

GOOD FENCES, GOOD NEIGHBOURS?: HOLINESS, BOUNDARIES, AND MISSION

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the communal boundaries of the church and the life of holiness and mission to which it is summoned in the gospel, with particular reference to the distinction between ‘bounded sets’ and ‘centred sets’ in recent missiological theory and missional ecclesiology. Drawing on the language of the *First London Confession* and the implied ecclesiology of Paul’s Corinthian letters, it argues that the church’s holiness-in-mission requires neither a fortress nor a boundaryless blur, but the kind of ‘good fences’ that assist the followers of Jesus to be ‘good neighbours’ to the people around them who do not know Christ.

‘Good fences’, it is argued, are communal boundaries that (i) are drawn as a circumference around the centre of the saving, ruling presence of Christ; (ii) accurately represent the distinctions and disciplines of confession and conduct that mark out those who follow Jesus from those who do not know him; (iii) make explicit the covenantal commitment of a community of believers to live under those disciplines together; and (iv) allow for the missional involvement of God’s people in the world and the hospitable welcome within the church of those who are in the process of learning Christ.

MENDING WALL

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall...”¹ begins the famous poem by Robert Frost, in which he voices the ruminations of a New England orchardist about the elemental forces (weather? gravity? elves?) that make new gaps in the orchard’s dry-stone wall each year. Year by year, fresh gaps appear across the season of the winter ground-swell, and year by year, when spring comes, the speaker and his neighbour walk the length of the wall, one on each side, rebuilding it.

Re-building a wall like that is hard work:

We have to use a spell to make them balance:

“Stay where you are until our backs are turned!”

We wear our fingers rough with handling them.²

But the owner of the neighbouring property is still stubbornly insistent on the importance of the annual ritual—even though in this part of the boundary line, with an apple orchard on one side and a pine forest on the other, a wall hardly seems necessary. To him it is an unquestionable, almost sacred duty:

...I see him there

Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me~

Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”³

¹ Frost, Robert, *Selected Early Poems* (Claremont: Coyote Canyon, 2008), 51.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 52.

The ‘something’ in nature that resists a wall has its parallel in human social interactions. In human nature, too— or at least in the way that human nature functions in a modern pluralist society— there is something that doesn’t like walls. The ancient impulses of tradition and tribalism that build boundaries around and between us are pitted against other impulses less friendly to such divisions. And in the context of a socially fluid, multi-faith culture, these other impulses can be particularly powerful.

One recent study of this dynamic is Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s massive, meticulously-documented book, *American Grace*. In it, the authors paint a vast and detailed picture of the ways in which the forces of neighbourliness and interfaith relationship (the “My Pal Al Effect” and the “Aunt Susan Effect”) work together to erode the boundary walls of doctrine and lifestyle that pastors, priests and rabbis keep attempting to build and maintain around modern America’s various religious communities.⁴

Religious leaders may talk about the eternal division between believer and unbeliever and about lifestyles and behaviours that are under divine judgement, but if (as most Americans do) you have an Aunt Susan who belongs to one of the categories that is on the wrong side of the wall, it is hard to keep believing that those kind of boundary lines are real, or that they matter:

“You know that your faith says ... she’s not going to go to heaven, but I mean, come on ... it’s Aunt Susan, you know, and if anybody’s going to heaven it’s Aunt Susan. So every American is sort of caught in this dilemma, that their theology tells them one thing, but their personal life experience tells them to be more tolerant.”⁵

BOUNDARYLESS COMMUNITY?

In a context like that, Christian talk about ‘holiness’ and ‘church discipline’ can sound (at best) quaint and (at worst) oppressive, legalistic, and obscurantist. Walking the boundary-walls of the church week by week, putting back the stones that have fallen off the top, can feel like the futile endeavour of an ‘old-stone savage’, locked into a losing battle against nature and gravity, too stubborn or too stupid to go behind the sayings and traditions handed down from the past.

Perhaps, one might argue, the time has come for a sort of boundaryless Christianity, in which there is a sense of belonging and a chance to explore, without the need to draw lines of belief and behaviour that divide people into the categories of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. What if tearing down the boundaries created exactly the kind of proximity and interaction in which the mission of the gospel could flourish? What if an approach of that sort turned out to be not a brand new idea, a way of accommodating to postmodern times, but a closer approximation to the way things were done by Jesus himself and among his first followers?

⁴ Robert D. Putnam et al., *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 134–160, 443–550.

⁵ Robert Putnam, quoted at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130264527>, accessed 21 Nov 2011.

Boundaries and Centres

One of the more nuanced and imaginative proposals for how we should address these questions can be found in missiologist Paul Hiebert's distinction between "centred sets" and "bounded sets",⁶ popularised more recently in books including Darrell Guder and Lois Barrett's *Missional Church*,⁷ Jim Peterson's *Church without Walls*,⁸ and Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch's *The Shaping of Things to Come*.⁹ Frost and Hirsch's book offers a memorable and frequently quoted explanation of the distinction:

The attractional church is a bounded set. That is, it is a set of people clearly marked off from those who do not belong to it. Churches thus mark themselves in a variety of ways. Having a church membership roll is an obvious one. This mechanism determines who's in and who's out. The missional-incarnational church, though, is a centered set. This means that rather than drawing a border to determine who belongs and who doesn't, a centered set is defined by its core values, and people are not seen as in or out, but as closer or further away from the center. In that sense, everyone is in and no one is out. Though some people are close to the center and others far from it, everyone is potentially part of the community in its broadest sense.

A useful illustration is to think of the difference between wells and fences. In some farming communities, the farmer might build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighbouring farms out. This is a bounded set. But in rural communities where farms or ranches cover an enormous geographic area, fencing the property is out of the question. In our home of Australia, ranches (called stations) are so vast that fences are superfluous. Under these conditions a farmer has to sink a bore and create a well, a precious water supply in the Outback. It is assumed that livestock, though they will stray, will never roam too far from the well, lest they die. This is a centered set. As long as there is a supply of clean water, the livestock will remain close by.¹⁰

Pulled out of their context, quoted and requoted in books and blog-posts, those paragraphs from *The Shaping of Things to Come* can be read as an argument for abandoning the concepts of 'insider' and 'outsider' altogether, dissolving any sense of membership or belonging into something implicit, undefined and relative. On this reading, 'centred set' and 'bounded set' are mutually exclusive categories, and churches and church-planters need to make a choice between the defunct 'bounded set' way of operating and the new-model 'centred set'.

Within the larger context of the book (and read alongside other books by the same authors)¹¹ an absolute dichotomy of that sort seems less likely.¹² The intention of the contrast is not so much to argue for

⁶ Paul Hiebert, "Sets and Structures: A Study in Church Patterns," in *New Horizons in World Mission* (ed. D. J. Hesselgrave; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 217–227.

⁷ Darrell L. Guder and Lois Barrett, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁸ Jim Peterson, *Church without Walls* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1991).

⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003).

¹⁰ Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 47.

¹¹ See for example the discussions of the "covenantal" dimension that is listed as one of the bare minimum requirements for the existence of a church in Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 147–154.

¹² See also the discussion in Guder and Barrett, *Missional Church*, 207–210, which argues that the mission community should be viewed as "a bounded set [the 'covenant community'] within a centered-set organisation".

abolishing boundaries altogether as to question their usefulness as the *defining* element of a church—to redirect attention from the boundaries to the centre, and to suggest the possibility of a variety of ways in which people might be said to ‘belong’ to a particular church community.¹³

Whichever interpretation is adopted, however, the contrast between ‘centered’ and ‘bounded’ set churches raises questions that are worth addressing. Does the church need to have visible, explicit boundaries that distinguish between insiders and outsiders? If not, what does belonging mean, and how is it expressed? And if there is a need for boundaries around belonging, what shape and what attributes should those boundaries have if they are to serve the calling of the church to be a display in the world of the wisdom and the glory of God?

Baptists, Boundaries and the Gathered Church

For Baptists, whose theological tradition makes much of a “gathered church” ecclesiology, questions like these are particularly pressing. The early Baptists of the seventeenth century insisted against the state-church structures of their day that the local church is (in the language of the *First London Confession*) “a company of visible Saints, called and separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel, being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, by mutual agreement.”¹⁴

The metaphorical language with which the early Baptists articulated their vision of the gathered church is strikingly similar to the imagery of ‘wells’ and ‘fences’ evoked by Frost and Hirsch. In the language of the *First London Confession*, the two images are evoked not as competing alternatives but as complementary metaphors—the writers of the confession picture the church as both “a walled sheepfold” and “a watered garden”, in which God has established “the fountains and springs of his heavenly grace continually flowing forth”:

Thither ought all men to come, of all estates, that acknowledge [Christ] to be their Prophet, Priest, and King, to be enrolled amongst his household servants, to be under his heavenly conduct and government, to lead their lives in his walled sheepfold, and watered garden, to have communion here with the Saints, that they may be made to be partakers of their inheritance in the Kingdom of God.¹⁵

The confessional language of the seventeenth century points toward one way in which contemporary Baptists might attempt to resolve the question of the relationship between the centre and the boundaries of the church. According to this approach, the two metaphors are to be placed side by side, with the implication that ‘centred set’ and ‘bounded set’ perspectives are to be viewed as coexisting in harmonious complementarity, as ways of describing the single reality of the visible, local church.

But within a tradition that insists emphatically on the supreme authority of Scripture over the faith and life of the church, an appeal of this sort to the confessional formulations of the past can only ever offer

¹³ This reading of the way in which the imagery is intended by the authors was confirmed in personal conversation by Mike Frost.

¹⁴ *First London Confession* (1644) Art. XXXIII.

¹⁵ *First London Confession*, Art. XXXIV.

a penultimate and provisional answer. Both contemporary missiological proposals and traditional doctrinal formulations must be tested against Scripture. And the perspective of the tradition needs not only to be *verified* by Scripture; it also needs to be deepened and clarified and elucidated. It is one thing to place the two metaphors in juxtaposition; it is another to articulate the nature of their inter-relationship and its implications for the life and mission of the church.

GOOD FENCES: HOLINESS-IN-MISSION IN 1 CORINTHIANS

One obvious place within Scripture to which we might turn with questions of this sort is Paul's letters to the first-century church in Corinth, with their explicit focus on what it means for the church to be "the church of God that is in Corinth ... sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints", their detailed attention to what the outworkings of that identity might look like in practice, and their emphatic insistence that Christians be committed together to the mission of God in the world, actively seeking the good and the salvation of others beyond the circle of their own fellow-believers.

When we read Paul's Corinthian letters with those questions in mind, at least four assertions can be made about the centre and boundaries of the church, and how they relate to the church's calling to holiness-in-mission.

Holiness-In-Mission Requires Boundaries

First, and perhaps most obviously, Paul's Corinthian letters reinforce the necessity that there be boundaries of some sort that delineate the membership of the church. The very notion of the church as "the body of Christ" and believers as "members" of that body (1 Corinthians 12:27) implies a bounded community within which the members own a particular responsibility for one another and relate to one another with a deliberate solidarity. Entry into the community involves the crossing of a line, symbolised in the dramatic action of baptism. Certainly, there is a process of "learning Christ" that precedes baptism and continues after it (cf. Eph 4:17–5:2), but the drama of baptism still makes the stark visual assertion that if someone is in Christ then somewhere in that process of learning Christ a line was crossed, and by the mysterious action of God a person was "baptised in the one Spirit ... into the one body" (1 Cor 12:13).

The ritual boundary-crossing of Christian baptism does not, of course, guarantee the certainty that everyone within the visible church is a believing, hoping, loving, persevering follower of Jesus. "Our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea," yet "God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness" (1 Cor 10:1-2, 5). Community boundaries are no infallible indicator of who is "in" and who is "out", as far as God is concerned.

But if it is possible for a person to be "removed from among you" (1 Cor 5:2); if there is a meaningful distinction between "those outside" and "those inside" (1 Cor 5:12), or between "the unrighteous" and "the

saints” (1 Cor 6:1); if a widow is free to remarry whomever she chooses, but “only in the Lord” (1 Cor 7:39), then a totally boundaryless community in which no-one can ever have any idea who is to be considered as inside and who is to be considered as outside is not an option.

Thomas Oden’s words are apt:

There is a fantasy abroad that the Christian community can have a center without a circumference. Since we gather around Jesus, it is argued, it is our center, not our boundaries, that matter. But this is the persistent illusion of compulsive hypertolerance. A community with no boundaries can neither have a center nor be a community.¹⁶

Holiness-In-Mission is About the Centre Before it is About the Boundaries

Holiness-in-mission requires boundaries. But the boundaries are not what comes first, or what matters most: holiness is about what is at the centre before it is about the lines around the circumference. The status of Israel as the ‘holy nation’ in the Old Testament was protected and demarcated by the various laws (circumcision, food laws, Sabbaths, purity codes) that circumscribed the nation’s life, but the symbolic heart of Israel’s holiness was not the law around the nation but the presence of God in the “holy of holies” in the nation’s midst.

Similarly, when Paul calls in 2 Cor 6:17 for the Corinthians to “come out from them, and be separate from them,” the rationale for the summons to holiness is the prior promise of God, that “I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor 6:16). It is because “we have these promises” (2 Cor 7:1) that we are to “cleanse ourselves from every defilement ... making holiness perfect in the fear of God.”

A concept of holiness that is principally or solely about the distinctions and dividing lines between the church and the world is a whitewashed tomb. The first question for a church is not, “how separated are you from the world?”, but “[is] Jesus Christ in you?” (2 Cor 13:5). If the answer to that question is not yes, then no amount of separatedness can compensate.

Holiness-In-Mission Requires the Right Boundaries

If the visible church’s boundaries are to serve the mission of God and promote his glory in the world, then it is important not only that they exist, and that they can be seen, but also that they are drawn in the right places. The very existence of the church in Corinth, after all, was the result of the redrawing of the boundary-lines that had defined the people of God under the old covenant, and Paul’s willingness (in explicit imitation of Jesus) to keep crossing the old boundary-lines in the cause of mission (1 Cor 9:19-23; 11:1).

Boundaries drawn too narrowly (e.g. the elitist Corinthian boundaries drawn around the “spiritual” people with their special gifts and the wealthy people with their special meals) dishonour Christ by dividing his body, and humiliating and excluding people who ought to have been welcomed and cherished (1 Cor

¹⁶ Thomas C. Oden, “Why We Believe in Heresy,” *Christianity Today* 40 (1996): 12–13.

11:23-34; 12:12-31). Boundaries drawn too loosely dishonour Christ by implying that there is no difference between those who know him and those who don't, and that his saving rule over the church is an empty ceremonial rule that can be disregarded with impunity (cf. 1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:9-20; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1).

Boundaries that are all about doctrinal subscription and nothing to do with lifestyle imply that the claims of Christ extend no further than the brain and the lips; boundaries that are all about lifestyle and nothing to do with doctrine imply that then church's unity is merely a matter of behavioural conformity, and has no basis in shared truth and common confession.

Boundaries that are drawn in the right place do not in themselves create or guarantee the church's holiness, but they do present a reminder to the church and a representation to the world of the ways of the God who dwells in the church as his temple, and the shape of the repenting-and-believing response to the gospel to which the church is called.

Holiness-In-Mission Requires Permeable Boundaries

Finally, if the church's holiness is to be a genuine, visible, holiness-in-mission, then it matters not only that the boundaries are present, and that they are drawn in the right places, but also that they are permeable boundaries – not ten-foot walls topped with razor-wire to keep the church out of the world and the world out of the church, but the kind of low, gated fences that allow for visibility and access in both directions.¹⁷

Across the letter of 1 Corinthians, Paul repeatedly insists on the importance of Christians maintaining contact and relationship with their pagan neighbours (1 Cor 5:9-13; 7:12-16; 9:19-27; 10:23-11:1), and his prescriptions for the shape and conduct of their church gatherings presuppose that they will be a hospitable community among whom “outsiders and unbelievers”¹⁸ will be present with the opportunity to observe things that would cause them to exclaim, “God is really among you” (1 Cor 14:25).

It is all very well to say with the seventeenth century Baptists that:

thither ought all men to come, of all estates, that acknowledge [Christ] to be their Prophet, Priest, and King, to be enrolled amongst his household servants, to be under his heavenly conduct and government, to lead their lives in his walled sheepfold, and watered garden, to have communion here with the Saints, that they may be made to be partakers of their inheritance in the Kingdom of God. But if that vision is to be fulfilled, it requires a church that understands itself as having some responsibilities to those outside its walls who have not yet come, or have not yet acknowledged Christ,¹⁹ and enough traffic across the walls for them to know themselves invited, and to have a chance to see something of the goodness of life within. The holiness of “visible saints” ought to be evident not only to the scrutiny of the church's discipline but also the observation of the surrounding community of unbelievers. A happy, holy, hidden gathering, oblivious to the world beyond their walls, is hardly a faithful expression of the fellowship created by the gospel.

¹⁷ On “permeable boundaries,” see David Arthur Desilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 300.

¹⁸ NRSV. Literally, “uninitiated [*idiotai*] or unbelievers”.

¹⁹ This was of course, in essence, the point that William Carey argued for in the following century, in his *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*.

GOOD FENCES, GOOD NEIGHBOURS

The social dynamics of a pluralist, multi-faith culture are certainly a test for the holiness and confessional integrity of the church; for us, no less than for the first-century Corinthians, it can prove true that “bad company ruins good morals” (1 Cor 15:33). But the very dynamics of neighbourliness and interfaith relationship that can make it hard to maintain the distinctive beliefs and behaviours of the Christian community are the same dynamics that enable those beliefs and behaviours to be communicated and made visible to others. “My Pal Al” and “Aunt Susan” are not only a threat to the distinctiveness of the church; they are also among the closest observers of the church’s life and the most immediate audience to whom its testimony is directed.

The conditions of our time are not a reason for the church to tear down all the fences of membership, doctrinal definition and communal discipline; nor are they a reason to wall ourselves in and hide from contact with the surrounding world. What the church’s holiness-in-mission requires is neither a fortress nor a boundaryless blur, but the kind of “good fences” that genuinely assist the followers of Jesus to be “good neighbours” to the people around them who do not know Christ.

What kind of fences are those? Good fences are fences that are drawn as a circumference around the indispensable centre of the saving, ruling presence of Christ; fences that do not divide believer from believer but accurately represent the distinctions and disciplines of confession and conduct that mark out those who follow Jesus from those who do not know him; fences that make explicit the common, covenantal commitment of a community of believers to live under those disciplines together; and fences that allow for the missional involvement of God’s people in the world and the hospitable welcome within the activities of the church of not-yet-Christians who are in the process of learning Christ.

In twenty-first century Australia and New Zealand, just as much as in first-century Corinth, those are the kind of fences that the church’s holiness requires.²⁰

²⁰ An earlier version of this article was published in *The Lever* 7 (2012): 3–7.