

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXVII, No. 2 (Issue 55) November 2019

Centered in Christ

Paul Muench

Abstract: To be doctrinally correct, a church body must have both correct doctrine and correct practices that support the correct doctrine. From ancient times, the culture of the Western church has pushed the church away from practices that were consistent with the doctrine of the church. The Hebrew worldview was what anthropology named a “centered set.” In a centered set, most everything is defined by relationships. Greek and Roman cultures defined their world by what anthropologists call a “centered set.” In a centered set, the world is defined by intrinsic qualities. This quickly led the church into false practices some of which are still being used.

During my life journey, including working as a missionary, seminary teacher, and college professor, God has stimulated me to ask some questions about my own culture. As I experienced different ways of understanding the world in the more than forty countries in which I have traveled, especially the five countries where I spent extended time, I came to be thankful for many blessings in my American worldview. However, I also learned that there are parts of my American worldview that I should change because it distorts my Christian faith, especially the living out of that faith.

How we view the cultural practice of bride price is an example that demonstrates a worldview difference. A story¹ about an anthropologist’s experience in Africa demonstrates contrasting worldviews.

Price or relationship?

An American anthropologist doing research in Africa was puzzled by what he learned about Louie. He was told that Louie was a very wise and well-respected young man; however, what he was told about Louie did not picture him as wise.



Rev. Paul Muench has an MDiv degree, a master’s in the study of mission, and a PhD in cultural studies. He served as a missionary in Papua New Guinea and Russia and was the Executive Director of Lutheran Bible Translators. He now is a Professor Emeritus of Concordia University Texas. Paul.Muench@concordia.edu

Copyright 2019 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 27, no. 2 (2019) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://lsfm.global/joinlsfm.html>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

The anthropologist was told that Louie was interested in marrying the king's daughter. Louie and the king's daughter had been friends all their lives. When it became known that Louie intended to bargain with the king to set an appropriate bride price for his daughter, the king's advisors cautioned the king not to demand the normal bride price. A normal bride price for non-royalty would have been one cow; however, for the king's daughter it might be two cows or perhaps even three cows if the lady were very healthy and beautiful. In this case there was a problem. The king's daughter was sickly and not that appealing to the eye.

The king's advisors cautioned the king that this might be his only chance to get an acceptable marriage for his daughter so they advised him to accept a bride price of only one cow. But the anthropologist learned that Louie offered and the king accepted a bride price of eight cows.

Now the anthropologist had a problem with the fact that the people thought Louie was wise. He could have gotten by with a bride price of two cows and perhaps even one if he had been good at bargaining. What is wise about offering eight cows?

The anthropologist felt he needed to talk with Louie to get an answer to the dilemma so he arranged to visit Louie. The anthropologist was welcomed by Louie and given the usual courtesies, a place to sit and a glass of the local brew. When a very beautiful and vibrant lady brought the drinks, the anthropologist stared and asked, "Who is this?" Louie answered, "This is my wife."

When the anthropologist's jaw dropped, Louie explained, "When you realize a great price has been paid for you, you are changed."

In addition to the theological lesson that could be learned from this story, the worldview difference is seeing bride price as an economic exchange as opposed to a cementing of relationships. Many cultures around the world view relationship building as the motivation that drives the exchange.

Our lifestyle, our decision-making, our self-image, and many other things basic to living are driven by our belief system, our worldview. Whether we call it religion or worldview, what we believe about our world drives our decision-making and, therefore, our actions. Because we in American culture divide between religious and non-religious, between sacred and secular, in this paper I will use the term *worldview* as a more inclusive term. I mean it to include all of our belief system. I begin by contrasting freedom-oriented cultures with relationship-oriented cultures. Freedom-oriented cultures tend to create bounded-set categories to describe their world. Relationship-oriented cultures are more inclined to describe their world via centered sets.

Freedom-Oriented Cultures

The dominant American culture thinks primarily in bounded-set categories. “In English our nouns, such as apples, oranges, pencils and pens, are basic building blocks of our reality. Most of them are intrinsic well-formed sets. A dog is a dog because of what it is, and a cat is a cat. Moreover, there is no half-dog-half-cat, or three-quarters-dog-one-quarter-cat.”²

The dominant American culture thinks primarily in bounded-set categories.

Bounded sets are fundamental to our understanding of order. We want uniform categories. In the kitchen we put forks in the fork bin, knives in the knife bin and spoons in the spoon bin. We want our walls to be uniform in color. In the yard we want grass lawns with no dandelions, tulips, or other “weeds.”

We use bounded sets in classical music. There are seven notes, and five half-steps in the scale. Each has a fixed pitch, defined in terms of lengths of the sound waves it produces. Good musicians can hit the note precisely and make clear runs.

Maintaining boundaries is essential in a bounded-set world, otherwise categories begin to disintegrate and chaos sets in. We do this by using borders. We put frames around pictures, windows, doors and blackboards. We use moldings to cover cracks between panels on walls and to mark the boundaries between walls. . . . We edge our sidewalks so the grass does not creep onto the cement. We use curbs to mark the edge of the street. On our highways we have solid lines to separate traffic lanes and to differentiate between traffic lanes and shoulders.³

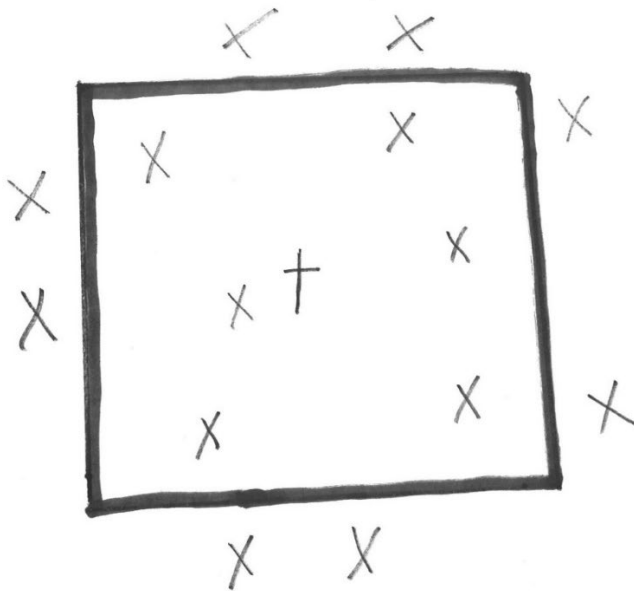
With this bounded-set thinking, we tend to divide our world into opposites: good versus bad, rich versus poor, friends versus enemies, Republican versus Democrat. “We separate objective knowledge from feelings and values, and exclude the latter because they are relational in nature.”⁴ When a good person does something wrong, we tend to move them to the bad category because we don’t have a defined middle ground. We feel betrayed when the senator from our party votes for something sponsored by the other political party.

Westerners view law as an impersonal set of norms that apply equally to all humans. Lying is wrong, not because it undermines a relationship, but because it violates a universal principle. The offender is guilty of breaking the law and must be punished, even if punishment destroys relationships and harms other innocent people. We define justice and righteousness as living within the law, not as living in harmony with others.⁵

This bounded-set view of reality is based on a Greek worldview. Greek philosophers were interested in the intrinsic nature of things and the ultimate, unchanging structure of reality.⁶ Our American way of defining our world as sharply defined categories comes to us from the Greeks.

We can picture bounded-set thinking by highlighting the boundaries. There will be a center, a definition, a value that brings a person or thing into the category, but it is the boundary that marks the entry and exit point. The boundary determines belonging.

We can picture bounded-set thinking by highlighting the boundaries.



We can picture a bounded set like this:

The key to understanding the bounded set is determining on which side of the boundary an object or person is. Often the boundary overshadows the center.

The Impact of Bounded-Set Thinking on the Christian

Because we cannot look into the hearts of people to know if they are Christian, our Western bounded-set way of thinking focuses on external things. Our attitude toward Christian instruction is often a test of orthodoxy. Can the potential Christian recite the proper doctrines? However, then we run into the problem of knowing and establishing the boundary. Is it enough to be able to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed? How much of the creed must the potential Christian be able to explain? Must they know and be able to recite and explain the whole of the Catechism? Just where is that boundary?

However, with bounded-set thinking, it is important to maintain the boundary. Without clear boundaries, it is feared the church will become polluted. We must be sure of who is a Christian and who is not. You are one or the other. There is no in-between. There is no "on-the-way."

We see the impact of bounded-set thinking in many of the church practices, such as practices related to adult baptism, confirmation, worship, and outreach. The Lutheran Confessions are biblical in how these topics are presented; however, I believe our practice is often shaped by our cultural background, which can cloud the doctrine.

We profess that Baptism is clearly a gift God gives (cf. Article IX of Augsburg Confession and Apology). Children should be baptized because it is God who creates faith and through Baptism gives the Holy Spirit. Yet, when an adult acknowledges the gift of faith, our usual practice is to require a lengthy period of instruction before Baptism. The adult must cross the intellectual boundary before earning the "gift" of baptism.

There is a broad misunderstanding among many of how one becomes a Christian—so deeply rooted in individuals, cultures and religions is the idea that we have "free will" in spiritual matters and must thus participate in our salvation by doing something, even if merely making a decision for Jesus. But wherever man must do something to be saved, salvation is rendered uncertain because the human mind, will and actions are always unstable, and such ideas are diametrically opposed to the cardinal teaching of the New Testament, that salvation is a "gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).⁷

In many cases confirmation practices are also perceived as crossing an intellectual boundary. The reward for amassing the correct information is the privilege of receiving the Lord's Supper.

May my 42-year-old handicapped son receive the Lord's Supper? He confesses a faith in Jesus but doesn't have the mental ability to verbalize much in the way of correct doctrine. Our bounded-set way of thinking would rule him ineligible. Does God want to use the Lord's Supper to strengthen my son's faith or should he be denied this gift because he hasn't earned it?

Our worship is also often shaped by our culture's bounded-set way of thinking. We often draw thick, clear boundaries describing what is proper worship. While teaching a university course on the New Testament, I explained to students that the prayer postures described in the Bible are hands raised or lying prostrate. Without raising a hand, a student exclaimed, "In the Bible Jesus says, 'When you pray, fold your hands and say: Our Father . . .'" Calmly, I asked that student to find that quote for me in Scripture.

Our worship must communicate correct biblical doctrine; however, often the worship boundary we are guarding is our tradition.

While working in Papua New Guinea, I discovered that just as there is no world-wide language, there is no world-wide music. What a sound means in one culture can mean something very different in another culture. For the Duna people, what I thought to be a happy tune was sad; and what I thought was a sad tune, for them was a happy tune. Martin Luther apparently had the same experience when dealing with another culture. Luther said:

I hate to see Latin notes set over the German words. I told the publisher what the German manner of singing is. That is what I will introduce here.⁸

Certainly, our worship must communicate correct biblical doctrine; however, often the worship boundary we are guarding is our tradition. Martin Luther was not concerned about guarding boundaries. (Also, note that he wasn't sure all of the audience was Christian.)

But such orders are needed for those who are still becoming Christians. . . . They (orders of worship) are essential for the immature and the young who must be trained and educated in Scripture and God's Word daily so that they may become familiar with the Bible, grounded, well versed, and skilled in it, ready to defend their faith and in due time to teach others and to increase the kingdom of Christ. For such, one must read, sing, preach, write and compose. And if it would help matters along, I would have all the bells pealing, and all the organs playing, and have everything ring that can make a sound.⁹

Luther was trying to knock down the boundary walls of tradition in favor of communicating the Word of God in ways his people could best understand.

The attitude of Luther toward worship transfers well to outreach. Luther said that orders of worship could be different "when, where and how you find it to be practical and useful."¹⁰ From the context, it is obvious that Luther thought an order of service useful when the order of worship accurately communicates the Word of God.

Our boundary setting also hampers our outreach communication. Often, we do not communicate the Word of God effectively to people because we evaluate them

according to our own cultural criteria or understanding. Whether the boundaries we set are conscious or unconscious, we set them via a reward/cost analysis. Our culture teaches us that it is very unwise to establish or continue a relationship that will cost us more than the rewards it brings.

Most often in relating to people we want to use our way of communicating, our form of friendship, our customs for interacting. The apostle Paul's "all things to all people in order to win some" costs too much. And, if the person would like to join us in worship, it must be using our forms, our music, our traditions. If the worship practice is difficult for us, we quickly identify it as outside the boundary.

The Movement from Centered Set (Hebrew) to Bounded Set (Greek) in the Church

Tracing the history of the movement of the Christian Church from centered-set to bounded-set thinking is outside the scope this paper. I will, however, point to a few practices that may be helpful to our discussion.

The practices of the Jewish religious leaders of New Testament times show the influences of Greek bounded-set thinking. The emphasis on rules is quite clear. (How many steps are allowed on the Sabbath?) Jesus' reply to the synagogue ruler who objected to His healing on the Sabbath is informative (Lk 13:10–17). Jesus points to a relationship that the Jews would understand when he calls the woman a daughter of Abraham, while at the same time showing the hypocrisy of their application of rules.

As the church grew and became more formal, it also took on many of the forms of the culture around it. By the third century, the church had left behind its Jewish context. For a church more and more influenced by the Greco-Roman culture, this meant more bounded-set thinking. This change in thinking is seen in the practices related to adult Baptism.

As the church grew and became more formal, it also took on many of the forms of the culture around it.

Things had changed by the beginning of the third century. Origen explains that after an initial testing period, future Christians entered the catechumenate, during which they received instruction and practiced the Christian life; then, when they had shown that they were sufficiently prepared, they took the second step and received direct preparation for baptism.¹¹

The catechumenate generally lasted three years. Preparation for Baptism began after the three-year catechumenate "with an examination of how far each catechumen has led a Christian life during the catechumenate."¹²

If the rules passed down to us in historical documents were followed, the examination was presided over by the bishop. He would ask the godparent and neighbors of each candidate: “Does he lead a good life? Does he obey his parents? Is he a drunkard or a liar? If the person was accepted, the bishop approved the person for baptism. If denied, the bishop would say: ‘Let him amend his life and when he has done so, let him then approach the baptismal font.’”¹³ Some people were automatically excluded from Baptism because of their occupation.

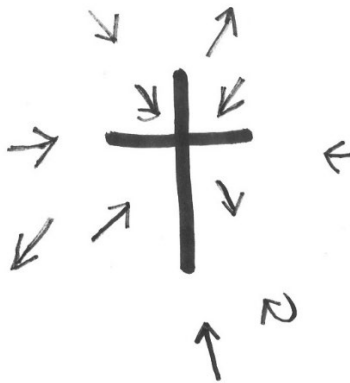
Relationship-Oriented Cultures

Relationship-oriented cultures think in terms of a Centered Set.

A centered set is created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of things to that center. Things related to the center belong to the set, and those not related to the center do not. Kinship groups, such as families, clans, tribes, are relational categories. The Smith family consists of John and Mary Smith, who define the family, as well as their children, grandchildren, and those brought into the family through marriage or adoption; all bear some relationship to John and Mary Smith.¹⁴

The worldview of Scripture, I believe, is based primarily on a centered-set approach to reality. Relationships are at the heart of its message: our relationship to God, as well as our relationships, therefore, to one another. This is the essential message that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to redeem it. This is the message of Paul in Galatians when he argues that the heart of Christianity is our relationship to God, not the keeping of the Law. The Bible is primarily a book about the history of relationships, not a treatise on the intrinsic nature and operations of reality.¹⁵

A Centered Set can be pictured like this:



While centered sets are not created by drawing boundaries, they do have sharp boundaries that separate things inside the set from those outside it—between things related to or moving towards the center and those that are not.

Centered sets are well formed, just like bounded sets. They are formed by defining the center and any relationship to it. The boundaries then emerge automatically. Things related to the center naturally separate themselves from things that are not.

In centered-set thinking, greater emphasis is placed on the center and relationships than on maintaining a boundary, because there is no need to maintain the boundary in order to maintain the set.¹⁶

In the illustration above, it is easy to determine which arrows are moving toward the center and which are moving away from the center. There is also an arrow that has changed directions. It therefore is now related to the center; it was converted.

Relationship in the Old Testament

Why do the Old Testament writers say that the Law is beautiful when it is the Law that accuses us of sin and condemns us (Ps 119:97)? God is a God of grace. The Law certainly condemns us because of our sin; however, God, in His loving way, gave the Law to His people to show them His intentions for them. The Law is a description of the perfect life. The Law tells us of the wonderful life God intended for us. Keeping the Law helps us to avoid hurting ourselves and others. Most of all, we keep the Law because of our relationship to God. We trust that God is correct in telling us this is the way to live.

Moses instructs the people of Israel in the consequences of not living according to God's plan for life. Physical, psychological, and material destruction come about when we break the relationship with God, our center. Moses also points out what happens when the relationship is restored.

The Lord will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut 30:10).

In the Old Testament, obeying and relationship are thought of as a combination. Obedience happens because of one's relationship. The Law is beautiful when it is observed as God's plan for life, as God's loving guidance keeping us from hurting ourselves and hurting our relationship with God.

Relationship in the New Testament

The New Testament also follows the centered-set relationship cultural pattern. Paul uses the relational term reconciliation to show our relationship to God in Christ.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:17–21).

Like the Old Testament, the New Testament sees a positive side to God's Law. In Matthew 18, we read of the lengths to which Jesus would like us to go to restore a right relationship with another person. We are applying Law, but the purpose is to restore the relationship. Paul asks the church in Corinth to follow the instructions in Matthew 18 (1 Cor 5:1–5). The obvious purpose was to restore the fallen Christian (2 Cor 2:5–8).

Following the pattern of the Old Testament, in the New Testament, we are shown the close correlation between relationship and obedience. Jesus says, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (Jn 14:15). By obeying, we are showing we trust that God knows life and what is best in life. Because God created human beings, we trust God's instructions as to how human beings ought to live.

We Love Because God First Loved Us!

"We love because God first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19) is a wonderful summary of the impact of God's relationship with us, His children. It is also an excellent starting point to describe outreach and worship in the Centered-Set Relational Church. Outreach is motivated and empowered by God's love for us. Worship is a recognition and celebration of God's love for us.

Outreach is motivated
and empowered by
God's love for us.
Worship is a recognition
and celebration of
God's love for us.

Because public worship is usually when and where Christians are most noticed and most visible to the public, there ought to be a relationship between outreach and worship. There is also a natural relationship between outreach and worship, because in worship we celebrate the love of God that motivates and empowers us to love others.

Not only are we returned to the proper relationship with God through Christ, we are also given a relationship responsibility (2 Cor 5:17–21). We are to relate to unrestored people so that we can communicate the message of God, which can restore their relationship with God.

Paul describes the work of an ambassador when he explains his outreach methods to the Corinthian Christians. Paul says:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law though I myself am not under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings (1 Cor 9:19–23).

Paul adjusts his way of relating in order to best communicate the love of God in Christ to the people with whom he is communicating.

Paul apparently is following Jesus’ instructions. “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Mt 5:41). The advice of Jesus is meant to change the dynamic of a relationship. Jesus wants you to try to change the attitude of the person imposing their will on you. A positive relationship makes communicating the love of God in Christ more probable.

The relationship-oriented church concentrates on building relationships in both outreach and worship. Obviously, to communicate well, you must make the adjustments Paul modeled. Because God sent His Son into our world, we are empowered to adjust to the cultural world of those who need to hear the message of God’s love in Christ.

As Luther modeled, we ought to also adjust our worship forms for those who need the most help. Our worship forms should be easily understood by new and potential Christians.

Mature Christians are empowered by God’s Spirit to make cultural adjustments. We love because God first loved us. Cultural adjustments to language, forms of music, and worship postures need to be made so that new and potential Christians can exclaim, “Surely God is here!” (1 Cor 14:23–25).

The relationship-oriented church concentrates on building relationships in both outreach and worship. . . . Our worship forms should be easily understood by new and potential Christians.

We need to modernize our language, we need to use music our people understand, we need to adjust worship to meet the needs of the people in front of us; but that adjustment must be for the sake of hearing and understanding Scripture, not for entertainment or simply to be modern. And, following Paul's advice to the Corinthians, we need always to keep in mind the potential Christian we want to join us.

A Relational Approach to Right Doctrine

In many places in the New Testament we find the leaders of the church dealing with those who taught false doctrine. Certainly, we must deal strenuously with those who persist in weakening the faith of Christians or even leading them away from a relationship with Christ. However, we ought always to start dealing with the false or inadequate teaching by following the Priscilla/Aquila model in Acts 18:24–28. Frontal attacks from a distance by uninvolved people is certainly not modeled in the New Testament.

Peter dealt with false teachers. His guidance is a blessing for the church today.

His [Jesus'] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is near-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pt 1:5–11).

We see in Peter's advice a centered-set way of thinking. Peter's focus is on relationship to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He tells his readers how to strengthen and preserve that God-given relationship.

Ambassadors for Christ

As individuals, as congregations and as a church body, we need to fight against the tendencies forwarded by our American cultural bounded-set thinking, returning to a more biblical centered-set way of thinking, focused on relationship. This adjustment will help bring our practice into conformity with our doctrine.

Endnotes

- ¹ The story was adapted from Patricia McGeer's "Johnny Lingo's Eight Cow Wife," *Reader's Digest* (February 1988): 138–141.
- ² Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 113.
- ³ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 113–114.
- ⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 114.
- ⁵ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 114–115.
- ⁶ E. J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture: Pythagoras to Newton*, trans. C. D. Dikshoorn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), chapter 2.
- ⁷ Matthew C. Harrison, "New CTCR report: 'An Inexpressible Treasure: The Theology and Practice of Holy Baptism,'" email from the LCMS Office of the President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 14, 2019.
- ⁸ Martin Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service" in *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53 ed. Helmut T. Lehmann and Ulrich S. Leopold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 53–54.
- ⁹ Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," 62.
- ¹⁰ Luther, "The German Mass and Order of Service," 61.
- ¹¹ Jean Danielou, *The Christian Centuries: A New History of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1, "The First Six Hundred Years" (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 159.
- ¹² Danielou, *The Christian Centuries*, 160.
- ¹³ William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1953), 53.
- ¹⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 23.
- ¹⁵ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 134.
- ¹⁶ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 124.