

Transforming Perspectives

*Does the BtD model serve as a useful model for discussing divisive issues?
Here are five personal perspectives resulting from such interactions.*

This article was published by Missio Nexus in **Anthology**, October 2017 (5:2, p. 22-27); reposted by permission.

Since 2011, the Bridging the Divide (BtD) Network has held five consultations. Nearly two hundred scholar-practitioners have been involved at some point, scores of papers have been presented and responded to, and dozens of group discussions have covered a range of topics related to ministry approaches among Muslims. Cutting-edge research has been shared and new perspectives have developed out of grappling together with the nuances of ideas sharpened as iron sharpens iron.

Yet sometimes people have wondered aloud: “Is anyone changing their perspective at all? Or does everyone just air their own opinions and go home with no concrete result?”

BtD’s Facilitation Team assessed these questions based on personal experience and responses from members of the network. We have not only observed and experienced significant learning taking place, we also believe BtD can serve as a useful model for discussion of divisive issues—not only in the realm of missiology but for Jesus’ followers dealing with a wide range of contentious issues.

To illustrate, we offer five vignettes of perspective resulting from BtD’s interactions.

From Anxiety to Solidarity

by Don Little

When I helped launch the first Bridging the Divide Consultation, I had a deep concern about growing Christ-dishonoring division in the body of Christ. I felt equally distressed by what I believed to be profoundly unbiblical practices among some Insider proponents.

On the last evening of the BtD consultation in 2014, participants shared how God had worked in them that week. As they shared, I felt a strong sense of my burden over the division in Christ's body lifting as I witnessed such loving unity among people holding sharply opposing perspectives.

I have come to appreciate the profound complexity of the issues and feel increasingly dissatisfied with simple insider/outsider characterizations.

Having participated in five consultations in which deep and frank wrestling with the issues occurred, I have come to know and trust Insiders and the expatriates who serve alongside them. Though I remain concerned about serious flaws in IM approaches, I have been impressed by the deep desire for faithfulness to both Christ and the Scriptures that I have seen in so many IM 'alongsiders.' I feel increasingly confident that when those close to Insider Movements discern serious distortions, they will do their best to address them and influence the leaders of the movements in healthy directions.

Don Little serves as a missiologist with Pioneers.

God is Working Among All of Us

by Kevin Higgins

I want to share specific ways my thinking has been affected by involvement with BtD as I engage those who have had severe concerns and questions about my thinking and about insider movements in general.

First, in an early article I wrote asking if some of the recovery of incarnational aspects of our theology might be something like a new reformation. I realize this inadvertently caused some readers to think I was claiming insider movements themselves as a new reformation. For some, this probably seemed to be claiming these movements as the most important thing God was doing today. *I did not intend these implications but can understand why people took my words as they did.*

Second, *I have seen ways I have not been careful enough in my interpretations* of some historical narratives in the Bible when describing how I see insider movements as biblical. I appreciate the help others have given me in understanding this weakness and I am rethinking a number of ways I have used passages like 2 Kings and John 4 in the past. I still think they speak to the conversation, but I have realized largely through my friends in the BtD

community that I have drawn more from them than they actually say to us. I want to rework my thinking on this.

Finally, I know there have been times in my own writing and speaking that I have hurt some of my brothers and sisters by saying things that seemed to convey that I felt insider types of movements were the best, or even only, thing God was doing in the world and that other approaches were not as good. I am very sorry for giving that impression. In fact, *I rejoice sincerely and deeply in what the Lord is doing through all sorts of ministry approaches.* I rejoice at what we heard about vital movements in Africa which are not 'IM' during our several BtD gatherings over the years. God is working among all of us, and my heart is full when I think of brothers and sisters in so many places, with so many approaches in so many contexts doing so many wonderful things as they face difficulty and hardship. You are wonderful examples to me ... even now I see your faces in front of me and I give deep thanks.

Kevin Higgins is International Director at Global Teams.

Diversity of Belief and Practice

by L.D. Waterman

When BtD began, I had many concerns about 'C5' fellowships and 'socio-religious insider movements' (IM). While the biblical foundation of those concerns remains, I now hold a less negative perspective. BtD has provided a forum where hard questions can be asked and answered, and unhealthy practices can be identified as such. Sharing of research and case studies in a context of high trust has increased my understanding of what is happening in a variety of movements.

A number of factors have shifted my perspective:

First, prior to 2010, I had seen an alarming number of materials from believers presenting the **Qur'an as 'God's Word.'** I was encouraged at the end of BtD 2012 that our gathering [summarized](#): *'The Holy Bible is God's word and our anchor. The Qur'an is not inspired by God. There is no salvation through Islam. Muhammad is not a prophet sent by God in the biblical sense.'*¹

I now appreciate what is happening in some movements described as IMs.

Second, I was concerned about **Christians converting to Islam** (described as ‘going inside’), hoping to reach Muslims with the gospel from inside Islam. My concern diminished when the 2011 BtD [summary report](#) included the statement: “*We reject...[t]he practice of encouraging cross-cultural workers from a Christian background to take on a Muslim identity.*”

Third, I had been disturbed by the **interpretations of Scripture** by many Westerners encouraging an ‘insider’ approach in journal articles and books such as *A Deadly Misunderstanding* (see my [review](#)). I’ve been encouraged that no one in BtD has affirmed the theological perspectives of that book, and some writers of pro-IM articles have been willing to acknowledge weaknesses in their handling of some biblical texts. Kevin Higgins’ humility in this regard and willingness to re-assess previous writings has especially encouraged me.

Fourth, my grasp of *non-‘insider’* movements (called **CPMs or DMMs**) has deepened through personal interaction and books such as Jerry Trousdale’s *Miraculous Movements*. I celebrate without hesitation the work of God in these movements, having *cultural* insider-ness without continuation of Islamic patterns that cause me concern.

Fifth, **research** such as [Ben Naja’s](#) in [Eastern Africa](#) and David Garrison’s *A Wind in the House of Islam* has impacted my thinking through the absence of agenda to champion “insider” movements or even reference that label (pro or con).

Sixth, I previously heard that many “insider” fellowships did not practice baptism. This left me dubious about the depth of faith in these movements. Case studies and research presented in BtD showed that **Muslim IMs generally practice some form of baptism.**

Seventh, insights from Tim Green and Kathryn Kraft⁶ brought helpful perspective concerning identity issues, **distinguishing ‘core identity’ from social and collective identity.** This clarified that some people call themselves Muslim only as an ethnic or social marker, not a descriptor of spiritual commitment or religious practice.

Eighth, through BtD interactions **I see significant diversity of belief and practice between various insider movements and within movements.** It now seems to me unhelpful to present arguments either promoting all IMs as one collective entity or condemning all IMs as one collective entity.

I now appreciate, more than in 2011, what is happening in some movements described as IMs. I still have concerns, and am uncomfortable with some beliefs and practices in some of these movements. Yet I also feel uncomfortable with the beliefs and practices of some Christian churches, and I don't write them off on that account.

Based on testimony from an array of credible sources, my current understanding is that IMs are really happening, consist largely of believers who are my brothers and sisters in Christ, normally practice water baptism as a sign of personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and teach and use the Bible as the only inspired word of God. I find all these things quite encouraging.”

L. D. Waterman (pseudonym) serves with Beyond. He has been a part of Bridging the Divide's Facilitation Team since its launch in 2011.

Deeper Respect

by Dick Grady

I have a deeper respect for those who have come to Christ from a Muslim background. The more I interact with our brothers and sisters who share a common Muslim birth heritage, the more I appreciate the depth of love they have for their families, their people, and Muslims in general. Although these friends hold differing convictions across the contextual spectrum, they have evidenced grace and spiritual maturity as they have interacted with those with whom they at times disagree. Different cultural contexts and personal experiences, with their birth communities as well as with Christians, have led them to hold widely divergent opinions on how to best reach their people with the gospel. Yet these followers of Jesus share a common boldness in evangelism and passion for seeing Muslims come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I have a deeper appreciation for the complexity of the issues being discussed. There is no perfect answer to the question, “How should a Muslim background follower of Jesus identify himself or herself?” Any quick answer will fail to accurately communicate the depth of a person's relationship with Christ. The light of Jesus can only be accurately seen as believers live out a transformed “in Christ” lifestyle in the communities where the Lord has placed them.

I have been challenged to deeper study of God's Word. I am often amazed that Spirit-filled believers, looking at the same passage of Scripture, can come away with quite different understandings of what the passage teaches. BtD has enriched my study of the Scriptures as I have attempted to see passages from another's perspective.

I have a deeper appreciation for the unity of the Body of Christ. In spite of our differences, there is only one body of Christ through which the Spirit is working to bring the gospel to the nations.”

Dick Grady is Vice-President for Global Ministries at One Challenge.

The Value of Growing Relationships

by Len Bartlotti

Missionary-anthropologist Paul Hiebert exposed “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” the blind spot that makes it hard for missionaries to reconcile an empirical worldview with non-western worldviews.

When I joined the Bridging the Divide network, I often felt myself in the ‘excluded middle’ of a nearly irreconcilable conflict among mission thinkers and practitioners. As an evangelical, I pledge allegiance to the biblical “faith once delivered to the saints,” as generally understood. As a field worker and missiologist, I am open to new approaches needed in Muslim contexts.

BtD has helped me and changed my thinking in at least three ways.

First, **I've discovered that most believers**—whatever their degree of professional, academic or practical involvement—**long for a safe place** to think out loud about vexing questions. I used to think that conferences and consultations served this purpose. Expert speakers and workshops would provide the answers.

I realize now that what I need, and what most of my colleagues want, is a safe environment to discover answers—and raise annoying questions—together. The very nature of the motley BtD network facilitates robust dialogue with believers on all points of the missiological spectrum.

I've taken some heat for my involvement. Apprehensive colleagues cautioned me, “Len, any views you express in BtD are yours only, not those of our

organization!” On the other side, one esteemed leader viewed my middle position of purposeful enquiry itself as “flawed”: “Why don’t you come out and clearly condemn heretical insiders!” BtD gives me space to resist group think and to explore issues without fear of rebuke or reproach.

Second, **I have learned to value input and out-of-the-box thinking coming from the humblest and unlikeliest of sources.** BtD provides a social space with a unique egalitarian spirit. Invitations and participation are not based on position or prestige, but on an assessment of one’s potential contribution to the conversation. That means BtD has a place both for recognized great brains and for relative unknowns with something valuable to say.

On a level playing field, we engage biblically and reasonably, passionately yet charitably, with brothers and sisters from diverse backgrounds, affiliations, and positions. Other voices are being heard.

Third, **my thinking has changed about the importance of relationships to grow in knowledge and wisdom.** BtD has provided a relational pathway toward understanding. Thorny missiological issues and practices are explored in an expanding learning community. Tolerance for differences of opinion while pursuing biblical clarity characterizes an ongoing missional journey with fellow “servants of Christ ... stewards of the mysteries of God.” All of us long for Muslims from every people and nation to know Christ and find a place to belong amongst his people.

Dr. Len Bartlotti is a professor and intercultural consultant.

Conclusion

From these testimonies across the spectrum of viewpoints, we can glimpse the value and transforming power of honest and respectful dialogue among brothers and sisters. As we celebrate what has been accomplished, we anticipate ongoing fruitful discussion of vital issues.

The June 2018 BtD consultation will focus on “Spiritual Freedom and the House of Islam.” More information about BtD’s mission, vision, and discussions can be found at btdnetwork.org. Send questions or comments to bridging.the.divide1@gmail.com.