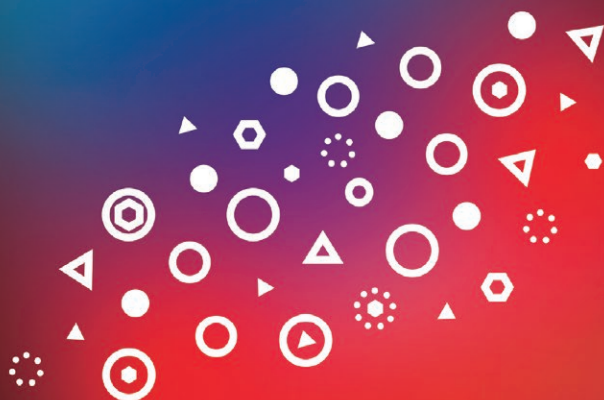


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COAUTHOR OF *MINISTERING IN  
HONOR-SHAME CULTURES*

# CENTERED-SET CHURCH



DISCIPLESHIP

AND COMMUNITY

WITHOUT

JUDGMENTALISM



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# DRAWING LINES AND ERASING LINES



## **DRAWING LINES**

While riding home from church when I was six years old, I looked disdainfully at people who were mowing their lawns because I had learned that Christians did not work on Sunday. Though I don't recall anyone at church actually telling me that people who mowed their lawns on Sundays were reprobates, I viewed them that way. Not only did they perform forbidden tasks on the Lord's day, they obviously had not gone to church. This provided me a clear way of labeling some people as non-Christians.

By observing those who mowed lawns on Sunday, I could distinguish those who belonged to my religion from those who did not. At the age of six I had already absorbed and applied a line-drawing approach to Christianity, and I had the security of knowing that I was on the right side of the line. I was "in." As I grew older I continued to derive security from the lines I drew. As a teenager I felt morally superior because, in contrast to those around me, I did not cheat on tests, steal on the job, drink, dance, swear, smoke, or do drugs.

After I left home to go to a Christian college, two different encounters led me to rethink using rules to draw lines. First, I happened to visit a church that had a longer list of rules than mine. Sitting in a pew in the back, I became increasingly uncomfortable as the church filled up. All the males had on

white shirts and ties. I did not. My hair was 1970s stylishly long; theirs was 1950s short. I felt shame for standing out and not complying with their rules. I was on the wrong side of their line. I imagined them looking at me and thinking just what I thought of people on the wrong side of lines I had drawn. Had I made others feel like this? I did not like it.

And, around the same time, I met some Christians who had a shorter list of rules than I did. They drank occasionally and enjoyed dancing. I faced a dilemma. My definition of Christianity told me that these people could not be Christians. In other ways, though, I recognized their faith to be more mature than my own. I either had to change my definition of a Christian or refuse to accept these friends as Christians. I concluded that legalism was the problem. I began to step away from my focus on rules, and I fully embraced my friends as Christians. I also began to see “legalists” as the ones who were not “good Christians.”

Over the next seven years I continued changing and embraced new expressions of Christian discipleship: a simple lifestyle, total commitment to Jesus, openness to gifts of the Spirit, and commitment to social justice. I thought I had come a long way from my high school legalism until I sat in a Bible study and watched the teacher draw two diagrams on the board.

He drew a line that angled uphill and said: “Many evangelical students see their life as a progression from the legalism of their youth to a more mature Christianity, which stresses issues of lifestyle and justice and explores authentic Christianity. It appears they have moved forward.” I thought, *Yes, that’s me*. Then he drew a circle and at different points wrote *legalism, simple lifestyle, freedom to drink, and issues of justice*. He pointed to the circle. “They move along, but they are not going anywhere. They just change one means of judging themselves as superior for another.”<sup>1</sup> I felt stunned. Perhaps I had not progressed as far as I had thought.

Stunned, yes, but I did not feel attacked because it was a gracious revelation—gracious in the spirit in which he did it and full of grace because it was a first step in my becoming more gracious toward myself and others. His observations led me to look at my life with new eyes. I saw that I had used the “broadening” of my faith perspective in the same way I had used

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<sup>1</sup>John Linton, Bible study, “The Oregon Extension,” Ashland, OR, January 1984.

the legalism of my youth: to draw lines between myself and others. Just as I had looked down on those who mowed their lawns on Sunday, I now looked down on those who did not share my new perspectives. Though I was self-righteously judging others, I also often felt judged by some people for things I did or believed. For instance, although my stance on US foreign policy in Central America caused some Christians to see me as a “good Christian,” other Christians critiqued me. One church I attended maintained that, regarding social issues, opposing abortion should be *the* priority for all Christians. I agreed it was an important issue, but because I put more time and energy into other causes, I felt like I did not measure up to their standard. I was on the wrong side of their line.

Often when I read a book or heard a speaker, I would add something else to my list of what “true” Christians should support with their time and money. I tried to balance and carry this increasing load, but eventually it became impossible. Even I could not stay on the right side of the lines that I had drawn. So I would come up with a rationalization and then adjust the lines so that I could still see myself as a “good” Christian.

Such line drawing is a community activity, defining who belongs and who does not. It gives security, but it also stifles authenticity. During my first four years as a missionary in Honduras, I attended a charismatic church, but I never shared that fact with people from my home church in New York. I told them about my Honduran church but never identified it as charismatic. I told myself that no one had asked, but I knew that I had purposefully withheld that information because attending a charismatic church had not been a casual decision. I had spent hours exploring biblical texts about the Holy Spirit, reading books about the gifts of the Spirit, and discussing it all with others in Honduras. Eventually I had decided to step away from my home church’s teaching that the gifts of the Spirit were for another age. I knew that this decision placed me on the wrong side of a line. Fearing shaming critique and rejection, I masked the truth and sealed off a significant aspect of my life from others. Though I remained in relationship with my New York church community, the shame that flowed from the lines we had drawn kept us from sharing our lives in a fully authentic way.

While lines provide clear guidance, they can also hinder us from hearing the Spirit’s call. After four years in Honduras, I became a campus minister

with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and moved to Syracuse, New York. Others involved with InterVarsity recommended that I look for an apartment near the university, but I had just spent four years drawing a thick line between missionaries who lived with the poor and those who isolated themselves in nice houses surrounded by large walls in wealthy neighborhoods. Living with the poor was not only part of my definition of being a good missionary, but it had become a badge of honor. If I lived on the “wrong side of town,” I would feel “in” with the circle of missionaries I most respected. There are certainly good reasons for living with the poor—in both Honduras and the United States—and the Holy Spirit has led me to do so at different points in my life. However, even more fundamentally, I think there are very good reasons to live in the context of one’s ministry. Ironically, I had distorted an incarnational calling from one context into doing the opposite somewhere else. Rather than living within walking distance of the university and having students as neighbors, I thought I should live on the other side of the city, unconnected to any people or ministry, just so I could grasp the status of being on the “right” side of the line I had drawn. Thankfully, before I signed a lease, I was honest enough with myself to recognize the distortion, and I rented an apartment a few blocks from Syracuse University. I wish I could tell you I did it free from shame, but I was not yet that far in my journey.

I tell these stories not only to portray some of the problems that flow from line-drawing judgmentalism, but more importantly to display a common error. In college I recognized my legalistic self-righteousness, but I mistakenly thought that the legalistic rules were the problem. I viewed the solution as discarding the rules. I had not dug deeply enough. Although my perspectives about what it meant to be a good Christian had changed over the years, my drive to be right and my line drawing had remained constant. I had torn down one house and built another that looked completely different without realizing that both houses had been built on the same flawed foundation. My foundation of judgmental line drawing had prevented me from fully experiencing authentic Christian community in either house. This flawed foundation had also hindered me from experiencing the unconditional love of God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Some material in this section is adapted from Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 34-36. Used by permission.

Because both houses were built on the foundation of line drawing, they had similar characteristics: gracelessness, conditional acceptance, fear, lack of transparency, lack of empathy, self-righteousness, and shallow ethical change. My intent had been to invite others to embrace the beliefs and practices that mattered to me, yet in the process I unintentionally fostered these negative characteristics. I am not writing this book to convince readers to let go of their beliefs and values, but to describe how we can affirm our beliefs and live out our values without producing the negative characteristics listed above. God worked in and through me during my early years of ministry, and I grew and changed in many positive ways. Yet until my foundation was rebuilt, I could not experience the full measure of new creation life in Christ.

I started drawing lines as a boy and kept drawing them for years. Others have different stories. Rather than drawing lines, some people try to erase lines and throw away all line-drawing markers. The following story displays the fruits of this approach.<sup>3</sup>

### ERASING LINES

Dustin Maddox's parents grew up in restrictive, line-drawing churches. As adults they fled the church and did not return, but Dustin occasionally went to church with his grandmother. Once, when he was eight, an older woman told a group of children, "Jesus loves you so much that he died for you so that God will not send you to hell." Dustin thought, *That doesn't make sense*. He raised his hand and asked, "If God loves us, then why does God want to send us to hell?" The woman responded, "People who ask questions like that end up going to hell." At that moment, Dustin, like his parents, decided he was done with church. He did not want to end up like that woman. The stories he had heard from his parents and his experience with judgmental Christians in high school reinforced this conviction. His rejection of confident judgmentalism led him to align with those who took the opposite stance—a pluralistic approach to any truth claims.

However, Dustin did have some nonjudgmental Christian friends who did not turn him off, and he sporadically went to their church youth group. Through their encouragement, he made a last-minute decision to accompany

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<sup>3</sup>Dustin Maddox, interview by author, Fresno, CA, March 6, 2018.

the youth group on a spring break mission trip to Mexico. The week was intense, both disturbing and exciting. He started the week by asking, “What is VBS?” only to find himself helping to run a Vacation Bible School program. The poverty he witnessed in Mexico disturbed and saddened him. Three brothers who walked a mile to come to the program caught his attention, especially the three-year-old, who made the trek barefoot. During a group prayer time, Dustin blurted out, “I don’t know how this works, but God, if you are there, if you could get this kid shoes, that would be really cool.” The next day the boy arrived wearing brand new shoes. Dustin recognized that any number of things might explain how that happened, but the startling answer to his prayer moved him deeply.

That prayer came in the context of a week of studies on the Sermon on the Mount, and Dustin was finding Jesus to be completely and utterly compelling, unlike anyone he had ever heard or experienced. During the final study, the day the boy arrived with new shoes, a youth pastor from another church did something that had never happened in Dustin’s youth group. He gave an altar call, and Dustin went forward. In that moment of repentance and the Communion service that followed, Dustin encountered Jesus and sensed a call to something greater. He also recognized his shortcomings and brokenness in a way that he never had before. Yet it was a guilt-freeing, shame-depleting experience that was radically different from what he had felt as an eight-year-old. God’s love overwhelmed him.

Back home he became actively involved in the church and youth group. Rather than drawing clearly defined lines to distinguish Christians from non-Christians, his leaders worked to erase lines because they too had experienced the negative fruit of line drawing. Because they held onto enough of Jesus, Dustin made connections with what he had experienced in Mexico. It felt like a Christian space to him, but in many ways the spirit and practices of the youth group matched the world that Dustin had inhabited before the mission trip. The fundamental philosophy was “whatever works for you.” Jesus seemed to be an optional add-on, a sort of a life coach mixed with relativism, even pluralism. In fact, things were so fuzzy and the imperatives so soft that Dustin felt no need to change his life in any significant way. He continued to party just as he had before. Later, when he began working at the church, his supervisor said, “Now that you are a leader, it is probably best



if you do these things in a less public way.” The softness of this suggestion displayed the degree of discomfort that the church felt with anything that might appear to be line-drawing exclusion.

Though Dustin did not experience any of the judgmentalism that drove his parents and his eight-year-old self from church, he began to recognize that the fuzzy, line-erasing approach also produced negative fruit. The flight from judgmentalism in the church led to a milder form of the “what-everism” Dustin had lived before becoming a Christian. The church often attracted Christians who were seeking an alternative to the line-drawing judgmentalism of their churches, and Dustin observed that as people got fuzzier and fuzzier, they eventually just left the church. As individuals wandered off, he sensed the church getting fuzzier too. Vague Christianity is not interesting or compelling, life-giving or transformative, and as the emphasis on genuine Christian orthodoxy decreased, the number of people leaving increased.

Just as I had sincere and positive motivations for drawing lines, Dustin (and others like him) had positive and sincere motivations for erasing them. Yet Dustin began to recognize deficiencies in the pluralistic, non-judgmental soil into which he and his friends had sunk their roots. The center of gravity was the autonomous “authentic self,” and he saw his friends, both Christians and non-Christians, pursue many unhealthy actions that they easily justified by claiming that they were just trying to discover their true selves. They legitimized a whole variety of behaviors with little genuine reflection about how it might hurt themselves or others. In the end, what was determinative was subjective, “I can do whatever I want, however I want, whenever I want, and no one can tell me differently.” There was no call or challenge to transformation, no imperative to work on deep-seated issues in one’s being or character. Rather, the corporate culture was one of permissiveness because, “Who am I to tell you anything differently?” Common guidance was to “listen to yourself,” which was offered without reins or constraints, without sharing a word of caution that our desires might mislead us because our feelings are fickle. More and more, Dustin realized that although the people in his church desired community, the soil in which the church was planted was not providing the conditions needed for true community.

Looking back now, Dustin sees how ineffective he was pastorally—not just because he never offered words of warning that were desperately needed, but because of the blandness of it all. Who wants to have a conversation with a pastor who is just super nice? As in, “Hey man, I am here to support you in whatever you choose.” There is a role for people like that in our lives, but they don’t draw us toward transformation. They don’t challenge us by saying, “I know who you are and all that you could be; here are some things that do not reflect who God created you to be.” If we are going to grow, we need people around us who can help us picture the kingdom of God by saying, “The path you are walking is not the way to life, but you can step into this kingdom life, because this is the life for which God made you.”

The reality of Dustin’s encounter with Jesus remained alive in his being, and themes from the Sermon on the Mount remained part of his experience. But as the years passed, he recognized that he had not been summoned to greater obedience to Jesus. He felt a strong push to try to fix the world but also an absence of any summons to sort out how to be a disciple of Jesus. He came to understand that many people in the church saw themselves as Christian authorities on the external world, but they did not recognize the need to obey anything beyond themselves in their individual lives. Despite his growing awareness about the negative aspects of the current he was in, he floated along because he didn’t want to be associated with line-drawing rigidity.

In response to the self-righteous judgmentalism of a line-drawing church, it is understandable that Dustin—and others like him—pulled out their erasers and wiped out the lines. In response to the relativism and blandness of fuzzy churches, it is also understandable that other Christians have pulled out their markers to draw clearer and bolder lines. The intentions of both are positive, but the fruit is negative. Is there another option? A third way? I began to see the possibilities of a third way when I studied Galatians with *Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida* (Love, Faith, and Life Church) in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, in 1992 and 1993.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Amor Fe y Vida* changed their name a few years ago to *Viviendo en Amor y Fe* (Living in Love and Faith). I am using the name they were using at the time, which is the name I used in Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace & Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

## **NEW CREATION COMMUNITY: PAUL'S VISION OF A UNIFIED TABLE**

After working for three years as a campus minister with InterVarsity in New York and then attending seminary, my wife, Lynn, and I returned to Honduras as missionaries. A few years after we returned, I walked down a dusty street and into a simple house in Flor del Campo, a squatter neighborhood in Tegucigalpa, where six leaders from Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida were waiting for me. They talked earnestly as the late-afternoon sun beat down on the tin roof above us. By attending seminars and reading books, these leaders had come to embrace a holistic gospel, but other members of their church were not supportive of their desire to become more active in confronting injustices and addressing physical needs in their community. The leaders had invited me to teach seminars on holistic mission, hoping that I would help convince the rest of the church to support a more holistic approach. The opportunity to become involved with this group excited me, but as an outsider I felt reluctant to tell the rest of the church how to think. Also, I knew about the legalism of many Honduran churches, and so I was concerned that working for justice for the impoverished would become a new obligation for the church, a dividing line that would separate “true” Christians from others.

I proposed offering two four-hour workshops to give them tools they could use to study the Bible and together see a more holistic gospel in the Bible. As I prepared to lead these workshops, I made sure to include biblical texts that I thought would address the rampant legalism in the area.

After going over some basics in biblical interpretation in the first session, we continued the next week. At one point I read Galatians 5:2, “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all,” and started making the point that we need to move beyond a simple, literal interpretation of Scripture if it is going to impact our lives. I was getting ready to talk about the principle that was behind this verse when a woman raised her hand and said, “My friend tells me that now that I have cut my hair, I am not saved. Is that true?” I felt both compassion and bewilderment—compassion for the woman, who was afraid that she had lost her salvation, and bewilderment about the severity of her friend’s line-drawing legalism. Attempting to keep the session on track, I suggested that she read the book of Galatians to discover the answer to her question. But as I attempted to

continue with the teaching I had prepared, other hands shot up, and four people asked similar questions. Finally, I said, “Let’s come back next week and study Galatians together.” By reading Galatians together, I knew we would encounter texts that specifically challenged legalism and affirmed that salvation is by grace, not works.

Unlike my first season in Honduras, I now recognized the more foundational problem of line drawing, and so I was concerned that the church might draw new lines. But I did not have a coherent third-way alternative. In response to their line drawing, I emphasized God’s grace, which was good, but as I look back on those years, I realize that I was providing pain relief medicine rather than addressing the underlying cause of the pain. I could see that part of the church’s problem was their line drawing, but the solution I offered, talking about God’s grace, had not actually worked in my own life. In my line-drawing years, I had preached salvation by grace, and yet I had lived out works righteousness. Thankfully, through the moving of the Spirit, more happened in the Galatians study with Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida than I anticipated.

In the midst of my preparations for our study on Galatians, I read an essay that Richard Hays had given at the Context and Hermeneutics in the Americas Conference.<sup>5</sup> Through that essay I saw that Paul’s concerns go beyond the Galatian church’s confusion about faith and works. Paul writes with passionate concern about the unity of the church community and how the principalities and powers were sowing division and enslaving people through judgmental line drawing. The following are some of the insights that emerged as the Amor Fe y Vida community studied Galatians together and began to see an alternative way, one that neither drew lines nor erased them.<sup>6</sup>

In Galatians 2:11-16, Paul recalls a beautiful scene of Jewish and Gentile Christians eating together in Antioch, where those whom culture and religion has separated are united in Christ. The table fellowship they share

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<sup>5</sup>The conference was sponsored by the Theological Students Fellowship and Latin American Theological Fraternity (*La Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana*) and was held in Tlayacapan, Mexico, on November 24–29, 1983. Hays’s paper as well as other papers from the conference are contained in Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla, eds., *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

<sup>6</sup>I have condensed the narrative. I spent many weeks studying Galatians with this church. Then, the following year, after studying Galatians with Richard Hays as part of my doctoral work, the church and I worked through Galatians again, engaging the new insights that I had gained.

offers a concrete example of new-creation reality through the cross of Jesus Christ (Gal 5:15-16). To appreciate the radical nature of this table fellowship more fully, we must recognize the role of the table in the first-century biblical context.

In most cultures, whom you eat with matters. If someone invites you to share a meal, he or she is communicating something by that act. In some cultures, including the biblical world of the first century, the significance was much greater. To invite someone to share a meal communicated acceptance and honor. It was not done casually. In the world of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, Jews used the dinner table, along with circumcision and Sabbath observance, to separate themselves from non-Jews. By excluding non-Jews from the table, Jews could maintain their distinctive religious and cultural identity.

However, God uses a dream about food to lead Peter to begin the work of breaking down this barrier and to preach the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10:10-44). Therefore, it should not surprise us that when Peter visits the church in Antioch, he comfortably takes his place at the table to share the meal with the other followers of Jesus—both Gentiles and Jews (see Acts 11:2-18; Gal 2:12).

Yet, tragically, the beautiful image of one united table of fellowship does not last. Some Jewish Christians arrive from Jerusalem, the mother church. Unable to overcome years of tradition and line drawing, they cannot eat with Gentiles; they sit at a separate table. Whether through explicit statements or the nonverbal implication of dining at a separate table, these emissaries from the Jerusalem church draw a line that communicates to the Gentile Christians that they may join the Jews at their table only if they become circumcised and follow other traditional Jewish laws.

Imagine the shame and abandonment that the Gentile Christians must have felt when the local Jewish Christians, who had previously eaten with them, left the table of union to join the newly arrived visitors at the Jewish-only table in the corner. They not only stopped eating with the Gentile Christians, but they also ceased celebrating the Lord's Supper together.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Most likely the "Lord's supper" in the early church was not a separate cultic event, but "an entire ordinary meal" that a Christian community may have eaten each time they came together. Quoted in Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994),

Paul tells us that Peter is afraid of those who are pressuring the Gentile Christians to become circumcised (Gal 2:12). Afraid of what? Before we imagine the scene, I invite you to remember a time when you felt that others were looking at you as if you were on the wrong side of a religious line. Now imagine what Peter thinks and feels as he sits at the table with the Gentiles, and the disbelieving stares of the emissaries from Jerusalem penetrate his being. He might imagine them going back to the church in Jerusalem, saying, “You will not believe what Peter is doing in Antioch. . . .” Under the scrutiny of their shaming gaze, Peter moves to the other table. Now imagine that you are another Jewish Christian who is still sitting at the table with Gentiles. You are not renowned like Peter; perhaps you are a new follower of Jesus. And then you see Peter, one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, leave. If he no longer thinks it is appropriate to eat at a table with Gentiles, how can you stay? Sadly, almost all the Jewish Christians leave the unified table—even Barnabas (Gal 2:13). Only one Jewish Christian—Paul—remains at the unified table with the Gentile Christians.

In response, Paul writes a passionate letter to the churches of Galatia to confront this practice of a group of agitators who are distorting the gospel and threatening the unity of the churches. They have drawn a line to communicate that the Gentile converts must live like Jews in order to be true Christians. The agitators seek to change the behavior of the Gentile Christians by shaming them and threatening to exclude them. Paul fears that the tragedy of the divided tables in Antioch will occur in Galatia as well.

In Antioch, Paul confronts Peter and reminds him that the Gentiles have a place at the table of God’s people—not by fulfilling certain actions that Jews used to distinguish themselves from others, but by trusting in Jesus’ faithful actions of obedience to God, even to the point of death on the cross (Gal 2:14-16).

Paul understands that the rules are not the problem. Rather, the problem is with line-drawing religiosity. Paul does not argue with Peter about the content of the line but confronts him for drawing the line in the first place. Similarly, he does not confront the agitators in Galatia for having the wrong set of rules. For example, he does not say, “Circumcision is not what

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81; see also Philip Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds: Social Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 52-53.

defines followers of Jesus; tithing distinguishes true believers from others. If you tithe, you have a place at the table!” Returning to the analogy I used at the end of my story about drawing lines, we could say that Paul does not argue about how to remodel the house. He digs deeper, proclaiming the need to rebuild on a new foundation.

Paul recognizes that someone with a line-drawing mentality might hear his critique of circumcision as an argument to draw a new line. That, however, would produce an anti-circumcision group that will be just as self-righteous and exclusive as the circumcision group. He makes it absolutely clear that he is not interested in drawing further lines of distinction. After arguing against the necessity of circumcision throughout the letter, he makes a stunning statement: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation” (Gal 6:14-15). By centering on Jesus Christ, he points to a totally different way than either drawing lines or erasing them.

Although Paul does erase some lines that the Jewish Christians are drawing to separate themselves from the Gentiles, Paul does not take the fuzzy approach we observed in Dustin’s story. Paul does not write, “Erase the lines—everyone is in!” In Antioch, he confronts Peter. Later in Galatians, he warns against a kind of “whateverism” (Gal 5:13), and he lists appropriate and inappropriate behavior (Gal 5:13-26), encourages loving confrontation when someone sins (Gal 6:1), and identifies some people as outsiders who are no longer part of the community of faith (Gal 4:30; 5:4, 9). Paul recognizes that the solution to disunity, judgmentalism, and confusion about works righteousness in Galatia is neither to draw new lines nor to erase all lines.

The members of Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida decided to leave behind their line-drawing paradigm as a way of defining their identity so that they could follow Paul in a radically different approach that would be centered on Jesus Christ and his saving work. I will share some of their adventure in this book.

My time with Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida was exciting. Though the changes were not easy, the new life we found together was profound and beautiful. Compare the question I heard from the fearful woman who had cut her hair with the comment that my wife, Lynn, overheard a few years ago from

Maria, a newcomer, who came to Amor Fe y Vida after experiencing line-drawing judgmentalism in other churches: “Now I have been changing, not because of rules and threats, but because I am loved.”

We will also return to parts of Paul’s letter to the Galatians later in this book. (For a more in-depth look at the points made in the previous paragraphs, see my forthcoming book, *Freedom from Religiosity: Studies in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, in the Luminaire Studies series.) This brief glimpse reveals how line-drawing judgmentalism distorts the gospel and produces shame and division. Paul responds to this situation with deep concern and passion. Let us do the same.

## MOVING FORWARD

Similar to my experience after reading Galatians, Dustin reached a turning point and began to move toward a third option after reading Leslie Newbigin’s *Foolishness to the Greeks*. Newbigin argues that for too long we have viewed the Bible through the lens of Western culture, but now we need to look at Western culture through the lens of the Bible because Jesus has something to say to our particular cultural moment. This new stance led Dustin to an even more critical evaluation of the soil in which he had taken root, as well as the approach of his church. Although our experiences with line drawing and fuzziness are radically different, Dustin and I share something in our journey. Through the work of missiologist Paul Hiebert, both of us came to a deeper understanding of our past experiences and a clearer vision of the alternative that Paul models. The next two chapters will describe Hiebert’s bounded-set, fuzzy-set, and centered-set models. The purpose of this book is not merely to explain these categories, but to help churches become communities that are centered on Jesus so that they can lovingly walk with each other on a journey of transformation. After describing Hiebert’s categories, the rest of the book will focus on application—that is, how to live out a centered approach in the church.

I wrote this book for practitioners—pastors, small group leaders, parachurch workers, youth group leaders, and Sunday school teachers. Much of the content of the book also comes from practitioners. Before I began writing, I intentionally sought out leaders who were seeking to apply the centered approach in their churches or ministries. I interviewed or met in focus



groups with more than forty practitioners. Many of the examples and stories in this book are the fruit of those interviews. My interactions with these leaders did not merely serve to provide illustrations for concepts and strategies in the book. Rather, as I listened to these thoughtful leaders, I began to identify the common key elements for living out a centered approach. I wrote the outline for the book *after* the interviews. Thus this book is a collaborative project written both *for* practitioners and *by* practitioners.

I was compelled to write this book because I have seen and experienced the shame and alienation produced by bounded churches, the blandness of fuzzy churches, and the liberating transformation through Jesus Christ of centered churches. The categories themselves are not the gospel, but they provide a powerful instructional tool to help us live the way of Jesus in our time. After hearing about these three approaches, someone recently said to me, “I have not heard anything like this for a long time. This will radically reshape my faith. This is huge.” May the same be true for you.

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