminent American religious historian, offered five seminal characteristics of our Protestant era. What I haven’t seen or heard among the many insightful reflections on this great tradition is what we are seeing today in the rank and file of movements to Christ: oikos (the Greek term for household). As you will hear from our guest editor, John Kim (p. 5), the sensitivities of an Asian perspective on Jesus movements today raises an ecclesiological question: why is the household unit so fundamental to these movements?

Over the past five centuries of Protestantism, the voluntary principle has been fundamental to the way we now frame our biblical ecclesiology. The church is viewed as a company of the committed, whose whole way of belonging seems to reflect the more modern social imagery of individual citizens who voluntarily cohere in a contractual way. This evangelical model of ecclesial belonging has been powerful and has reached to the ends of the earth. Forged in resistance to the deficiencies of a Roman Catholicism, it has successfully integrated itself into the values, interests and institutions of Western society. At the risk of being reductionist, we might ask: is it possible this historic paradigm of a voluntary church has blinded us to other necessary elements of a Christian movement? This issue of the IJFM suggests that it has.

We’re grateful to the Asia Society for Frontier Mission (ASFM) for focusing our theme on the fundamental place of oikos (household) in Jesus movements today. Many of the articles in this issue were originally presented at the October 2017 ASFM meetings in Bangkok, Thailand. Still others were presented at the 2017 ISFM/EMS meetings in Dallas. The whole tone and vision of this theme is represented in John Kim’s article (p. 37). His persistent examination of these movements has pushed this important ecclesiological issue to the front burners of our missiological reflection.

I believe each of the perspectives offered in these articles substantiates a new ecclesial priority of the family. One of the participants there in Thailand turned and focused an interrogating gaze on us as Westerners. Suddenly, what had been a theoretical exercise became personal, and I had to do a quick inventory of the

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role I play in my own oikos. It was
penetrating. And spiritually exhilarating as it pushed me beyond any
reformation I had experienced as an evangelical. I realized that what God
was doing in these emerging movements across Asia and Africa was a
prophetic voice to modern churches embedded in a Western Christendom.

We must be willing as a Western church to allow a thorough assess-
ment of how our modern ecclesiologies have failed to curb the moral and
institutional degradation of the family. We see it in our churches—not just
in our societies. We are struggling as a Western church to stem the loss of
this essential social unit of identity and belonging. By contrast, the importance
and vital role of extended families and their networks is very clear in move-
ments among Muslims and Hindus today. It is a welcome corrective, and
we trust it will encourage a new ecclesiological sensibility in this new era of
World Christianity.

Together, these authors represent more than a hundred years of field
experience in and around these Jesus movements, and their interaction
calls for new nomenclature to emerge: “high-identity Muslim people” (p. 7);
“family blessing movements” (p. 51); the “Missio (M) Framework” (p. 67);
and “spiritual oikos” (p. 37)—just to mention a few. Again, we are so grate-
ful for the fertile interface between the ISFM and the ASFM, and the
way it generates insight that then can move laterally and inform other
frontier contexts.

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In Him,

Brad Gill
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