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On Insiders and Outsiders

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JUSTIN ARIEL BAILEY

Having recently written a book, *Reimagining Apologetics: The Beauty of Faith in a Secular Age* (IVP Academic, 2020), I have the privilege of reading reviews of it. One reviewer offered a thoughtful critique concerning my consistent language of “outsider” and “insider” in the book. This prompts me to reflect on my own story as an ethnic and denominational outsider moving my ministerial credentials to the CRC.

First, here is the critique: the terms “insider” and “outsider” represent a self-satisfied posture of “us vs. them” where the insiders have all the answers, and the outsiders have all the questions. This keeps us from learning from those outside the walls of the church, but the church needs at times to be evangelized by the world.

I am in full agreement with this basic point. But I use the terms “insider” and “outsider” primarily as descriptive rather than normative terms. “Insider” reflects the reality that a person of faith inhabits a tradition that feels different from the inside than it does to those outside. This is simply true about any thick community, be it a church or otherwise. My point was that many of the most important things about faith can only be grasped from the inside, from a place of commitment. My hope was that imaginative empathy could offer a way to bridge this gap of understanding.

Imaginative Empathy

I have also endeavored to take “outsiders”—authors **George MacDonald** and **Marilynne Robinson**—as my primary models to show us the way in. Indeed, Robinson calls herself “a Christian apologist for the secular world rather than to it.” Artists, poets, and writers are—to use Makoto Fujimura’s phrase—*mearcstapas*, “border-walkers” who problematize the clear lines between outside and inside, carving out ample space for those who feel far from God and far from faith. I try to show, for example, how John Ames (a believer) needs Jack Boughton (an atheist) to see clearly, and how it is divine generosity that makes space for us to join in an authentic human search.

And yet, there is some normative force to “insider” and “outsider.” This is because I trust that the Christian story is not just beautiful but also good and true. With respect to this story, I write as one amazed to have been invited in. Ephesians 2:19 says, “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” This astonishment at being “no longer a foreigner or a stranger” provides me no space for self-satisfied presumption. Nor does it exempt “members of his household” from being called into question.

In my book, I put it this way: “What is being narrated is not an abstract truth, but a particular story that happened (and is still happening) in history. Outsiders are invited into the story of God, not just my story, or my tribe’s story. God’s story, a theodrama, embraces these smaller stories, but it does so by catching them up and transfiguring them. As Willie Jennings argues, with respect to this story all non-Jews are outsiders who have been invited in. Every new act of translation requires an act of joining, which enriches the story itself as it unfolds in new ways, as well as the storyteller” (235).

All of us have experiences of being on the inside and outside that situate how we experience those terms. The previous caution on “us versus them” should be taken seriously. My experience of these terms, however, has been different. Part of this is theological. When I speak about insiders and outsiders, I am working with a centered-set approach to theology and Christian witness (oriented toward the center, Christ) rather than a bounded-set approach (obsessed with the boundaries and in declaring who is in and out). My use of these terms draws from Jennings, who writes in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* that true Christian ministry is “loving, caring, intimate joining ... a sharing in the pain, plight, and life of another,” and from missiologist Lamin Sanneh who argues that the translatability of the gospel favors outsiders.

My Story

But when I write about insiders and outsiders, I am mainly thinking of my own story. I am attracted to this language primarily because I have always identified with the outsiders. I am Filipino American but was raised and educated in predominantly white spaces. My first church was an immigrant congregation, Filipino American like myself, where I was lovingly identified as “coconut”—white on the inside—a telling epithet! My second church was Korean American, and though I felt deeply loved and welcomed for the better part of a decade, I was never unaware of my outsider status. I now once again find myself in a predominantly white space, in Northwest

Iowa, among the Dutch Reformed. They, too, have welcomed me with open arms. But I am never unaware of my outsider status.

Last year I moved my ordination credentials to the CRC. I found my way from Baptist roots, through immigrant-church pastorates, into the Reformed tradition through reading Calvin, Kuyper, and Mouw. As I began the process of moving my credentials, I realized that I felt some reluctance to relinquish my outsider status. Being an outsider can feel lonely. But it can also create space, allowing a person to enjoy some of the benefits of a tradition or a community without owning its baggage (“not my people, not my problems”).

And yet, at some point, an outsider recognizes the presence of real invitations to share meaningful space within the thickness of an ethnic community or denominational tradition. The invitation holds pitfalls and promise. You are never completely sure if you have been accepted.

But if you receive the invitation in good faith, it entails some important responsibilities: First, to accept the gifts of the tradition along with its faults. Second, to bring the gifts that only you can bring. Third, to remind those who are on the inside that there are others: unseen, unheard, outside, on the fringe, or far away.

Concerning these travelers from the “highways and hedges,” the mission seems clear: to point them, with trembling gestures, in the direction of the feast (Luke 14:12-24). Because what we are really after is not a pronouncement of who is in and who is out, but a posture of humility and hope that only the gospel can bring. Living and loving from that posture will take all the imagination we can muster.