

## Book Review

**S. T. Antonio, *Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm***

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Since the emergence of the Insider Movement (henceforth IM) paradigm, great debates have surrounded it. Comprised of two groups (i.e., missionary advocates and insider believers from Muslim backgrounds or BMBs), the IM's soteriology, ecclesiology and missiology has challenged traditional church and mission approaches. Antonio enters in "not to solve this debate, but to ... focus on ... the nature and identity of the church" (xvii) and "outline a fresh and robust biblical vision for the nature of the church that can illuminate the insider paradigm and ultimately guide our efforts in multiplying churches among Muslims" (xxii).

*Insider Church* is divided into two major sections. The first details a biblical vision of the Church to clarify the narrative and themes of its identity (ch 1), the marks of the Church (ch 2), and how Church is contextualized (ch 3). The second appraises the IM by explaining what their insider conception of ekklesia is (ch 4), evaluating it (ch 5), and its implications for conversation with IM advocates (ch 6). The book concludes with an epilogue of recommendations for multiplying biblical churches among Muslims. Due to the challenge of unpacking the IM's "interlocking" traits such as Islam, contextualization, pneumatology, and ecclesiology, Antonio only examines its ecclesiology (xxi).

Antonio hits many right notes by elucidating a clear picture of the Church when identifying how God's people are mainly portrayed in Scripture as a "covenant" people, Jesus' "kingdom community," and an apostolic-founded church (5), as well as through such metaphors as "exile," "remnant," and "holy nation" throughout the book. For Antonio, the essence of the Church must include the paired traits of Church universal versus local as well as visible and invisible. Also, there must be a strong and healthy relationship between Church and salvation (i.e. there is no salvation outside the Church other than rare exceptions, such as Melchizedek, that come to faith independent of other believers' witness). Antonio also includes regular, not intermittent, gatherings as one of the Church's core functions. He warns against holding a stripped-down or confused ecclesiology that maximizes the exceptions in soteriology but minimizes the main avenues to salvation (41). The local church must also be visible, not just among themselves but in relation to their closer social context (i.e. the Muslim community) and with other churches (51). In turn, the latter must find ways to incorporate the former. IM advocates that hinder BMBs from fellowshiping with the universal body (in spite of security risks) are arresting their development (47); regular churches that do not welcome BMBs also fall short.

Antonio continues by noting that in the New Testament churches were visible and known to outsiders. In comparison, insider churches are *visible only amongst themselves* and *invisible* to outsiders (109-111). The NT Church also made adjustments to prevent scandalizing other believers while insider churches make few adjustments for other Christians (96). An illuminating insight is the insider church is "not significantly influenced by classical attributes of the church (one, holy, catholic and apostolic)" but leans more toward the Protestant marks of "the Word, baptism and

communion” (112, 153). Antonio raises concerns, however, over how baptism and communion are conceived differently among insider churches. For their part, IM advocates have offered their own marks as valid indicators of an emerging biblical church (from Acts 2:42-46): prayer, the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, meeting in the temple and house-to-house, devotion to the Word, prayer and relational discipleship (113).

While these IM church marks are uncontroversial, other stances raise eyebrows, most especially not only can salvation be found *outside* the Church but it can “flourish *inside a non-Christian ‘socio-religious’ community*” (italics mine; 114). Another claim that concerns many is that the kingdom of “God’s exercise of his reign and rule ...includes [other] religions” (117). How this IM claim looks on the ground is, however, not detailed in the book. To correct such an expansive and questionable vision of Church, Antonio calls the IM church paradigm to a ‘single expanded ecclesiology’ (134) – a visible church where two distinct groups of believers are under one roof (i.e. a heterogenous unit principle) as followers of Christ.

Antonio also rightly critiques the IM’s omission of biblical metaphors for the Church such as “holy,” “set-apart people” and “the new humanity” (135-136). These omitted metaphors stress a distinct and visible community rather than an invisible one among Muslims, and IM proponents overemphasize “yeast” or “seed”—metaphors that convey inside-out, gradual transformation. Another critique concerns the framework of the IM base religious narrative of prime reference as the Quran rather than Scripture (137). Overall, Antonio concludes this section by stating that the IM’s ecclesiology is selective and amiss on a number of key areas. At the same time, he states that other, more established churches have also been wanting in wholly emphasizing voluntary, individualistic ecclesiologies in contrast to the insider churches’ focus on communal commitment and responsibility.

*Insider Church* excels in its detailed examination of the themes of contextualization and the nature of Church to help everyone assess its fidelity to a more authentic biblical vision. The book, however, does not adequately represent the IM’s ecclesiology.

Firstly, though Antonio notes that space delimited discussions of IM pneumatology (xxi), at least a page or two to outline related issues could have been discussed. This point is salient because the Holy Spirit is deemed the critical teacher (or factor) in the insiders’ ability to contextualize their soteriology, ecclesiology, and missiology. Also, while critiquing the insider churches’ overemphasis of certain biblical metaphors for Church, Antonio hardly explicates the ecclesiological understanding of “kingdom of priests” (7-8). A key doctrine of the Reformation, the priesthood of all believers has been upheld more in word than in practice in many regular churches today. Conversely, IM churches have strongly practiced this. Finally, by stating that “Paul regularly appointed elders in every church he planted” (142), the book risks giving the false impression that no bottom-up selection of leaders occurred (but see Acts 1:15-23, 6:3, and 20:28) thus implying the insider church’s leadership selection is unbiblical. Antonio’s definition of a local church (44) also omits mission, even though that lies at the heart of insider churches and is fundamental to any church.

Elsewhere, the telic nature of insider churches’ contextualization process is overlooked, even though all IM advocates have stressed that as an ongoing or open-ended process where change cannot be mechanically programmed or predicted. While Antonio fairly describes IM churches as “embryonic” and “emerging,” his critiques could be read as the need for “instant purity now” rather than the inherently long, generational change involved. If established churches themselves still

labor to purge the syncretisms of their own after many generations, can we also be patient to trust in God's Spirit to effect purity and change among insider churches over a long-time span?

*Insider Church* will not resolve all differences between IM advocates and critics. At the same time, by its more honest and open approach to appreciate yet critique both sides, Antonio's analysis models a more balanced treatment of the whole discussion for others to emulate.