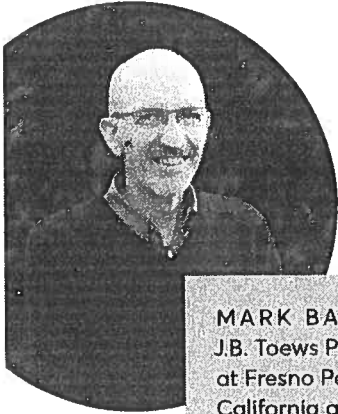


## The MB Herald interview



MARK BAKER (Ph.D., Duke University) is J.B. Toews Professor of Mission and Theology at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California and the author of *Freedom from Religiosity and Judgmentalism: Studies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (the tenth installment in the Luminaire Studies Biblical Commentary series). Dr. Baker sat down with *MB Herald* to discuss his interest in Galatians, key concepts and themes in the book and how it connects to his research on the Centered-set Church. [The full-length interview is available here.](#)

**MBH: Mark, please give us a brief background. What did your journey look like?**

MB: I grew up as the son of a camp director for a Christian boys' camp in New York State under an evangelical umbrella of churches. I studied at Wheaton College, after which I went to teach at a Christian bilingual school in Honduras for four years. I then worked for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship for three years in upstate New York in Syracuse. After marrying Lynn, I attended a small Seminary in California (that no longer exists) called New College Berkley.

In 1989, Lynn and I returned to Honduras as missionaries. While teaching through SEMILLA, the anabaptist seminary in Central America, I visited Panama, where I first had contact with the Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1999, I was invited to teach at MB Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, and I continue to teach there today.

**MBH: What sparked your interest in Paul's letter to the Galatians?**

MB: As a youth ministry worker and a missionary, I thought I had a good sense of what Galatians was about: The Apostle Paul, encountering erroneous teaching that salvation hinged on works, penned his letter to correct this misconception and teach that salvation is by grace, not works. I utilized Galatians

when I encountered people who struggled with legalism, which was prevalent in Central America then.

I later read an article by Richard Hays, a New Testament scholar, he recommended that rather than read Galatians through the lens of [Martin] Luther's experience, better to look at the letter itself to see what was genuinely taking place in the Galatian churches. Hays states that the question of who belongs to the community is really at the heart of Galatians. I was awakened to possible applications for Galatians and its full breadth and depth. I especially appreciate that Hays' argument wasn't an over-and-against argument. It wasn't saying, "Galatians is not about being saved by grace." Instead, it said, "It's that and so much more," which I have sought to include in my teaching and writing about Galatians.

**MBH: This is not the first Galatians commentary. You have written one in Spanish. Why write two commentaries on the same book, and what are some differences between the Spanish version and the Luminaire version?**

MB: The main reason would be that Galatians keeps feeding and surprising me. I started this book thinking: "I'm committed to this, so let's just get through it." However, I was quickly and pleasantly surprised by how the Spirit led me to see new things and gave me new energy and excitement. As for the commentaries, the Spanish one is a more scholarly commentary, more detailed, with more footnotes and things like that. I was happy for the opportunity and the challenge to write something more accessible for the Luminaire one. To make this book more accessible, I intentionally designed it for use in groups with discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

**MBH: You discuss honour-shame dynamics in the New Testament world. How critical is using the honour-shame lens in our scripture reading, and do you have some practical tips for Western audiences to practice using this lens?**

MB: Honour-shame dynamics are significant in a few ways. For a Western audience, at the most basic level, it broadens our concept of the liberating significance of the cross of Jesus Christ. We are saved from our guilt, and we are also liberated from our shame. An example would be the Bible study I lead at the county jail in Fresno. Preaching a gospel of release from guilt is a significant, valuable, and essential thing to do in that context. If I only proclaimed freedom from guilt, that would bring

an aspect of salvation to these men. But these men are also profoundly burdened by shame for what they've done. To also proclaim that through the cross of Jesus, we are liberated from shame is very significant in that context.

In our increasingly multicultural societies, we encounter people from cultures who are more honour-shame oriented and do not understand terms of guilt and forgiveness as quickly as we do in the west. So it's of significant evangelistic significance when interacting with people of different cultures. Then there's also the level of understanding dynamics of scripture itself. In the commentary towards the end of chapter 6, Paul says I boast in the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross, Jesus flips the whole honour-shame dynamic on its head. He lived a life of including rather than excluding, and Paul states that this is his new honour code, which would have been very counter to typical honour-shame dynamics of the day.

As for how to practice using an honour-shame lens for us in the West, that can be a challenge. One of the things that my co-author Jayson Georges points out in *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures* is that the terms honour and shame are not readily used in scripture because that was the culture the scriptures were written in; it's in the air. We need guides who can help us see these things in scripture. In the commentary, I mention two creative non-fiction books, *The Lost Letters of Pergamum* by Bruce Longenecker and *A Week in the Life of Rome* by James Papandrea, which really help us to feel and understand the honour-shame culture of the time of Paul.

**MBH: You speak of bounded, fuzzy, and centered church lenses. Another of your books, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community Without Judgmentalism*, covers this subject in more detail. Please share more about this idea and how the two books are connected.**

MB: This is something that is of special significance for Mennonite Brethren because Paul Hiebert, who was a Mennonite Brethren missionary in India, is the one who developed this way of thinking about the Church: bounded, centered, and fuzzy. He borrowed the concept from math, and it's used widely now, but it goes back to Paul Hiebert. There are three different ways a group determines who belongs to the group. A bounded group is one that creates certain things that people must comply with, and if they comply, they are on the inside of the group. Bounded churches tend to go the way of judgmentalism, a sense of superiority, excluding people, shaming, etc. This is seen in what we typically call legalistic churches. Still, very progressive churches

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that think of themselves as non-legalistic can also be bounded and just as judgmental.

So in response to judgmentalism, some say we need to get rid of this, and they erase the boundary line, and this is what becomes a fuzzy church. It's like a bounded group with no line and tends to lose its identity. As such, Hiebert advocates for a third approach which is entirely different. This approach discerns who is part of the group by looking at their orientation to a center, which in the case of the church is Jesus. Therefore the way to see if people are a part of the church is to look and see if they are moving toward the center or away from it. I explore these concepts and how to live them out in *Centered-Set Church*. In this Luminaire Studies book, I've sought to give more of a biblical basis to those same concepts.

**MBH: What else would you like readers to know about your new book?**

One of the themes in the book is the necessity that we continue to proclaim the gospel to non-Christians and ourselves. I think Galatians is a wake-up call to ourselves that the gospel of Jesus Christ is radical and is not our natural way of doing or thinking about things. Therefore we need to regularly be reminded that our salvation, our place in the people of God, is based on the work of God through Jesus Christ on the cross, and we need to be brought back to that center continually.

[Purchase your copy of \*Religiosity and Judgmentalism: Studies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians\* here.](#)