

Wonderful Concern, Disappointing Conclusion

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In June of this year, the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) included in its general assembly a discussion (for the fourth year in a row) of “Insider Movements.” Overture #9, approved by the PCA’s General Assembly in June 2011, critiqued the influence of Insider Movements on terms used in some translations of the Bible. At that point a Study Committee on Insider Movements (SCIM) was established to provide a biblical assessment of “Insider Movements’ histories, philosophies, and practices.” The SCIM presented materials at three General Assemblies: in 2012, 2013, and 2014. I deeply appreciate the PCA’s concern for biblically sound and effective proclamation of the gospel and I applaud the effort that has been invested in consideration and discussion of these issues.

In recent years, I have written some articles raising concerns about issues related to Insider Movements (including “Do the Roots Affect the Fruits?” *IJFM*, Summer 2007; “Contextualization: A Few Basic Questions,” *EMQ*, April 2008; and “What is Church?” *EMQ*, October 2011). So I resonate with many of the concerns addressed in the 2014 report, entitled “A Call to Faithful Witness” (available at <http://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/2101-SCIM-2014-ALL-with-MRs-4-30-14.pdf>). Among other things, I deeply appreciate the concern expressed that some proponents of IM seem to “exalt sociology over Scripture” (p. 2113), and “mingling of theological and sociological terms promotes confusion” (p. 2120). Yet as I read through the report’s conclusions, I was disappointed that years of investigation and discussion by deeply committed and very capable brothers had not yielded a more nuanced and helpful conclusion at the general assembly.

First, the Committee Report frames issues in terms of “the IM paradigm” (p. 2140ff). This phrase appears to be a descriptor created by the committee and filled with the content they considered relevant for critique, painting at times with what seems to be too broad a brush. It appears many components of the so-called “IM Paradigm” (other than retaining religious identity) are not uniquely related to IM. Some elements criticized as part of the IM Paradigm are tendencies found in numerous *non-IM* evangelical indigenous missions fruit as well. For example, this description of IM believers on page 2113: “They have not changed their name, style of dress and speech, or country of residence. They feel little need, and sometimes substantial reluctance, to affiliate with a national Church which may pressure new converts to adopt attitudes and practices which antagonize their previous social circle, such as the cultural practices mentioned above.” This portion of the IM Paradigm description would apply to scores of movements and ministries that would not want to be lumped together with socio-religious Insider Movements.

Second, the Committee Report (CR) rejects some helpful nuances contained in the Minority report (MR), “Realities on the Ground” (p. 2295ff). The CR critiques the IM paradigm, asking: “Are religion and culture so tightly linked that a Christ follower can only stay within his birth culture by also staying within his birth religion?” (p. 2113) Yet when the MR answers precisely this issue by offering “an important guideline” that “while discipling should be carried out in the birth communities, disciples should not be encouraged to remain inside the Islamic religious institutions” (p. 2311), the Committee Report criticizes this distinction as being “insufficiently clear.”

Third, the framing of issues and drawing of conclusions based on a construct imposed from the outside by critics tends toward creation of a straw man. On one hand, it seems to me the Committee has done a good job of choosing proponents of Insider Movements to quote and critique. I think they have drawn on a fair and reasonable representation of writers on the subject. In the conclusion to its introduction (p. 2111) the Committee also expresses gratitude to “interviewees,” yet the Committee Report appears to rely heavily on written sources, with insufficient personal interaction with those quoted to confirm accurate understanding of meaning and intent.

Fourth, the Committee Report concludes that “in those areas where MR 2014 demonstrates lack of clarity and ambiguity, it is subject to friendly appropriation by IM proponents.” The phrase “subject to friendly appropriation by IM proponents” constitutes a frequent refrain in the CR, repeatedly given as a primary reason for rejecting numerous portions of the Minority Report. Readers can note a vast difference between *demonstrating* that a statement is actually flawed and fearing it to be “subject to friendly appropriation” by one’s opponents. The Committee Report’s frequent fall-back to the latter argument calls into question their rejection of the Minority Report. Having set up somewhat of a straw man, the Committee Report argues that any description or nuance that could give support to the bogeyman (“IM paradigms”) must be excluded.

This methodology locks the report into an “outsider” critique based on apparent unwillingness to grapple with the nuances and diversity of missiological realities on the ground. The Committee Report’s failure to acknowledge (to grasp?) the distinction between discipleship “in ...birth communities” vs. remaining “inside ... Islamic religious institutions” constitutes just one example of its shortage of missiological nuance. The Minority Report was intended as additional perspective and was proposed to be passed alongside the Majority Report. I wish that steps had been taken to resolve alleged “lack of clarity and ambiguity,” so that the useful insights and perspectives of the Minority Report could have been included in the report accepted by the general assembly.

As it stands, the conclusion of the report (p. 2136) states, “Unlike CR 2014, MR 2014 provides readers with insufficient tools to answer important, practical questions.” I appreciated the questions listed at that point, but as an outside observer, I was disappointed that even after all their work, the majority and minority reports did not sufficiently interact with each other to offer fruitful discussion of these questions per se. This observer is left wondering if the Committee Report was prematurely accepted when it would have been better to call for the hard work needed to grapple with useful insights from the Minority Report. Contrary to its bold claim for itself (“CR 2014 provides clear biblical and confessional categories and principles that equip Christian workers and CMBs to answer these questions on a firm, biblical basis and with practical concreteness”), it appears to me that at some points the CR presumes categories and definitions based on misunderstanding and/or imposition of their own prior views rather than aiming for real understanding of field realities. That presumption in turn appears to imply inadequate answers to the questions being posed and to portray the Minority Report’s nuanced critique of IM as being “IM-friendly.”

The impression that the Committee Report is unduly driven by their own prior views is reinforced by the fact that Attachment 3, “Christians of Muslim Background (CMB) Input” (pp.

2283-4), contains only quotations from strong opponents of IM. This masks the reality that many soundly evangelical followers of Christ from a Muslim background would give answers very different from those included in the attachment. The lopsided set of quotations leaves this reader wondering whether the Committee has a very limited set Muslim-background relationships or intentionally chose to only include quotations from aggressive opponents of IM. Compounding this problem is the reality that some of the questions (such as “Should followers of Christ enter the mosque?”) are so vaguely worded that the Q&A format appears designed simply to attack a foe rather than to increase understanding of the issues. (Are readers really supposed to believe that no follower of Christ should ever enter a mosque? Have the committee members never visited a mosque? Couldn't the committee have found some better nuanced answers to this question?)

I was thankful that the report included a statement that it is not “intended to provide the final word in addressing and analyzing these issues.” I hope that in the days to come additional consideration can somehow be given to overcoming the weaknesses of the Committee Report and giving better attention to important insights contained in the 2014 Minority Report. The PCA has an important voice in discussion of missiological issues. It's sad when the message they announce rings with notes of misunderstanding mixed into their conclusions. The insufficient nuance in the Committee's biblical zeal for truth and desire for correction ends up making the good work of the committee much less helpful than it could have been. When needed biblical corrective is too broadly applied, it causes a fresh set of problems – a very sad result from so much diligent effort.

We share the high privilege of being God's coworkers in the advance of His Kingdom among the unreached. I applaud the PCA and the SCIM for their concern for God's glory to be reflected in biblically sound proclamation of the gospel leading to faithful obedience. This is my passion as well. I hope they will continue to increase the accuracy and effectiveness of their contribution to discussion of these important issues, so that the glory of our sovereign God may be more clearly made known among all nations.