

Authentic Christianity and its Distortions: Communicating Jacques Ellul’s Thought Using Paul Hiebert’s Bounded and Centered Set Categories.¹

By Mark D. Baker

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Jacques Ellul, French sociologist and lay theologian (1912-1994), wrote widely on the contrast between what we might call authentic Christianity and distortions of Christianity.² As displayed in the table below, as he explored different facets of Christianity and its distortions in a number of books he used a variety of couplets to label the contrasting elements.

Authentic	Distortion
Revelation	Religion ³
Revelation and fellowship	Religion ⁴
Christian faith	Religion ⁵
Faith	Belief ⁶
X	Christianity ⁷
N.T. Christianity	Official Christianity ⁸
Morality of freedom	Morality of obligation ⁹
Ethics of freedom	Morality ¹⁰
Christianity/Christian ethics	Morality ¹¹

Ellul explored these themes with penetrating analysis that grabs a reader’s attention and provokes new thoughts and actions. Ellul’s terminology, however, is cumbersome. One problem is that Ellul took words that commonly are positive or neutral and gave them negative meanings.

¹ Presented at: Prophet in the Technological Wilderness: A Centenary Celebration & Critical Review of Jacques Ellul, Wheaton College, July 9, 2012. A lecture at the Oregon Extension by Doug Frank (1983) introduced me to Ellul’s work on this theme. “Introduced” is too mild a word. Frank’s lecture both deeply unsettled me and excited me with new possibilities. I dove into the Ellul books he cited. That lecture and the follow-up reading have had a huge impact on my life, ministry, scholarship and teaching. I am deeply grateful to both Doug Frank and Jacques Ellul. I thank Larry Dunn for introducing me to Hiebert’s bounded and centered set categories over ten years ago.

² I am not aware of Ellul using the term “authentic Christianity.”

³ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 25, 39, 201, 204, 261, 444; Jacques Ellul, *Living faith: belief and doubt in a perilous world* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 126; Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, ed. William H. Vanderburg (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 93.

⁴ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 156–57.

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 49; Jacques Ellul, *To Will & to Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), 87; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 95.

⁶ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 94.

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 10–11.

⁸ Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 154.

⁹ Jacques Ellul, “The Meaning of Freedom According to Saint Paul (1951),” in *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles That Set the Stage*, trans. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 121,128.

¹⁰ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 69–70; Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 201,238,289; see also Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 17.

¹¹ Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 79.

So, although according to Ellulian definitions it is accurate to say “The Christian life is not a moral life” it requires the reader to go against the common use of the word “moral.”¹² A reader must adopt and remember Ellulian definitions while reading his works. A second problem is that Ellul occasionally slipped and used one of the terms he had defined as negative in the more conventional positive way in the same book.¹³ A third issue is the diversity of terminology that Ellul used within a book, but especially between books. It is often conceptually overlapping and at times contradictory. Although a frustration and hindrance, one can overcome these problems and understand Ellul’s thinking on this general theme in books like *To Will and To Do*, *The Ethics of Freedom*, *Living Faith*, *Perspectives on Our Age* and *The Subversion of Christianity*. One faces a greater challenge, however, when seeking to communicate to others Ellul’s thinking on the contrast between authentic Christianity and its distortions. Do you replicate his language and its problems? Use some, but not all, of his terminology to lessen the confusion factor? Is there one term or couplet that can serve as the overall umbrella?¹⁴ Or, do you seek other terminology?

A disadvantage of using terms from within the religious and ethical semantic field is that Ellul ends up making huge contrasting distinctions between words that, as commonly used, only have a small degree of difference, such as: ethics vs. morality¹⁵ and faith vs. belief.¹⁶ The words themselves do not provide a great deal of semantic muscle to help carry the definitions Ellul gives them. Therefore rather than asking words from within the semantic field to do all the work, we might do better to look elsewhere.

Paul Hiebert, missionary anthropologist (1932-2007),¹⁷ borrowed the mathematical concepts, bounded and centered sets, to describe different conceptions of Christianity. The clarity and concreteness of Hiebert’s categories hold great promise in facilitating communication of significant elements of Ellul’s work contrasting authentic Christianity with its distortions. I will first introduce Hiebert’s categories, then based on Ellul’s work reinterpret those categories. Finally I will evaluate how the categories work as a vehicle for Ellul’s thought, especially noting what is left out.

¹² Ellul, “The Meaning of Freedom According to Saint Paul (1951),” 128. For example, in an ethics course in which I introduced students to Ellulian thinking on an ethics of freedom and distortions of Christianity I also used a textbook entitled *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

¹³ In *To Will and To Do* and in *The Ethics of Freedom* “morality” is negative, contrasted to a Christian ethics of freedom. Yet he occasionally uses the term positively, for instance in *To Will and To Do* (249, 252). It appears to me that in *The Subversion of Christianity* he found it especially challenging to maintain his language of “Christianity” being the negative term and “X” being the positive. See for instance pages 141-46.

¹⁴ One can guess that Ellul himself recognized the problem and therefore took a new approach in *The Subversion of Christianity* and sought to bring a number of elements under the one term “X” that contrasted with the negative term, the sociological movement: Christianity. Those elements he wanted the readers to have mind when they saw “X” in the book were: “First, the revelation and work of God accomplished in Jesus Christ, second, the being of the church as the body of Christ, and third, the faith and life of Christians in truth and love.” Ellul was correct to sense that previous positive terms he had used such as “revelation” or “faith” did not capture all he wanted to communicate as the opposite of his negative terms “religion” or “Christianity.” Yet, his solution “X” does not even work well within the book, let alone be useful in conversation and communication beyond the book.

¹⁵ Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 97.

¹⁶ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 97.

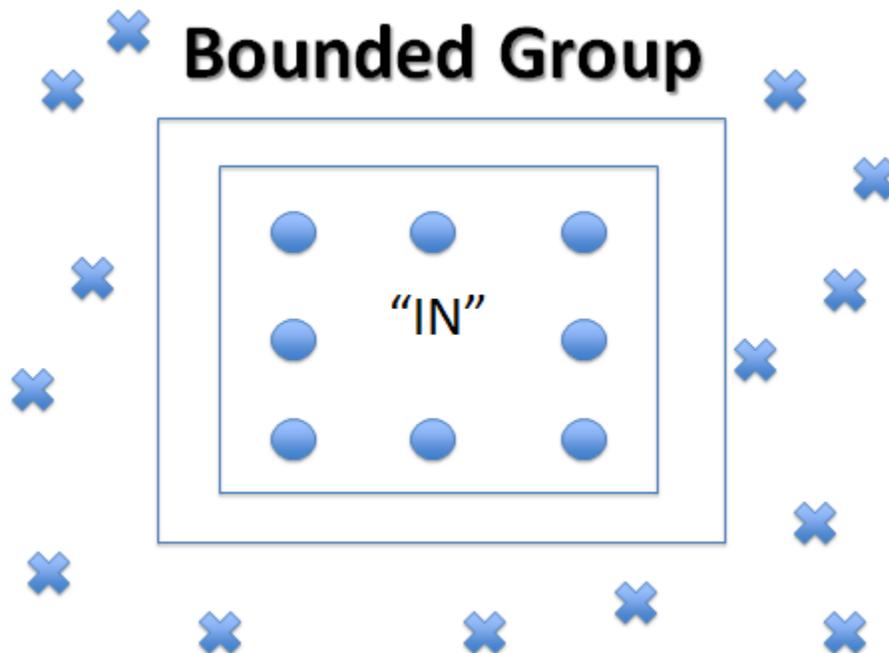
¹⁷ Paul Hiebert was born and raised in India. His parents were second generation missionaries there. He graduated from Tabor College (1954), Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (1957), and University of Minnesota, Ph.D. (1967). He was a missionary in India from 1959-65, taught anthropology at the University of Washington and missionary anthropology at Fuller Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Paul Hiebert's Terminology: Bounded and Centered Sets

As a Mennonite missionary in India Paul Hiebert reflected on the question: when do we consider a person a Christian? It is not a simple question in the Indian context. In writings exploring the question he argued that how a group conceptualizes the category Christian or church influences how they will answer the question.¹⁸ Hiebert borrowed from mathematical set theory to describe different ways to categorize things and people.

Bounded Sets

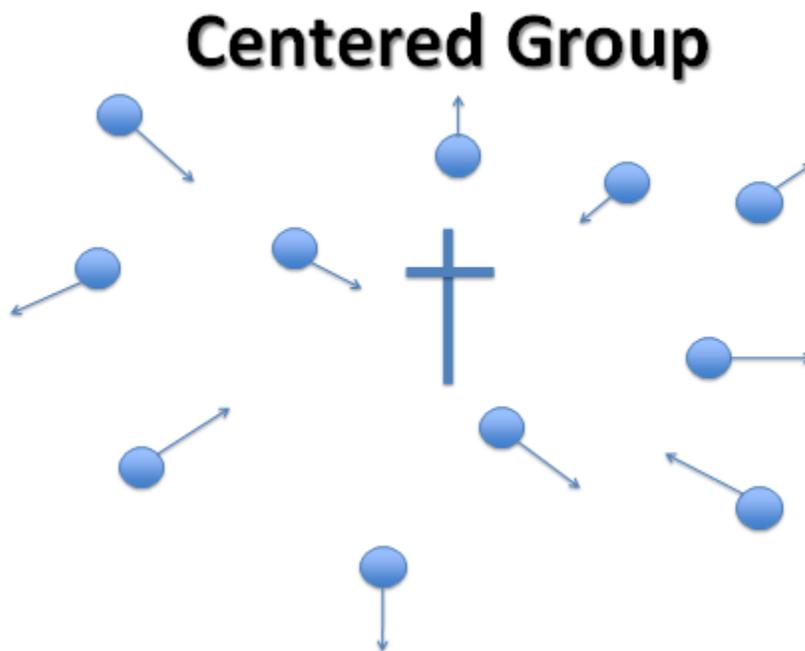
One way of categorizing things is to list essential intrinsic characteristics an object must have to belong to the set. Hiebert explained that bounded sets have a clear boundary line that is static and allows for a uniform definition of those who are within the group. He used the example of apples. We can develop a list of characteristics that distinguish apples from other fruits. That serves as a boundary line. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. It may be big, small, green, ripe, rotten, of one variety or another, but if it has the characteristics that define apples it is inside the boundary line. In society there are many bounded groups: clubs, unions, organized sports teams, associations, etc. In general terms a bounded group creates a list of essential characteristics that determine whether a person belongs to that group or not. Anyone who meets the requirements is considered “in.” For instance I tell my students they are part of a bounded group—Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary students. They applied, met requirements, were accepted, paid tuition, have an ID card, etc. Maintaining the boundary line is essential for a bounded group. Without a clear boundary individuals lack security of identity, and the group may disintegrate.



¹⁸ Paul G. Hiebert, “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories,” *Gospel in Context* 1, no. 4 (October 1978): 24–29; Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 107–136.

Centered Sets

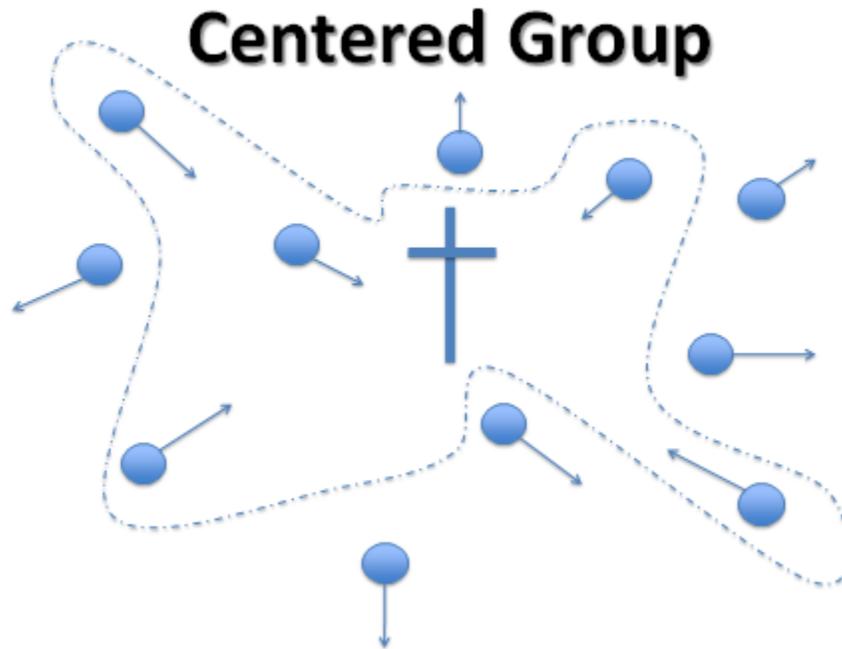
An alternative approach to forming a category focuses extrinsically on how something relates to other things. All books in a university library published in 1990 would be a bounded set. All books in a university library checked out by a particular student are a centered set. The latter group is defined by its relationship with the center of the set—the student.¹⁹ Although the books do not change, their relationship with the center, the student, does change. When returned they are no longer in the set.²⁰ In society there are also many centered groups. Whereas an official fan club might have dues and requirements, and thus be a bounded group, anyone who cheers for a particular team would be part of the centered group of that team's fans. Hiebert stated that some people may be far from the center, but they are moving toward the center, therefore they are part of the centered group. On the other hand, some people may be close to the center, but may be moving away from it, and therefore are not part of the centered group. The group is made up of all objects moving toward the center. A distinction can still be made between those who are “in” and “out.” This is done, however, by looking the object or person's direction, their relation to the center, not by looking to see if they have meet the standards of a particular boundary line.



We can draw a line between those who belong to the group and those who do not, but the line does not form the group. It emerges automatically as those related to the center separate from those not related to the center.

¹⁹ Hiebert noted that relational sets are not limited to centered sets. They could also be defined by relationship to others in a common field. He limited his discussion to centered relational sets because of the correlation with Christianity and the church (Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 123).

²⁰ This example is an adaptation of one that Hiebert borrowed from Phil Krumrei, “An Analysis of Set Theory and Its Application to Christian Faith” (Unpubl. ms., Harding Graduate School of Religion, n. d.) in Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 123.



“In centered-set thinking, greater emphasis is placed on the center and relationships than on maintaining a boundary, because there is no need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set.”²¹ The people within the group will not necessarily be uniform in their characteristics, but they will be heading the same direction.

Fuzzy Sets

Hiebert included two other categories: fuzzy intrinsic and fuzzy extrinsic sets. In the former the boundary line is fuzzy in the latter the center is fuzzy. These groups are less defined, less cohesive and more relativistic. Although of increasing applicability in the contemporary context, for reasons of space we will focus on bounded and centered groups and move now to how he related these two categories to the church.

Bounded Set or Centered Set Thinking and the Church²²

What is the concept of Christian if defined according to a bounded set perspective?

1. Generally use tests of orthodoxy, verbal affirmation of belief and of certain doctrines and certain externally verifiable behaviors to classify the person as Christian or not.
2. There would be a sharp distinction between Christians and non-Christians and much effort is put into maintaining the boundary in order to maintain the category.
3. Christians are viewed in essence as being the same—once a person is a Christian he or she is 100% Christian.
4. There would be great emphasis on conversion as the one essential change all people must experience to be saved, and it would be seen as a single dramatic crossing of the

²¹ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 124.

²² Based on Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 115-130.

boundary at a particular time. Sanctification, growing in faith is good, but not essential. Discipling people to Christian maturity is secondary.

5. Christian is seen as a state of ontological being acquired when one is declared righteous before the law—focus is on this state of being, who the person is.

How does bounded-set thinking affect the way in which people view the nature and ministry of the church?

1. Church is seen as a gathering of Christians. Unity is based on uniformity—thinking and acting alike. “Other churches with different membership requirements would be seen as *other* sets. A critical question would be whether they are truly ‘Christian’” (116). Theology would be seen as ultimate, unchanging, universal and generally stated in propositional form.
2. Significant attention would be given to maintaining clear boundaries, and clear membership rolls.
3. The church would tend to be democratic and function like a club or corporation.
4. A high emphasis would be placed on evangelism—getting people into the category. Conversion is the means of entry. “Consequently, discipling new converts, organizing living churches, manifesting the signs of the kingdom—while good in themselves—would not be essential to the central task of bringing people to faith in Christ” (117).
5. “Building the church would be seen as an end in itself. Church gatherings would focus on maintaining the identity of the church and its organization” (117).

What is the concept of Christian if defined according to a centered-set perspective?

1. “Christians would be defined as followers of the Jesus Christ of the Bible, as those who make him the center or Lord of their lives” (125).
2. There would be a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians. “The emphasis, however, would be on exhorting people to follow Christ, rather than on excluding others to preserve the purity of the set” (125).
3. There would be recognition of variation among Christians. Some are closer to Christ in their knowledge and maturity.
4. Two types of change would be recognized. The first is conversion, entering or leaving the set—or turning around and heading a different direction. The second is movement toward the center. Conversion is a definite event followed by an ongoing process of discipleship.

How does centered-set thinking affect the way in which people view of the nature and ministry of the church?

1. Church is seen as a group of people gathered around Christ to worship, obey and serve him. Unity comes through common covenant relationship making the church one family. The focus would be on people and relationships more than on maintenance of order.
2. Since Jesus Christ as center is what defines the church, care will be given to defining that center in spiritual and theological terms. There would be a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians based on relationship to the center. The leadership of more mature Christians would be recognized. There would be understanding with people struggling to grow. At times the church will exercise discipline on members whose behavior is contrary to Scripture, but the goal would be restoration to faithfulness not exclusion.

3. The church would stress evangelism—calling people to turn to follow Christ as Lord, and equal effort would be given to helping them grow in that relationship.
4. Idolatry would be the greatest evil to be avoided—that is putting anything other than God at the center of their lives.

Ellul and Hiebert

Although it would have been quite interesting to actually sit in on a conversation between these two social scientists and theologians, this essay does not aim to create that conversation through comparing their work. In the work summarized above Hiebert asked a narrow question: “what do mean when we say Papayya, a nonliterate peasant, has become a Christian?”²³ His thesis was that we will answer that question very differently depending on whether we use bounded or centered categories. In the works this essay is based on, Ellul asked many questions, including much broader ones than Hiebert, about the relationship between Christianity and society. Hiebert mentioned a preference for the centered approach,²⁴ but his work on this topic was mostly descriptive. His main points of advocacy were the importance self-awareness and bringing hidden categories and biases to light. In contrast, Ellul offered description, but prophetically advocated throughout his work. These authors did not write works of similar scope or purpose. What follows then is not comparison. Rather I will seek to communicate some of Ellul’s ideas using Hiebert’s terminology. Or stated differently, I will expand on Hiebert’s description of these categories by using Ellul’s work. What follows assumes and builds on the previous section of Hiebert’s definitions of the categories.

Ellul: Bounded and Centered Christianity Contrasted

In bounded set Christianity the boundary line is of utmost importance. It defines who is a Christian and who is not.²⁵ Humans have a great desire to be righteous in our own eyes and “to be declared righteous by the whole group to which we belong.”²⁶ The boundary line is the tool used for that declaration of righteousness. The boundary line will consist “of ways of thinking and acting that are rigidly codified” so it will allow for easy evaluation of compliance and function efficiently.²⁷ This emphasis leads the group to focus on the visible and the measurable rather than on the deeper issues of character and virtue.²⁸ Bounded group Christianity is about compliance, measuring up to a standard. Centered group Christianity is about direction, not about achieving something, but about repentance, reorientation and changing course.²⁹ Whereas in any bounded set the boundary line is paramount, in any centered set it is the center, that which people are reorienting toward, that is of utmost importance. Authentic Christianity, rooted in biblical Christian revelation, contrasts radically with bounded group Christianity not just because of the difference between a bounded and centered approach, but because of the God at the center.

²³ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 133 see also 107.

²⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 134.

²⁵ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 109.

²⁶ Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 159.

²⁷ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 109; see also Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 146 and; Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 70–71.

²⁸ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 193.

²⁹ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 179–81, 257.

Content of the Center: God Revealed through Jesus Christ

“That which constitutes Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. Everything derives from the fact that Jesus is God, that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.”³⁰ How then does having the God revealed through Jesus Christ at the center affect the character of centered set Christianity? Through bounded group religiosity people seek to “hoist themselves up to the level of God.”³¹ “The revelation of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of the God of Jesus Christ, is exactly and entirely contrary to [humans going up to God]. . . God descends to humankind.”³² The bounded approach leads people to think they must offer something to God, to go up, God, in order to be accepted by God. But God’s taking the initiative, descending to humans, means that at the core of Christianity is grace.³³ “It is not well doing, but being well received by God.”³⁴

God’s initiative taking displays not only the gracious character of centered set Christianity, but also its relational character. What lies at the center is not a list of principles or laws, nor information about God. At the center is a relational God. Christian ethics are rooted in and flow from “the relation between the person of Jesus Christ and a person who takes him as his Savior and Lord.”³⁵ Ellul captured the dynamism and power of the central relationship stating, “The one who suffered, who was crucified and raised in his glorified body, *he* still speaks to me today with words that burn, that start me off and push me into being something other than what I am, even while fulfilling every particle of myself as I am.”³⁶

This mode of revelation, God’s self-revealing initiative, is as important as the content.³⁷ For instance a church practicing bounded set Christianity may have a clearly articulated statement of faith that affirms salvation by grace and relationship with a gracious God. They may speak words about God’s grace, but the spirit of their bounded practice communicates the opposite. They may state that a relationship with God is central and foundational, but the reality is that their boundary line would function without God’s active presence.³⁸ The dynamic of the group will pull people’s focus toward the line. It “transforms next-to-last human realities into ultimate, absolute, foundational realities.”³⁹ In contrast, the dynamic of a centered group will pull people’s focus to the center—a relational God.

A Static Ethic of Obligation vs. A Relational Ethic of Freedom

Building on what we have already observed about a bounded group, we can note that it will produce a fixed static moral system that is imposed on the members of the group. In order to be part of the group they are obligated to comply.⁴⁰ In contrast a centered paradigm places people in a relationship of trust with a God who gives commands and who they follow.⁴¹ Rather

³⁰ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 88.

³¹ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 182.

³² Ellul, *Living Faith*, 137; see also Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, 94–95.

³³ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 301; Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 66, 70.

³⁴ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 43.

³⁵ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 88.

³⁶ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 172–73.

³⁷ Ellul states that the mode of revelation is what differentiates the Christian faith from other beliefs. (Ellul, *Living Faith*, 98.)

³⁸ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 177. Ellul pointed out that a principle based morality taken in highly autonomous direction does not have or need an active relational God, and can become highly individualistic. Hiebert would probably call this a fuzzy approach with relativism leading to lack of group identity.

³⁹ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 118.

⁴⁰ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 86, 249; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 181; Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 70–71.

⁴¹ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 256; Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 70–71.

than confirm to an imposed general morality, those who have reoriented their lives toward the center, God, conform to a word revealed, present and living.⁴² A bounded group provides answers. The revealed word destabilizes and confronts with questions.⁴³ A bounded paradigm gives a one-size-fits-all-ethic; a centered paradigm recognizes that as situations change people will need to listen anew.⁴⁴ Bounded Christianity cannot allow for complexity and diversity in regard to ethical norms and behavior within the group. As we will explore below it is not that people participating in a centered set church will enjoy questions that destabilize and confront, but they can bear them because the grace that permeates centered Christianity makes it possible to recognize shortcomings, to stumble and be humble without facing the threat of exclusion. Whereas a bounded group church will press for static sameness, “Christians look and act like this,” a centered group church recognizes that God “does not introduce us into a permanent, durable state, an accomplished situation, but rather into a mode of being-with-him.”⁴⁵ A relational centered set paradigm highlights that a primary characteristic of Christians is to live in freedom from the bondage of bounded Christianity. Freedom is not one of a number of virtues, not one of the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists; rather it should permeate the whole.⁴⁶

Many of the actions of a bounded group and a centered group may, superficially, appear the same. For example people in both groups may tithe and remain faithful to their spouses, but in spite of the external resemblance they are not the same, are not truly Christian “if they are not done and lived out in freedom.”⁴⁷

Centered Christianity Does not Mean “Anything Goes”

A boundary creates an air of strictness and gives the impression of ethical seriousness. At first glance a centered set might appear to allow libertinism. That is far from the case. A centered set, an ethic of freedom, does not mean the lack of commands or ethical content. It does not dismiss or ignore the laws and commands of the Bible.⁴⁸ To reorient one’s life to Jesus and seek to follow Jesus will have significant implications—it is a call for transformation. Actually, the centered paradigm allows for a depth of demands and ethical reflection not possible in a bounded paradigm. As stated above the bounded group will emphasize actions that are easily observed and measured rather than issues of character and virtues. It will even avoid straightforward commands, like “love your neighbor,” that are difficult to evaluate or achieve. A bounded group will actually impede loving one’s neighbor. When love and bounded set morality come together “love takes flight.”⁴⁹ In contrast the freedom of the centered group is a freedom for, a freedom to express love for neighbor.⁵⁰ People involved in a centered set type of relationship with God recognize that they have not arrived, they are not loving in a complete and definitive fashion.⁵¹ A bounded set group might pick out a few specific actions and label those who comply as good

⁴² Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 86; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 105.

⁴³ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 99–100, 144.

⁴⁴ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 247.

⁴⁵ Ellul, “The Meaning of Freedom According to Saint Paul (1951),” 130.

⁴⁶ Ellul, “The Meaning of Freedom According to Saint Paul (1951),” 118; see also Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 104–112; Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 12–13.

⁴⁷ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 106, see also p. 110.

⁴⁸ Ellul, “The Meaning of Freedom According to Saint Paul (1951),” 123, 125–26; Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 138, 148, 151.

⁴⁹ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 201.

⁵⁰ Ellul, “The Meaning of Freedom According to Saint Paul (1951),” 124.

⁵¹ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 180.

loving Christians. In contrast, because the centered approach is directional and recognizes the transformational relationship as a journey it facilitates self-criticism. In the static and complete definitions of a bounded paradigm, to acknowledge falling short would place one on the wrong side of the boundary line; in a centered paradigm to fall short does not carry with it the threat of exclusion. Inherent to the centered approach is a recognition that all participants fall short of the center. Evaluation of where one is in relation to the center is expected and ongoing—constantly measuring “the distance separating the faith of Jesus and of Abraham from the faith I myself am living.”⁵²

To say there is space to fail and fall short in a centered approach does not mean that those in a church practicing a centered approach stand by passively as others act inappropriately.⁵³ “Christians must carry one another and support one another. If they think another is in error they must come to his aid and support, for they following the same road. . . . But if our relation to others is to be that of love-truth, there can also be no question of superiority or domination. . . . Face to face with the one we believe to be in error, we have to be those who bring the good news of love. We have to be for him and not against him. . . . We must be moving together towards the Lord.”⁵⁴

Not Easy

To say that a centered set Christianity allows and facilitates questioning and evaluation does not mean it is easy. As we will explore below, a bounded set approach provides a system that reassures and provides security.⁵⁵ In contrast a centered set approach unsettles and is difficult. Ellul described this powerfully in these two quotes:

Faith is a terribly caustic substance, a burning acid. It puts to the test every element of my life and society; it spares nothing. It leads me ineluctably to question all my certitudes, all my moralities, beliefs, and policies. It forbids me to attach ultimate significance to any expression of human activity. It detaches and delivers me from money and the family, from my job and my knowledge. It’s the surest road to realizing that “the only thing I know is that I don’t know anything.”⁵⁶

Have confidence in his Word and not in a rational program. Enter on a way on which you will gradually find answers but with no guaranteed substance. All this is difficult, much more so than recruiting guerillas, instigating terrorism, or stirring up the masses. And this is why the gospel is so intolerable Grace is intolerable. . . .⁵⁷

Attraction to Bounded Group Churches

Although a centered set paradigm has many positive qualities we can praise, the reality is that a bounded set paradigm is a constant temptation and there is a tendency for the former to degenerate into the latter.⁵⁸ Why? Grace and love are foundational and permeate a centered set paradigm, and . . .

⁵² Ellul, *Living Faith*, 180.

⁵³ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 172.

⁵⁴ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 169, 171, 172; cf. Gal. 6:1-5.

⁵⁵ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 112.

⁵⁶ Ellul, *Living Faith*, 111.

⁵⁷ Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 172; see also, Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 238.

⁵⁸ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 238–39, 261.

The uncertainty of fluctuating things like love and grace horrifies us. Saying that God loves us grants us no reassurance. We would prefer it if he gave us fifty things to do, so that when we had done them we could be at peace. We do not want an ongoing relationship with God. We prefer a rule.⁵⁹ . . . We prefer to deal with mere words, with a formula which is stable, which does not budge, which we can count on, which enables us to estimate our chances.⁶⁰

It is true that a centered set paradigm and relationship with the living God allow for diversity and for consideration of individual situations and context, but the reality is that imposing a moral code and drawing a boundary line makes leading a church easier.⁶¹ It is efficient, promotes success and provides security for the participants.

We are possessed by an obsessional desire to justify ourselves, to declare that we are righteous, to be righteous in our own eyes, to seem to be righteous in the eyes of others, of neighbors and acquaintances, and finally to be declared righteous by the whole group to which we belong. In human conduct and sociological movements this thirst for self-justification is constant and fundamental. . . We do not want grace. Fundamentally what we want is self-justification.⁶²

In contrast to a centered set, a bounded set approach to ethics provides the opportunity for self-justification and of meeting the standard and thus having the secure feeling of having the group's approval. But this produces a group of mask-wearers; they present a façade of righteousness to each other and, corporately, they present a façade of superiority to those on the other side of their boundary line. If people are wearing masks they are not truly in relationship with the people behind the masks.⁶³

The bounded-set paradigm has qualities that not only attract individuals, but also have appeal at the institutional level. For instance in the first centuries the Church remained small numerically and new converts, upon repentance, began a process of discipleship rooted in centered-set relations with God and other Christians. But post-Constantine when masses began to enter the Church necessity demanded another approach. A bounded-set imposition of morality was used.⁶⁴ Christians have been pulled to use it again and again throughout the history of the Church when facing similar situations.

Bounded Set Religion as a Power

The previous section could make it sound like an individuals or a church opt for a bounded or centered paradigm like they might choose between two cars—list the characteristics of each and buy the one they find most compelling. And, like a car, one could trade it in for another model whenever one wanted to. But there is more going on here than comparative shopping. True, the bounded set paradigm does have some attractive qualities, but it functions as a power. It attracts, but also enslaves.⁶⁵ It has been transformed “into a force which man has no

⁵⁹ Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 152; see also Ellul, *Living Faith*, 151.

⁶⁰ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 146.

⁶¹ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 102; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 110.

⁶² Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 159, 161; see also Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 183; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 121.

⁶³ Ellul, *To Will & to Do*, 176–78; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 179.

⁶⁴ Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 30–38, 72.

⁶⁵ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 238.

ability to either resist or to control.”⁶⁶ When humans, through a bounded set approach to ethics have severed God’s command from a relationship of dialogue with God and turn it into our law “we invest the law itself with power. The power that we have denied to God (the power of love) is transferred to what we have made an emanation of our own, namely the law. . . It is an implacable power of judgment that hangs over us. We have made the law into the law of death. . . The law itself becomes a power over us which constrains and binds us and pushes us further and further away from God.”⁶⁷

Recognizing the enslaving force of bounded set religiosity underscores the reality of the earlier statement that freedom is a foundational characteristic that permeates centered-set Christianity. It is not a simple matter of choosing one paradigm over another, as if we were shopping at a car dealer. To participate in centered Christianity one must be freed from the bounded approach. How? Bounded group religiosity is one of the powers that crucified Jesus and one of the powers that through the cross was stripped of power through encountering “the one who did not compete with them but let himself be stripped.”⁶⁸ Thus the powers lost the power to vanquish (Col. 2:14). The powers were returned to the status of things. They have not been destroyed, but they have lost their power “in relation to the man who attaches himself in faith to the victory of Jesus Christ, who bears his cross, who lives in the strength of his grace and resurrection.”⁶⁹

Dialectical Tension

To be freed by Christ does not mean believers are immune from the pull of bounded set religiosity. It is pervasive and invasive; one can even develop a bounded attitude about practicing a centered form of Christianity. The reality is the Christian is at the same time “both free and enslaved, both reconciled and in revolt, both saved and judged.”⁷⁰ The Christian lives in this tension and therefore all the more needs the gracious embrace of Jesus at the center of centered set Christianity.

Assessment and Conclusion

The previous section was not a general analysis of bounded and centered Christianity that used insights from various sources. Rather I sought to base it wholly on Ellul’s writing or ideas that flow from his writing. This allows for better evaluation of whether the clarity and concreteness of Hiebert’s categories hold great promise in facilitating communication of significant elements of Ellul’s work. Ellul alone has much to offer on this topic. If, however, I were not constrained as I was in this essay I would seek to include some themes that Ellul did not address. For instance Ellul’s discussion focuses on the individual. That emphasis is important, but the role of community and other followers of Jesus merits more attention. I would also give significant attention to the role of shame and honor in bounded and centered Christianity.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 152–53. For Ellul’s definition of “power” see pages 151-53, for a discussion of religion as a power see 156-58.

⁶⁷ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 146.

⁶⁸ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 159.

⁶⁹ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 160, see also p. 14.

⁷⁰ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 228; see also Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 210–11.

⁷¹ I included exploration of the themes shame and community in relation to bounded and centered Christianity in the following works (I did not, however, use Hiebert’s terminology): Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace & Freedom* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999); Mark D. Baker, “Saving

To say I limited myself to Ellul does not mean to imply that I exhausted all that Ellul has to offer. The previous pages have not communicated all that Ellul described through the use of various contrasting couplets in the table on page one. In part that is because of space limitations. Other themes that Ellul explored could be brought into a discussion of bounded and centered Christianity, for instance the impossibility and necessity of a Christian ethic and the inability of humans to truly know what is good.⁷² Additionally, themes that Ellul gave much attention to, freedom and technique for instance, could be developed at greater length. The bounded and centered categories do not, however, lend themselves to communicating all that Ellul did in his books cited in this essay. For instance, the broader relationship between Christianity and society would be hard to fit in. Yet this essay has shown that a great deal of Ellul's thought on authentic Christianity and its distortions can be brought together in coherent ways using the bounded set and centered set categories. In other settings I have found that using these categories facilitates communication of Ellul's thought better than trying to make one of his couplets function in that role. Using these categories certainly provides more clarity and ease of understanding than using the full mix of terms that Ellul uses.

I argued that using terminology from outside the religious semantic field would enable the terms themselves to communicate more contrast than the words Ellul used. There is, however, also a drawback to this reality. The categories themselves communicate such a sharp contrast that a presenter can lean too much on that contrast and not include the breadth of analysis that Ellul's thought provides nor the radical depth of his thought. Although this essay did not seek to compare and contrast Ellul and Hiebert it is important to note how much was gained by filling Hiebert's categories with Ellul's thought. Hiebert's categories are communicated relatively easily and generate significant discussion, even without adding Ellul's insights. But so much more can be done. Although this essay argues for using Hiebert's categories it does not argue for replacing Ellul with Hiebert. Writing the essay has challenged me anew to work at getting more, not less, of Ellul's thought into my writing and teaching on these themes. I hope it has done the same for the reader.

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Significance of the Cross in a Honduran Barrio," *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 14 (2006): 59–81 available at <http://profmarkbaker.com/publications/articles-essays/>. Doug Frank, who introduced me to Ellul's work on religion and faith, and the theme of shame, explores both in the following: Doug Frank, "Naked but Unashamed," in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement*, ed. Baker, Mark D. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 122–134; Doug Frank, *A Gentler God: Breaking Free of the Almighty in the Company of the Human Jesus* (Australia: Albatross Books Pty Ltd, 2010); Sociologist Robert Brenneman, also influenced by Ellul, has done significant work on the theme of shame and religion in his work: Robert E. Brenneman, *Homies and Hermanos: God and Gangs in Central America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷² Themes explored in Ellul, *To Will & to Do*.