



FOLLOWING JESUS IN COMMUNITY

We are called to follow Jesus into the world, by the power of the Spirit, to the Glory of God the Father. And we are invited to do so in community.

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Who's With Me!?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In this white paper we are going to review some of the work by Paul Hiebert, a noted missiologist who introduced some language and potential frameworks for thinking about how Christians could be organized. Many others have interacted with, added to, and/or restated his work over the years. We contend that it may be time to introduce some new language into this topic of conversation. Let's begin, however, by looking at the "problem to solve." Then, we will look at bounded, centered, and fuzzy sets. Eventually, we will get to something we call a directional set.

Paul Hiebert grew up in a conservative evangelical Christian denomination. His parents were missionaries in India, and he eventually served as a missionary there, as well. Like us, he accepted Christ at a young age during a worship service in which he was invited to come forward. For Hiebert, and for us, what marked him as a Christian was his decision (i.e., a specific moment in time to which he could point as his conversion) and the attending beliefs and behaviors that came along with it. Over time, both while living in India as a child and eventually as a missionary, he began to notice that different cultures thought differently about what marked someone as a Christian. Some cultures, particularly Western cultures like the United States, tended to have clear lines of demarcation. Others, particularly non-western cultures, tended to have fuzzier lines of demarcation. How then, he wondered, might we define who and who is not Christian?

Hiebert began that conversation through his writing in 1978 and continued to hone his thinking all the way through 2008. Along the way, he suggested various ways to consider conversion and what it meant to be Christian. Others have taken up the conversation in response. This includes people like David Hesselgrave, Dean Gilliland, Darrell Whiteman, D.A. Carson, David Clark, Robert Johnson, Roger Olsen, Stanley Grenz, John Franke, Brian McLaren, Michael Frost, Alan Hirsch, Tony Jones, Phyllis Tickle, Judith Gundry and Miroslav Volf, Carl F. H. Henry, and many others. In case you are not aware, that list covers a wide swath of the theological spectrum. Some were very supportive and others were not. A few suggested new ways forward based on Hiebert's work and others called the church in a different direction. The conversation Hiebert initiated has garnered consistent interest and conversation for more than 40 years.

But why does that matter? As Hiebert noted, none of us have the privilege of reading the Lamb's Book of Life so why waste time worrying about who is and is not Christian?

That's a fair question. For us, the answer is simply that following Jesus is something we are called to do in community. Because that is the case, we need a way to understand, imagine, and gather with that community. In order to be the "hands and feet" of Jesus, the Body of Christ needs to be a body. We might argue that the Body of Christ is pretty adept at "cutting off its nose to spite its face," especially in today's culture. It is important, therefore, to have the conversation about how the Body of Christ might envision itself and the means by which it makes those determinations. We are called to follow Jesus into the world, by the power of the Spirit, to the Glory of God the Father. And we are invited to do so in community.

We think it is time to look at this issue through a new frame. Our current frames, especially when amplified by cultural tendencies, give rise to anger, infighting, and divisiveness. More importantly, however, they tend to ignore, or at least greatly diminish, the authority of the Spirit thereby limiting our ability to join with God in his redemptive mission. We might also suggest that the math isn't quite right.

So, let's jump into seeing the different kinds of social sets that Hiebert suggested and see what we learn. [Back to top.](#)

BOUNDED SETS

We have noted that we are called, in community, to follow Jesus into the world by the power of the Spirit and to the Glory of God the Father.

In particular, we pointed out that:

"We need a way to understand, imagine, and gather with that community. In order to be the "hands and feet" of Jesus, the Body of Christ needs to be a body. We might argue that the Body of Christ is pretty adept at "cutting off its nose to spite its face," especially in today's culture. It is important, therefore, to have the conversation about how the Body of Christ might envision itself and the means by which it makes those determinations."

Back in 1978, Paul Hiebert borrowed language from the world of mathematics to describe different ways Christians could accomplish this task. In his early writing on the topic, the mathematical phrases he borrowed were "bounded sets" and "centered sets." Over the course of the following 40 years, as he and several others continued to discuss these concepts and their anthropological, missiological, and ecclesiological dimensions, those phrases took on a life of their own. As a result, the mathematical definition or meaning of "bounded sets" and "centered sets" is not the same as it is within conversations about theology, missiology, theology, and social set theory. For example, in mathematics, a bounded set is a particular type of centered set just like a square is a particular type of rectangle. We share this only to call attention to the fact that, in our opinion, a conversation about social set theory should no longer begin with a reference to mathematics.

Now, we are going to begin our review of this 40-year conversation by looking at what Hiebert eventually described as "well-formed intrinsic sets." They are more widely known as "bounded sets" which was his earliest name for such a group. Hiebert noted this could be one way of categorizing social sets – one way of categorizing a Christian community.

A bounded set has very clearly defined boundaries. This is why Hiebert later began to use the phrase “well-formed” for categories (i.e., sets) for which there are strong demarcations for what is and is not included in the category. Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost illustrated the concept of a bounded set by referring to how livestock might be raised in the United States. One way to keep cattle in a field, they suggested, was to put a fence around them. This would make it clear which cattle were in the set and which were not.

One of the best and most succinct summaries of Hiebert’s bounded set theory is in a paper titled, “Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert.” It was co-authored by Michael Yoder, Michael Lee, Jonathan Ro, and Robert Priest. In that essay, they offered the following summary:

Bounded sets

- The category is created by listing the essential, inherent characteristics belonging to the set – these are used to define the boundary
- Bounded set objects are thought of as uniform (and static) in their essential characteristics – they constitute a homogeneous group
- Bounded sets are often ontological sets
- For a non-member of a set to become a member would require immediate change in all essential characteristics

Hiebert offered this concept as one way of organizing or defining the Christian community. To be clear, it was not his preferred way, but it was one he felt could be (and often was) used. Others who have interacted with his writing have argued that it is the best way to go about the work of categorization.

Perhaps most helpful in Hiebert’s descriptions of bounded sets is the way in which he highlighted the tendency for certain cultures to prefer bounded sets. Every culture may use different types of categories but, as Hiebert noted in his book “Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues”, American (we might say Western) culture, “places a premium on clear well-bounded sets.”

In such an approach, the category of “Christian” has clearly articulated boundaries which include certain intellectual assents (i.e., a statement of beliefs), behaviors, language, etc. Given our propensity for multiplying denominations, these boundaries might vary from one Christian group to another. In a bounded set approach, therefore, the answer to “Who is with me?” is “The people who share the same ideas, say the same words, and act the same as you.” The group is “uniform and static.”

Many scholars would say the Constantinian church worked within a bounded set framework. Constantine was quite determined to help the church establish a clear and commonly accepted articulation of the Christian faith. He felt the theological conflict could divide his empire. He needed peace, so he called the Council of Nicaea and forced the bishops he hosted to make a decision which in effect created a “bounded set” notion of orthodoxy.

The key point we wish to make here, however, is that bounded set approaches to envisioning or categorizing the community of those who call Jesus Lord is fundamentally one in which beliefs, ideas, behaviors, etc. are clearly defined and stagnant. Inclusion in such a community means one must hold fast to those beliefs and ideas while holding fast to the behaviors and other markers of inclusion. If each aspect is not present, then one is not to be included in the group.

While the Reformation era brought with it an appetite for renewing the theology and practices of the church, it did not challenge the bounded set categorical structures of the time. Instead, it birthed an ever-growing number of differently bounded sets. This approach was spurred on by rationalism, the Enlightenment, and modernity. We would suggest most Christian communities today, at least those that have been heavily influenced by Western approaches to Christianity, tend to operate within a bounded set framework. Some, however, have raised up “centered sets” as a better means by which to approach this task. Hiebert agreed that centered sets seemed to be a better way of thinking about Christian community. Let’s jump into that next. [Back to top](#).

FOLLOWING JESUS AS A CENTERED SET

Previously, we shared that “we are called to follow Jesus into the world, by the power of the Spirit, to the Glory of God the Father. And we are invited to do so in community.” That begs the question, who is in that community or, at least, what does it mean to be in that community? Paul Hiebert began this conversation over 40 years ago by providing a few frames for how we might answer these questions. We’ve looked at his description of bounded set and now we’re discussing centered sets. Some, including Hiebert himself, have raised up centered sets as a potentially better means by which to think about or envision a Christian community. Like with bounded sets, Hiebert eventually referred to them using different terminology (e.g., well-formed extrinsic sets). For our purposes, we will refer to them as centered sets.

Centered sets, like bounded sets, have well-formed boundaries. The key difference, however, is that they are not created by drawing such boundaries. That is to say membership in a centered set is determined by one’s relationship to a particular reference point (i.e., the center). Whereas membership in a bounded set could be determined by the intrinsic attributes of each person, one’s inclusion in a centered set requires boundaries but, more importantly, a reference point. Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost illustrated the concept of a centered set by referring to how livestock might be raised in Australia. They noted that a bounded set approach would be to put a fence around the cattle (which they suggest might be common in the United States). In Australia, they noted, a ranch might put a water well in the center of the field. The cows in the set, therefore, are those who return to the well.

One of the best and most succinct summaries of Hiebert’s “centered set” theory is in a paper titled, “Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert.” It was co-authored by Michael Yoder, Michael Lee, Jonathan Ro, and Robert Priest. In that essay, they offer the following summary:

Centered Sets

- The category is created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of things to that center
- Members are things that move toward, or are in relationship to, a common center or reference point (although they may vary in distance from the center)
- While centered sets are not created by drawing boundaries, they do have well-formed boundaries that separate things inside the set from those outside it
- Centered sets have two types of change inherent in their structure: entry or exit from the set (based on relationship to the center), and movement toward or away from the center

It is important to note the existence of boundaries within the concept of centered sets. Many have written books and articles describing centered sets as something with fuzzy or unclear boundaries. That is not true (Hiebert eventually referred to those as fuzzy sets, and we will discuss those next). Rather, a centered set has boundaries but inclusion is based on direction, orientation, or relationship with the center. For example, a remote villager in India (the example used by Hiebert) could choose to follow Jesus, which means he is oriented toward the center and therefore included in the set. His inclusion is connected to his entry into the set (i.e., choosing to follow Jesus) and his orientation toward Jesus. He is included in the set even though he doesn’t yet display all of the other markers of being a Christian (e.g., participation in a local community of faith, cognitive understanding and coherent articulation of orthodox beliefs, etc.). Centered sets are still binary (i.e., either – or) in their construction because a person is either in the set or out of it. The boundaries still exist.

Hiebert and several other missiologists have a tendency to prefer the centered set approach to identifying the Body of Christ. Several voices within the missional theology movement share this propensity for centered set thinking. Generally speaking, their assertion is that it allows the Body of Christ and even local communities of faith to spend less time policing the boundaries and more time inviting people to move in the direction of Jesus.

Hiebert helpfully noted that this approach can be difficult in “American” cultures given their affinity for binary definitions for many types of categories. Due to the exportation of western theological education, we would suggest that the western academic tradition also tends to prefer the clarity that comes from binary definitions. In practice, this means that centered set approaches can be difficult to embrace for many churches or traditions around the world, even if they are not “American” or “Western.”

As a result, the centered set approach has been both hailed and scorned. Some believe it is the best (perhaps only) way to envision the Body of Christ while others will say it does not give enough weight to the required characteristics of being a Christian. As Hiebert continued his writing on the topic, he began to notice that some approaches to categorization didn't have clear boundaries (i.e., they were not well-formed like bounded and centered sets). That led him to describe fuzzy sets, which is our next topic. [Back to top](#).

FOLLOWING JESUS AS A FUZZY SET

So far, we have looked at everything from the missionary nature of God to wild geese to the importance of discernment.

We turned our attention to the fact that following Jesus in community requires an awareness of who is in that community. Our thought is...

"We need a way to understand, imagine, and gather with that community. In order to be the "hands and feet" of Jesus, the Body of Christ needs to be a body. We might argue that the Body of Christ is pretty adept at "cutting off its nose to spite its face," especially in today's culture. It is important, therefore, to have the conversation about how the Body of Christ might envision itself and the means by which it makes those determinations."

In 1978, Paul Hiebert, a third-generation missionary and well-known missiologist, initiated a conversation about various ways to approach this task. Over the next 40+ years, scholars, pastors, missionaries, and followers of Jesus of all types continued to wrestle with these concepts. We are spending a bit of time reviewing the different approaches that Hiebert eventually codified in his writing. We looked at well-formed intrinsic sets (i.e., bounded sets) and then we focused on well-formed extrinsic sets (i.e., centered sets). Both of these approaches favor clearly defined boundaries. In practice, this means they favor binary approaches to categorization. Today we look at fuzzy sets which do not have clear boundaries (i.e., they are not binary in nature).

Very few within the theological, missiological, and ecclesiological conversations around Hiebert's social set theory have spent much time addressing fuzzy sets. This could be because Hiebert himself didn't spend much time reflecting on it in his writing, and he had a clear affinity for centered set approaches to envisioning Christian community. It could also be because the fuzzy set category pushes against our propensity for binary classifications in western cultures.

Let's begin by looking at a succinct summary of Hiebert's fuzzy set theory provided in a paper titled, "Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert." It was co-authored by Michael Yoder, Michael Lee, Jonathan Ro, and Robert Priest. In that essay, they offered the following summary:

Intrinsic fuzzy sets

- Categories assume continuums and are not based on sharply divided either-or thinking
- Objects may simultaneously belong to two or more sets – no excluded middle
- Change is a process, not a point

Extrinsic fuzzy sets

- Membership in a category is based on relationship to other things
- The boundary is fuzzy with no sharp point of transition between one and the other
- Membership is one of degrees; varying distances exist from center
- Change or conversion is a process, not an instantaneous about-face

In case you missed it, the most prevalent feature of fuzzy sets is that there is no sharp point of transition. In practice, that means something or someone could be in two sets at the same time. For example, a color could be 30% red and 70% orange. It is neither red nor orange but both at the same time. Hiebert provided examples such as a mountain giving way to the plain or night becoming day. Both are gradual transitions. In a fuzzy set approach, a person could be both Christian and Hindu (which might be an intrinsic fuzzy set) or young and old (which might be an extrinsic fuzzy set). The point is that fuzzy sets exist on a spectrum and assume change happens over time – it is "not an instantaneous about-face." We think it is important to note, however, that fuzzy sets don't eliminate boundaries or definitions of sets. For example, a fuzzy set approach still acknowledges that there are mountains and plains (and clear definitions for those). The approach simply accepts that something could be in both at the same time.

Given those realities, it is not hard to imagine why fuzzy sets have not been a preferred method to use in the task of creating or defining Christian community. In such an approach, both beliefs (i.e., cognitive awareness) and practices (i.e., behaviors) do not carry much weight. In a fuzzy set, it is perfectly okay for a person to attend a Christian church service on Sunday and yet face Mecca when praying during the day. In a centered set approach, the same may be true, that is a person may attend a Christian church service on Sunday and engage in different religious practices during the week. The difference, however, is that in a centered set, the person has made a choice to follow Jesus and will change behaviors over time. That is not required in a fuzzy set. The person is allowed to mix both sets of practices in perpetuity. One can be 60% Christian and 40% Muslim, 50% Bears fan and 50% Packers fan, or 23% Canadian and 77% American. The important point is that you are not forced to choose one or the other. It is a both/and approach to categorization.

We understand why this has not been an approach favored by the Christian community over the past 40 years. It can be difficult to see how fuzzy boundaries fit with the Christian faith. Hiebert went so far as to suggest this approach can lead to syncretistic systems of beliefs and practices. Given those realities, the fuzzy set categories rarely make their way into theological, missiological, or ecclesiological conversations.

In our opinion, it seems like there might be a need for a new frame or lens through which we can view social sets. If we are following Jesus in community, it could be that we need a new way to envision that community, a new way to know who is with us. It could also be that a “new” way isn’t new at all. [Back to top](#).

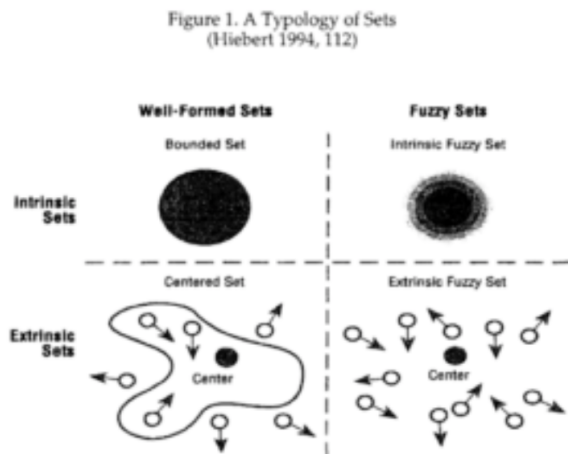
AN UNDERLYING ISSUE WITH SOCIAL SET THEORY

As the Body of Christ, it is important for us to follow Jesus in community. But who is in that community? Does it matter if we know? We suggest it does but perhaps not for the reasons many might assume. Being the “hands and feet” of Jesus means we have to actually be a body, a community. Our walk with Jesus is exactly that – our walk. Discipleship and mission are not something we should do alone. Jesus spoke the Great Commission to a community of disciples (some of whom doubted, according to Matthew 28). When we read about elders in the Bible, we always hear about them as a group. Following Jesus on mission must be done in community with others.

In 1978, Paul Hiebert suggested a few ways to understand who is in that community. The conversation expanded to include several pastors, missionaries, theologians, and scholars. Eventually, Hiebert created a social set model with four quadrants. Social sets are either well-formed or fuzzy and intrinsic or extrinsic. Almost no one in the conversation about social set theory uses these phrases. Instead, the three common phrases are:

1. bounded sets (i.e., well-formed intrinsic sets);
2. centered sets (i.e., well-formed extrinsic sets);
3. fuzzy sets, which can be extrinsic or intrinsic,

The image below is from Hiebert’s book “Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues”.



There are obvious benefits to the models put forth by Hiebert. For example, four quadrants often help people understand or at least study the way different cultures tend to think about social sets.

However, we think there might be a need for a new frame or lens through which to view social sets. If we are following Jesus in community, it could be that we need a new way to envision that community, a new way to know who is with us. Eventually, we’ll share some of our thinking along those lines, but our present focus is to highlight a few reasons why our current models for social set theory within

Christianity may not be quite right for the task at hand. Most of the reasons stem from a 1,500-year-old endeavor to “conquer” enemies.

The words, processes, and organizational structures one uses to share one’s theology carry significant weight in the Church. While this was certainly the case before Constantine rose to power within the Roman Empire, his need for a clear, concise, and unified articulation of the Christian faith gave theological statements enormous power. We should be grateful for the fact that his efforts helped the Church develop the Nicene Creed. Some might suggest his efforts also eventually led to the formation of Chalcedonian Christology. Nonetheless, we should also be mindful of what we lost in the process (or at least what was diminished).

The followers of Jesus, as we see them in the gospels, Acts, and the various epistles, were working out their faith in the context of community. There was a deep commitment to listening to the Holy Spirit. They were searching for “what seemed good to the Spirit.” As we noted in our first post about the Holy Spirit, the early councils of the Church continued to follow the model set by the Jerusalem council, that is, they would share their findings by saying something like “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and it seems good to us that we...” According to works produced by Charles Joseph Hefele regarding a history of the Christian councils, this practice stopped with the councils that gathered under Constantine’s rule (remember, Constantine hosted the bishops and required them to attend the Council at Nicaea). According to the writings of Eusebius, Constantine opened the gathering with a speech in which he noted that, “After having, by the grace of God, conquered [his] enemies...” he had turned his attention to disagreement within the church. He went on to say, “I shall not believe my end to be attained until I have united the minds of all.” Following the decisions of the Council at Nicaea, Constantine issued a decree that if anyone didn’t agree with the decisions of the council he

or she would be punished by the Roman Empire. That seems to be a far cry from “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit.” It’s more like, “I have unified the minds. Now, do what I say or else.” We would suggest that began a long history of using theological statements as the markers of what is right or wrong instead of the Fruit of the Spirit leading the way. It stunted the church’s ability to be an ongoing community of discernment.

Now, lest you forget as you are reading this, we are grateful for the Nicene Creed and for the way the Spirit worked through the Body of Christ to develop such things in spite of the cultural reasons surrounding its formation. As we noted, the Spirit works through Scripture, tradition, people, and much more to help the Body of Christ discern and do the will of God. The Spirit was obviously present in the Council at Nicaea. We are simply saying that, when compared to the previous councils, the theological statements coming out of the council were given extraordinary power because they were backed by the power of the state and enforced by the Roman army. As a result, the statements became something to fight over rather than something to discuss in the presence of the Spirit. Theology began to be more about what we say. Practicing the way of Jesus became subservient to speaking or writing the correct theology. Constantine’s edict following the Council of Nicaea didn’t say, “You will be imprisoned if you don’t behave like Jesus.” It was focused on “[uniting] the minds of all.” Toward the end of his speech, Constantine made it clear his goal was to “banish all causes of dissension.”

The coalescence of theological statements, the power of the state, and the desire to “banish all causes of dissension” began a centuries-long battle over theological boundaries – one that continues today. Herein lies the potential issue with bounded, centered, and fuzzy sets. Let’s dive into that next. [Back to top.](#)

Following Jesus Through the Power of the Spirit

DIRECTIONAL SETS

We have reviewed the various ways Paul Hiebert approached the concept of social set theory. His work and that of the scholars, pastors, teachers, and authors who have interacted with it over the past 40+ years is very important. It has given us tools to consider the missional task of following Jesus in community. Previously, we suggested there might be a need for a new way to envision that community, a new way to know who is with us as we participate in the Kingdom mission of God.

We contend that social set theory, as we have come to understand it in the church, finds its origin in the story of Rome’s need to “banish all causes of dissention.” We noted that “when compared to the previous councils, the theological statements coming out of the Council of Nicaea were given extraordinary power because they were backed by the power of the state and enforced by the Roman army. As a result, we suggested, “Practicing

the way of Jesus became subservient to speaking or writing the correct theology.” We can simultaneously be grateful for things like the Nicene Creed and Chalcedonian Christology, which were crafted in light of Rome’s political needs for unity, and lament the impact it had on the Church’s ability to be an ongoing community of discernment. The coalescence of theological statements, the power of the state, and the desire to “banish all causes of dissension,” seems to have led to a centuries-long battle over theological boundaries – one that continues today.

As a result, social set theory, as we have come to understand and describe it in the Body of Christ, begins with theological statements – with disembodied words or phrases which were designed to answer challenges facing the Body of Christ in the 4th century. Those challenges were different from those faced by the disciples in the Gospels and those faced by Paul in his missionary journeys in the first century. While there are obvious similarities across the centuries (i.e., concern for the other) and God’s nature is unchanging, the Body of Christ must always be about the work of discernment. Herein lies the challenge with social set theory as we currently understand it. Bounded, centered, and fuzzy sets all begin by naming boundaries, by determining who is in and out based on “disembodied words or phrases.” While boundaries are important, we contend that what centered the early Church was following the Spirit. It was focused on discerning where the Spirit was leading rather than determining who was in the group. That is to say, they didn’t begin with boundaries. Rather, they began with listening to each other, engaging those around them, and watching for the Fruit of the Spirit. The community was constantly discerning how to be faithful followers of Jesus, even to the point of changing commonly held beliefs and practices.

For example, we wrote previously about food sacrificed to idols. Additional examples could have been aspects of table fellowship such as not only what faithful disciples could eat but particularly who they could eat with. These are just a few examples of the disruption to “boundaries” that following the Spirit entailed. The early church couldn’t rest in the rules. They had to follow the Spirit.

Instead, the Body of Christ held a posture of discernment. This led to both continuity of the truth of the Gospel and changes in commonly held beliefs and practices. As they learned more about the work the Spirit was doing in the world and discerned the direction of the Spirit’s leading, they discovered ways in which the truth of the Gospel was being reinforced and ways in which obligations revealed in the past may no longer be appropriate. What’s more, they recognized that the Spirit might be leading one community to do one thing in Corinth and something else in Rome – yet both were moving in the same direction. The Fruit of the Spirit would be visible in all but what each community actually did might be different. That is to say where they were headed – their direction – is what brought them together. The communal discernment process brought consensus around the direction the Spirit was leading and they coalesced around that direction. We call that a directional set.

Yes, there were beliefs and practices to be shared but those were not the starting place for inclusion in the community. We consistently see Jesus and the apostles including people who did not yet share the “right” beliefs or practices and we see the early church continuing to listen to the leading of the Spirit even when it meant changing those beliefs or practices. In Matthew 28, Jesus even commissions some who doubted! What

bound them together was a common direction – participating in the redemptive work of the gospel by following Jesus into the world through the power of the Spirit to the glory of God.

A directional set coalesces around where God is leading, around a direction, while also accepting the dynamic nature of discerning that direction. The direction, participating in the redemptive work of the gospel by following Jesus into the world through the power of the Spirit to the glory of God, is unchanging but the day-to-day realities of what that means are not static. If such things remain static, we, by extension, may be saying that the Spirit is no longer leading us or, worse, that we have discerned the mind of Christ and no more thinking or reflection is needed. We contend the Spirit is still moving, still speaking, still calling us into the fullness of the Kingdom. That means we are moving in a direction and must have the humility to continually discern what that means. Such humility brings with it a new lens for envisioning the Body of Christ. Rather than a static community that has nailed down all the “right” things, it is the community of people who are listening to and following the leading of the Spirit. This will manifest itself in the Fruit of the Spirit over the long term. It will also generate a willingness to patiently submit to the Spirit and others who claim Jesus as Lord.

Next, we will share more about this concept of being a directional set. In particular, we will look at the way it has been played out in various traditions of the church, what it means to be a community of discernment, and how we deal with the tension between the dynamic nature of a directional set and the unchanging nature of God. [Back to top.](#)

NO LIGHT DIRECTIONAL SETS AND BAPTIST WITNESS

We have considered characteristics of different sets very generally. I mention this because we need to keep in mind that the concept of a directional set as presented by David and Greg has in view the Body of Christ in its broadest sense rather than the specificity of local communities of faith within particular traditions. These are often two very different sorts of “sets,” and their differences present us with tensions, with ambiguities – and with opportunities.

For better and for worse, most churches tend to be in some way bounded or centered sets. They have been since the days when the Scriptures were committed to writing. “They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us” (1 John 2:19). That’s strong “set language.”

Since churches are human realities, this strong “set language” can potentially signal something quite problematic. Since the church is the Body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, it can signal blessing.

Problematically, whether it’s overt, or merely implicit, there is often in churches a sense like the one conveyed in the lyrics of 1980s and 90s Christian rocker Steve Taylor’s song, “I Want to be a Clone”:

If you want to be one of His, you have to act like one of us!

Here is a strong form of the bounded set attitude in caricature. While this position is often embraced for the sake of mission, it isn’t necessarily conducive to participating in God’s Kingdom and its mission. The goal drifts toward replicating the institution. It more nearly calls to mind the quip of the 19th-century French Catholic liberal, Alfred Loisy, “Jésus annonçait le Royaume et c’est l’Église qui est venue” (“Jesus announced the Kingdom, and it was the church that came”).

Yet the church is, in all its imperfection, by grace also a sign of the Kingdom of God. Thus in the varied expressions of this sign, churches are means through which God gives gifts for mission. Each local community of faith has in its tradition something which enables persons to follow Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

There are two particular gifts the Baptist tradition I inhabit may offer for following the leadings of the Spirit as we share in Christ’s Kingdom mission. Baptists arose as part of the Puritan movement in 17th-century England. One of the striking claims made by the Puritans in their early years, one that has been invoked often by Baptists throughout their history, has been called by historians “the further light clause.” It was famously recalled of the Pilgrim leader John Robinson, “[H]e was very confident the Lord had more truth and light to yet to breake (sic) forth out of his holy Word.”

This “more light” is neither invention nor mere novelty. It is Christ – yet with awareness that the Truth Christ is is not so small as to be grasped easily. In a book titled *What Baptists Stand For*, we find this clearly affirmed. “Baptists frankly recognize that our understanding of Christ’s revelation must inevitably be a growing thing. . . . not because Christ Himself has in any way changed, but because God by His Spirit has taught us to see in Him treasure of wisdom and power that our (forebears) did not discover.”

Thus the “more light” is “[t]he true light, which enlightens everyone. . . .” (John 1:9) To live in expectation that, in the words of The First London Confession (1644), “the Lord will daily caufe truth more to appeare (sic) in the hearts of his Saints,” is a humble acknowledgment that, this side of the Kingdom of God, we do not have full knowledge concerning God’s ways in the world. The Wild Goose flies ever ahead, the Spirit of whom Jesus said, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it

to you.” (John 16:12-14) The Puritans acknowledged this. As Edward Winslow said, “It is not possible . . . that full perfection of knowledge should breake (sic) forth at once.” Thus throughout the history of Baptist witness, we find paired “the ways known” and “the ways to be known.”

Again, this is neither invention nor novelty. Rather it is described by English Baptist historian Ernest A. Payne in his presidential address to the Baptist Union of Great Britain in 1977. “We have, we may believe, been led, in accordance with the promise of Scripture, to a better understanding of the mind of Christ.” How is the mind of Christ sought? It is by listening to the witness of Holy Scripture in community.

This is the second gift offered by the Baptists. In 1997, a group of Baptist pastors and scholars (one of which I was part) published a statement calling for Baptist communities more fully to embody and reflect the best aspects of our historical witness. We said that we, “affirm an open and orderly process whereby faithful communities deliberate together over the Scriptures with sisters and brothers of the faith, excluding no light from any source. When all exercise their gifts and callings, when every voice is heard and weighed, when no one is silenced or privileged, the Spirit leads communities to read wisely and to practice faithfully the direction of the gospel.” We might well think of the gospel as adventure as well as Good News.

I have often quipped that if there were a “Kairos hymn,” it should be one found in many Baptist hymn collections in the nineteenth century. It begins, “’Tis God the Spirit leads in paths before unknown; The work to be performed is ours, the strength the Spirit’s own.” This sets us well to live into the vision set forth, in the words of pastor, theological educator, and Baptist Union president, Brian Haymes, “And with, I hope, an open-minded modesty, that recognizes that not even the Baptist word is final, I shall be glad to go on affirming such things until Christ leads us beyond the ways known to those yet to be made known.” [Back to top.](#)

A MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT AMONG “FRIENDS”

In 1647, a young man sought direction for his life in a world of political upheaval and empty religious practice. He asked friends, priests, and leaders to help him on his quest. Nothing they offered helped or connected to his need until he encountered the living Christ who said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.” The young man then exclaimed, “and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.” The discovery of that present reality of Jesus turned young George Fox’s spiritual frustration into joyous fervor in following the way of Christ.

Over time, as Fox shared the gospel, large numbers of people came to know and follow Jesus and many preachers and teachers joined the movement. Together, Fox and his followers set out to know Scripture and the Giver of Scripture and to be led by the One Giver of Scripture, life, and ongoing direction. They were

eventually called the Society of Friends, in accordance with Jesus's words in John 15:14, "You are my friends if you do whatsoever I command you." Eventually dubbed "Quakers" from their powerful testimonies, even in front of magistrates, they lived to obey God no matter the consequences.

They attested to the fact that the light of God is present in every person (John 1:9), something they called, "that of God." As a result, they refused to honor one person over another seeing all people as created equal in the eyes of God. Therefore, they couldn't abide by the harsh realities of prisons so they responded with prison reform. They couldn't abide the devaluing of dark-skinned people so they led the abolition of slavery on at least two continents. They were engaged with the world around them but defined by their attention to the life of Jesus and the words of Scripture.

Following Jesus and the words of Scripture meant being attentive to the Spirit's leading. Since they believed that Christ came to teach his people himself, Friends focused on hearing God directly through discernment from the Spirit. As a result, Friends formed "clearness committees" to discern God's direction for individuals and meetings for discernment for corporate guidance on specific matters. Commitment to the group process of discernment, which Friends call "the sense of the meeting," helps the community discern the "mind of Christ" through conversation, Scripture, and prayer.

This attentiveness to the Spirit, coupled with a commitment to Scripture and communal discernment fostered a non-creedal community. That is to say, the community's theological beliefs vary and have continually been refined as the community listens and responds to the guidance of the Spirit.

As it is with many movements in the Christian tradition, the history of the Friends community records various splits, statements of faith, and theological perspectives among the variety of Quakers around the world. Friends, who trace their beginnings back to George Fox and the powerful preaching and teaching ministry of early Friends, are brought back time and again to the importance of seeking God, listening to His voice, and responding as directed. Using more recent terminology, Friends helped bring in a wonderful blend of missional theology and spiritual direction—a combination that helps us stay attuned to God's voice in order to partner with God in God's work in the world.

In keeping with the concepts shared by Greg and David, I am especially drawn to the way a directional set gives appropriate language to the Friends movement over the years. Ours has been a community focused on discerning where God is leading. To be friends of Jesus, Friends must study and follow the commands of Jesus, which can only be accomplished by assuming a posture of ongoing discernment. In doing so, we begin to see the Fruit of the Spirit emerge as a community gathers around the direction in which the Spirit is leading. Love for one's neighbor is coupled with a slowness to anger and an abundance of lovingkindness. An ongoing receptivity to the Spirit's guidance helps us value people, pay attention to the ongoing work and word of Jesus, and respond in obedience to the never-ending direction of the Holy Spirit.

The directional set nature of the Friends has kept us “on our toes,” knowing that abundant life is dependent upon an ongoing relationship with God through listening, discernment, and response. [Back to top.](#)

WE ARE BRETHREN!

On Pentecost weekend, sometime in late May 1767, a large crowd of German families gathered at the farm of Isaac Long in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, for a “great meeting.” Hour after hour, preachers from the region exhorted, encouraged, or excoriated this massive, amalgamated congregation. Remarkably, the audience consisted of members from theological and denominational traditions that were at odds with each other. In nearly every other environment, Christianity was torn asunder by the boundaries erected between groups, but in Lancaster that weekend disciples of Jesus came together, worshipped together, and heard each other speak of their own experiences and understandings of God.

One of those in attendance that weekend was the tall, urbane, well-educated pastor of the German Reformed Church in Lancaster City. Philip William Otterbein had come to Pennsylvania originally as a young missionary to German immigrants living on the frontier. He had begun his ministry 15 years earlier in the fledgling Tulpehocken community, where Evangelical Seminary (one of our Kairos legacy partners) now resides. He had since had an experience of spiritual renewal that changed the trajectory of his ministry.

Otterbein listened intently that Pentecost day to a passionate sermon offered by a short, rough, uneducated Mennonite farmer bishop. Martin Boehm had never intended to enter the ministry but had literally drawn the short straw; his perplexity at having nothing to say to his flock had led him to a spiritual crisis while plowing his field. He now preached with energy and conviction. Despite their differences in life experience and outlook, Otterbein recognized a kindred spirit in Boehm. At the end of the message, Otterbein worked his way to the front of the crowd, ostentatiously wrapped his arms around the shorter man, and proclaimed loudly, “Wir sind Bruder!” We are brethren.

And thus began a partnership that lasted until their deaths nearly 50 years later. Boehm was eventually excommunicated from the Mennonites because of his friendship and cooperation with Otterbein, and Otterbein was marginalized within the Reformed synod for the same reason. In the end, they would end up serving as the co-founders of a new denomination, the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, which took its name from that fabled first meeting. This is the denomination in which I was raised and with which I am ordained. I live within a dozen miles of the barn (still standing) where the movement had its symbolic founding moment.

“Movement” is actually a better word for what Otterbein and Boehm initiated than “denomination.” Neither

regarded their participation with one set of Christ's followers as exclusive of participation with another. Martin Boehm considered himself a lifelong Mennonite (I was privileged to be at the service at his gravesite when the Lancaster Mennonite Conference revoked his excommunication), but also worshipped in his later years in a Methodist chapel erected on his own farmland. And, yes, he was also for decades an overseer (bishop) of the United Brethren. And he found nothing incongruous about that collection of experiences.

Martin Boehm was a rare Christian leader who was not defined by bounded sets. His whole ministry was animated by a transformative experience with Jesus Christ, and he gladly transcended human-made boundaries to invite others into that ongoing journey. The movement he worked so strenuously to create was imbued with that same spirit. The United Brethren were an unusual thing in 18th century America—a church created not out of a schism but out of a coming together. It consisted of those who were shaped by their experience of following and being shaped by the Spirit. The fact that they eventually organized at all was due only to their exclusion by their home churches, simply for working together.

It has admittedly been a struggle over the years for us United Brethren to maintain that original spirit. We have a written confession of faith that I describe as bold but brief, one that focuses on Christ and is intended to be inviting, not off-putting. One core principle of our life together is that we will not denigrate (the old word for it in our founding documents is “traduce”) each other for varying perspectives. We do not have defined positions on most theological questions. We don't tell local congregations how to organize themselves or what leadership needs to look like. We refrain from speaking for each other on matters of political and social issues. The result is not mush; it's not everyone agreeing in the middle. It's doing what Scripture admonishes us to do—to “honor everyone”, especially our brothers and sisters who see things differently.

This is hard. It seems sometimes that everything in American Christianity, and in our polarized American culture, tempts us to forsake that original spirit and instead define new and exclusionary boundaries to keep people, ideas, and questions out, particularly when we feel most fearful. Time and again during the 40 years that I've been part of the UB movement we've had to catch ourselves, to resist the temptation to create new boundaries in favor of following Jesus by the power of the Spirit for the glory of God. When we follow the Spirit, we are drawn in the same direction that drew Otterbein and Boehm to each other, that drew the earliest disciples in Jerusalem together, that makes possible an extraordinary, theologically hospitable, vibrantly spiritual enterprise like Kairos University.

To me, the original spirit of the UB movement looks a lot like the work of the original Spirit on the original day of Pentecost. And so does the original spirit of so many other traditions that I have come to know and appreciate. I am persuaded that all directional set movements, which are animated by the transformational work of Jesus Christ as they follow the call of the Spirit, are precisely what our own generation needs to see again in the people of God, no matter the names of our tribes, our theological convictions, or our histories. Wir sind Bruder. Und Schwestern. [Back to top.](#)

BREATHING IN AND BREATHING OUT

Historically, one of the distinctive features of the Wesleyan tradition is a fundamental pursuit of holiness. John Wesley, the primary founder of what became known as the Methodist movement, had been an Anglican priest. Schooled in the creedal formulas of the faith, Wesley spent over a decade trying to attain a “pure heart before God,” living as best he could the expectations of life rooted in those creeds and the moral rules and ramifications associated with them. According to his journals, his consistent frustrations would cause him to doubt his own faith—even while still preaching and teaching in alignment with the rubrics within which he had been schooled.

Over the course of that decade, Wesley learned that he lacked the assurance of faith that would ultimately draw him to his goal. Yet, on May 24, 1738, the trajectory of his life and ministry would be changed forever. His own words describe his experience: “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society on Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s ‘Preface to the Epistle to the Romans.’ About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”^[i]

What has since been known as Wesley’s “Evangelical Conversion” began a spiritual revival that would impact greatly the remaining decades of the 18th century and set the stage for the multiplication of a renewal movement and various denominational expressions to this day. And it began within one person’s decade-long quest for spiritual self-definition and discernment. Before Wesley could hear the voice of the Spirit in that quest, however, he had to learn how to listen for the Spirit’s voice—and he had to learn how to get out of his own way to hear it. What he learned and heard impacted how he taught about the Spirit from that point forward. The Spirit, he said, was like God breathing on His people, and God’s people breathing back to God—a “respiration” process of ongoing renewal whereby “[the believer] feels ‘the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him;’ and all his spiritual senses are then exercised to discern spiritual good and evil. By the use of these, he is daily increasing in the knowledge of God, of Jesus Christ whom he hath sent and to all the things pertaining to his inward kingdom” (*italics mine*).^[ii] Such rhythmic respiration helps believers discern the voice of the Spirit and their role within the Body of Christ.

Wesley encouraged this act of breathing in and out with the Spirit, of listening to the guidance of the Spirit and acting accordingly. Cohesion came through a shared mission and a willingness to listen to the voice of the Spirit.

Today, Wesleyans of all types tend to self-identify into categories of traditional, progressive, and liberal camps (with some even stretching so far to the theological edge they might even be seen as Universalists). Denominational attempts at bringing clarity to corporate distinctives within such diverse demographics

naturally have gravitated toward social sets that range between the porous and central to the highly bounded depending on how centralized they are within their infrastructures. All, of course, claim to be “Spirit-directed.” Books of Discipline, Articles of Religion, as well as a huge archive of contextually significant resolutions, have established precedent-setting boundaries within which many have submitted themselves corporately.

How, then, does a global community that is so widely diverse in its theological expressions, and historically creedal in its orientation, obtain such cohesion? That is the current dilemma—at least within United Methodist and several of its cousin denominations.

It would seem that a return to the “respiration process” described by Wesley would be helpful. It will call us in a common direction as the Spirit invites us to follow Jesus on mission to the glory of God. “Directional sets,” understood as a community engaged in the ongoing discernment of where God is leading while at the same time giving freedom to individual congregations to engage that mission based on the organic voice of the Spirit endemic to its particular culture, are what breathing with the Spirit looks like in practice. A mission to “make disciples for the transformation of the world,” for example, could find its best expression through the social justice ministries of a progressive congregation in center city Philadelphia, while at the same time through the community healing ministry tent meetings of rural Minnesota—each based on the discernment of the Spirit’s direction for that local Body of Christ.

Whether we admit it or not, discerning the direction of the Spirit for the congregations of Jesus followers cannot find its starting point in the power and control mediated through the creedal and disciplinary frameworks that we often use to define the Wesleyan tradition. Yet, those frameworks—as well as their historical contexts—can still assist us in discerning the movement of the Holy Spirit within the vibrancy of today’s world. As with the followers of Jesus in the 4th and 5th centuries, our world is filled with influences that threaten to syncretize that which is uniquely Christian with the current whims of society, requiring some contextually appropriate parameters consistent with what our forebearers sought to provide within their milieu. However, holiness cannot be embraced simply because it is legislated.

What John Wesley’s personal journey teaches us is that no matter what structures form the boundaries of our faith, only the Holy Spirit can change a heart—if we allow ourselves to listen and be caught up in the movement of the Spirit! [Back to top.](#)

DIRECTIONAL SETS AND BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Previously we looked at two historical examples to help shed even more light on the directional set concept. Philip especially noted the 1997 statement of Baptist pastors and scholars which affirmed “an open and orderly process whereby faithful communities deliberate together over the Scriptures with sisters and brothers of the faith, excluding no light from any source.” I will take Philip’s quote even further in terms of implications for directional sets and Bible interpretation.

The truth is, historically, light from most sources has been excluded by Bible interpreters who fall into either the bounded set or centered set categories. One’s interpretation tends to be either bounded or centered firmly within the boundaries determined by the majority theological opinion of the specific community of interpreters (whether they be Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, and so on). Often, there is very little “wobble room” regarding specific interpretations that fall outside the boundaries of one’s group or denomination.

Of course, most Bible interpreters will quickly say they approach the interpretation of the biblical text with an “open mind,” in most cases using the “neutral” human tools of the grammatical-historical approach and the various “criticisms.” These interpreters, however, often fail to understand how much their own culture and worldview, and those of their group or denomination, subtly, or not so subtly, influence both their interpretations as well as their boundaries. As a result, we now have over 1,000 different denominations worldwide, with each placing their own cultural boundaries on the biblical text.

Here’s where the concept of directional sets is so helpful, especially when doing Bible interpretation: discern where the Spirit is moving and follow Jesus in that direction. So how do we do this when doing Bible interpretation? Such directional set Bible interpretation reinforces what I’ve argued for over the years in my own writings, especially in my book, “Doing Bible Interpretation”. Here I maintain that two of the basic foundations to good Bible interpretation (of seven) are these: 1) the Holy Spirit guides Bible interpretation and 2) Bible interpretation is best done in community. Let’s look at each foundational piece in turn.

First, let’s look at pneumatic Bible interpretation. When studying God’s authoritative Word, it’s important to realize we are not alone. We have a helper. The Holy Spirit has promised “to guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13) including our Bible interpretations. Directional set Bible interpreters will thus exhibit humility as we approach the biblical text, knowing that we can’t do it only on our own. Instead, our interpretations of the Bible must always be guided by the Holy Spirit. Sure, we have our own human minds that God has also given us, and we should use them (as well as the culturally determined human-made “tools” we have developed to help us). Directional set Bible interpreters clearly maintain that Bible interpretation is both a Spirit-led and human-led process. To emphasize the human alone is an arrogance that does injustice to God’s role in the Bible interpretation process.

Second, let's look at communal Bible interpretation. Bible interpretation never was intended to be done entirely alone, in isolation from other believers. It's not a private discipline (as much as Western believers might think it is). While we can learn much about the Bible in our own private devotions and study, it's particularly in community with other believers where good Bible interpretation occurs. We need a local community of believers—in Bible studies and in small and large group gatherings—to help us. Directional set Bible interpretation is best done with a community of believers who are all listening to the Holy Spirit and examining the Bible together to discover God's will for their lives, both individually and corporately.

The example of the Bereans in the book of Acts is helpful here: "Now these Jews . . . received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The Bereans are a good example for all of us who would study God's Word. They are also an example of how a directional set approach to community allows cultural diversity to be present within the Body of Christ, even as that Body strives to interpret Scripture. Peter provided a helpful example of that, as well.

The example of the Bereans in Acts 17 comes after both Peter's experience with Cornelius in Acts 10 and Paul's experience with the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. In each of those passages, we see a reference to the cultural realities of Jews and Gentiles. In Acts 10, we see the Jews were "astonished" that the Spirit could come upon "even the Gentiles." As we move through Acts and the letters of Paul, the cultural points of circumcision and food laws (i.e., what and with whom one could eat) tend to take center stage in the controversy around cultural diversity in the early Church. The church was in the midst of discerning if the Gentiles could be part of the family of Abraham and yet remain rooted in their Gentile culture and customs (e.g., not be circumcised, eat food sacrificed to idols, and engage in other Gentile customs). The Bereans were Jews "who examined the Scriptures daily." We know there were Gentiles who did the same. Perhaps more telling is the fact that we know there were Jews and Gentiles who studied the Scriptures together as they sought to be led by the Spirit.

Given this historical distance between the early Church and today, it is easy for us to minimize the importance of what was happening. The earliest followers of Jesus embraced the idea that a person could be a member of the family of Abraham without adhering to Jewish cultural norms. Gentiles could follow Jesus, interpret Scripture in community, and follow the guidance of the Spirit while remaining culturally Gentiles.

In recent years, this controversy resurfaced in conversations taking place regarding missions work around the world. This time, however, it was not about whether or not someone needed to be culturally Jewish in order to follow Jesus but rather if someone had to abandon their culture in order to follow Jesus in ways that align with the (mostly western) dominant cultural practices of Christianity. For example, could a person rooted in a Muslim culture who had turned to follow Jesus continue to be culturally Muslim? The person was "inside" the Muslim culture but had submitted himself to the Lordship of Christ. Did that person need to cease engaging in cultural customs in order to "truly" follow Christ? What about Hindu culture? What about Democrats? Republicans? Green Party members? Tribal communities and cultures?

The debate by missiologists over this "insider" concept was hot and heavy, with questions like: "Were these insiders really saved?" and "Could the Holy Spirit really work in individuals who remained in original cultural contexts?" In this debate, there were many references to Paul Hiebert's understanding of set theory.

To help bring light to this issue a few hand-picked missiologists, including myself, were invited to participate in a week-long meeting at a secret location in Thailand. We were joined by a number of these “insiders” who had turned to become followers of Jesus yet remained in their cultures. That week we were divided up—missiologists and insiders—placed around tables, and told to study the Gospel of Mark, with no other resources other than the Markan text in English. So, for an entire week, I and my cultural insider brothers and sisters in Jesus (who also knew English) attempted to interpret the book of Mark together.

I was skeptical at first. But I soon discovered two things. First, my insider brothers and sisters had the same Holy Spirit I had. It was reminiscent of Acts 10 when the Jews were astonished that Gentiles could receive the Spirit. And second, by interpreting the Bible in community together we could arrive at some real truths for our lives and our individual fellowships of believers—without the assistance of any outside “tools.” We had the Bible. And, like the followers in Acts 15, we had the Spirit and each other. We were all following the Spirit and what brought us together was our shared direction, not our shared cultural norms, expectations, or boundaries. We were a directional set community practicing Bible interpretation!

Through this experience, I gained a new appreciation for the depth of faith found in my insider brothers and sisters as well as for the power of the Holy Spirit in the Bible interpretation process, a process made even stronger through a community approach to the text. It was a wonderful, and embodied, experience that brought stories like Acts 10, 15, and 17 to life. We tend to see the work of Bible interpretation through our cultural lenses, just like the earliest followers of Jesus. By God’s grace, those early believers, who submitted themselves to the lordship of Christ, have provided a wonderful example of how the Body of Christ extends beyond cultural boundaries.

And so may it be for all of us as we interpret the Bible with a directional set mindset. Together in community—local and global, majority world and minority world, insiders and outsiders, Baptists and Lutherans—we continually seek the Holy Spirit’s help to keep us walking in the direction of Jesus as we interpret God’s Word. [Back to top.](#)