

WHEN ARE THE LOST, FOUND?
 JOHN WESLEY IN CONVERSATION WITH MISSIOLOGIST PAUL HIEBERT
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“When are the lost, found?” is a question with a long history of deliberation throughout the history of the Church. Indeed, one can hear some form of the question behind a number of passages of Scripture. And, if we ourselves have a strong sense of accountability to the mission of Jesus “to seek and to save the lost”, we know instinctively we are not quite finished wrestling with it, especially as we interact with others as witnesses of Jesus. As a contribution to our effort to wrestle well with the matter, let us invite two notable figures to discuss the question—a question that preoccupied each of them: Paul G. Hiebert, a notable missiologist, and John Wesley.

John Wesley (1703-1791) is likely the more familiar figure, at least to we who are of Wesleyan ilk. Wesley comes to this conversation with Hiebert not on the basis of his success as a missionary to the Georgia colony, but on the basis of the profound influence of his theological thought as it emerged from the muddled trenches of genuine pastoral engagement as Methodism’s leader. Paul Hiebert, often described as a “missionary anthropologist”¹, may be less familiar to us. Born in India in 1932 to second-generation Mennonite Brethren missionaries and an anthropologist specializing in South Asia studies, he served as professor at Fuller Theological Seminary and at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for thirty years until his passing in 2007. His influence in missiology and anthropology continues today through the Paul G. Hiebert Global Center for Intercultural Studies at Trinity.²

Hiebert’s “muddled trench” was his life-long exploration of how the gospel might be both proclaimed and preserved in the face of the variety of cultures, languages, and worldviews. He recognized that no culture is a neutral vehicle for transmitting the gospel message, but that all are affected by the fall so that “no culture is absolute or privileged.” In fact, the effect of the gospel is that it becomes redemptively disruptive even as it takes root in a culture so that, as Hiebert says, “We are all relativized by the gospel.”³ On the basis of this conviction, his appeal was that we value the church in its global expressions as a “hermeneutical community”⁴ that, guided by the Spirit and submissive to the

¹ Mark R. Kreitzer, review of Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), in *Global Missiology* (www.globalmissiology.org), 2 (January 2010).

² See <http://www.hiebertglobalcenter.org/>

³ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 29.

⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 274-5.

authority of the Bible, guards the gospel from being captured (and thus twisted) by any one cultural context and preserves its prophetic voice and transformative power.

Hiebert: What does it mean to be found?

Hiebert is concerned with understanding the fundamental nature of true conversion, and presents a case study⁵ as a platform for proposing how we might freshly consider the question, “When are the lost, found?” The case study revolves around Papayya, an illiterate Indian peasant who hears the gospel message for the first time one day and responds by genuinely joining in a prayer led by the speaker. He then continues on his way home. His culture, language, and worldview remain as they were, and the prospect for further exposure to what he has just heard is limited.

Hiebert asks, “Can Papayya become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once?” He says we must surely answer, “Yes”—but asks on what basis we make this affirmation. What essential change has taken place? Papayya’s language, Tegulu, is built to accommodate his Hindu worldview so that there is not even a word in his language that adequately translates *theos*; and any word that might seem to approximate it is attached to concepts that would threaten the biblical witness to who God is. How do we know Papayya has crossed over death to life, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light?

Surely as we think of this case study we are thinking about our own communities, our own local churches, our own children—and about recent studies on religious “nones” revealing the porous boundaries between religious practice and secularity.⁶ When we pray for them, what are we looking to happen? Hiebert suggests we must re-think exactly what we mean when we speak of the lost being found.

To help us, he urges we apply the mathematical distinction between intrinsic sets and extrinsic sets. To summarize, intrinsic sets are formed “on the basis of the essential nature of the members themselves”—on what they are *intrinsically*. Apples, for example, are round edible fruits of the *rosaceous* tree; grapes, on the other hand, do not belong to that particular set. An intrinsic or “bounded” set that is “well-formed” has a sharp boundary between things that are inside and things that are outside the category. If we conceive of *Christian* as an intrinsic (bounded), well-formed set, then the question is whether Papayya is in or out, on whether there has been *enough* transpire that he is truly and essentially Christian. If we affirm he is, we must answer some important questions,

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories.” *Gospel in Context* 1/4 (1978): 24-9. Hiebert’s case study is summarized in the next several paragraphs.

⁶ “Many ‘Nones’ are “betweeners’—remaining on the margins of the church with a porous identity: at times, secular; at times, religious.” Oral presentation to the Secularity Group, American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, 2013.

says Hiebert—questions such as: what makes him identifiably Christian? And is this even possible with his Hindu worldview still intact?

Some intrinsic sets, on the otherhand, are fuzzy rather than well-formed. In a fuzzy intrinsic set there are no sharp boundaries and the emphasis is on change as a process rather than as a single decision or point in time. Fuzzy sets recognize the reality of degrees: fruit becomes more and more ripe, daylight transitions into night.⁷ In a fuzzy, intrinsic or bounded set, says Hiebert, conversion to Christianity is conceived as “gradual movement from outside to inside the set, based on the gradual acquisition of the necessary beliefs and practices or on a series of small decisions.” Thus, the boundary between Christians and non-Christians would less well-defined.⁸ Bounded sets, whether well-formed or fuzzy, are the bias of Western culture, says Hiebert. And maintaining boundary lines is a priority. We want our traffic in neat lanes, not just on our roadways but on the highway to holiness, too.

Extrinsic sets, on the other hand, “are formed not on the basis of what things *are* intrinsically but on their relationship to other things or to a reference point.” Hiebert explains, “For example, a *son* and a *daughter* are *children* of a *father and mother*. If they are children of the same parents they are *brother* and *sister*, not because of what they are intrinsically, but because of their relationship to a common reference point.”⁹ Extrinsic sets are, then, *centered* sets rather than *bounded* sets. In a centered set, things related to the center belong to the set while those not related to the center do not. Take a box of sand and iron filings, for example. We might define *iron* as those particles attracted by a magnet. Similarly, members of the set might be understood as those moving toward the center or reference point while non-members move away or at least do not indicate movement toward.¹⁰ Although the emphasis is not on maintaining the boundary, “the boundary emerges,” says Hiebert, “when the center and the movement of the object has been defined. . . . The boundary *is* so long as the center is clear.”¹¹

To make things even more interesting, centered sets can be well-formed or they can be fuzzy. In a fuzzy centered set there are many shades rather than sharp points of transition.¹² In a fuzzy centered set, says Hiebert, *Christian* would mean all those in *any* relation to Christ the center. Persons may relate to Christ the center as lord or only as a

⁷ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 118-19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁹ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123-4. The illustrations are Hiebert’s.

¹¹ Hiebert, “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories”, 27.

¹² Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 131.

guru or outstanding person worth emulating. There would be no sharp dividing line between Christian and non-Christian.¹³

For each of these four possibilities – well-formed and fuzzy, bounded and centered sets—Hiebert suggests implications for how *Christian* is defined, how the Church is understood and how it operates (such as what membership means and who qualifies for membership), and how the missionary task is undertaken. Hiebert intimates that if we insist on understanding the term *Christian* as a bounded set then there is little hope for the Papayyas around the world; at least the term could not be applied apart from first obtaining acceptable results from tests of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Without actually saying so, he seems to argue for a well-formed *centered* (extrinsic) set as most faithful to a biblically-sound missiology that remains “critically contextual”¹⁴ and sustains the gospel in critical triadic relationship to every culture (including western culture): the gospel *versus* culture, *in* culture, and *transforming* culture.¹⁵

Hiebert and Wesley: Some Points of Resonance

Although set theory was not developed until the 19th and 20th centuries, Wesley is not at all lost in this conversation. Indeed, the essence of the conversation is one that had been underway in his own backyard for the entire century before his birth, and one in which he passionately participated. The bounded set conversation was the sticking point particularly for those in the Calvinist camp. How might a person know whether they themselves were among the elect? The British delegation to the Synod of Dort took what came to be known as a preparationist point of view. They argued at the synod that “by the power of the word and Spirit of God” there is “wrought in the heart of a man *not yet justified*” a series of “inward acts tending toward conversion.”¹⁶ Though their success at Dort was minimal, the fuzzy, bounded set of the preparationists gained enough traction over time that a number of congregations began admitting persons into membership on the basis of their giving witness to experiencing such preparations. This created great discomfort among those for whom admission to church membership functioned as the

¹³ Ibid., 131.

¹⁴ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 25-28. Critical contextualization seeks to encode the gospel into forms understood by the people, without making it captive to the context. Radical contextualization, on the other hand, while putting cultures on equal footing, tends to accommodate cultural realities at the expense of transforming culture.

¹⁵ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 31.

¹⁶ Joseph Hall, “Via Media: The Way of Peace in the Five Busy Articles, Commonly Known by the Name Arminius” in *The Works of the Right Reverend Joseph Hall, D.D. Bishop of Exeter and afterward of Norwich*, edited by Philip Wynter (Oxford: at the University Press, 1861), 9:488-519. For a fuller discussion of the preparationist view in relation to the Synod, see Stanley J. Rodes, *From Faith to Faith: John Wesley’s Covenant Theology and the Way of Salvation*, Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology 8 (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 99-108.

basis of their assurance that they were indeed among the elect. When Wesley took his first breath in Epworth more than eighty years after the Synod of Dort, the conversation was still a lively one: Who is *in* and who is *out*?

We might be tempted to assume Wesley himself would opt for a boundedset approach to the question, though in an evangelical Arminian sort of way. Perhaps this is because many of us belong to denominations with a history of focusing on maintaining the boundary. The 19th century holiness movement was certainly a time of drawing up boundaries. In some cases, denominations expelled the holiness folk; in other cases, holiness folk themselves seemed to settle into an emphasis on externals as a boundary maintenance move.¹⁷

In actuality, Wesley himself took up a theological position that was decidedly centered-set rather than bounded-set. And it is not difficult to see that a centered-set approach is particularly friendly to a Wesleyan-Arminian point of view with its emphasis on cooperancy. Wesley's view resonates most with what Hiebert described as a well-formed centered set. To better explore this resonance, it will help to look more closely at Heibert's description of such a set.

In his delineation of what *Christian* means in a well-formed centered set, Hiebert identifies two important types of change. First, there is the matter of entering or leaving the set. He identifies conversion as the point of entry, so that while both the circumstances and the experience surrounding conversion vary, "all become followers of the same Lord."¹⁸ And though he speaks of the possibility of a person leaving the set, he does not discuss *deconversion*. Wesley certainly allowed for variation while affirming the role of the Holy Spirit as a constant amid the wide range of circumstances and experiences surrounding conversion. However, there are limits to the resonance between Wesley and Hiebert on this point as discussed below.

A second change, says Hiebert, is "movement towards the center, or growth in a relationship."¹⁹ He notes that one characteristic of a centered set is that all objects are seen in constant motion, they are moving, fast or slowly, towards or away from the center. [They] are never static."²⁰ Applying this characteristic to what *Christian* means when conceived in a centered-set sort of way, Hiebert says, "Having turned around, one

¹⁷ It is interesting that among late 19th century American holiness groups a number of holiness folks became "come-outers" having decided that the only way to be *in* (to be holy) was to come *out* of their denomination. On the "come-outers" see especially Chapter 2 in Stan Ingersol, Floyd Cunningham, Harold Raser, and D. P. Whitelaw, *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2009).

¹⁸ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 127.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁰ Hiebert, "Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories," 27.

must continue to move towards the center. There is no static state. Conversion is not the end, it is the beginning.”²¹

The idea of movement also stood at the core of Wesley’s covenant theology which comprised the very infrastructure of his theological thought. Although there are some differences in the way Wesley nuances the centered-set idea to be highlighted below, there is strong resonance on the priority given to movement. Wesley describes the disciples themselves in terms of movement, noting their progression from before to after Christ’s death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit. One example appears in response to a question posed at the Methodist Conference in 1747 concerning the eternal destiny of two specific individuals who seemed unsettled as far as their eternal state. The conference answered, “They cannot die in this state [of uncertainty]: they must go backward or forward. If they continue to seek, they will surely find, righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”²²

A Bit of Dissonance

Despite the resonance noted, there are several points at which Wesley’s version of a well-formed, centered set differs from that of Hiebert’s. Part of this dissonance arises from Hiebert’s struggle to “have his cake and eat it, too.” It is not altogether clear how one comes to belong to Hiebert’s well-formed centered set. On the one hand, belonging is moving toward the center. “The critical question,” he says, “is to whom does the person offer his worship and allegiance?”²³ “Christians would be defined as . . . those who make [Jesus Christ] the center or lord of their lives.”²⁴ But while he asserts “there would be a clear separation between Christians and non-Christians” he goes on to say, “The emphasis, however, would be on exhorting people to follow Christ, rather than on excluding others [in order] to preserve the purity the set.”²⁵ But are those responsive to such an exhortation actually *in* this centered set? Is response itself a signal of regeneration, something along the lines of the idea of “nascent regeneration” as proposed by Randy Maddox?²⁶ If to whom an individual offers her worship and allegiance is what is determinative, does *response* in and of itself actually answer *that* question?

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² *Minutes* (1747), np. *John Ben[n]et’s Manuscript Minutes of the Early Methodist Conferences, 1744-1748*. Methodist Archives. The University of Manchester (1977/429).

²³ “Conversion, Culture and Cognitive Categories,” 28.

²⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 125.

²⁵ Ibid., 125-6.

²⁶ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 159.

Wesley places a high value on response as essential to regeneration, yet, as I have argued elsewhere, without equating the two.²⁷ While *movement* toward the center is certainly a function of God’s prevenient grace, movement in and of itself is not the transformation described in the Bible as “being born from above,” “crossing over from death to life,” and the like. What Wesley *does* affirm is that conversion in the sense of a testimony to regeneration is *not* what determines whether or not one belongs to a centered set having the Triune God of the Old and New Testaments as its center.²⁸ Consequently, being settled with respect to the object of our worship and allegiance is not a condition of belonging.

For Wesley, initial responsiveness and first moves that are consciously toward God occur as we experience the Holy Spirit *first* as the spirit of bondage.²⁹ And the discovery to which the Spirit leads us—even as he makes known to us the character and love of God and the provisions of his grace—is to a heart-rending recognition that we are yet *unregenerate* and in great need of salvation. As the Spirit pulls away the veil from our hearts, we are awakened. However, particularly in the early phases of our awakening, we most often grossly underestimate the depth of our sinfulness and great distance from God.³⁰ As we are increasingly gripped by the reality of our deservedly being under the wrath of God, simple awareness becomes mourning. It is a difficult season, a time when doses of harsh reality need to be matched by generous doses of encouragement.

It was precisely at this point of awakening we find Wesley formalizing entry into the centered-set he conceived: admission to a Methodist Society. This was not church membership. A Society was not, after all, a church; it was a discipleship center, to use contemporary terminology. The basis for admission revolved precisely around the direction of the movement of the individual: “There is one only condition previously required in those who desire admission into this Society,” wrote Wesley, “*a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.*” But while admission to a Society certainly was an avenue of encouragement to those experiencing the disturbance of awakening, this boundary emerging amidst movement was also a point of *sensitivity* for Wesley. There was nothing casual about the matter of movement. “As the Society increased,” Wesley wrote, “I found it required still greater care to separate the precious

²⁷ Stan Rodes, *Was John Wesley Arguing for Prevenient Grace as Regenerative? Wesleyan Theological Journal*. 48/1 (Spring 2013), 73-85.

²⁸ This does not remove the value of requiring such a testimony of those seeking church membership. The point here concerns the larger question of an individual’s standing before God.

²⁹ See Wesley’s commentary on Romans 8:15. John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: publisher unnamed, 1788), 484. See also Rodes, *Faith to Faith*, 155-65.

³⁰ See Wesley’s rejoinder of William Law’s *Spirit of Prayer*: “[A] Sinner newly awakened, has always more or less Confidence in himself, in what he *is*, or *has*, or *does*, and *will do*; which is not *Humility* [as Wesley understood Law to assert], but downright *Pride*.” John Wesley, *A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law* (London: W. Strahan, 1756), 74-5.

from the vile.”³¹ This effort involved interviews to determine whether a person was still moving toward God or had for all intents and purposes disqualified himself or herself from the set. In case the latter were true, this, too, should also be formalized, Wesley felt, by the individual’s dismissal from the Society.

For Hiebert, Wesley’s attention to boundary flags the set as a bounded rather than centered set. But this seems too strictly drawn, and even Hiebert noted that boundary emerges even in a centered set. To be sure, the distinction between the attention given to boundaries in a bounded set and that given to boundary-*sensitivity* in a well-formed centered set is not easily discerned. Movement *away* from the center also contributes to the emergence of a boundary by helping define and make evident movement *toward* the center. If this is the case, then the attentiveness to boundary functions to preserve the properties of what it means for a set to be a centered one. Furthermore, Wesley’s attentiveness to boundary was secondarily about who is *in* and who is *out* in any ultimate sense, but was about stirring those who had become casual regarding their spiritual condition, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, conserving the momentum of the work of the Spirit in the lives of other members of the Society. In this way, Wesley’s boundary awareness (and consequent sensitivity) did not threaten the essential character of the centered-set model with its primary emphasis on movement toward the center. This is evident in Wesley’s assessment of the situation of those who die while in the throes of awakening. These persons, said Wesley, were “darkly safe with God”³² though they were not *Christian* in the more precise sense in which Wesley very often applied that term within the framework of his covenant theology.³³ Nonetheless, they were “safe with God” because the direction of movement was clear, though the individual had not yet entered into all the privileges and benefits of the gospel. Wesley declared to those distraught over the passing of one who died in the course of awakening: “He did fear God, and according to his circumstances work righteousness. This is the essence of religion, according to St. Peter. His soul was ‘darkly safe with God,’ although he was only under the Jewish Dispensation.”³⁴

³¹ John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist in a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Perronet, Vicar of Shoreham in Kent* (London: printed by W.B., 1752), 14-15.

³² John Wesley, “John Wesley to Ann Bolton (December 15, 1786),” *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, Edited by John Telford. Standard edition. (London, Epworth, 1931), 7:358.

³³ Wesley *not infrequently* uses the term *Christian* to refer to those who have themselves entered into all the salvific benefits of the gospel dispensation, evidenced most clearly by the Spirit of adoption (i.e. the witness of the Spirit) which belongs peculiarly to the gospel or evangelical dispensation.

³⁴ In the scheme of Wesley’s covenant theology, the covenant of grace spanned from the fall to the present, and every dispensation (including the Mosaic or Jewish dispensation) was salvifically sufficient on account of the victory of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. However, only the gospel or Christian (or evangelical) dispensation delivered the full

Finally, we must note that this conversation between Hiebert and Wesley is limited by an important factor: in Hiebert's case study, Papayya was "kerygmatically privileged". That is, Papayya had benefitted from the proclamation of the gospel. Wesley's version of the centered set, if we may speak in such terms, seems to move beyond this and to take into consideration those who have not been so privileged. The possibilities available to those who never hear the preaching of the gospel was a featured consideration of the 1770 Methodist Conference, a point lost amid the controversy that ensued as a result of the poorly chosen wording of the minutes. Those that never heard the gospel, the conference asserted, may be accepted of God not on the basis of a turning of the heart consciously toward Christ or even toward one they can identify as God, but on the basis of a level of responsiveness calibrated to the light they have, however meager.³⁵ This point, however, moves beyond the case at hand, and must await a subsequent conversation between Hiebert and Wesley.

Concluding the Conversation

How might the foregoing conversation answer the presenting question, "When *are* the lost, found?" Wesley and, it seems, Hiebert, would say that '*found-ness*' is a *function of movement toward the center, toward God*—such movement being completely predicated upon the provision of Christ's redeeming work, made known in some measure by the grace of God, empowered by the work of the Spirit, and conditioned on willing response. '*Found-ness*' is, therefore, a *variegated category more dynamic than what tests of orthodoxy or orthopraxy can tolerate*.³⁶ At the same time, Hiebert and Wesley would concur that '*found-ness*' is always and exclusively correlated to the center which is none other than the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And finally, '*found-ness*' is also the *domain of the superintendency of the Holy Spirit* who works always to activate a progression toward a life-changing revelation of Jesus who is made known in Holy Scripture and who is the exact representation of the Father.

measure of Christ's victory, a victory granted when, by faith, one escaped "from the legal [Jewish] to the evangelical state." See Rodes, *From Faith to Faith*, 133-53.

³⁵ Rodes, *From Faith to Faith*, 125-9.

³⁶ Wesley judged that the failure to articulate doctrine properly or even being in outright doctrinal error was of less importance soteriologically than the evidence of genuine movement toward God, the "fearing God and working righteousness" according to the light one has received. See the discussion in Rodes, *Faith to Faith*, 120-5.