What are the Main Boundaries for the Evangelical Church and How Can we Best Address our Major Issues?

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The Church Growth movement has been accused of selling out to pragmatism [LLE1] or functionalism by embracing growth principles just because they work. They seem to accuse the movement of doing anything and everything to reach people for Christ, and that we resort to any "trick" to grow a church. The critics claim we have embraced non-Christian principles, i.e., we sell Jesus like the world sells Coca Cola™. To them, Bible content and Bible methods are indissoluble. Some claim we can't use "so-called" worldly methods or media to build a church. To illustrate this debate, the pastor of a megachurch told me in the late 60s,

"Some pastors will use only biblical methods to win a soul, I will use any method that is not anti-biblical."

Then another pastor told me that God had allowed (given) this world all these new media to preach the gospel, i.e., television, Internet, radio, advertising, movies, etc.

The following question will give direction to this paper. How far into the study of secular leadership can the church go to determine biblical church leadership (the John Maxwell leadership question)? How far into marketing can the church go to determine methods of communicating the church message (the George Barna marketing question)? How far can the church go in stretching its Sunday gathering to accommodate unsaved cli-

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entele (the Bill Hybels seeker question)? How far can the church go in heeding intuitive authority apart from biblical revelation (the C. Peter Wagner New Apostolic question)? How far can the church go in expressing emotions as a form of worship and ministry (the Pensacola Revival question)? How far can the church go to accommodate non-biblical life styles into leadership (the ordination of homosexuals question)? How far can the church go in its preaching to include syncretistic understandings of Jesus and the gospel (the New Age Jesus question)? How far can the church go to include non-literal questions about the Bible and non-historical interpretations of biblical record (the liberal-conservative question)?

These questions will probably offend some just because they are raised as questions. Maybe some are offended because they have already answered the questions in their mind, but this paper must nevertheless raise their questions because there are broad concerns in evangelical Christianity. These issues must be addressed. Others might not approve of identifying persons or movements with these issues, but I have tried to identify persons who have obviously associated with a position or a question. They have already answered the questions and positioned themselves on the issue. They can help answer the questions associated with their issue.

Approaching Boundaries

Webster's Dictionary has defined *boundary* as "something that indicates or fixes a limit," i.e., a separating line. The emphasis is on the actual point that separates two items or views. This means a study of those principles that form fences or points of differences between Christianity and non-Christianity. The *Oxford Dictionary* adds the following definition, "That which must be limited, confined or restrained." The emphasis here is on the item that is being limited or bound up. This means a study of boundaries must include an examination of the nature of Christianity that would be essential to its essence of existence. This implies the nature of Christianity would demand limits.

Somewhere in the journey from true Christianity (I Timothy 3:16) to heresy (I Timothy 1:19, 20) there is a point of no return, i.e., a boundary. Somewhere in a journey from holiness (I Peter 1:16) to ungodliness (II Peter 2:21-22) there is a line beyond which God would not have us step. Somewhere between biblical principles of Church Growth (Matthew 28:19, 20) and human

efforts (Matthew 7:26-27) there are methods that should not be used. There is a line between an authentic church (Matthew 16:18) and a group that has the title "church," but has lost the essential properties of a church (Revelation 2:12-29). Somewhere there is a boundary between the true manifestation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4) and a false desire for spiritual things (Acts 8:19-23) and a false attempt to manipulate the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:13-16).

The study of boundaries is not a new challenge, nor is it a new reaction. There were questions even in the Church Age when Scriptures were being written.

John wrote,

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world (I John 4:1 NKJV).

Jude wrote,

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 4 NKJV).

Peter warned,

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed (II Peter 2:1-2 NKJV).

Paul warned,

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons (I Timothy 4:1 NKJV).

It seems every church age has battled the boundaries issue. Most of them were doctrinal issues, but not all. Martin Luther rejected the enthusiast. John Wesley was ridiculed for his new

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"methods" and was sarcastically labeled "Methodist." Jonathan Edwards struggled with emotional expressions of revivalism in the First Great Awakening, and Charles Finney was criticized for embracing "the right use of appropriate means" in the Second Great Awakening. There seems to have always been new methods with each new outreach of the gospel, and concurrently with the introduction of new methods, there seems to have always been reaction, some more negative than others.

The very nature of Christianity implies there would be an on-going battle to keep it pure. There is an adversary to Christianity who is called a liar (John 8:44), who originally distorted God's word in the Garden of Eden. He still attempts to corrupt the minds of believers (I Corinthians 11:3) and blinds the minds of non-believers (II Corinthians 4:3, 4).

God divinely knew there would be attempts to either dilute His message or add to it. While the following was a direct reference to the last book of the Bible, the meaning can be applied to all Scriptures.

> For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18, 19 NKJV).

Contemporary Need For Boundaries

There are different forces and pressures on the church today that force us to re-examine our boundaries. We should not change the biblical nature of the church, nor should we change the biblical boundaries of the past. But perhaps some of our past boundaries were not biblical. Perhaps some of our past boundaries were culturally driven or they were fences that we erected out of fear, embarrassment or ignorance. As we grow in our understanding of Church Growth, perhaps we need to reposition our boundaries. (There will always be boundaries. But like our fences in the backyard, we may need to build them at different places, build them out of different material, and build them to different heights).

We are experiencing a post-Christian world in America.

When our culture was dominantly Christian, we related to both secular and non-Christian religious activities from a position of strength (i.e., cultural strength). In the future, our boundaries will be built in a non-Christian culture or an anti-Christian culture. Boundaries in a Christian world will be different from those in an anti-Christian world.

We also minister in a world with a growing post-modernity influence. Our target audience for evangelism will not think lineally as in the past (Builder generation), that means they will not think rationally. They will think viscerally (Buster generation). Post-modernity is a discovery of the super-natural world, and that doesn't mean Christian supernatural. They will not be primarily scientifically driven but will know things primarily by pragmatism and they will be Spirit motivated.

The world is becoming technologically linked to the Internet, by e-mail and a web page site. People have access to an almost unlimited store of knowledge including Christian data, pornography, and immediate link to others worldwide. As the world in which we minister changes, and as people to whom we minister change, and the way in which we communicate changes; what implication does all this have on our ministry? This reflects first, on our authority, i.e., our appeal to the Scriptures; second, on our message; i.e., what shall they believe about the gospel; third, on our method of communication; i.e., how shall we evangelize; fourth, on our community; i.e., what shall be the church; and fifth, on our motivation; i.e., how shall our calling from God be carried out? These are questions we are just beginning to ask and answer.

Illustration Of Need For Boundaries

Everything that is suggested about Christianity is not true Christianity. A person can't believe just anything they choose to believe. Christianity has boundaries, just as there are boundaries in every area of life.

1. **Firewall**	For protection from destruction
2. **Police barricade**	For investigation and to keep evidence pure
3. **Traffic cones**	For guidance
4. **Speed limits:**	For protection
5. **Computer password**	For unwanted entry

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6. **Entrance gate**	To exclude some
7. **Restricted parking**	For more efficient work
8. **Office hours**	For work efficiency
9. **Need to know basis**	Restricted information

Suggested Boundaries

This paper will examine five core topics. Each core will have its unique nature that will suggest boundaries for church ministry, i.e., Church Growth. These cores speak to us about our limits, like a twelve-year-old boy going to an activity, hears voices where he can go and not go. He wants his behavior to be acceptable, but the boy has these voices in his head, each voice comes from a different source of authority, and each one attempts to set different boundaries for the boy's actions. It would be wonderful if all five voices in his head agreed; but whether they agree or not, the twelve-year-old boy only has limited understanding of what he hears. He is sometimes confused. As the boy attempts to enter the activity, he hears his mother say, "Don't enter," his school teacher says, "It's not wrong," his Boy Scout code tells him "to be loyal, " his church youth group asks "What would Jesus do?" and a policeman is there to make sure no one breaks the law.

The following cores, with their implied limits, do not conflict in God's mind, only in our understanding of what He has said. Because none of us has all the facts on which to make decisions and none has perfect reasoning faculties to understand perfectly, and none of us has a broad background to experience all that God is doing; the boundaries get fuzzy. This paper will attempt to help us clarify God's boundaries of ministry and Church Growth.

1. *The Jesus Core.* Christianity is Jesus Christ and those who come to God must come by Him (John 14:6). Jesus is the revelation of the Father to the world. Those who believe in Christianity, must believe in Him (John 1:12) and those who preach Christianity, must preach Him (Acts 4:12).

> **Boundary One – Jesus**
> Essential Christianity recognized the biblical person of Jesus Christ as the core for its belief and practice.

But when is the preaching of Jesus not an effective commu-

nication of Christianity? Is the message of Jesus Christ presented in Roman Catholic sermons and writings adequate to save a hearer? What about the story of Jesus in the Koran or the Book of Mormon? Will the message of Jesus in these contexts save a hearer? Can they save? (The first question deals with the subjective intent of the presenter, the second asks is there enough objective content to save?)

How much about Jesus must a person know to be saved? His sinless life? His miracles? His deity? His substitutionary death? Besides being complete, how accurate must the presentation be?

Paul seems to deal with his enemies' preaching when he says, "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes and will rejoice" (Phil. 1:18 NKJV).

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The Jesus boundary is crossed in ministry when the message of Jesus is inconsistent with the obvious presentation in Scripture of His person and work.

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2. *The Gospel Core.* The essence of Christianity is the gospel message, i.e., the good news. This message is objectively written in words, i.e., the propositional gospel, and subjectively experienced, i.e., the person of Jesus Christ.

The gospel—a proposition. The basis of good news is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This message is best expressed in these words of Paul,

> Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (I Cor. 15:1-4 NKJV).

> The gospel message is simply the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who deny the reality of these truths, deny the essence of Christianity. For a per-

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son to be saved, mere mental agreement to a proposi-
tional statement is not enough.

The gospel—a Person. The gospel is more than a proposition;
it is a person—Jesus Christ. A person's becoming a Christian in-
volves more than giving mental assent to the fact of the death,
burial and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel enters our lives
when Jesus Christ enters our hearts. "But as many as received
Him [Christ], to them He gave the right to become children of
God, *even* to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12 NKJV).

BOUNDARY TWO – THE GOSPEL
Essential Christianity recognizes salvation is in the person of
Jesus as accomplished in His death, burial, and resurrection.

But when is the gospel, not the gospel of Jesus Christ? Is the
gospel communicated by Hollywood really the gospel? What
about communicating the gospel by a backslider? By an
apostaciser? By someone morally reprobate?

Communication involves four elements: First, the message to
be communicated; second the source-encoder, i.e., the person
sending the message; third, the media used to send the message;
and fourth, the receiver-decoder, the one receiving the message
and interpreting it. All four influence the essence of communicat-
ing the gospel.

First, if the message is the same as contained in Scripture,
there is no problem. But some think Jesus died as my substitute,
others as my example, still others give a mystical element to his
death; while others say His death was a mistake. How much cor-
rect doctrinal implication must be poured into the message of
the gospel?

Second, the source-encoder may have various meanings in
his/her head when communicating the gospel. Can God use a
source-encoder when the gospel is communicated from the point
of view of a Calvinist, Arminian, cultist, liberal, or television
production? Does the orientation of the source-encoder influence
the message? Contaminate the message? If the source-encoder
completely misunderstands the gospel, but communicates its
content correctly, can God use it?

Third, what about the media? Is the message the media, or is
the reversal true? Are there some media that can't be used to
present the gospel because the media is contaminated in the

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minds of the source-encoder? Receiver-decoder?

Fourth, the receiver-decoder may be hindered by presuppositions, ignorance, blindness, prejudice, attention-disorders, etc. Is the gospel properly communicated if the receiver-decoder doesn't understand it? Does it take two to communicate?

The questions raised leads us to the boundary, i.e., the fence. At what point does the gospel of Scripture no longer remain the gospel? When have we not preached Christ? Before drawing a boundary, remember the Bible story. John wanted to keep the boundary close to his perception. "Master . . . we forbade him because he does not follow us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us, is for us" (Luke 9:48-50 NKJV).

BROKEN BARRIER

The gospel boundary is crossed in ministry when good works are attached as a condition for salvation, or the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death is not presented, or is denied, or an alternate understanding of salvation is attached to the presentation.

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3. *The Doctrinal Core*. There are certain essentials of Christian truth that form the core for Christian objective doctrine. These truths were debated in the liberal-fundamentalist controversies from 1900 to 1950. Like things that are essential to the operation of an automobile, these certain truths in our doctrinal core are essential to Christianity. A car cannot be operated without tires, steering wheel, fuel pump, carburetor, etc. Without these, the car is inoperative and without certain essential doctrines, Christianity is inoperative. Following the analogy, what core doctrines are essential to Christianity? First is the authority of Scripture as the revelation of God's person and will as evidenced by verbal inerrancy. Second is the deity of Jesus Christ as God who became fully man, and man who is fully God. This truth is reflected in the virgin birth. Third is the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for sins, as evidence in the shedding of His blood. Fourth, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from death to give us new life and fifth, the bodily return of Jesus Christ to take His children to live with Him and to judge those who reject His plan of salvation.

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> **Boundary Three – Doctrine**
> Essential Christianity recognizes the Scriptures as authorita-tive, the deity of Jesus, His substitutionary death for the for-giveness of sins, His physical resurrection to give new life and His bodily return for the consummation of His program on earth.

Some would deny there is a doctrinal boundary to Christian-ity, they would suggest that the only requirement of Christianity is to believe Jesus and accept the gospel. But Christianity affirms the Trinitarian existence of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. How much must be believed to be saved? How much can be denied and still retain the essentials of Christianity? To the author, the essentials of Christianity are wrapped up in the Apostle's Creed:

> **The Apostle's Creed**
> I believe in God the Father Almighty,
> maker of heaven and earth:
> I believe in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord; who was con-ceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He de-scended into Hades; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Anyone who denies "the doctrine of Christ" has questioned His Sonship, His virgin birth, His atoning death and His resur-rection. John suggests,

Anyone whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God: He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son" (II John 9).

Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: but he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also" (I John 2:23).

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> **BROKEN BARRIER**
> The doctrinal boundary is crossed in ministry when the essential belief of Christianity is not presented, or is denied, or an opposite belief is presented.

4. *The Christian Experience Core*. The child of God has unique experiences that are not shared with other religions, nor with other faith groups, i.e., those historically identified as cults. The Christian experience begins when a person believes the gospel (propositional truth) and receives Jesus (personal truth). That act of faith is an experience that changes those who believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ lives in their life (Galatians 2:20), they are motivated as they experience God's love, God's grace, and God's peace. They give evidence of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23), and they receive confidence in their relationship to God (I John 5:11-13).

> **Boundary Four – Christian Experience**
> Essential Christianity recognizes that the experience of saving faith will produce forgiveness, cleansing, and assurance of one's relationship with God. The experience of continued faith will produce the positive fruits of the Spirit and a desire to serve the indwelling Christ.

There are many ways to test the boundaries of Christian experience. First, when a person claims to be a Christian, but does not have any Christian experience, or at least some of the experiences of Christianity, that person's experience can be questioned. When a minister claims to serve Christianity, and the Biblical experiences are not evident in those to whom ministry is given, then the validity of that ministry can be questioned. When ministry makes claims that produce the opposite of Christian experience, or denies the essential nature of Biblical experience; then the credibility of that ministry can be questioned.

> **BROKEN BARRIER**
> The Christian experience boundary is crossed in ministry when the empirical results that should follow salvation are denied, or the opposite is taught by those offering salvation.

5. *The Blessability Core*. Over the years the author has wit-

nessed the blessing of God on various groups, i.e., both Calvinists and Arminians, both secessionists and those who practice tongues, both high church and low church, both those who sprinkle and immerse, both liturgical and brethren worship services, both teetotalers and "sippers," both fundamentalists and moderates. But as I observe the blessing of God in ministry, I have asked the following questions:

1. How can God bless both sides, when one obviously is wrong?
2. Obviously there is an outer boundary of God's blessing. What is the least essential a person must embrace to experience God's blessing?
3. Why was God not more explicit to explain the outer edges or boundaries of Christianity?
4. Obviously, God blesses certain non-tangibles that are not involved with these issues. What are the non-tangibles that God blesses?

The blessing of God is similar in definition to atmospheric worship or atmospheric revival, i.e., "The presence of God among his people." Revival is defined, "I will pour out My Spirit" (Joel 2:29). It is also described, "When times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). The blessing of God is not bigger crowds, big responses at the altar, growth in membership, offerings, baptisms, etc. The blessing of God is an intangible experience of God evidently working in the hearts of listeners as the gospel is preached. It is experiential Christianity, but it is based on objective truth, i.e., the gospel, essential doctrine, Jesus, and Christian experiences.

Boundary Five – The Blessability Core

Blendability is the presence of God when ministry is given by those who follow biblical criteria of serving the Lord; by exercising hope (in the future work of God), faith (in the ability of God to do what He promised), and love (deep feelings of compassion for those to whom ministry is given). God's blessing is evident in His power to transform, motivate, deliver, and give abundant life to followers.

There are many problems when using the blessability of God as a criteria for the boundary of Christianity. First, the blessing of God is similar to being used by God. There were some obvi-

ous illustrations of ungodly people that God used, i.e., Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17) and Cyrus (Is. 45:1). Sometimes God may use the communication of Jesus by unsaved persons; He may even use a person who is anti-Christian. But being used of God does not mean they have the blessing of God, i.e., they enjoy the presence of God or they have Christian experiences. So there may be a difference between the people we accept and endorse.

When God blesses a person, we need to ask what is He blessing? Is God blessing the person's spiritual gifts? His prayer ministry? His preparation? His spirituality?

Some people are more focused on what they won't do, rather than what they will do. They are more focused on what they are against, than what they are for. They may oppose another minister's doctrine, life-style, or worship expression; but the one they oppose: God is blessing. But what does God bless? Does God bless the gift He originally gave the person, or does God bless the gospel content (i.e., the message of a sermon), and not put His blessing on the preacher (i.e., the messenger)?

Because our emotions and feelings are both fleeting and misleading, John tells us to "test the Spirits" (I John 4:1). We can deceive ourselves and deceive others. We must test our feeling—and the blessing of God—by doctrine (I John 4:2-3). Paul tells us to get the big picture, "Test all things, hold fast what is good" (I Thess. 5:21).

BROKEN BARRIER
The blessability boundary is crossed in ministry when the presence of God as reflected in Scriptures is denied, or the opposite is taught by those claiming God's presence.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

I have many friends in denominations that hold beliefs that are different than mine, but we agree on the essential core of doctrine. There is so much more that we agree about doctrine than disagree. Nevertheless, because we are all within the boundaries of Christianity, "we be brethren."

> **In essentials, unity.**
> **In non-essentials, tolerance.**
> **In all things, love.**

I have many friends who have different standards from me for Christian living and practices of holiness. I do not think I am better than they, and if they are willing to tolerate my personal Christian life-style, "we be brethren."

I began my Christian life in a Presbyterian church, and have graduated from two Methodist institutions of higher education, plus two seminaries that would be classified independent. To-day I minister in a Baptist church but my greatest allegiance is to Jesus Christ. If that is your allegiance, then "we be brethren."

On three different occasions, I have been asked to speak to a group that I consider on the other side of Christian boundaries. My answer the first time seemed to work, so I used it on two other occasions. I told the person I had not been baptized in their tank by their minister. I asked if they thought I was going to heaven? Then I replied, I wouldn't want to go help a group build churches if they thought I wasn't going to heaven. On all three occasions, the invitation was rescinded. I don't feel proud that I turned them down, for I wish that all groups believed the same simple message,

For by grace are you saved by faith, and that not of your-selves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2:8,9).

Epilogue

Then the Lord said to Moses, "When did I become weak? Now you shall see whether my word comes true or not!"

So Moses left the Tabernacle and reported Jehovah's words to the people; and he gathered the seventy elders and placed them around the Tabernacle. And the Lord came down in the Cloud and talked with Moses, and the Lord took of the Spirit that was upon Moses and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied for some time.

But two of the seventy—Eldad and Medad—were still in the camp, and when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied there. Some young men ran and told Moses what was happen-ing, and Joshua (the son of Nun), one of Moses' personally cho-

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sen assistants, protested, "Sir, make them stop!"

But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I only wish that all of the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them all!" (Numbers 11:23-29 Living Bible).

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