Coming to Terms

Why Can't Evangelicals Agree?
Clarifying Evangelical Responses to Insider Movements and Familial Language Translations

by Larry W. Caldwell

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While it is vital that evangelicals dialogue about insider movements and familial language translations, little effort has been made to understand the basic underlying assumptions of those doing the dialoguing. I contend that evangelicals engaged in such discussions come at the issues with different foundational epistemological presuppositions that possibly prohibit agreement from ever happening in the first place. Until such presuppositions are understood, the question "Why can't evangelicals agree?" will remain unanswered. This article will attempt to shed more light on these underlying foundations by seeking answers from two very diverse fields: mathematical set theory and epistemological theory. Insights from these fields may help all involved to better see where the other side is coming from, and thereby gain a better appreciation for why each side believes as it does.

The first section of this article begins with an examination of set theory. I will demonstrate how evangelical theologians/missiologists/Bible translators,[1] broadly speaking, fall into one of two different categorical "sets." As a result, set theory, in general terms, may describe these two different evangelical groups who not only categorize reality differently, but differ in real ways on how some specific theological/missiological issues are to be pragmatically worked out. I will also demonstrate that, in the final analysis, set theory helps to show that these two groups of evangelicals—despite the real differences—are really not that far apart in their thinking, as far as some of these root theological/missiological issues are concerned. If this is so, why can't evangelicals agree? In the second section of this article I will further explain that one possible reason for the lack of agreement among evangelicals is that something deeper is working to separate them. This "something deeper" is found at the level of their basic epistemological foundations. I will show that it is the differences in their epistemological foundations that cause evangelicals from each set to categorize reality differently and to come to different pragmatic conclusions concerning the same theological/missiological issues.

Moreover, it is these epistemological foundations that keep them apart even though they are able to agree on most other root theological/missiological issues. Once this extended background has been given, I will apply insights gained to the current disagreements among evangelicals concerning insider movements and familial language translations, with a view to helping clarify why evangelicals respond as they do to these particular issues.[2] Finally, I will conclude by briefly touching upon some factors that may help each group gain a better appreciation for the other, whatever their real epistemological differences.

Set Theory, Epistemological Foundations, and Evangelicals

Set theory has been an integral part of mathematics for over one hundred years. During the years 1874 to 1897 Georg Cantor, a German mathematician and logician, was the first to create a theory of abstract sets of entities. So influential were Cantor's ideas that today almost all mathematician theory derives itself from a common source, namely, Cantor's Theory of Sets.[3]

Simply put, a set

> is a collection of definite, distinguishable objects of perception or thought conceived as a whole. The objects are called elements or members of the set. (Hashisaki and Stoll 1975:238)

Cantor's genius lay in the fact that his set theory not only allowed for the ease of determining the members that could be included in a set (up to infinity), but also the members that could be excluded from a set (again up to infinity). This paved the way for complicated mathematical formulations involving the relations between sets.

Set theory in its modern development can be an incredibly complicated subject; the above summary merely scratches the surface. Nevertheless, the implications of set theory extend far beyond mathematics. Today, for example, anthropologists use set theory to help explain how people from different cultures form different individual mental categories in order to systemize their perceptions of reality and the world around them.[4]

In this article, I have chosen not to go into the minutiae of set theory and how it is used in anthropology. I am assuming that it offers a good model. Rather, I want to examine the implications of set theory for evangelicals in order to attempt to show how evangelicals form their mental categories as they systemize reality as they perceive it.

One person who significantly cut through the complexities of set theory and showed its applicability to missionaries and missiologists (and by extrapolation to all evangelicals) was

Anthropologists use set theory to help explain how people from different cultures form different individual mental categories.

the late anthropologist and missiologist Paul G. Hiebert (1978, 1979, 1983, 1994[5]). Hiebert succinctly described the three different categories of sets that make up the central core of set theory: bounded sets, centered sets and fuzzy sets. The following study will be limited to bounded sets and centered sets.[6] We turn first to a discussion of bounded sets.

Bounded Sets

Bounded sets are those mental categories formed in the mind whereby

> the mind puts together into a set those things that share common characteristics.... Bounded sets have certain structural characteristics—they force us to look at things in a certain way. (1994:112)

Hiebert gives further descriptions of bounded sets using the category "apples" as the basis of comparison:

> 1. The category is created by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set. For example, an apple is (1) a kind of *fruit* that is (2) usually round, (3) red or yellow, (4) edible, and (5) produced by a *rosaceous* tree. Any fruit that meets these requirements (assuming we have an adequate definition) is an *apple.*

> 2. The category is defined by a clear boundary. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. It cannot be 70 percent apple and 30 percent pear. Most of the effort in defining the category is spent defining and maintaining the boundary. Not only must we say what an *apple* is, we must also clearly differentiate it from *oranges, pears,* and other similar objects that belong to the same domain but are not apples. The central question, therefore, is whether an object is inside or outside the category.

> 3. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics—they constitute a homogeneous group. All apples are 100 percent apple. One is not more apple than another. Either a fruit is an apple or it is not. There may be different sizes, shapes, and varieties, but they are all the same in that they are all apples. There is no variation built into the structuring of the category.

> 4. Bounded sets are essentially static sets. An apple remains an apple whether it is green, ripe, or rotten. The only change occurs when it emerges from the flower, and when it ceases to be an apple (e.g., by being eaten.) The only structural change is a move from outside to inside the category or vice versa (1994:112-113, emphasis his).

Evangelicals as a Bounded Set

What are the characteristics of the category "evangelicals" if they are defined in terms of bounded set theory? Let's examine each of Hiebert's above four descriptions point-by-point.

Description #1: Essential Characteristics
"Bounded set evangelicals" can easily be defined in terms of a set of essential

characteristics. But precisely what distinguishes bounded set evangelicals from both non-bounded set evangelicals and non-evangelicals? While evangelicals in general—and bounded set evangelicals in particular—sometimes disagree on who is in the evangelical camp (and who is not), believing in *the authority of the Bible* is clearly the most essential characteristic.[7] Other essential characteristics include the death, resurrection and bodily second coming of Jesus Christ; the reality of sin and the need for atonement for that sin through Jesus Christ; the reality of heaven and hell and accompanying beliefs in eternal rewards and eternal punishment; the concept of a triune God, and so on. But these other characteristics, while essential, are subordinate to the main characteristic, the authority of Scripture. Even within this main characteristic various subdivisions exist, depending on the average bounded set evangelical being asked. Typical subdivisions are "inerrancy," "the role of women in the church," and "the authorship and dating of books of the Bible," to name but a few.

As can be readily observed, all of these essential characteristics deal more with concerns for right doctrine (orthodoxy) than with right practice (orthopraxy). Not that bounded set evangelicals are not concerned with issues of practice; they certainly are. Still, orthopraxic concerns are often secondary to issues of orthodoxy. Regardless, whether in matters of orthodoxy or orthopraxy, it is their commitment to the authority of the Bible to prescribe the belief and actions of Christians that establishes the overall boundaries of the set "bounded set evangelicals."

Some of the complexities of bounded set evangelicals can perhaps be better explained by reference to a diagram (see Figure 1, right). Notice that all of the boundaries for bounded set evangelicals are closed, as illustrated by the solid lines surrounding each specific area (fundamental doctrinal beliefs, other orthodoxy issues, and other orthopraxy issues). These solid lines reflect the fact

that bounded set evangelicals are quite uniform concerning what they do (and do not) believe and practice.

Description #2: Well-defined Boundaries

Hiebert's observation that "Most of the effort in defining the category is spent defining and maintaining the boundary" (1994:112) is truly apt here. There certainly is a desire among such evangelicals to maintain a clear distinction between just who is a bounded set evangelical and who is not. The amount of debate concerning the inerrancy of Scripture in years past proves this point easily enough. Generally speaking, bounded set evangelicals can be characterized positively by the words *uncompromising* and *resolute* and negatively by the words *unyielding* and *closed*.
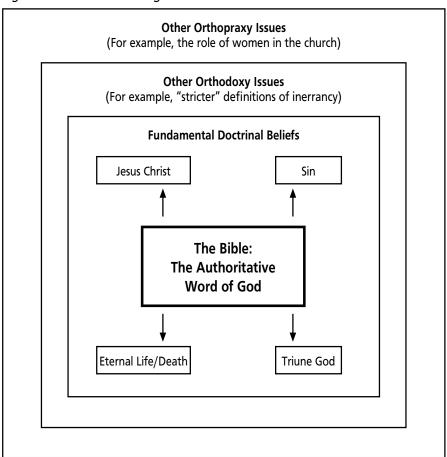
Description #3: Homogeneity

Bounded set evangelicals are typically fairly uniform or homogeneous

when it comes to their set's essential characteristic—belief in the authority of Scripture. Either one believes in the authority of Scripture or one does not.

Description #4: A Static Set?

Are the bounded set evangelicals really a static set in terms of the Hiebert model? Yes and no. Yes, in that a bounded set evangelical believes in the authority of the Bible; not to do so, by definition, automatically places one outside the boundaries of the set. No, in that, despite the restrictiveness of the set, some flexibility remains within the subdivisions of the set's various essential characteristics. Even with disagreements among bounded set evangelicals on the nuances of many of these sub areas (see Hiebert's structural characteristic #1, above), those who claim the name "evangelical" are typically considered part of the evangelical family as long as they believe in the authority of the Bible.

Figure 1: Bounded Set Evangelicals

Other Orthopraxy Issues
(For example, the role of women in the church)

Other Orthodoxy Issues
(For example, "stricter" definitions of inerrancy)

Fundamental Doctrinal Beliefs

Jesus Christ

Sin

**The Bible:
The Authoritative
Word of God**

Eternal Life/Death

Triune God

Centered Sets

Not all people create mental categories in the same way and thus, not all people have a bounded set mentality. There are other ways to perceive and categorize the world around us. One alternative to forming bounded sets is to form centered sets. Again, according to Hiebert, centered sets can be distinguished by the following:

1. A centered set is created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of things to that center. Things related to the center belong to the set, and those not related to the center do not....

In a centered set, members are things that move toward a common center or reference point. Non-members are things moving away from it.

2. While centered sets are not created by drawing boundaries, *they do have sharp boundaries* [emphasis his] that separate things inside the set from those outside it—between things related to or moving towards the center and those that are not.

Centered sets are well-formed, just like bounded sets. They are formed by defining the center and any relationships to it. The boundary then emerges automatically. Things related to the center naturally separate themselves from things that are not.

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.

3. There are two variables intrinsic to centered sets. The first is membership. All members of a set are full members and share fully in its functions. There are no second-class members. The second variable is distance from the center. Some things are far from the center and others near to it, but all are moving toward it. They are, therefore, equally members of the set, even though they differ in distance from the reference point. Things near the center, but moving away from it, are not a part of the set despite their proximity to it.

4. Centered sets have two types of change inherent in their structure. The first has to do with entry into or exit from the set. Things headed away from the center can turn and move toward it....

The second type of change has to do with movement toward or away from the center. Distant members can move toward the center, and those near it can slide back while still headed toward it (1994:123-124).

Another way to understand the differences between bounded sets and centered sets is by means of a visual diagram. Figure 2 (below) gives a pictorial explanation of the differences. Note that the boundary line of the bounded set is solid black and of uniform shape while the boundary line of the centered set is dashed and shaped to fit the relationship of its members to the center.
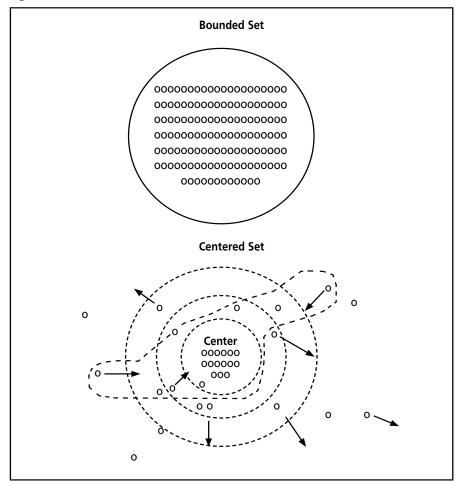
Evangelicals as a Centered Set

What are the characteristics of the category "evangelicals" if they are defined in terms of centered set theory? Again, let's examine each of Hiebert's above four descriptions point-by-point.

Description #1: Essential Characteristics

Centered set evangelicals are not as easy to classify as are bounded set evangelicals. Still, it is not difficult to determine what the "center" for centered set evangelicals is since they share with bounded set evangelicals the same essential characteristic: a belief in the authority of the Bible to prescribe the belief and actions of Christians.

Unlike bounded set evangelicals, however, centered set evangelicals tend to be more flexible with regard to the specific subdivisions related to the authority of Scripture. For example, a centered set

Figure 2: Bounded Set and Centered Set

evangelical does not have to believe in the definition of inerrancy of one particular person (or group) in order to be accepted as a member of the centered set. In fact, many different opinions on this issue are allowed as long as the center—a belief in the authority of the Bible to prescribe the belief and actions of Christians—is maintained. While the particular belief and actions of individual centered set evangelicals may well differ from those of their bounded set counterparts, their belief and actions are nonetheless similarly rooted in the authority of the Bible.

It goes without saying that bounded set evangelicals and centered set evangelicals hold in common the other essential characteristics (the death, resurrection and bodily second coming of Jesus Christ; the reality of sin and the need for atonement for that sin through Jesus Christ; the reality of heaven and hell and accompanying beliefs in eternal rewards and eternal punishment; the concept of a triune

Centered set evangelicals often feel uncomfortable with the boundary-setting characteristics of their bounded set brothers and sisters.

God, etc.). Yet even here the particularities of these essentials are given much more latitude in the belief system of the individual centered set evangelical.

Description #2: Lack of Boundary Maintenance

Centered set evangelicals are also concerned with just who is (and who is not) an evangelical, as exemplified by their commitment to the authority of the Bible. For them, this belief is a sharp boundary. What distinguishes them from bounded set evangelicals, however, is their lack of preoccupation with who is "in" and who is "out." Hiebert's words regarding centered sets clearly applies to centered set evangelicals here since for them there is "no need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set" (1994:124). Generally speaking, centered set evangelicals can be characterized positively by the words *flexible* and *tolerant* and negatively by the words *accommodating* and *liberal*.

Some complexities related to centered set evangelicals can be better explained by way of reference to Figure 3 (below). Figure 3 has the same general framework as Figure 1 above, but with some significant differences. While in Figure 3 there is still a strict boundary concerning the authoritative Word of God (as well as for the other essential characteristics listed), the remaining boundary markers for centered set evangelicals are more fluid, as illustrated by the dashed lines surrounding the other areas. These dashed lines represent the more flexible and tolerant nature of centered set evangelicals concerning what they do (and do not) believe and practice.
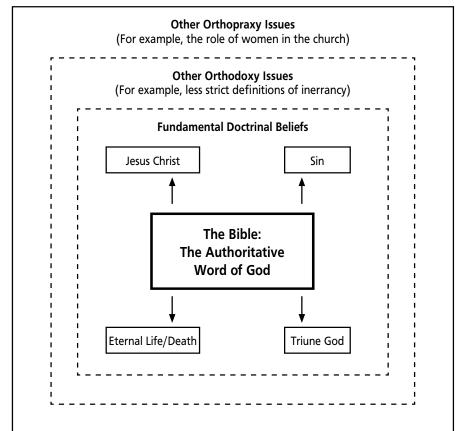
Description #3: Lack of Homogeneity

Centered set evangelicals would readily concede that, within their category, variation and the lack of a simple common uniformity are the order of the day. Moreover, they see such variation as desirable. They tend to welcome the views of all as long as the center—the authority of the Bible—is acknowledged. Centered set evangelicals often feel uncomfortable with the strict boundary-setting characteristics of their bounded set brothers and sisters and the desire to determine just who is in (and out) of the set.

Description #4 Dynamic Set

Because centered set evangelicals are more flexible they also can be categorized as being more *dynamic,* in the sense of being open to or moving toward change. That is because, again by definition, centered set evangelicals are allowed more freedom to explore new

Figure 3: Centered Set Evangelicals

Other Orthopraxy Issues
(For example, the role of women in the church)

Other Orthodoxy Issues
(For example, less strict definitions of inerrancy)

Fundamental Doctrinal Beliefs

Jesus Christ | Sin

**The Bible:
The Authoritative
Word of God**

Eternal Life/Death | Triune God

ideas due to their lack of concern for strict boundaries other than that central belief in the authority of the Bible.

Preliminary Conclusions and Further Questions

What conclusions can we draw from this investigation of bounded sets and centered sets? First, by analyzing all evangelicals through the criteria of set theory it is clear that evangelicals in both sets are not so different in their root level theological beliefs. The "center" is the same for each group. Moreover, the essential characteristics that help form that center are also basically the same. There are, of course, vast differences in how a bounded set evangelical and a centered set evangelical will answer specific questions concerning, say, the inerrancy of Scripture, the role of the women in the church, and the dating and authorship of books of the Bible. Still, all things considered, this analysis has shown that, at a root level, the bounded set and centered set evangelical are not far apart.

Yet, if this is true, why do they not communicate with one another better than they do at times? Why do bounded set evangelicals tend to be more uncompromising and resolute in their theological and/or missiological thinking, and centered set evangelicals more flexible and tolerant? What accounts for the differences that lead one evangelical to become a member of the bounded set and another evangelical (who holds to the same root level beliefs) to become a member of the centered set? Obviously categories of set theory alone do not answer such questions. Set theory is merely one helpful tool in delineating the parameters that differentiate evangelicals from one another. It does not explain how or why these differences develop in the first place. To explain this something else is needed.

The Need for Another Model: Epistemological Foundations

To answer such how and why questions we need to develop another model. Such a model needs to go beyond the root level beliefs of evangelicals (which, as we have seen, are essentially the same) to the deeper, more basic level of epistemological foundations. I believe that it is these epistemological foundations that account for the differences between the two groups.

Epistemology can be defined as "the theory or science that investigates the methods or grounds of knowledge"[8] or "a theory of knowledge or an inquiry into how we gain knowledge" (Erickson 1986:49). In other words, epistemology is that which attempts to understand how knowledge is gained; more simply put: how we know, and how we *know* that we know! When this definition is applied to the question at

As long as 2 x 2 = 4, there is no need to investigate other possibilities.

hand—namely, why evangelicals can all believe in the authority of Scripture and at the same time can believe so differently about other theological/ missiological issues—the answer lies in the fact that bounded set evangelicals and centered set evangelicals have different basic understandings concerning how knowledge is gained. They have basic epistemological differences that influence all of the subsequent theological/missiological decisions they make.

What are these epistemological differences? Hiebert, in an important article entitled "Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology" (1985a), once again offers us much insight into this question.[9] In this article Hiebert devised a "taxonomy of epistemological systems, a meta-epistemological grid by which we can compare and contrast various epistemological options" (1985a:5). The grid runs the spectrum from positions of absolute idealism to determinism. Most of Hiebert's "Taxonomy" is reproduced in Figure 4 (opposite page).

A brief perusal of Hiebert's taxonomy readily reveals that the epistemological options available to evangelicals are limited to either naive idealism/naive realism or critical realism. The other positions—especially absolute idealism and determinism—are simply not tenable options for evangelicals, though some will occasionally fall from naive idealism/naive realism into critical idealism or from critical realism to instrumentalism.

Since the word "naive"—used in reference to naive idealism/naive realism—may be perceived as pejorative, I will substitute the word "conservative" to describe these evangelicals. In keeping with that change, I will likewise refer to "critical" realist evangelicals as "progressive."

Evangelicals as Conservative Realists

What characterizes conservative realist evangelicals? Such evangelicals do believe that the external world is real. They believe that the human mind can understand the external world exactly, as it is, without bias. But more than just viewing science as a photograph of reality, these evangelicals see theology/ missiology itself as a photograph of reality. For them knowledge is reduced to simple mathematical formula: 2 x 2 always equals 4. As long as 2 x 2 = 4 there is no need to investigate other possibilities. A proper answer to the question has been found, thus there is no need for further investigation.

In terms of their main essential characteristic (the authority of the Bible), conservative realist evangelicals tend to reason along these lines: "The Bible is not only the authoritative Word

of God, it is the inerrant Word, and obviously my (or my group's) definition of inerrancy is the correct one since my (our) definition is what the Bible states." Or, "Women are not allowed to teach men, that is what Scripture says and there is just no alternative." Likewise, matters surrounding the dating and authorship of particular books of the Bible are very important to conservative realists. Regarding the authorship of the Pentateuch, for example, they would argue something like this: "Since Jesus referred to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, there is simply no other option." Hiebert's words accurately describe conservative realist evangelicals: "Because knowledge is exact and potentially exhaustive, there can be only one unified theory. Various theories must be reduced to one" (1985a:6).

By now, the similarities between the epistemological foundations of conservative realist evangelicals outlined here and the previously described bounded set evangelicals should be obvious. Indeed, these similarities are no accident, for the epistemological foundations that form the conservative realist's understanding of reality are pragmatically worked out in bounded set ways. Bounded set evangelicals tend to be uncompromising and resolute in their theological and missiological thinking because their epistemological foundations allow them no other choice. For them to change

Figure 4: A Taxonomy of Epistemological Positions

Positions	Nature of Knowledge	Systems of Knowledge
Absolute Idealism	Reality exists in the mind. The external world is illusory. E.g., Vedantic and Advaita Hinduism.	Each system is an island to itself. Systems are incommensurable. Unity is possible only as everyone joins in the same system.
Critical Idealism	Reality exists in the mind. The external world is unknowable. Order is imposed on sense experience by the mind.	Each system is an island to itself. Systems are incommensurable. A common ground is found in human rationality which is assumed to be the same for all humans.
Naive Idealism/ Naive realism	The external world is real. The mind can know it exactly, exhaustively and without bias. Science is a photograph of reality. Because knowledge and reality are related 1:1 this is naive idealism or naive realism.	Because knowledge is exact and potentially exhaustive, there can be one unified theory. Various theories must be reduced to one. This leads to reductionism such as physical reductionism, psychological reductionism or sociocultural reductionism.
Critical Realism	The external world is real. Our knowledge of it is partial but can be true. Science is a map or model. It is made up of successive paradigms which bring us closer approximations of reality and absolute truth.	Each field in science presents a different blueprint of reality. These are complimentary to one another. Integration is achieved, not by reducing them all to one model, but to see them all in their relationship to one another. Each gives us partial insights into reality.
Instrumentalism (Pragmatism)	The external world is real. We cannot know if our knowledge of it is true, but if it "does the job" we can use it. Science is a Rorschach response that makes no ontological claims to truth.	Because we make no truth claims for our theories or models, there can be no ontological contradictions between them. We can use apparently contradictory models in different situations so long as they work.
Determinism	The external world is real. We and our knowledge are determined by material causes, hence knowledge can lay no claim to truth (or to meaning).	There is no problem with integration for all systems of knowledge are determined by external, nonrational factors such as infant experiences, emotional drives and thought conditioning.

their theological or missiological thinking—for them to think in centered set ways—would require nothing short of a paradigm shift in their understanding of reality. It is no surprise that they sometimes have trouble dialoguing with centered set evangelicals, despite the fact that the root level beliefs of the two groups are essentially the same.

Evangelicals as Progressive Realists

What characterizes progressive realist evangelicals? Like their conservative realist counterparts, progressive realist evangelicals see the external world as real. However—and this is the key difference—progressive realists believe that their knowledge of this real world is indeed partial but can be true. Science, and thus theology/missiology, is not a photograph of reality, instead it is a map or model. Theology/missiology is still viewed as something akin to mathematics. Now, though, the simple $2 \times 2 = 4$ type formulas are expanded to allow for more variables: $\_\_\_ \times \_\_\_ = 4$, where there are more acceptable answers allowed: 1×4, 2×2, -2×-2, -1×-4, $2 \times$ square root of 4, and so on. All of these answers are correct as is the original $2 \times 2 = 4$. The difference is that the number 4 is not derived solely from one mathematical expression. I do not mean to imply that progressive realist evangelicals will allow for any and all possibilities. They are not relativists; there are limits. As is true mathematically (where only multiples of the number 4 will properly fit into the $\_\_\_ \times \_\_\_ = 4$ equation), so, too, limits are placed upon Bible interpretation and translation possibilities.

In terms of their main essential characteristic, progressive realist evangelicals tend to reason along these lines: "The Bible is the authoritative Word of God, but just how it is also the inerrant Word depends on how a person defines inerrancy, since the biblical evidence appears to give us different options." Or, "Women may or may not be allowed to teach men. We must examine all of the possible contexts of male and female roles and commands concerning teaching in the Bible, and then, and only then, can we come up with some tentative conclusions based on that overall data." Likewise, progressive realists are more open to possible explanations concerning dating and authorship issues. Again, regarding the Pentateuch, they would certainly not discount Mosaic authorship. However, they would answer the authorship question something like this: "Jesus referred to Moses as the author of the Pentateuch, but did he mean that Moses was the only author, or that Moses highly influenced the material in the Pentateuch and thus his name should be attached to it as the tradition

They are not relativists; there are limits.

demanded, or was he saying that Moses was mainly responsible for a work that was subsequently redacted by others?"

Thus, following Hiebert, the nature of knowledge for progressive realists "is made up of successive paradigms which bring us closer approximations of reality and absolute truth" (1985a:6). Using the $2 \times 2 = 4$ example once more, increasing the number of variables likewise increases the chance of getting closer to the reality of what makes up the number 4. In the mind of progressive realist evangelicals, being open to several possible acceptable answers to many non-doctrinal theological/missiological issues helps them to come closer to reality for a particular issue.

As has already been shown, the descriptions of progressive realist evangelicals and centered set evangelicals bear obvious similarities. Once again, this is because the epistemological foundations one finds in the progressive realist's understanding of reality are pragmatically worked out in centered set ways. Centered set evangelicals tend to be flexible and tolerant in their theological and missiological thinking because their epistemological foundations do not allow them to be otherwise. What was true for conservative realists is likewise true for progressive realists: to change their theological or missiological thinking—for them to think in bounded set ways—would require nothing short of an entire paradigm shift in their understanding of reality. As a result, they, too, sometimes have trouble dialoguing with bounded set evangelicals, despite the fact that the root level beliefs of the two groups are essentially the same. Figure 5 (opposite page) helps to illustrate the relationship between evangelicals, their epistemological foundations, and set theory. (Note: This graphic is meant to be read from the bottom up.)

Still other questions arise at this point. Can an evangelical have conservative realist epistemological foundations and pragmatically work them out in centered set ways? Or can an evangelical have progressive realist epistemological foundations and pragmatically work them out in bounded set ways? These are valid questions, to be sure, and it is difficult to arrive at definitive answers. On the whole, however, I believe that, by definition, an evangelical with conservative realist epistemological foundations will *in general* work out such presuppositions in bounded set ways. Likewise, an evangelical with progressive realist epistemological foundations will *in general* work out such presuppositions in centered set ways.[10]

To summarize, evangelicals are by default in the evangelical camp when

they all have the same essential theological/missiological beliefs centered in the authority of the Bible. How they pragmatically work out their individual beliefs in areas of both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, however, depends upon the basic epistemological foundations to which they subscribe (conservative realist or progressive realist). In the final analysis, it is these epistemological foundations that determine whether or not a particular evangelical will pragmatically work out his or her individual beliefs in bounded set or centered set ways.[11]

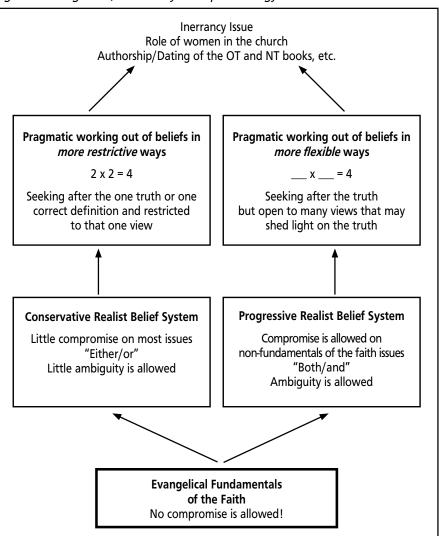## Clarifying Evangelical Responses to Insider Movements and Familial Language Translations

In this article I have not referred directly to those evangelicals who are advocating for or against insider movements, or to those who are debating the merits of various familial language translations. In fact, I have purposefully used other issues—the inerrancy of Scripture, the role of women in the church and the authorship/dating of particular books of the Bible—to give readers an overall feel for how different epistemological foundations can lead to different evangelical responses. Thus, I believe the prior discussion of set theory (and, especially, of epistemological foundations) is essential to better understand and clarify why many evangelicals differ in their views on key theological/missiological issues like insider movements and familial language translations. In light of the above, I believe that arriving at a conclusive "one view fits all" evangelical response to these issues may prove to be impossible, as illustrated in Figure 6 (pg. 84). That said, our earlier discussion also shows that on these particular issues, evangelicals who maintain vastly differing viewpoints still share much common ground, providing space where they can unite rather than divide. Let us look at each issue in turn.

Evangelical Responses to Insider Movements

First, let us consider evangelical responses to insider movements and those insiders who have decided to follow Jesus. While there is much that evangelicals agree about, several key areas of disagreement remain. These concern both orthodoxy belief issues ("What should insiders believe?") and orthopraxy conduct issues ("What should insiders practice?"). Key orthodoxy issues include an understanding of Jesus as God's Son and how best to communicate this understanding; the concept of and use of the word "Trinity"; whether or not Muhammad can be viewed positively as God's messenger; and whether or not there are some truth elements found in the Qur'an. Key orthopraxy issues include reciting the *shahada* ("There is no God but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God," although this has an orthodoxy element as well); reading the Qur'an for personal and corporate edification (again, there is an orthodoxy element to this as well); participating in ritual prayer *(salat)* in a mosque; self-identifying as a Muslim, and remaining within Islam.

What is to be done regarding these orthodoxy and orthopraxy disagreements? Though both sides agree on the evangelical foundations (especially that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God) their basic epistemological starting

Figure 5: Evangelicals, Set Theory and Epistemology

points lead each side to reach different conclusions about these issues.

I would argue that, *generally speaking,* evangelicals who are more positive toward insiders and insider movements are more likely to be centered set progressive realists. As a result, while they fully believe in the authority of the Bible as their center they are, at the same time, more flexible concerning some of the key orthodoxy and orthopraxy issues referred to above. They are also more flexible concerning whether or not Jesus followers can remain within their own religion and culture. Centered set progressive realists are also more tolerant of missionaries who have come alongside insider movements. One key concern of these centered set progressive realists is whether or not Jesus followers are truly being discipled while remaining insiders, since discipleship is an essential characteristic of their fundamental belief system. *How* this discipleship occurs, however, is not so important; *that* discipleship occurs is the main orthopraxic issue for them. They see that discipleship can still happen while insiders remain within their religious/cultural systems. These centered-set progressive realist evangelicals do not see insider movements as a fundamental faith issue and therefore are tolerant of some ambiguity when it comes to insiders and insider movements, which is a part of their tendency toward "both/and" thinking.
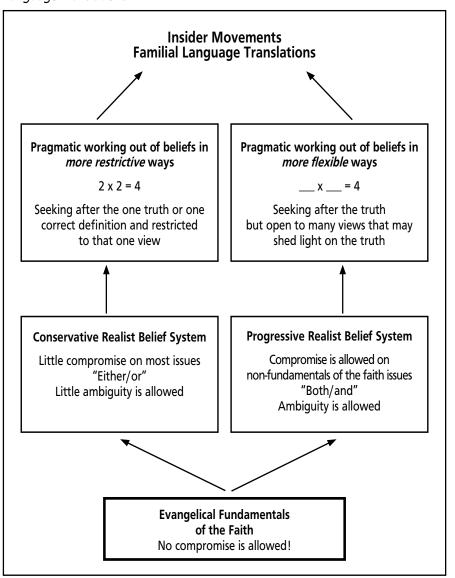
Conversely, I would again argue that, *generally speaking,* evangelicals who are more negative toward both insiders and insider movements are more likely to be bounded set conservative realists. As such, these evangelicals, in believing in the authority of the Bible as their center, are less flexible concerning some of these key orthodoxy and orthopraxy issues; they view insider movements as compromising the very essence of the Christian faith. They are less flexible concerning whether or not Jesus followers can remain within their own religion and culture. Bounded set

conservative realists are also less tolerant of those missionaries who come alongside insider movements.

As with centered set progressive realists, one main concern of these bounded set conservative realists is whether or not Jesus followers are truly being discipled while remaining insiders, since discipleship is also an essential characteristic of their fundamental belief system. *How* this discipleship occurs is very important to them. They contend that in some cases it is better for insiders to leave their religion/culture because its false beliefs and practices prevent good

discipleship from happening properly within the old religious system. These bounded set conservative realist evangelicals see insider movements as a fundamental faith issue and therefore are less tolerant of any ambiguity when it comes to insiders and insider movements, which is a part of their tendency toward "either/or" thinking. Despite this either/or tendency, bounded set conservative realist evangelicals generally remain compassionate toward both the followers of Jesus within insider movements and the missionaries ministering to them.

Figure 6: Evangelicals, Set Theory, Epistemology, Insider Movements and Familial Language Translations

**Insider Movements
Familial Language Translations**

Pragmatic working out of beliefs in *more restrictive* ways

2 x 2 = 4

Seeking after the one truth or one correct definition and restricted to that one view

Pragmatic working out of beliefs in *more flexible* ways

___ x ___ = 4

Seeking after the truth but open to many views that may shed light on the truth

Conservative Realist Belief System

Little compromise on most issues "Either/or"
Little ambiguity is allowed

Progressive Realist Belief System

Compromise is allowed on non-fundamentals of the faith issues "Both/and"
Ambiguity is allowed

Evangelical Fundamentals of the Faith
No compromise is allowed!

What unites both groups on this issue is the desire to see the lost reached with the gospel and that missionaries are necessary for this to happen.

Evangelical Responses to Familial Language Translations

Concerning evangelical responses to familial language translations, much of what I have said earlier applies to this issue as well. Evangelicals who tend to be more center set progressive realists will be more flexible concerning translations and familial language choices while evangelicals who tend to be more bounded set conservative realists will be much less flexible.

The issue of familial language translations, however, is further complicated

*O*ur epistemological foundations even influence the conclusions we draw about those whose understandings differ from our own.

because it directly relates to one of the main evangelical fundamentals of the faith: an understanding of Jesus as God's Son and how best to communicate this understanding in Bible translations, especially those destined for use among Muslim people groups. Since this familial language translation issue directly impacts the fundamental doctrinal belief in the triune God, it is taken seriously by bounded set conservative realists and centered set progressive realists alike. Christians through the centuries have dialogued about and

debated various theological understandings of the triune God; it is such a key fundamental element of evangelical faith that the issue of familial language translations naturally deserves close attention by both groups. On this issue the two sides have many more common understandings of the triune God than they have differences.[12]

What unites both groups is the desire to see the Bible translated into the languages of the various people groups of the world and that these translations be as accurate as possible.

I believe that Figure 7 (left) helps illustrate the complexities facing both groups of evangelicals in relationship to insider movements and familial language translations. Note that the borders in the figure in relationship to orthodoxy and orthopraxy issues are porous dot-dash lines that indicate the struggle both groups have in trying to figure out what the actual borders are.
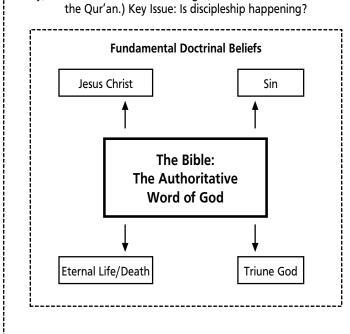
Figure 7: Evangelical Responses to Insider Movements and Familial Language Translations

Other Orthopraxy Issues
(For example, reciting the *shahada,* reading the Qur'an for personal and corporate edification, participating in ritual prayer *(salat)* in a mosque, identifying as Muslims.)
Key Issue: Is discipleship happening?

Other Orthodoxy Issues
(For example, understanding Jesus as God's Son, the concept of the Trinity, Mohammed as God's messenger, some truth elements found in the Qur'an.) Key Issue: Is discipleship happening?

Fundamental Doctrinal Beliefs

Jesus Christ   Sin

The Bible: The Authoritative Word of God

Eternal Life/Death   Triune God

Conclusion: Toward a Greater Appreciation for Each Other

Why can't evangelicals agree? This article has suggested that one primary reason is that evangelicals—when addressing key theological/missiological issues like insider movements and familial language translations—approach such issues from very different epistemological starting points. Whereas differing epistemological foundations may not allow agreement to take place, understanding the other's (and even one's own) epistemological foundations may help all concerned to gain a greater appreciation for the other.

With this possibility in mind, I propose the following practical steps for all evangelicals discussing these crucial issues:

1. *Recognize the reality of epistemological foundations.* All evangelicals must come to

realize that our epistemological foundations greatly influence how we approach any issue, especially key theological/missiological issues like insider movements and familial language translations. Further, while we need to understand and appreciate our own epistemological foundations we also need to recognize the reality of the differing epistemological foundations of those with whom we disagree. We also need to see that our epistemological foundations even influence the conclusions we draw about those who hold to understandings that differ from our own.

2. *Acknowledge that while agreement may not be possible, fellowship still is.* Whereas agreement on these key issues may never be fully achieved by all evangelicals, it is still a valuable exercise for both sides to continue to dialogue: to attempt to understand where the other side is coming from, to acknowledge the real differences and to be respectful of the other's views. To do this each side will need to see both the strengths and the weaknesses in their various approaches and appreciate the Spirit-driven possibility that, although agreement may not happen, fellowship can still be maintained.

3. *Explore the possibility that core common beliefs may help bridge the divide.* Whereas agreement may not happen on these key issues, it still is important for both sides to understand and acknowledge that we do agree on the same basic core evangelical fundamentals of the faith. As a result, there is infinitely more that unites us than divides us. Exploring more fully this overwhelming agreement on core evangelical beliefs can hopefully help bridge the divide.

4. *Realize where the true battle lies.* It is crucial that both groups recognize that, in the final analysis, our battle as evangelicals is not with the followers

of Jesus within insider movements, nor with those missionaries who are finding themselves in the midst of insider movements, nor with Bible translators who are trying their best to communicate the truths of God's Word to their particular people group. Rather, our true battle is only with Satan and his forces. Consequently, it behooves both groups of evangelicals to realize that as important as these theological/missiological issues are, they should never distract us from the overarching goal of reaching our lost and dying world with the Good News of Jesus.

Attempting to understand the pros and cons of various theological/missiological approaches to insider movements

> *Our battle as evangelicals is not with followers of Jesus within insider movements.*

and familial language translations is appropriate and necessary. At the same time, such discussions should be done in a spirit of love and harmony, without malice and dissension. It is hoped that this article will help both groups better appreciate and value one another, and to move forward in reaching the lost. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] Note that although this article is specifically addressed to evangelical theologians/missiologists/Bible translators who are dealing with the issues of insider movements and familial language translations, for sake of space and clarity I will refer to this specific group simply as "evangelicals."

[2] In this article I will not discuss the particulars of either insider movements or

familial language translations; it is assumed that those reading this article are familiar with these two issues as well as with some of the controversies concerning them in evangelical circles. For those who do need more information see back issues of the *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* which has been dealing with these issues since 2000, and more recent issues of *Christianity Today.*

[3] For further information on set theory see, for example, Cohen (1966) and Hatcher (1966).

[4] Cf., for example, Hiebert (1978).

[5] Hiebert championed various aspects of set theory in his 1978, 1979 and 1983 articles. His 1994 article, however, encapsulates his most comprehensive understanding of set theory for the mission task and it is this article that will be referred to throughout the remainder of this article.

[6] The whole category of fuzzy sets seems, by definition, to be something outside of mainstream evangelical theology/missiology. Fuzzy sets have no clearly defined borders. Instead "there are degrees of inclusion. Things may be one-quarter, one-half or even two-thirds in the set" (Hiebert 1994:118; cf. 118-122 and 131-133). Such ambiguity is usually outside the realm of evangelicalism, thus the disregard of fuzzy sets in this particular discussion is legitimate. The study of fuzzy sets, however, may give us much insight into the categorical sets and thus the epistemological foundations of insiders in insider movements. Hiebert himself acknowledged this when he began his 1994 chapter with the story of the Indian peasant, Papayya, and the question of whether or not a nonliterate peasant can "become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once? If so, what do we mean by conversion?" (1994:107). Although Hiebert's death in March 2007 occurred before the controversy over insider movements really began to escalate, this chapter sets forth some good characterizations of insiders who may appear to fall into this category of fuzzy set.

[7] Some would argue that an understanding of a sovereign triune God is the most essential characteristic and should be at the center. While I agree that God is indeed central to everything, at the same time I believe that our human understanding of God is primarily found in his authoritative word, the Bible. Thus, for the theological/missiological agenda of this article I place the Bible at the center.

[8] A composite definition taken from the Webster and Oxford dictionaries.

[9] Cf. Hiebert (1985b).

[10] The emphasis here is on the phrase, *in general.* These are not absolute categories; there is room for movement. Furthermore, there is a process to all of this. An evangelical, for example, may have initially been a conservative realist and through the years shifted to a progressive realist position. The reverse can also be true. But *generally speaking* these categories are helpful.

[11] For a case study of how set theory and epistemological foundations influenced the issue of inerrancy in the Asian context see Caldwell (2004).

[12] The report of the World Evangelical Alliance Global Review Panel (finalized on April 26, 2013) has done a good job in helping both sides come to terms with some of the complexities involving familial language translations. See "Report to World Evangelical Alliance for Conveyance to Wycliffe Global Alliance and SIL International from the WEA Global Review Panel" available at www.worldea.org/images/wimg/files/2013_0429- Final%20Report%20of%20the%20WEA%20Independent%20Bible%20Translation%20Review%20Panel.pdf.

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