CENTERED-SET CHURCH

DISCIPLESHIP

AND COMMUNITY

WITHOUT

JUDGMENTALISM

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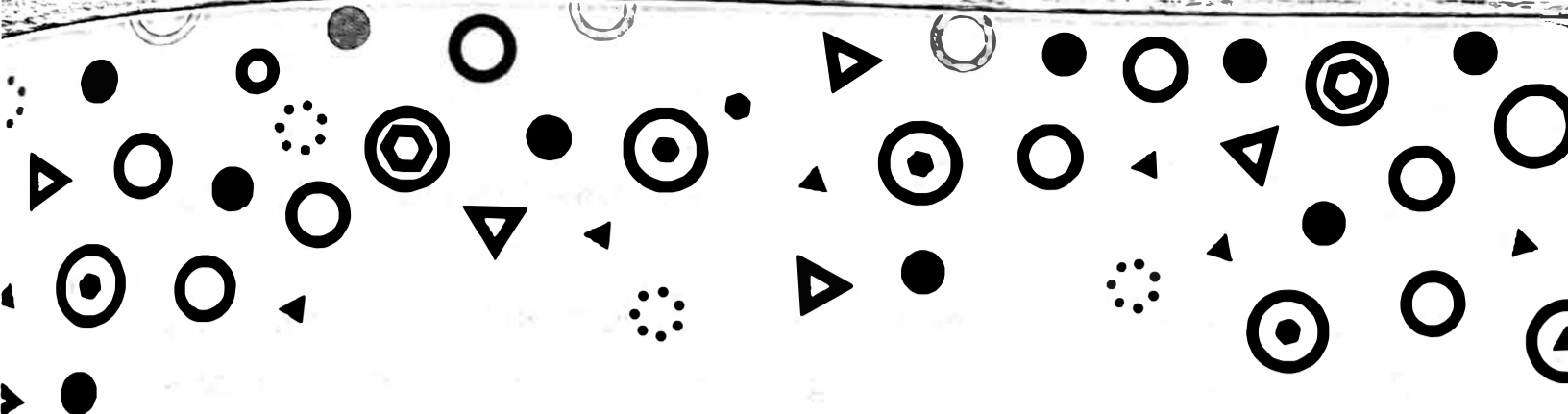
DEFINING THE PARADIGMS

TWENTY YEARS AGO, after a church service, my friend Larry Dunn approached me and said, "Mark, I read your book *Religious No More*. Have you read Paul Hiebert's work on bounded and centered sets?" When I replied that I had not, Larry countered, "You should." He knew he did not need to say more. Larry knew that, once I read Hiebert's article, I would see connections to my own work. Indeed, Hiebert's diagrams and definitions captured me immediately, clearly communicating something for which I had been seeking language. I wish I had read Hiebert before I had published that book, as it would have been better. Since reading Hiebert, I have become like Larry, looking for opportunities to introduce people to Hiebert's definitions of bounded, fuzzy, and centered sets.

As a professor, I work to come up with diagrams and drawings that I can use in class to illustrate concepts, as it is helpful to be able to visualize something. For the three stories I told in the first chapter—mine, Dustin's, and Paul's—Hiebert's concepts and diagrams clearly and concisely communicate the core dynamic of each. Some diagrams, however, not only illustrate an idea, but also generate new ideas, exciting the imagination with possibilities and propelling people to act. Hiebert's diagrams of bounded, fuzzy, and centered sets have done that for me and many others.

In chapter two, I will define these three paradigms and introduce Hiebert's diagrams for each. Then I will begin to describe what it means to be a bounded, fuzzy, or centered church. In chapter three, I will respond to the most common questions about how centered churches differ from bounded and fuzzy churches.

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BOUNDED, FUZZY, AND CENTERED CHURCHES

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WELDON NISLY'S ENCOUNTER WITH A NEW PARADIGM

Weldon Nisly grew up in rural Iowa. As a boy, he loved spending time with his grandfather, who was a bishop in the Conservative Mennonite Church. Throughout Weldon's childhood, the only church he knew had been influenced by his grandfather, whose leadership approach was similar to Paul's in Galatians. When Weldon was fourteen, his beloved grandfather died, and a marked change took place in the church as the new bishop started drawing lines to distinguish who was "in" and who was "out." Though Weldon did not have the language or categories to describe the difference, he felt it. As his insatiable desire to learn grew, he asked more and more questions, but the new bishop responded by saying, in effect, "These are the rules, these are our beliefs." Throughout Weldon's late teens, he kept asking deeper questions and searching for new answers until the bishop excommunicated him, and so Weldon parted ways not only with the bishop and that denomination, but with church in general. He stayed away for almost five years until he realized that his struggle was not with God, faith, or even the church, but a particular approach to church and belief. After joining the Mennonite church, he sensed a call to ministry and went to seminary in the mid-1970s.

As a new seminary student, Weldon Nisly heard Paul Hiebert give a presentation. He recalls, "I was blown away. It illuminated a profound insight for me and gave me tools for understanding what I had experienced in church." He now had words and categories to explain the difference between his grandfather's approach to church and the bishop who followed him. "What Hiebert presented challenged and excited me. It has been part of everything I have done in ministry for the past forty years."[1] What did Hiebert talk about that had such an impact on Nisly?

Thankfully, Hiebert later published the content of that presentation,[2] and many who have read his work on bounded, fuzzy, and centered sets have responded similarly to Weldon. When I first encountered Hiebert, I recognized that he was describing the paradigm in Galatians that the people of Iglesia Amor Fe y Vida in Honduras and I had glimpsed together, but Hiebert portrayed this paradigm with a clarity that I had lacked. For over twenty years now, I have used Hiebert's diagrams in my teaching—from seminary classrooms to indigenous churches in the Peruvian Andes.

Hiebert begins by asking, When is someone considered a Christian? Though the answer may differ from one church tradition to another, many people would have a clear response, just as Hiebert did. But then he became a missionary in India, where his clear means of answering that question did not function. To engage this question, Hiebert uses an example from India of a man named Papayya. Should he be considered a Christian after he hears a story about Jesus and salvation through the cross and says a prayer expressing his desire to worship Jesus with other Christians? What if Papayya refers to Jesus as God, or the Son of God, but uses a word for "God" significantly different in meaning than the English, Hebrew, or Greek terms for God? What if Papayya offers incense to a picture of Jesus on the shelf in his home, but does not take the other gods off the shelf? What if he starts attending church, but still participates in Hindu celebrations? When should Papayya be considered a Christian?

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[1]Weldon Nisly, interview by author, Seattle, WA, February 15, 2018.

[2]Paul G. Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," *Gospel in Context* 1, no. 4 (October 1978): 24-29; revised and expanded in Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 107-36.

In exploring this question, Hiebert argues that the way people conceptualize church and the category of Christian will shape how they answer the question about Papayya. Hiebert, a cultural anthropologist, borrows from mathematical set theory to describe three different ways to categorize people. He applied the theory to the issue of distinguishing between Christians and non-Christians. In this book I will apply it to the question of how a church discerns who is appropriately considered part of their church. To ask, "who belongs?" or "who is part of our group?" can include the question of whether someone is a Christian or not, but also more than that. In the first chapter we observed that I used line drawing to distinguish between Christians and non-Christians as well as to make distinctions between Christians.

BOUNDED, FUZZY, AND CENTERED SETS

Bounded sets. Hiebert explains that bounded sets have a clear, static boundary line that allows for a uniform definition of those who are within the group. In general terms, a bounded group creates a list of essential characteristics that determine whether a person belongs to that group. For example, a league soccer team is a bounded group. Such a team has a limited number of players. There are tryouts. Ability matters. A team also has other requirements, such as having a uniform, attending practices, paying dues to the league, and so on. Coaches draw a clear line to determine which players have the ability and meet the requirements to be on the team. As figure 2.1 illustrates, everyone who is not part of the team is on the other side of the line.

Fuzzy sets. A fuzzy set is similar to a bounded set, but the boundary line is removed—or at least less clear. The grounds for distinction are rather vague, and so the group is fuzzy. In the soccer example, imagine a city park where people gather on Sunday afternoons to play pickup games. The same people might participate week after week, but someone could miss several weeks and still show up and play. If others think that you are a lousy player, you might have a hard time getting on a pickup team, but how that would happen is not clear. Some people might play soccer each time they go to the park, while others might sometimes play ultimate frisbee. One week you might show up and find volleyball nets taking up the whole field. As figure 2.2 illustrates, group membership cannot be clearly established.
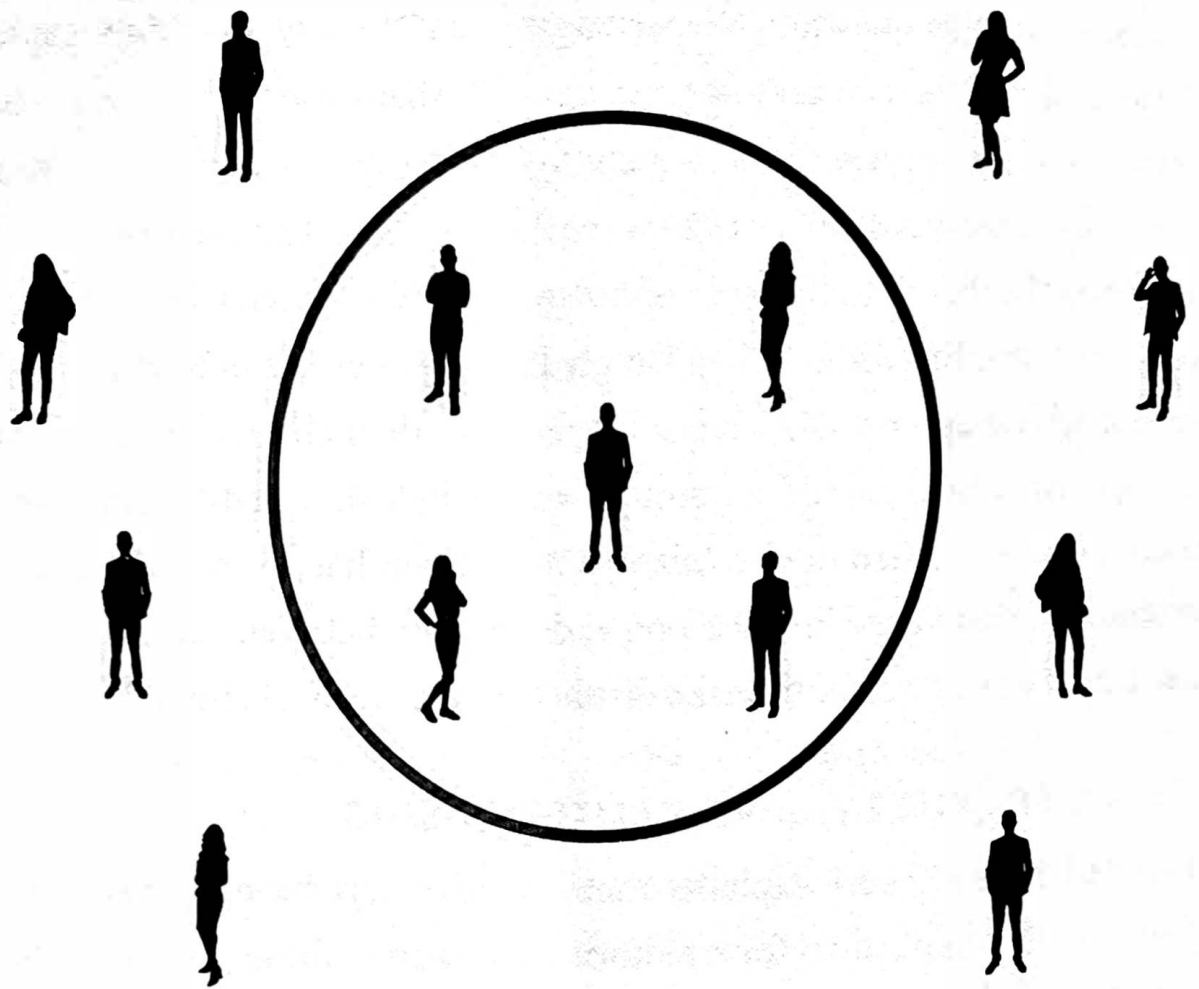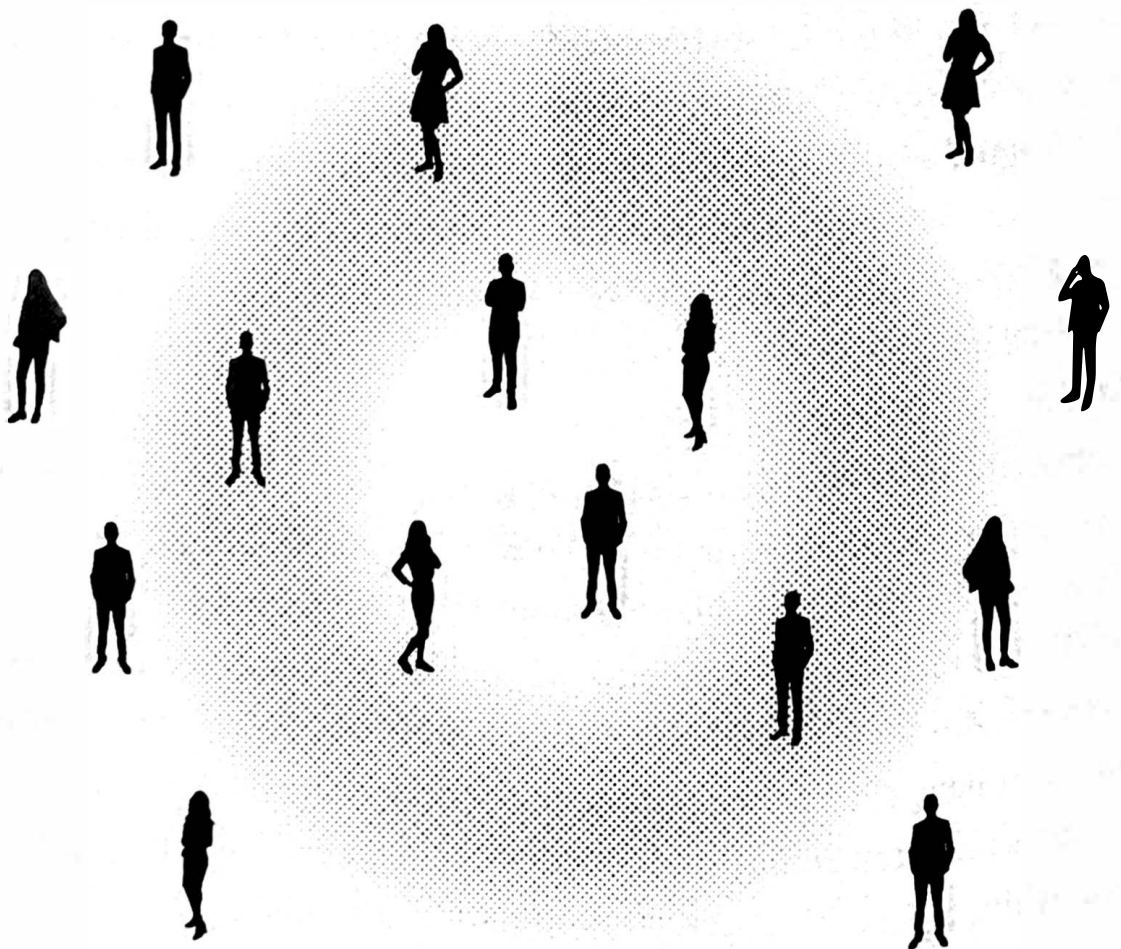
Figure 2.1. Bounded set

Figure 2.2. Fuzzy set

Though bounded and fuzzy groups differ radically, they share the same paradigm about how to define who belongs to a group, though they are positioned at opposite ends of a continuum. At one end, the boundary line is clear; near the other end the line gets increasingly vague and then totally disappears.

Centered sets. A centered set reflects a completely different paradigm. This third-way option is not on the bounded-fuzzy continuum. Rather than drawing a line to identify people based on their common characteristics, a centered set uses a directional and relational basis of evaluation. The group is created by defining a center and observing people's relationship with the center. As figure 2.3 illustrates, the set is made up of all who are oriented toward the center.[3]
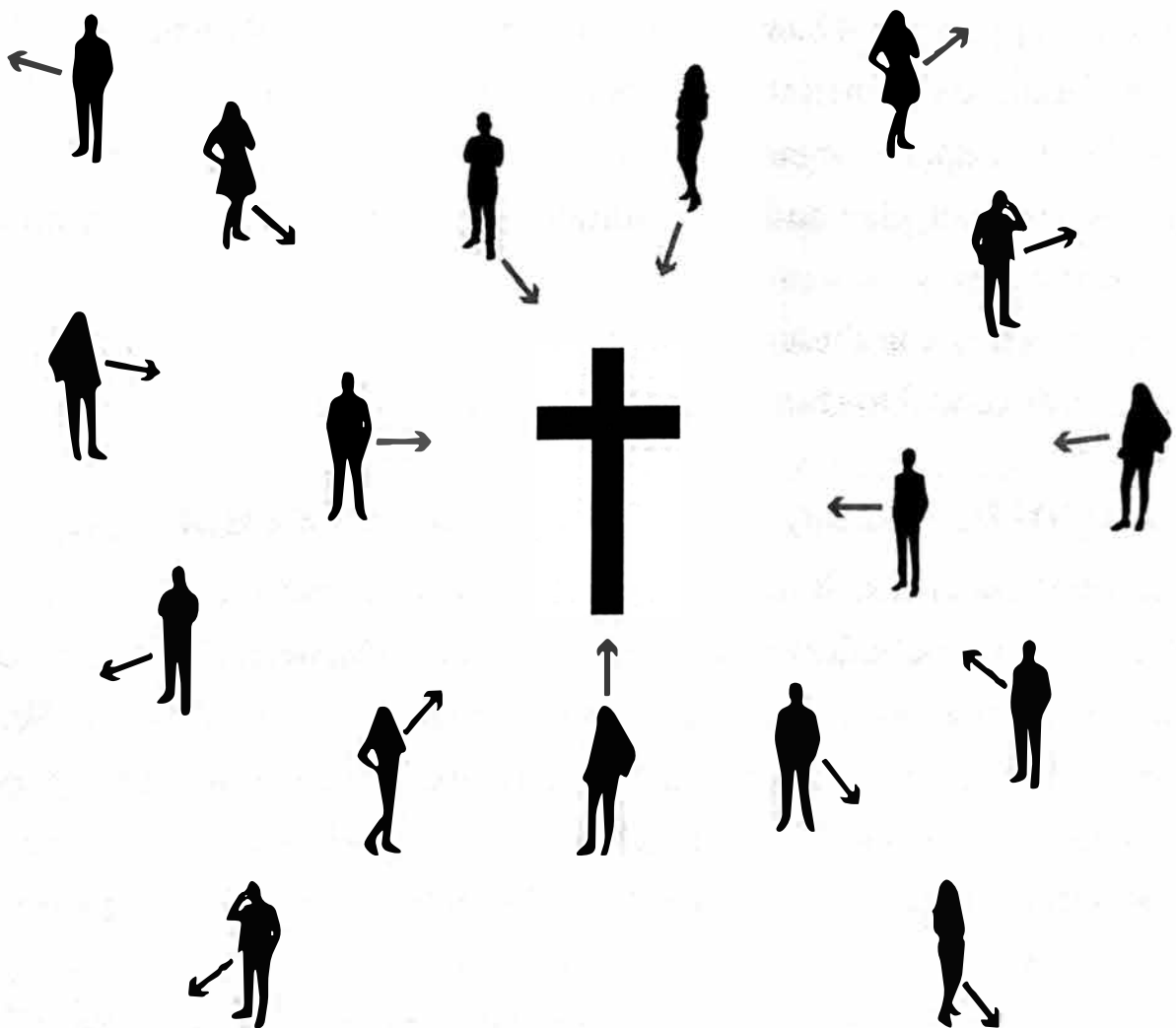
Figure 2.3. Centered set

[3]Hiebert notes that relational sets are not limited to centered sets. They can also be defined by relationships to others in a common field. He limits his discussion to centered relational sets because of the correlation with Christianity and the church (Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections,* 123).

Hiebert says that even though some people may be far from the center, they are part of the centered group if they are heading toward the center. On the other hand, some people may have been close to the center, but now are no longer part of the centered group because they have turned around and are moving away from it. Though the people within a centered group may not be uniform in their characteristics, they will all be heading the same direction.

In the soccer example, a centered approach would be when someone invites anyone who wants to play soccer to gather at a local public park on Saturday afternoon at three o'clock. In the diagram, those who show up are represented by the people whose arrows are heading toward the defined center, which is soccer. Those who do not show up to play are represented by the people whose arrows are turned away from the center. Some of those who show up may not be very good, but their lack of ability will not exclude them, because the invitation is open to all who want to play. If too many people show up, the organizers will start another game. The group will not define who can play and who cannot play based on ability or who can afford the fees.

After describing these three approaches to group membership, Hiebert applies the model to churches.

BOUNDED, FUZZY, AND CENTERED CHURCHES

Bounded churches. Bounded churches draw a line that distinguishes insiders from outsiders, Christians from non-Christians, or true Christians from mediocre Christians. The line generally consists of a list of correct beliefs and certain visible behaviors. In Galatians, the agitators display a bounded group approach by asking questions such as "Have you been circumcised? Are you believing the right thing and eating with the right people?"

All bounded sets have a sense of exclusion of those who do not meet the requirements. Often that leads to the insiders having a sense of superiority and increased status, but not always. Although those who make a sports team often exude a sense of superiority, there is generally no corresponding dynamic among those in bounded sets like Costco members or people with annual passes to national parks. In theory a church could be a bounded set

and avoid the negative attitudes displayed in my line drawing in the previous chapter, but I have not seen that neutrality in reality.[4] For a variety of reasons, the lines drawn by bounded churches foment judgmentalism and communicate a sense of conditional love.[5] Therefore, in this book the definition of a bounded church includes the technical definition of a bounded set described in the previous section as well as the additional element that the boundary lines produce a sense of inferiority in the excluded and self-righteousness in the included.

The definition of a bounded set leads us to think of a church with a clear list of criteria used to explicitly state whether someone belongs. That does occur in bounded churches, for instance, if one does not affirm a list of beliefs one is told you cannot belong and your outsider status is made clear. Yet in bounded churches one's status in relation to a boundary line is communicated in a variety of ways. For instance, a teenager reported that after asking a question and suggesting an alternative to one of the church's beliefs, her grandmother said, "We do not believe that." The words themselves might simply be informational, and the grandmother did not state, "that belief disqualifies one from membership." Yet with an emphasis on "we" and the tone of voice communicated, the message was clear that if you want to be part of the "we," our church, you should not be thinking such things. One's status in relation to a line can also be communicated through silence and shunning. Similarly, people in bounded churches learn that many lines exist beyond those officially stated. They pick this up from what they hear people say about others, from facial expressions, and how people are treated—as insider or outsider. Unstated lines are no less real.

What churches come to mind when you read the previous paragraphs? Many of us might think of legalistic churches. And while the legalism of my youth provides a clear example of a bounded approach to church, my line drawing continued after I turned away from legalism. As my own

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[4] To say that in theory a bounded church could be a "neutral" bounded group is not to imply there would be no negatives. Even if the judgmentalism of superiority was absent, some of the other negative dynamics explored in this chapter and the following would still exist.

[5] Some of the elements that pull bounded churches to stronger expression of the negative characteristics of bounded sets will be explored in other chapters, especially four and five, such as distorted concepts of God, human religious tendencies, and thirst for status.

story demonstrates, a church can practice bounded-group line drawing in a variety of ways. Boundedness is not limited to legalism. In fact, I have participated in churches that were self-righteously not legalistic, where we looked with disdain on legalistic Christians in the same way that they might have looked with contempt on those who fell short of their standards. Though we had radically different lines, we all drew lines in a bounded-set way. Bounded churches can use a variety of things to draw lines that define insiders from outsiders, including rituals, spiritual experiences, political commitments, activism, attendance, beliefs, and behaviors.

In critiquing a bounded approach to church, I am not critiquing anything that qualifies as a legitimate boundary. The problem is not with having a line that differentiates between things that are acceptable and unacceptable, but rather with how bounded churches use those lines to separate and categorize people in a judgmental way.

Fuzzy churches. Some churches recognize the problematic fruit of line drawing within bounded churches, and so they opt for what appears to be the obvious solution: they erase the line. This fuzzy approach to church comes naturally in many places today. As we observed in Dustin's story, the relativism and pluralism he brought from his cultural setting easily found a home in his fuzzy church. In a society that holds tolerance as the supreme virtue, a bounded church is problematic, whereas a fuzzy church is not. Yet as Dustin observed, fuzzy churches solve one set of problems while creating others.

Centered churches. Unlike fuzzy churches, centered churches can distinguish those who belong to the group from those who do not. In a centered church, God is the center focus. Therefore, the critical question is, To whom do we offer our worship and allegiance? In Galatians, we might imagine Paul asking centered questions such as "Are you living according to the new creation reality created by God's action through Jesus Christ? Are you trusting God for your security or placing your security in certain rituals and beliefs? In which direction are you heading?"

Two types of change happen in a centered church. The first is directional. Is someone facing the center or oriented in the other direction? From this perspective, conversion happens when someone turns toward

the center. The second change relates to movement toward the center. Such movement varies because members do not move at the same pace. The group is unified by the first change because they are all oriented toward Jesus Christ. However, they are not uniform because the characteristics of the various members will differ due to their varying distances from the center.

In figure 2.4, we can distinguish those who belong to the group from those who do not by looking at the direction of their arrows. All those within the drawn line are part of the group. Though a centered church makes a distinction between Christians and non-Christians, as Hiebert observes, the emphasis is "on exhorting people to follow Christ, rather than on excluding others to preserve the purity of the set."[6]
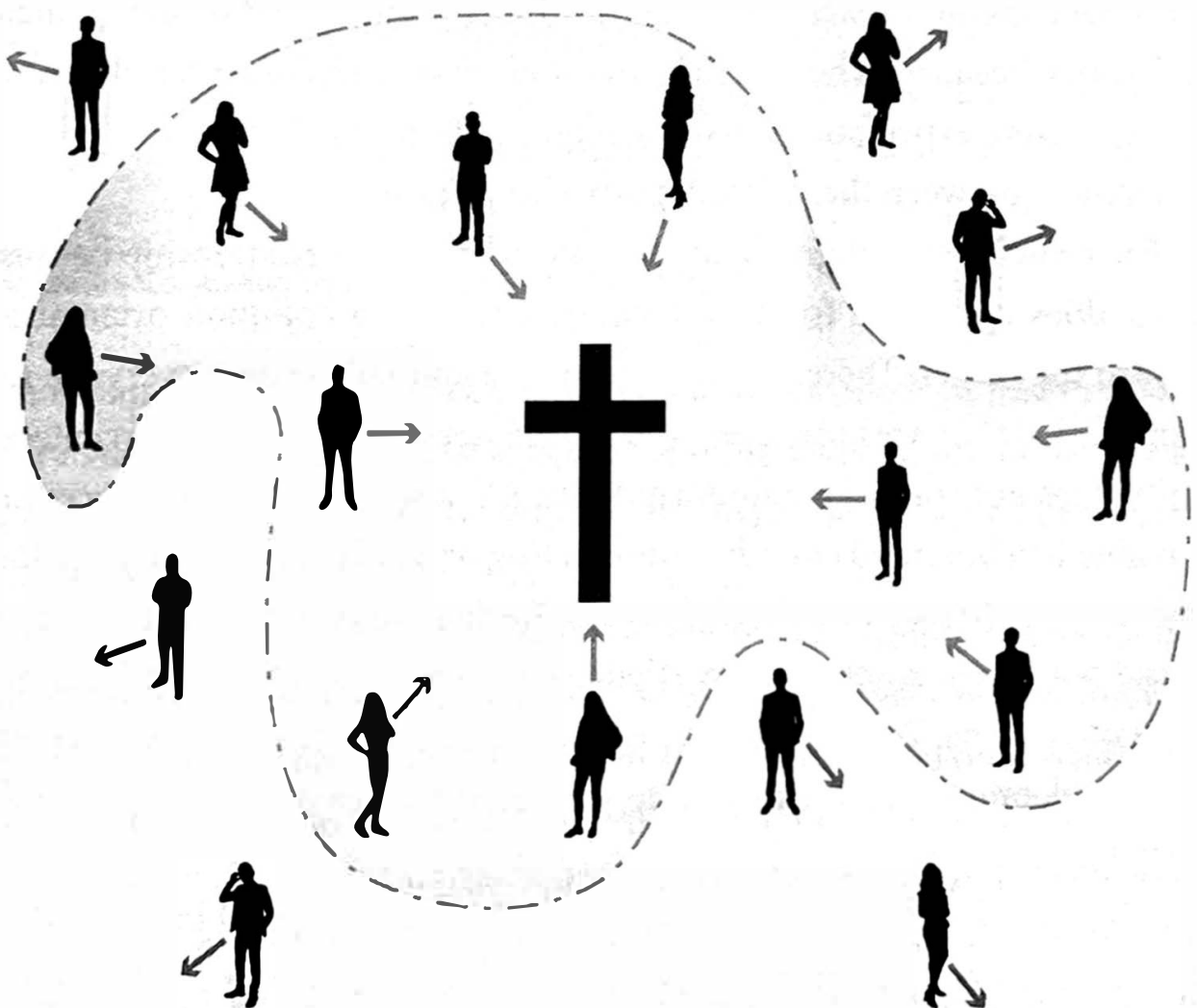

Figure 2.4. Centered church: those who belong to the group

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[6]Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 125.

Note how this approach differs from a bounded church, where the line defines the group. On the centered diagram, I can draw a line, but I draw the line by looking at the arrows. The line does not define the person's relationship with the group. Rather, the line emerges by observing a person's relationship with the center. If we erase the line, we still have the group. Both centered and bounded churches put energy and emphasis on what defines them. For a bounded group, it is the line of exclusion. For a centered group, the emphasis is on defining the center and maintaining a relationship with the center.

Distinguishing between approaches. Bounded churches, by nature, make those outside the group feel excluded. Both bounded and centered churches have a high sense of expectation for those in the group, whereas a centered church has a greater sense of welcome and inclusion because its identity does not depend on excluding others. A fuzzy group is also strong on inclusivity, but because it neither has a boundary line nor a center, it cannot communicate expectations to its members. Figure 2.5 highlights important differences between these three approaches to group identity.

The centered paradigm facilitates sincere and deep relationship because unity does not come from uniformity, but from a common orientation toward the center. There is space to struggle and fail because everyone recognizes that they are in process—moving closer to the center. Since centered unity does not come from uniformity there is also space for differences not possible in a bounded church. Commenting on Paul's response to a conflict over appropriate diet choices (Rom 14), Rachel Tulloch observes, "Unity is found not in agreement of all particulars, but in the direction of our actions and convictions. To whom do we eat or not eat? To whom do we celebrate or not celebrate? More crucially, to whom do we live or die? To whom do we belong?"[7]

A bounded church focuses on defining and maintaining the boundary, whereas a centered church focuses on defining the center and maintaining clarity about the church's center, which is, first and foremost, Jesus Christ—not only in terms of our beliefs about Jesus, but more importantly

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[7]Rachel Tulloch, sermon preached at Wine Before Breakfast, University of Toronto, February 27, 2007, quoted in Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh, *Romans Disarmed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019), 136.