

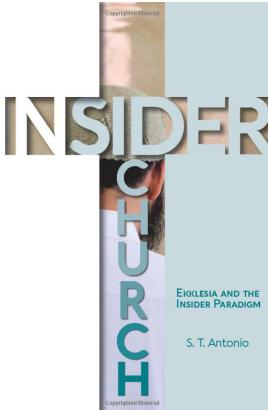
Insider Church: Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm

By S.T. Antonio

William Carey Publishing, 2020. 211 pages.

Reviewed by Don Little

*Don, a Canadian resident in the United States, was called to minister to Muslims as a teenager and has been actively involved in this calling for 45 years. In his role as Pioneers Missiologist-at-Large, Don is networking, mentoring, teaching, and training in order to equip frontline workers for increasingly fruitful ministry among Muslims. He is a co-founder and the Director of The Lilias Trotter Center and the author of Effective Discipling in Muslim Communities *(Little 2015), which arose out of his doctoral studies in mission and cross-cultural studies. His life-focus is to disciple people to be all that they can be in God and to mobilize, train, and mentor men and women to a life of loving Muslims.*



N.B. Please read this book review *after* you have read the review above of the book *Seeking Church*. They are written as complementary reviews and are meant to be read in the order they are published.

As I was preparing to teach a new course on discipling believers of Muslim background (BMBs) and planting churches among Muslims a couple of years ago, I reached out to my colleague S.T. Antonio to find out whether he could recommend a book to serve as the core text on church planting for the course. The book that he recommended, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principles and Best Practices for Multiplication* by Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, is excellent and I did assign it as the text

on church planting for the course that year. However, in re-reading S.T. Antonio's book now, which I first reviewed in pre-publication draft form before teaching my course in 2020, I am impressed afresh at the depth and quality of his own book, *Insider Church*.

Coming as it does out of his ThM thesis at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, *Insider Church* is thoroughly biblical, exegetically compelling, and irenic in both its description and critique of the ecclesiology of the insider paradigm. Antonio, in addition to being the editor of *Seedbed*, has served in cross-cultural ministry in the Middle East for almost a decade now. Though the ThM work that provides the core of this book was undertaken prior to Antonio's arrival in the Middle East, his growing experience as a pioneer church planter in the heart of the Muslim world was clearly the backdrop from which he wrote *Insider Church*. One of his primary concerns in publishing this book was to provide much-needed help to everyone engaged in pioneer church planting among unreached peoples to think through and develop a sound and biblically rooted understanding of the church. He does this by carefully and fairly describing the ecclesiology of those who minister within an insider paradigm, and then sensitively and gently offering valuable correctives. The result is that whoever reads this book will be exposed to both an excellent treatment of the biblical idea of and reality of the church, and they will have a great model of how to engage those with whom one has profound disagreement in an irenic and gentle way.

In my other book review in this edition of *Seedbed*, *Seeking Church*, I discussed the vision for insider churches which Duerksen and Dyrness sought to defend. Why is it so important that those who are engaged in pioneer church planting have good ecclesiology? Few contemporary theologians would disagree with the sentiment that evangelicals have an underdeveloped doctrine of the church (ecclesiology). There are many important issues at stake in the debate surrounding the insider paradigm,¹

1 If you are unfamiliar with these issues, a good introduction is L.D. Waterman's "Insider Movements: Current Issues in Discussion," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 37, no.4 (2013): 292–307. Ecclesiology is *not* one of the eight issues described by Waterman.

but the one that evangelicals tend to be ill-equipped to handle well is in having and articulating a solid biblical ecclesiology. It might not be stretching it too much to suggest that had evangelicals had a more robust ecclesiology, it is possible that the insider paradigm would never have gotten much traction among evangelical missionaries 30 years ago.

One can only imagine a community of Christ's followers living with Muslim identity in a Muslim community if one has a seriously underdeveloped ecclesiology. Such an insider community cannot possibly be identifiable as a church, and the church is what Christ came to earth to set up following Pentecost. It is vital that we, who are called to help plant churches and facilitate movements of churches planting churches among the unreached, work from a historically grounded and biblically anchored ecclesiology. S.T. Antonio's little book *Insider Church* breaks new ground in laying the foundation for a solid ecclesiology that by its very nature undermines the often-confused practice and vision of the insider paradigm.

In Part One, Antonio masterfully describes the conversations that have been going on about the nature of the church throughout church history, and sensitively suggests a strong, biblically sound, and contextually compelling vision of the nature of the churches that we are seeking to see God birth among unreached peoples. Antonio covers much of the same ground as Duerksen and Dyrness in *Seeking Church*, but as I read Antonio's account of the church, I found myself saying "amen" over and over again. It was so refreshing to read his careful exegesis, sensitive historical analysis, and careful engagement with contemporary missiological trends. Reading Antonio's work was faith renewing and deeply encouraging, after having spent weeks trying to read and accurately understand Duerksen and Dyrness's sociological analysis and defense of insider ecclesiology. Though the books are about the same size, and display similar levels of scholarship, I found Antonio's work to be far more valuable for anyone who is actually engaged in the ministry of church planting. There are many great insights and penetrating critiques in this little

book. And it is much easier to read. Its language is straightforward and clear and avoids so much of the academic sophistication that Duerksen and Dyrness exhibit. Admittedly, it would appear that the audience for the two books is quite different. But since those reading this review in *Seedbed* are seeking help in their church-planting ministries, it is good to know that the book that presents the better ecclesiology is also the book that is easier to read.

So, what does Antonio cover in his book on the nature of the church and insider ecclesiology? The book is organized in a very straightforward way. In the first half of the book, entitled “Toward a Biblical Vision of the Church,” Antonio explores the role and nature of the church in the context of biblical history (Ch 1) and how the people of God in the First Testament are related to the new people of God who are gathered to Christ as members of his body. His insights here are rock solid. In contrast to Duerksen and Dyrness who reduce the church to a status below the kingdom of God, Antonio does an excellent job of articulating the way that the kingdom of God and the church are wholly inter-connected in Jesus’ ministry and teaching:

Proclaiming the kingdom and forming his emerging ekklésia were all a prelude to the climax and central purpose of Jesus’ coming—his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Contrary to all expectations, Jesus inaugurated the kingdom, not through the sword but through the cross. Receiving universal authority, King Jesus commissioned his church to implement his universal reign through discipleship of the nations, which involved baptizing them into the growing community of the triune God (Matt 28:19–20). And after Pentecost, that’s exactly what his disciples did.... (17, emphasis added)

Then in the second chapter, Antonio describes what he calls the “five essential elements” of a *local church*, as seen in the NT. The first two are related to the “core essence” of the church; the final three involve the activity and organization of the church. They are: (1) shared experience of

salvation, professed in baptism, (2) solidarity and identity as “ekklésia,” (3) regular gathering as “ekklésia,” (4) biblical patterns of community, and (5) appointed elders (34–45).

Then after concisely clarifying distinctions between the local and universal church and the church visible and invisible (44–54), he tackles the often-contentious question of the marks or attributes of the church, which Duerksen and Dyrness almost completely dispense with in *Seeking Church*. Antonio first describes the four classical attributes of the church conveyed in the expression: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. He then suggests that Protestants have done well to add two key marks to these classical attributes: (1) the word being faithfully taught and obeyed, and (2) two rituals that express and cultivate the core attributes of the church – baptism and the Lord’s Supper (56–63). This is in contrast to Duerksen and Dyrness who suggest that baptism and the Lord’s Supper can both be abandoned if they are offensive to a non-Christian religious context. In this chapter, he also clarifies a number of other oft-asked questions about the church. This one chapter presents a concise, balanced, and biblically informed Protestant understanding of the church that most church planters will do well to embrace and rejoice in.

In the third chapter, “Contextualizing Church,” Antonio discusses the core issues in the contextualization debate in evangelical mission circles over the past 50 years. After a nuanced and wise discussion of all the ins and outs of the conversation, he sums up authentic contextualization at the end of the chapter as:

Following the biblical patterns of contextualization of Israel and the church, authentic contextualization avoids the twin dangers of cultural foreignness and syncretism by faithfully reflecting the biblical nature and purpose of the church in ways which are meaningful to the local context; which critically engage with and transform the beliefs, practices, and symbols within the culture; and which reflect the indigenous-pilgrim character of the people of God. (88, emphasis in the original)

Having laid an excellent foundation in Part One, in Part Two Antonio undertakes a careful description (Ch 4) and then a judicious “appraisal” of Insider Church ecclesiology (Ch 5). In chapter 4, Antonio describes the primary characteristics of insider *ekklésia* using the seven dimensions below. Then he carefully assesses its strengths and weaknesses in chapter 5, using the same seven dimensions (listed on p. 126, discussed throughout pp 126–166):

- Biblical Theology of the Church
- Essential Identity of the Church
- Local and Universal Church
- Visible and Invisible Church
- Marks of the Church
- Salvation and the Church
- The Church, the World, and Contextualization

These seven dimensions arise naturally out of the earlier chapters and offer a robust and meaningful set of criteria for critiquing insider ecclesiology. Space does not allow me to present Antonio’s nuanced and careful critiques. His discussion of insider ecclesiology charitably lists the strengths, where they are evident, and then gently points out the shortcomings. In the process, he covers many of the key debates surrounding the insider paradigm. In chapter 6, he explores a number of implications that proponents of the insider paradigm need to weigh carefully. Here is a statement of the conclusions that he takes from his evaluation:

My conclusion is that the insider paradigm indeed offers a model which unleashes the yeast of the kingdom among Muslim communities, while simultaneously leaving the door open to another yeast that risks “leavening” the pure, unleavened bread of the biblical nature of the church. The insider paradigm opens our eyes to neglected aspects of the church’s identity, stimulating us toward creative ways of “implanting” the church in Muslim

contexts. However, the insider paradigm also neglects certain biblical themes and aspects of the biblical identity of the church, and it includes certain claims, concepts, and principles which potentially hinder the expression of the church's full biblical nature. (169)

He reminds us that when gathering groups of believers together for the first time in a new region, the groups will typically begin as only "embryonic churches." But, *over time*, they have the potential to develop into full-fledged churches which include all the elements of a full local church as spelled out in this book. Having a clear understanding of the end in mind helps us move in the right direction from the outset.

Antonio concludes the book with a short epilogue recommending "eight principles" to help shape our church-planting strategy among Muslims, which if adopted, will enable new churches to develop healthy biblical identities as churches (175–83). Here is a concise expression of these principles:

1. Emerging churches should be immersed in the full biblical story of the people of God and learn the full scope of biblical images of the church in both the Old and New Testaments.
2. Emerging churches should continually grow in their understanding of their salvation in Christ and of the God who saved them.
3. Emerging churches should find ways to embrace and name their identity as the people of God in their context.
4. Emerging churches should have a clear understanding of all of the elements of a healthy local church and should work at developing expressions of these elements locally.
5. Emerging churches should understand their connection to the global family of God and develop ways of connecting and identifying with the church universal.

6. Emerging churches should learn to live out and express their true identity as the people of God in ways that communicate in tangible glimpses the full glory of the church.
7. Emerging churches should develop patterns of faithful engagement with and obedience to the whole Scriptures, including the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
8. Emerging churches should develop a holistic understanding of their role in exemplifying and declaring the King and inviting non-believers to join in the community of the King.

As you can see, this is a list of eight “shoulds.” Antonio does not give much in the way of practical guidance on how to carry out these principles (one of the few shortcomings of the book). Yet, he is on to something very important here. At one point in the ministry that I was a part of in Morocco several decades ago, a struggling house church that was on the verge of collapse was re-invigorated through catching a strong vision of the church in the New Testament. Their new vision, which Antonio expresses particularly in points 1-4 and 8, led to this little house church growing, sending out church planters to several cities, and becoming one of the stronger house-church networks in the country. The little struggling “embryonic” church was invigorated as a result of gaining a full-orbed vision for the church through a study of the church in the NT. In a very real sense, seeking to apply these eight *theoretical* “shoulds” can provide *practical guidance* for all involved in pioneer church planting.

Unlike Duerksen and Dyrness’s *Seeking Church*, which I found to have little value for frontline workers, I *highly recommend* *Insider Church* as a book that every church-planting team should read and discuss. Antonio focuses his analysis on insider ecclesiology as it finds expression in the *Muslim* world, but I believe that most of his critiques would apply equally as well in other kinds of religious contexts which Duerksen and Dyrness briefly explore in their book (Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist). Allow me to give the last word to Antonio, with which I heartily concur:

We should not be content with the mass conversion of Muslims or the conversion of Muslim families. Our vision must include not only biblical discipleship, but biblical churches. The apostle Paul was not satisfied with conversion and fellowships of believers; his ultimate motivation and goal was to see churches become mature and complete in Christ, which Paul could present as a pleasing offering to the Lord on the last day (Rom 15:16; Phil 2:16; Col 1:28–29). We should follow this example by praying and working tirelessly toward the goal of presenting to the Lord an offering of mature, biblical churches from every corner of the Muslim world. (183)

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