

The Jerusalem Council Applied: Proceedings of the ISFM 2006 Conference, Part II

Insider Movements in the Gospels and Acts

by John Ridgway

Editor's Note: This paper is the first part of a much longer discussion of "insider movements" in the New Testament. A second paper focused on "insider movements" in the Epistles is currently planned for an upcoming issue of IJFM.

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Introduction

In this paper, I would like to argue for the validity and usefulness of the "insider movement" concept by demonstrating its existence in the early church. Therefore, I would like to undertake a personal biblical reflection of the Scriptures with specific reference to the Gospels and the Book of Acts.

Furthermore, I would like to demonstrate that at the heart of the gospel from Genesis to Revelation is God's desire to reconcile every ethnic community through "insiders" in those communities and through mobile apostolic leaders and their teams who would go to every ethnic community. This would not occur through organized religion but through Jesus' introduction of the kingdom of God. Jesus himself was an insider who inspired insider movements. His preaching of the kingdom introduced a mindset into the early apostles and the other disciples that would enable them to not only be insiders in their own communities but also to take the gospel to all the ethnic communities of the world, as they lived out a kingdom lifestyle amongst the lost nations.

My purpose in this paper is to give my own perspective, based on prayerful study of the Scriptures and 27 years of experience living in the Hindu and Muslim worlds. My hope is that these thoughts will add some clarity to the current discussion on this most important subject.

In his paper "The Key to Insider Movements: The 'Devoted's' of Acts"¹ (published in the proceedings of the 2004 ISFM meetings in St. Louis), Kevin Higgins attempted to come up with a detailed working definition of the term "insider movement." I quote:

A growing number of families, individuals, clans, and/or friendship-webs becoming faithful disciples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture. This faithful discipleship will express itself in culturally appropriate communities of believers who will also continue to live within as much of their culture, including the religious life of the culture, as is biblically faithful. The Holy Spirit, through the Word and through His people will also begin to transform His people and their culture, religious life and worldview.

Some may take exception to this definition as it includes the phrases “their religious culture” and “the religious life of the culture.” In my own experience, it is not possible to distinguish between the cultural and religious life of a Hindu community as it all blends together to make up the *physical identity* of that community. This physical identity relates to everything that can be seen. It encompasses the culture, the religious system and festivals, the linguistic and ethnic realities, the social and economic system, etc. However, the entrance of the Good News can bring about a spiritual transformation that results in a *spiritual identity* that commences with the second birth and enables the person to become a citizen of the kingdom of God. In due course, this spiritual transformation can affect whole families, their communities, their lifestyles, their relationships, and the society as a whole. These families and communities of believers are being formed from pre-existing social networks and as a result maintain their physical identity whilst growing in their spiritual identity and therefore become the people of God in that part of society. So I will use Higgins’ definition with this understanding of it. (See also the definition in Lewis, “Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities,” pp. 75-76, this issue.)

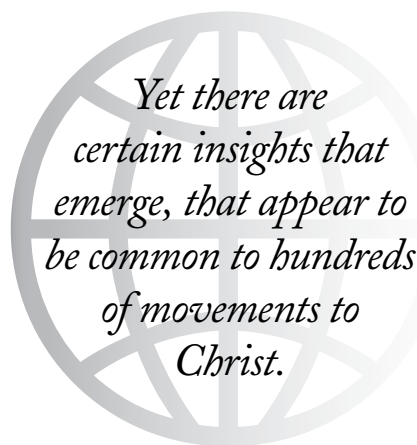
As we seek to describe the events that occurred in the first century, we recognize that the birth of the Christian movement was a unique point in history. In that sense, such events will never be repeated. Yet, there are certain insights that emerge, that appear to be common to hundreds of movements to Christ over the last 2000 years of Christian history, as documented by numerous people including Kenneth Scott Latourette.² I believe that these insights have application for us in the 21st century.

Origins of the First Century Gospel Movement

The idea of insider communities was embedded in the gospel from the beginning. Galatians 3:8 tells us, “The

Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations (ethnic groups) will be blessed through you.” As we look at Genesis 12:1-3 we notice at least three key elements in the gospel announced to Abraham:

- Abraham would experience personal blessing that would be through faith rather than the law (Romans 4:13)
- Members of Abraham’s family/community/natural network who were responsive would also



receive God’s blessing

- “And all the families (Hebrew *mishpāchōt* “extended families”) on earth will be blessed through you”

The DNA of the gospel contained:

- a faith response to the promise of God
- a blessing to a responsive community
- a blessing to all the peoples (ethnic communities) on the earth.

The remainder of the Old Testament documents God’s purposes for the Jewish nation in particular and yet His concern for the nations of the world. This concern would find its full expression with the entry of Jesus into this world.

Jesus the Insider

When Jesus entered human history, he entered as an insider. John 1:14 tells us, “The Word became flesh and lived for awhile among us.”

From conception to death, he experienced every detail of human experience and was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). The author again says, “He too shared in their humanity” and “he had to be made like his brothers in every way” (Hebrews 2:14, 17). Not only did Jesus become a total insider to the *human* race but also a total insider to the *Jewish* race as “a descendant of David” (Romans 1:3). Jesus adopted a customary trade, paid taxes, made pilgrimages to the Temple, observed the Jewish customs and laws.

At the beginning of his public ministry, he began to preach the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 4:17) and the good news of the kingdom (Matthew 4:23). Jesus was talking a new language. He was introducing new concepts, new expressions, new values, new outcomes that had always been in the mind of God. This great theme of the kingdom runs through the whole Bible. Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy have amplified these thoughts in their book, *The Insider*.³ Jesus’ command was to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) and indeed, the theme of the kingdom dominated his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

By Matthew 13, Jesus is giving seven different descriptions of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is global. It includes both wheat and weeds. The Son of Man and the evil one are strategic influencers. The kingdom appears to be without religious structure. It seems chaotic and undefined. (Notice that Jesus said let the wheat and the weeds grow together.)

In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus asks his disciples how the people understood his identity as the Son of Man. This was a title that referred to a heavenly ruler with an everlasting kingdom that would rule all mankind (“all peoples, nations, and men of every language”, Daniel 7:13-14) in contrast to a title that was associated with Jewish Nationalism. This subject is

explored in considerable depth by Rick Brown.⁴ The disciples replied to Jesus' question with the answer, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." It seemed the crowds only saw Jesus as a Jewish prophet: his physical identity. Then he asked the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter's response focused on Jesus' *spiritual identity*: "You are the Christ." The physical identity was seen. The spiritual identity was perceived. With this clarity, Jesus declared his role as the church builder. Then Jesus declared our role as those who are to use the keys of the kingdom.

From Matthew 18:1 to 20:28 Jesus illustrates the values of the kingdom. In Matthew 21-22, Jesus tells three stories about the kingdom directed against the chief priests and the Pharisees. In Matthew 24, Jesus explains the connection between the gospel of the kingdom and the end of the age. Then Jesus tells three stories about the kingdom in Matthew 25 that are directed to his disciples, and in Matthew 26 he relates the last supper to his Father's kingdom.

The whole kingdom lifestyle seemed independent of any religious structure. In fact, it would enable a Jew to live as a new believer in his Jewish society. It would actually enable any individual, family, or community to live out the gospel in their own society no matter what its religious nature.

The genius of the good news of the kingdom was that it was *so simple*, involving a change of heart and following the ways of the kingdom in discipleship to Jesus the king. It could work within any cultural/religious framework since its allegiance was not to a religious structure but to God's kingdom.

Jesus the Insider Starting Two Insider Movements

Jesus the insider was beginning to spawn insider movements within the Jewish community and beyond.

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Mark 1-4 records the beginnings of a *Galilean Jewish insider movement* commencing in Capernaum. There Jesus recruited the early disciples and cast out evil spirits. As a result, "news about him spread quickly over the whole *region of Galilee*" (Mark 1:28). By Mark 6:30-44, we find Jesus feeding at least 5,000 such followers. The Scripture indicates that these were men, and so the actual number would no doubt have been more.

Jesus encouraged others to be insiders. When he sent out the apostles, he sent them into the area where they were from (where they were insiders). In Matthew 10:5 in the Message, it says, "Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighborhood."

John's Gospel (chapters 2-3; 7-10; 11ff) records the details of the beginnings of a *Judean Jewish insider movement*. In John 2:23, John 7:31 and John 8:30 we are told that in each of these situations many people believed in Jesus. Even over to the east of the river Jordan in the district of Perea, we are told in John 10:42 that "in that place many believed in Jesus."

By the time of Jesus' resurrection, there were at least 120 believers in Jerusalem (Acts 1:15) with thousands of followers overall. An insider movement within the Jewish nation at large was underway, including Judean as well as Galilean believers. More significantly, Samaritan and Gentile movements were to begin as well.

Jesus the Apostle Starting Two Insider Movements

Jesus was not only an insider, but he was also our apostle (Hebrews 3:1). He trained 12 apostles. The good news of the kingdom would enable these men not only to experience the new birth and become citizens of the kingdom, but also be carriers of the good news to the nations. This

new kingdom mindset would in due course enable these men to think beyond their Jewish community and religious structures.

Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman in John 4 was quite a shock to the disciples. However, it started an insider movement in that place as many *Samaritans* believed the woman's (insider) testimony. Jesus stayed with this community for two days, and "many more became believers." There is no record of the disciples being with him when Jesus stayed in this Samaritan town. Thus, the disciples were witnessing an insider movement outside of their own community. The disciples at this stage were probably not aware of the implications of Jesus' actions. Stuart Caldwell⁵ has utilized this account in John 4 to demonstrate very useful parallels to ministry amongst Muslims.

In Mark 5:1, we have the record of Jesus crossing the lake to the Gentile region of the Gerasenes where Jesus heals a Gentile man named Legion as he apparently had about 2,000 demons in him. Again there is no record of the disciples getting out of the boat possibly because it was a Gentile region and also it was a place of tombs and there were also an abundance of pigs there. After the amazing encounter with Jesus this man is completely restored and begs Jesus to let him go with him. Jesus, however, sends the Gerasene demoniac back to share with his own people, who were Gentiles, and tell them what the Lord had done for him and how he had experienced the Lord's mercy. We are told the man went away and began to tell everyone how much Jesus had done for him. This was the beginning of a *Gentile insider movement* taking place in that area known as the Decapolis.⁶ Jesus then went north to Tyre and Sidon,

met the Syro-Phoenician woman, and then came back on the eastern side of the Jordan, which was predominantly Gentile. Not long after this, Jesus is feeding 4,000 followers there (Mark 7:31 and 8:1-10). And so a *Gentile insider movement* was well under way in this district of the Decapolis where there were ten cities.⁷

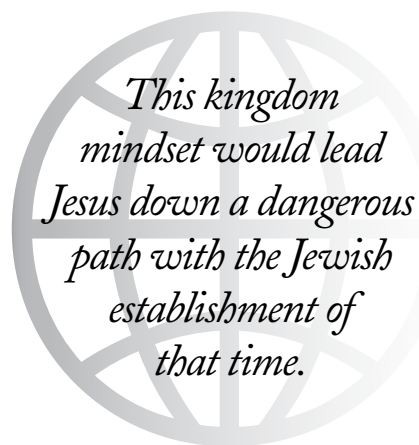
But this kingdom mindset would lead Jesus down a dangerous path with the Jewish establishment of that time. As Jesus entered his public ministry, within the first week, he was in conflict with the Jewish leadership. We are told that Jesus went down to Jerusalem from Capernaum to attend the Jewish Passover.

When Jesus entered the temple complex (among the largest in the Roman world) to celebrate the Jewish Passover in the first week of his public ministry (John 2:13-22), he found the temple courts being used for the sale of sacrificial animals. Such behaviour was totally unacceptable, as God's house had been turned into a "den of robbers." Jesus stopped the sale of all these sacrificial animals and cleared out the whole temple area. Naturally, this action of Jesus greatly upset the religious leaders. They demanded from Jesus, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews thought he was referring to Herod's temple, "But the temple he had spoken of was his body." However, this insight did not make sense until after Jesus' resurrection.

From this point onwards, Jesus' focus was not on the physical Jewish Temple, but on *the good news of the kingdom*. The offering of His body would enable our bodies to become temples of the living God in which He would dwell.

My own reflection on the gospels would suggest the possibility that *the good news of the kingdom was providing a spiritual message (the good news)*

and a spiritual community (the kingdom of God) that would take it beyond the confines of the Jewish religious traditions and culture. Luke 16:16 tells us that "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John." The Old Testament covenant/message was "obedience to the LORD through the Law" (old wine) in the context/framework of "the Law and the Prophets" (old wineskin). But Luke 16:16 continues, "Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it."



The New Testament covenant/message was to be "obedient to the LORD through faith" (new wine) in the context/framework of the kingdom (new wineskin).

The Old Covenant focused on the physical, whereas the New Covenant focused on the spiritual within the person, not on physical structures. *Spiritual wine must be poured into a spiritual wineskin, the kingdom of God, and not into physical wineskins* (religious systems). Paul explained in Romans 9:4 that "temple worship" was one of the privileges of being a Jew (Old Testament). However, Romans 12:1 tells us "to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is our spiritual worship" which is to be worked out in the real physical world. This is one of the privileges of being a citizen of the kingdom of God (New Testament).

The author of Hebrews explained it this way in Hebrews 10:1, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves." Again, he states, "They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order" (Hebrews 9:10).

Entering this kingdom was not based on one's religion or one's own righteous performance within that religious system but on a vulnerable humble heart that trusted the King. Jesus illustrated this stark difference in Luke 18:9-14 when he told the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. The Pharisee prayed (to/about himself) regarding his religious righteousness, but the tax collector asked for God's mercy, and he was the one whom God justified. Since entry into the kingdom is through a second birth and not through the first birth, it is open to all mankind.

Post-Pentecost

Finally, the entrance of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost now enabled all that Jesus had done and said to be translated into action in the lives of people. The focus was no longer a magnificent temple in Jerusalem (although as insiders the Jewish believers still continued to worship there), or any other building such as the great mosques of Medina and Mecca, or the lofty cathedrals of Europe, or the huge mega-churches of America, or the ancient temples and shrines of Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism, etc. *The focus was now on the Holy Spirit living in us.* We have become the temple of the living God (1 Corinthians 3:16), and as living stones, we are becoming a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God lives by His Spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22).

No longer was there an association with holy cities such as Jerusalem, Constantinople, Rome, Medina, Mecca, Ayodhya, etc. No longer

was there bondage to the laws of Moses as the means of salvation or to any dogma of any religious system, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Communism, and even Christianity. The laws, dogmas, or even traditions, customs, sacraments of any system were not the issue. The issue was faith, enabled by the grace of God, in Jesus Christ.

Now *the message* was very simple: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel” (2 Timothy 2:8).

Now *the expression* was very simple: the kingdom of God, a spiritual community not associated with any religion or nation or ideology, but in fact the reign of God through Christ, not only in the lives of people on this earth but also over all beings in the heavenly realms.

Now *the transformation* was very simple: the Holy Spirit living in us, transforming our lives and enabling us to live in harmony with one another and with all the ethnic groups of this world.

The focus had shifted from the laws of Moses to faith in Christ. The focus had shifted from holy cities and religions to a kingdom community that embraced people from all the nations, yet knew itself as a physical, identifiable networks of believers in the various cities, towns and villages where the gospel had come.

The birth of the movement of the gospel in the first century was now about to be unleashed. It was free of the boundaries of Judaism and of any religious or non-religious system.

Natural Expansion of the Gospel amongst the Jews

After his resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples discussing the kingdom of God. This must have been an extraordinary occasion as Jesus spent extended time to explore the nature of the kingdom of God and how this expression of the gospel

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would enable movements of the good news to occur in every nation of the world. Then he promised them that they would be empowered by the Holy Spirit. This took place on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem when “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) were present. Also converts to Judaism as well as Cretans and Arabs were there. These Jews came from Mesopotamia in the East; Galatia and Asia Minor in the North; Rome, Crete and Cyrene in the West, and Egypt in the South.

From my own reading of the account in Acts there appears to have been at least three streams of Jews present on that day. Firstly, there were emigrant *Mediterranean and Mesopotamian Jews* who were Jews (first, second, third or more generation) living in the Roman Empire and generally somewhat lax in their Jewish practices. They were only in Jerusalem temporarily for this Pentecost celebration and would then be returning to their homes in the Mediterranean world. Secondly, there were the *Galilean and Judean Jews* (Acts 2:7, 9) who were living in their own country. Finally, there were the *Grecian Jews* who were Greek-speaking Jews that had lived in the Roman world but had now returned permanently to Jerusalem especially to practice their Jewish faith and were on the whole quite strict in their Jewish practices. They are mentioned in Acts 6:1 and 9:29 as well as Acts 6:9.

Acts 2:9-10 tells us there were Jews from “Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia (modern Turkey), Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene” representing the eastern region of the Mediterranean world. Then there were Jews who were called “Parthians (modern Iran), Medes (east of Mesopotamia) and Elamites (north of the Persian Gulf), residents

of Mesopotamia” (Modern Iraq). They represented the *Mesopotamian Jews*.

Significant response would have taken place on the Day of Pentecost from all three streams of Jews present on that day. Let us now follow the expansion of the gospel among the second stream, namely the Galilean and Judean Jews, as well as the Grecian Jews, i.e., the third stream. We will look at the first stream in more detail in the next section.

After Peter spoke on the Day of Pentecost, about 3000 people responded. The new believers met every day in their homes and in the temple courts. Every day new people were responding (Acts 2:46-47). By Acts 4:4, the number of men that had responded was about 5000 which meant that possibly 15,000-20,000 people were involved. A remarkable movement of the gospel indeed, and accomplished exclusively by insiders.

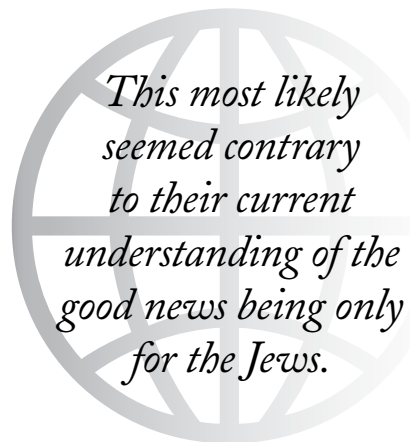
By Acts 5:12, the believers were still meeting in Solomon’s Colonnade, a porch that ran along the inner side of the wall of the Temple that enclosed the outer court. Men and women were continuing to respond. These new believers were meeting in the Temple area to pray. In doing this, they were merely following their cultural and religious norms. Moreover, their homes also became a natural place for spiritual fellowship and worship. Every day they continued to meet “in the temple courts and from house to house” (Acts 5:42).

Then a further conflict arose between Stephen and “Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia” who were members of the synagogue of the Freedmen. Freedmen were Jews who had been freed from slavery in Cyrene (chief city in Libya), Alexandria (capital of Egypt and second only to Rome

in the empire), Cilicia (Tarsus was the capital of this province) and Asia (Ephesus was the capital). Since Paul (Saul at this time) was from Tarsus, it is very possible that he attended this synagogue and may have been one of those among these conservative Grecian Jews who were arguing with Stephen. Finally, Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin with charges of, “We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God” and “This fellow never stops speaking against the holy place and against the law.” Again, they said, “For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:12-14).

Stephen, who clearly grasped the implications of the good news of the kingdom, was obviously free of the laws and customs of Moses and the magnificent temple of Herod in Jerusalem. He recognized that true worship was no longer tied to a building but was demonstrated by a changed life (Romans 12:1). However, by the time these false witnesses had been persuaded to twist his words, he now appeared to be speaking “words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.” When the high priest challenged Stephen regarding these charges (Acts 7:1), Stephen began to present an overview of their Jewish history, up to the time when Solomon built his magnificent temple. Then he made the explosive statement, “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48). It was clear that he had Herod’s magnificent temple in Jerusalem in mind when he made this statement. Stephen went on to state, “You always resist the Holy Spirit! . . . You have betrayed and murdered the Righteous One” (Acts 7:51,52). The Sanhedrin went into pandemonium at these statements, and Stephen was dragged out of the city and stoned with Saul standing there giving his approval of Stephen’s death.

On that same day that godly men were burying Stephen “a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). We are told in Acts 8:3 that “Saul began to destroy the church.” It is very likely that most of the believing Jews in Jerusalem including some emigrant Jews were sympathizers of Stephen. As such, they recognized that the good news was not just for the Jews, but also for all nations and that the temple in Jerusalem and the



Law of Moses were no longer part of God’s purposes. But now their lives were in danger.

However, “those who had been scattered (by the persecution) preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there” (Acts 8:4-5). As a result, *many Samaritans responded*, and Peter and John were sent down to check out this phenomenon. This most likely seemed contrary to their current understanding of the good news being only for the Jews. Clearly, the Holy Spirit enlarged Peter’s understanding and after he saw Gentiles (Cornelius and his relatives and close friends) respond to the good news, he realized that God “accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:35).

Then, Acts 11:19-20 records, “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with

Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message *only to Jews*. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene (Capital of Libya), went to Antioch and began to speak to *Greeks also* telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.”

These Greek-speaking Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene, who were very likely strong sympathizers of Stephen, had already begun to realize that even Greeks could respond to this good news of the kingdom, a kingdom that was not defined by Jewish law, tradition, or customs but could be accepted by anybody of any background.

Again, this phenomenon would have seemed strange to the apostles in Jerusalem, and they sent a Mediterranean Greek-speaking Jew to investigate the situation. When Barnabas “saw the evidence of the grace of God” in Antioch, he was very excited and immediately thought of another Mediterranean Greek-speaking Jew who was familiar with this area and had gone through an amazing encounter with Jesus himself. So Barnabas went to Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, to search for Saul who was a Roman citizen by birth and yet had been trained by Gamaliel in Jerusalem to be a leading Pharisee of his day. Acts 9 tells the events of the amazing encounter that Saul had with Jesus and the ensuing conflict Saul faced with Grecian Jews in Jerusalem who saw him as a traitor and were determined to kill him (Acts 9:29).

Saul and Barnabas had considerable influence in Antioch (Acts 11:19-26). This multicultural, multi-religious city was to become the great sending base for the apostolic movement (Acts 13:1-3) that would touch the rest of the Roman Empire and beyond.

As we reflect on this *Jewish insider movement*, we see it starting in Jerusalem and spreading throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria (Acts 9:31). It initially met in the temple courts and then seems to have moved

more and more into homes. We notice in Acts 12:12, that many people were gathered in the home of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, and they were praying for the apostle Peter. Persecution forced many believers to scatter and pass on the good news wherever they went. In this scattering process, Philip talked to Samaritans. In addition, Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem talked to Greeks in Antioch.

It would appear that over this period from Jesus' ascension until the time when Barnabas and Saul ministered in Antioch (about 18-20 years later), possibly between 30,000-50,000 Jews had responded to the good news. Also other movements in Samaria and Antioch were spawned in the process.

Key leaders were essential for this movement to take place. Peter was pivotal to the response in Jerusalem. Stephen was the key to the movement going beyond Jerusalem. Philip was a link for the gospel touching the Samaritans and the Ethiopian world. Barnabas and Saul were strategic for the movement in Antioch. Peter later influenced Jews in Lydia and Joppa (Acts 9). These men had steadily grasped the implications of the good news of the kingdom and its expression in their own nation and beyond.

Emigrant Expansion of the Gospel to the Nations

Pentecost represented an amazing number of emigrant Jews such that Acts 2:5 stated "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." These first, second, third or more generation Jews would have begun to influence their context wherever they lived in the Roman Empire. And, of course, their context would have influenced them as well.

As Barnabas and Saul started their missionary journey, this was the first stream of people they sought to impact. Acts 13:5 tells us that after arriving in Salamis, "They proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues." These Mediterranean

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Jews were in practice generally quite nominal Jews and were more culturally akin to the Greek-speaking Roman world in which they lived. Being Jews, Barnabas and Saul had a natural bridge to this group, which in turn had a natural bridge to the Roman world.

In fact, we get the impression in Acts 21:21 that Paul was actually teaching "all the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs." This would have enabled these Mediterranean Jews to relate even more closely with their Roman and Greek counterparts. *They were emigrant Jews who were becoming contextualized culturally and religiously for the sake of introducing the good news to their Greek and Roman friends.* It appears that on his first journey Paul focused on these lost emigrant Jews first, as they were his own people and, secondly, as they would have had natural access to the Gentile main-streams of the Roman Empire. There was some response from this group, but the primary response was from the Gentile world, which became Paul's focus.

It is interesting to note why this discussion in Acts 21:17-25 was occurring. A large insider movement was taking place in Judea and beyond. The elders in Jerusalem said to Paul, "many thousands of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law." Was this movement syncretistic? No. Was the leadership in Jerusalem unable to think beyond the Jewish religious system? Perhaps. Was this movement actually valid since these insiders were expressing their new faith within their own religious system? Yes! Absolutely! Were they right to impose their thinking on other Jews who lived amongst the

Gentiles and would not have held to the same religious traditions? No! That was pressing syncretism upon other believers. However, this whole issue exploded when Jews from the province of Asia shouted regarding Paul, "this is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place (holy temple)." The city of Jerusalem was thrown into uproar (Acts 21:31). This led to Paul's arrest and subsequent trials before Felix and Festus. Finally, he was sent to Rome to appear before Caesar.

We also note that Paul had continued with the same strategy of *focus-ing on the lost emigrant Jews as well as the Gentiles on both his second and third journeys.* In the process, he came across responsive Jews as well as God-fearing Greeks and worshipers of God such as Lydia who responded. For example, in Corinth, "Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed," (Acts 18:8). And the Jews in Ephesus wanted to spend more time with him (Acts 18:20).

An amazing emigrant Jewish couple from Pontus (Northern Turkey) was Aquila and Priscilla. They had settled in Rome but had been forced to leave and settle in Corinth where Paul recruited them. Later he asked them to shift to Ephesus to help commence the ministry there. Then they returned to Rome. In Romans 16:4, Paul says of them, "They risked their lives for me. Not only I but *all the churches of the Gentiles* are grateful to them." This emigrant Jewish couple had impacted Gentiles all over the Roman Empire, and had moved at least four times.

Today we have ever-increasing Asian American and Asian Australian communities who also have the capacity to influence not only their

own communities but also the communities to which they have emigrated. In Asia, we have Filipinos working in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. We have Indonesians and Indians working in Malaysia and Singapore. All of these immigrant communities have an unusual opportunity to influence their host communities as well as their own communities.

The emigrant Jews were often motivated by trade, business, and commerce in their desire to live in other countries. But in the process they influenced the communities where they lived. Others were maids, servants, and slaves who worked in another country. Kenneth Scott Latourette states in Volume 1 of his series *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*⁸ on page 116,

The chief agents in the expansion of Christianity appear not to have been those who made it a profession or a major part of their occupation, but men and women who earned their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those whom they met in this natural fashion.

This would have been particularly true of the emigrant Jews in the first century, who had become fostered insider movements among the peoples in the places where they had settled.

After having examined the natural expansions of the Kingdom through the earthly ministries of Jesus we now turn to the apostolic expansion of the Kingdom into the nations. In addition we will look at how the Kingdom expanded naturally along pre-existing social networks and the issue of syncretism as well as Paul's perspective on insiders in these movements.

Apostolic Expansion of the Gospel to the Nations

We have described the natural expansion of the Kingdom in the Jewish mainstream and how this insider movement impacted the life of the Jewish nation. Jesus himself provided the leadership to bring

about these initiatives and to sustain the initial movements.

Now we will look at the *apostolic movement of the gospel* recorded from Acts 13-28. An insider movement does not normally flow into other ethnic mainstreams without the presence of apostles, prophets and evangelists. These mobile leaders and their teams are the ones who cause the gospel to go beyond its natural borders into other ethnic groupings.

We have already noted the influence of Peter, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas and Saul within the Jewish insider move-



ments and their role in pushing these movements into new ethnic streams.

Acts 13:1-3 is a pivotal turning point in the expansion of the gospel as the Holy Spirit specifically set apart Barnabas and Saul for a work that would take them deep into the Gentile world. This apostolic expansion was essential for the good news to be sown into new ethnic streams.

The first missionary journey consisted of Barnabas and Saul plus John Mark. On the second journey Paul selected Silas to accompany him. On this journey Paul asked Timothy to join them. Luke (a doctor) also joined them in Troas. Paul recruited Priscilla and Aquila to leave Corinth and help start a ministry in Ephesus. They in turn influenced Apollos who went on to Achaia to the city of Corinth and influenced the believers in that place.

On Paul's third journey he had Timothy and Erastus with him, as

well as Gaius and Aristarchus from Macedonia, Sopater from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Tychius and Trophimus from Asia Minor also accompanied him. Luke was also with him for some of the trip making up to 12 people as part of this mobile team.

Another key associate was Paul's close friend, Titus, whom he probably recruited from Antioch and who accompanied Paul and Barnabas to the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). Titus played a key role in the Corinthian scene as well as in Crete.

These mobile teams functioning apostolically were essential for initiating new insider movements.

It is interesting to note that as the gospel moved further into the Gentile world, the background of the various mobile leaders involved also changed. Jesus was a Galilean Jew. Barnabas was a Greek-speaking Jew from Cyprus. Paul was a Roman citizen who was also a Greek-speaking Jew. Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Greek father. Paul had him circumcised. Titus was purely Greek. Paul refused to let him be circumcised. Timothy had considerable influence in Ephesus and Asia Minor, and this fitted his background. Titus, who was a pure Greek fitted well into the Greek-speaking world of Corinth and Crete.

Insider Movements of the Gospel within the Nations

We have already examined the insider movement that took place within the Jewish nation beginning at Jerusalem.

We have also noted the results of the scattering of the believers out of Jerusalem due to the persecution in connection with Stephen. As a result, *Samaritans* began to respond. Also Philip influenced the Ethiopian eunuch who could have taken the good news back to his own country of *Ethiopia*.

These insider movements impacted the whole of *Judea, Galilee and Samaria*. The gospel also spread to

Damascus, an important city in the Roman province of *Syria* about 150 miles (about five days travel) north of Jerusalem. Damascus was considered the oldest city in the East and was the hub of a vast commercial network with roads leading to Baghdad, Mecca, and cities in the west. It had a huge temple to Jupiter but also had a large Jewish population. There the believers living in Damascus were known as *The Way*, and they were very possibly sympathizers of Stephen. This would account for why Saul wanted to eliminate them. The *Way* spread even to *Ephesus* (Acts 19:9, 23). Interestingly, Paul would later identify with this Jewish insider movement, which appears to have started in Jerusalem (Acts 22:4-5). It was also called a sect (Acts 24:14) and was well known to Felix, who had governed Judea and Samaria for six years by this time (Acts 24:22).

In Antioch we see the beginnings of an insider movement amongst the *Greeks* in that place. This was to spread both to the east and influence the Syriac-speaking world as well as to the West, especially through the journeys of Paul.

Through the apostle Peter, Cornelius and his relatives and close friends responded to the Good News and a movement began in Caesarea (about 30 miles north of Joppa), a Gentile city named in honor of Augustus Caesar. Paul visited this city at least twice (Acts 18:22; 21:8,16) to encourage the small insider *Roman movement* that was developing there, most likely through social networks connected to Cornelius. Brian Petersen⁹ in the current issue speaks further to Cornelius' situation.

On Paul's first missionary journey, which touched Cyprus and the Galatian cities, the Scriptures record an extraordinary response in Pisidian Antioch amongst Jews, devout converts to Judaism, and amongst many Gentiles, which spread throughout the whole region (Acts 13:49). These three strands were the beginnings of insider movements in that area.

W *e too need to be concentrating locally as insiders and yet committed globally as citizens of the kingdom of God.*

There were also responses in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe despite severe persecution from jealous Jews. After returning to Antioch, Barnabas and Paul recounted to the believers there how God had "opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." *Gentile insider movements were now being launched in the Galatian province.*

On Paul's second journey we see the beginnings of the church being planted in Macedonia and Greece. The Thessalonian believers seemed to have influenced this whole area (1 Thessalonians 1:7-8), and a movement was taking place.

On Paul's third journey, the church in Ephesus seems to have influenced the whole region and a movement was underway in that place. Acts 19:10 tells us that daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus were held by Paul and the disciples, and these discussions went on for two years. During this time, "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." At that time Epaphras became a believer and carried the good news to Colossae. From there the gospel spread to Laodicea and Hierapolis.

However, these new Gentile insider movements, which were expressions of the Kingdom of God in their natural ethnic settings, did not see themselves as converts to Judaism that required keeping the laws of Moses and especially circumcision. The Jewish insider movement and especially those believers who were Pharisees, however, felt that circumcision was essential for salvation for everyone. *The integrity of the Gentile insider movements was now at stake.*

This led to a very important summit in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15. The conclusion of this critical session, where the apostles and elders met, was that the Gentile believers did not have

to follow all of the Jewish customs. The Gentiles were free to remain insiders in their own ethnic communities and as a consequence the gospel could freely travel along natural ethnic lines.

Because of this amazing session, a letter was sent to "the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia." The Gentile insider movements were now authenticated and also encouraged by the leadership of the church at that time. This represented a major breakthrough for the mobility of the gospel and for the expansion of Gentile insider movements all over the Mediterranean world.

Characteristics of Insider Movements

There appears to be at least ten characteristics of these insider movements.

1. *The gospel is very simple.* It is the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and him crucified, risen, and ascended on high. Nothing more. It is not the crucified Jesus plus the Law. It is not the crucified Jesus plus leaving your community and joining an alien community.
2. *The expression of the gospel is his kingdom* (Matthew 6:33). The kingdom expands most naturally through the pre-existing networks of family, community and the society. As such the wheat and tares all grow together (Matthew 13:24-30 and 36-43 as well as 47-51). We don't sweat the mess.
3. Understanding our *spiritual identity* as being related to our second birth, when we become citizens of his kingdom. It has nothing to do with our cultural religious identity.
4. Understanding our *physical identity* as being related to our first birth, when we were assigned (1 Corinthians 7:17) a place and time in history (Acts 17:26) that determines our cultural, social, and religious identity.

5. *The transformation of lives* comes about by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit causing us to become holy. And God gives Spirit-filled teachers who can give instruction and even discipline to the believers.
6. The outworking of this transformation *is in the context of the lost mainstreams* where the person has responded to the good news. As 1 Peter 2:11 states, "Live such good lives among the pagans" (the Greek word for "pagans" is simply the *ethne* or nations).

This outworking of the gospel is normally through the *natural networks* of relationships found in families and relatives, in the workplace, amongst close friends, with neighbours and occasionally with those in need (Luke 10:25-37). Rodney Stark¹⁰ in his book, *The Rise of Christianity* argues that as movements in history have grown, their "social surface" has expanded exponentially. He states,

Each new member opens up new networks of relationships between the movement and potential members. The forms of social networks will differ from culture to culture, but these interpersonal relationships will define the lines through which conversion will most readily proceed.

7. *The concept of church being household (oikos)* fits naturally into this insider flow of the gospel. Indeed this understanding of church is found throughout the Book of Acts and the Epistles. Paul especially utilizes it in 1 Timothy 3 when he thinks about the heads of *households* being the leadership of the insider movement. In 1 Timothy 3:15 he specifically refers to God's household as the church of the living God. When referring to the believers in Rome, Paul lists many households in Chapter 16.
8. The local leadership that is needed for insider movements is also part of the natural fabric (1 Timothy 3) and it is the deacons who lead their own households (1 Timothy 3:12), as well as elders, overseers and

bishops (1 Timothy 3:1-7) who desire to care for other households as well. These local leaders are mostly laymen, who are already respected in their pagan communities. They provide an organic structure based on relationships in contrast to an institutional structure based on positions and programs. Often when resolving issues of justices such organic structures are necessary. An example is Acts 6:1-6 when certain widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

9. Within these insider movements, there is the *cultivation of young apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers and other mobile leaders* who will be released to go and plant the good news into new ethnic groups where the gospel is not known. The church is the umbrella that embraces these mobile teams as well as the local expressions.
10. A very helpful characteristic of an insider movement is the availability of an *indigenous, simple local Bible translation* that the common man can easily read and understand. In this way the priesthood of all believers is nourished as every believer can learn from the Scriptures directly and in turn can influence others with the good news.

Conclusion

We have seen that the *good news of the kingdom of God is the basis for insider movements*. These insider movements occur in every ethnic community of the world through "sent out" mobile gifted people who both understand and live out this commitment to the kingdom of Christ.

We are strongly aware of Jesus' words, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). Jesus was truly an insider, yet his focus was the world (Matthew 13:38 and Matthew 28:18-20). We too need to be *concentrating locally* as insiders and yet *committed globally* as citizens of the kingdom of God.

May we be part of what God is doing in the twenty-first century to his glory. **IJFM**

References and Notes

¹ "The Key to Insider Movements: The "Devoted's" of Acts," by Kevin Higgins, *IJFM* 21:4 Winter 2004. p. 155

² See *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* by Kenneth Scott Latourette, 7 volumes, Harper and Row, NY, 1937-1945.

³ *The Insider* by Jim Petersen and Mike Shamy, NavPress, CSC, 2003.

⁴ "The "Son of God": Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus," by Rick Brown, *IJFM* 17:1 Spring 2000 and "Explaining the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts," *IJFM* 22:3 Fall 2005 and 22:4 Winter 2005.

⁵ "Jesus in Samaria, A Paradigm for Church Planting Among Muslims," by Stuart Caldwell, *IJFM*, 17:1 Spring 2000.

⁶ The Decapolis was a district containing ten cities on the east side of the Sea of Galilee and it had its own coinage, courts and army. *Holman Bible Atlas*, Holman Reference, Nashville, 1998.

⁷ The cities in the Decapolis were originally built by the followers of Alexander the Great and rebuilt by the Romans in BC 65. *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1982.

⁸ See again *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* by Kenneth Scott Latourette, Vol. 1, p. 116.

⁹ A condensed version of Petersen's discussion of the Cornelis event appears in this issue of *IJFM*. For a fuller discussion see "Foreigners, Pharisees, and Foreskins: The Controversy Over Changing "Community" in the book of Acts," by B. Petersen. This article is available for download from the *IJFM* website.

¹⁰ *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark, Harper Collins, NY, 1997.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge invaluable interactions with numerous leaders in the Navigator movement including Waldron Scott (author of *Bring Forth Justice*), Jim Petersen (author of *Living Proof, Church Without Walls, Lifestyle Discipleship*, etc.), Mike Shamy (author of *The Insider* along with Jim Petersen), Donald McGilchrist, Mike Treneer, Alan Andrews, Vijayan, Don Bartel, Jeff Hayes, Gary Bradley, Dick Fischer and others who contributed various comments. Also very helpful contributions were received from Rick Brown, Bible scholar and mission strategist.