

# What's an Adventist, Anyway? *Bounded Sets Versus Centered Sets* | BY GIAMPIERO VASSALLO

There are a lot of Adventists around. We happen to be wandering on nearly every speck of soil that covers our planet. However, in Europe—especially in the Western part—we are not as well distributed as in other parts of the world.

But, with more than seventeen million of us, Adventists come in every shade—and I don't mean just of skin color, different social strata, different ages, or things like that.

There are—whether we believe it or not—different types of Adventists, although some try to categorize them and call them conservatives, progressives, traditionalists, liberals, moderates, or even offshoots.

When I was studying at Newbold College of Higher Education, some would differentiate between students and professors who study and teach at different schools. We had people from fifty-five nations at Newbold; I know because I worked in its student association. One could observe Adventists from Africa, South America, Western Europe, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, North America, Australia, the Caribbean, India, China, Korea, and so on. Although they were all Adventists, they were different—and those who were *not* different somehow ceased to be, for example, fully African or Asian.

## Early Problems

When the early church of the apostles was faced with the problem of plurality regarding Jewish Christians versus non-Jewish Christians, they had to settle the dispute somehow, as we read in Acts 15. They basically accepted variety, based on certain commonalities.

The apostle Paul wrote, “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor. 12:14 NIV).

But don't differences in opinions, theological outlooks, behavioral patterns, make it difficult to come up



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with the categories of *Christian* or *Adventist*? What's an Adventist, anyway?<sup>1</sup>

## Types of Categories

The first step is to take a closer look at how we form categories. Note that the way we think has a lot to do with the way that our ancestors thought. That is what determines the way we build categories such as *Christian* or *Adventist* in our mind.

Consider categories in relation to counting. For example, imagine that one, two, and three belong to a category, and four, five and six belong to another category. Set theory, which is related to categorization, helps us understand our basic question. I want to demonstrate this by discussing two ways to form categories.

One kind of category is called an intrinsic set, because it is formed on the basis of the essential nature of the members themselves. We will call it simply the bounded

set. As an example, consider an apple. What's an apple? An apple is a red, yellow, or green edible round fruit of a certain tree. We have just defined the category *apple* according to a bounded set.

The other kind of category is called an extrinsic set, or a centered set, because it is based on its members' relationships to each other or to a reference point. Examples include words like father, mother, son, and daughter. These are relational words. You become a father, a mother, a son, or a daughter, because you are in a certain relationship with another person.

## Bounded Sets

A nineteenth-century mathematician defined a bounded set as a collection of objects that can be regarded as a single entity or as a whole if the objects share properties that define a whole. So, using the previous example, all apples share properties that make them apples in a bounded set.

## Characteristics of Bounded Sets

I will show the characteristics of a certain set, point to a culture that has incorporated this kind of set thinking, show how an Adventist would be defined in that way, and then show how the Adventist Church and its mission would function in that particular way. In the end, I will propose which way is more biblical.

Bounded sets have five characteristics:

1. They create a category by listing the essential characteristics an object must have to belong to the set.
2. The category is defined by a clear boundary. Either a fruit is an apple or not. The central question here is whether an object is inside or outside the category.
3. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics. All apples are 100 percent apple.
4. Bounded sets are static sets. An apple is an apple, no matter if it is ripe or rotten.
5. Bounded sets are built in terms of unchanging, universal, abstract categories. That leads to our abstract-analytical approach to logic.

## Western Culture as a Bounded Set

We in the West are most familiar with bounded sets. A dog is a dog and that's that, because all dogs share certain characteristics. Bounded sets are so fundamental to our sense of order. We want uniform categories. For example, in the kitchen we put forks in the fork section, knives in the knife section, and spoons in the spoon section.

It is important to maintain boundaries in a bounded-set world; otherwise, categories begin to disintegrate and chaos sets in. In the West, we do this by using borders. For example, we have frames around pictures, windows, doors, and blackboards. Men wear ties to cover the joining of the fabric down the front of their dress shirts. We edge our sidewalks so that the grass does not creep onto the cement. We use curbs to mark the edges of the street. On our highways we have solid lines to separate traffic lanes and to differentiate between traffic lanes and highway shoulders.

Particularly in America, people tend to think in terms of opposites: good versus bad, rich versus poor, friends versus enemies.

Where does the idea of bounded sets come from? If you're familiar with the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," then you know: it comes from the ancient Greeks, and is based on a Greek worldview. Greek philosophers were interested in the intrinsic nature of things, and the ultimate, unchanging structure of reality, which they described in terms of sharply defined categories.

We have categories of plants, animals, diseases, kinship systems, personality types, and whatnot, as if these categories form universal types. We are also concerned about objectivity; subjectivity, a person's involvement in what is known, is seen as contamination. We cannot form categories with feelings, values, or drive, because they all have to do with relationships.

Another issue is our attitude to law. Law is something impersonal, a set of norms that applies equally to all humans. Lying is of course

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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 the 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.

### **Adventists as a Bounded Set**

It's important to understand ourselves as Westerners, because that forms our understanding of what it means to be an Adventist in this cultural region.

How could we define an Adventist according to the bounded-set paradigm?

1. Since we cannot really look inside a person, we have to use external characteristics that we can see or hear, in order to call someone an Adventist. It would mean that a person has gone through a verbal affirmation of the 28 fundamental beliefs of Adventism—all of them. In addition, we need to see evidence of a changed life—no alcohol, no smoking, no pork, etc.
2. In a bounded set, we have to draw and maintain a sharp line between Adventists and non-Adventists, because it is critical to maintaining the category *Adventist*.
3. All Adventists would be the same, whether they are older, experienced Adventists or younger converts. Spiritual maturity is not essential, as someone is either 100 percent Adventist or not.
4. Conversion would be the one essential experience required in order to cross the boundary between non-Adventist and Adventist. We would expect all believers to enter by the same door, share the same basic theological doctrines, and behave in the same basic way.
5. An Adventist Christian would be seen as someone that has been declared as such. The intrinsic nature of the person as an Adventist is what counts.

### **Church as a Bounded Set**

Of course, a bounded-set mindset affects our view and organization of our church.

1. Church would be a gathering of Adventists, whereby its unity would be based on uniformity—all Adventists would think and act alike. Walls between Adventists and other denominations would be high, because boundaries define the ultimate nature of reality. Bounded-set churches act like clubs, which are voluntary associations of like-minded people who share a common interest: meeting specific personal needs. The church would view theology as ultimate, universal, unchanging truth, and would define it as a set of doctrines. It would divorce theology from the historical and cultural contexts in which it was originally formulated.
2. We would take care to maintain boundaries, meaning clear membership rolls and that only members of the congregation would be allowed in business meetings and church offices.
3. We would take a democratic approach to church membership. All members—no matter how mature—would have an equal say in running the church. Its formal organization would be mechanical. We would look for clearly defined roles, explicit rules, well-planned programs, management by objectives, and performance measured in quantitative terms and bottom lines.
4. We would stress evangelism as the major task of the church, which means getting people into our category. Discipling new converts would not be as essential to the central task of bringing people into the Adventist fold.
5. Building the church would be an end in itself. Gatherings are for maintaining the identity of the church and its organization. Because identity is intrinsic—part of the essential structure—the greatest danger would be the worship of the group, of the corporate self.

## Missions and Bounded Sets

Bounded-set thinking also has repercussions for our view of missions.

1. We would, of course, seek to win the lost to Christ, but would be careful not to baptize them until they know all about our beliefs and behave in the right way.
2. We would look at other denominations and religions as also being bounded sets. Therefore, we would stress the differences and tend to see everything in all the others as fundamentally wrong or pagan. We would fear incorporating the ideas and practices of others into our Adventist system, because it could compromise our uniqueness.
3. Adventism would mean doing things in a certain way. Those we won over would also need to follow our Western way.
4. Because our theological positions would be carved in stone, prospective native leaders would need to first be thoroughly educated. Therefore, we would be slow to appoint native leaders to positions of authority.

## Centered Sets

Centered sets are an alternative way of creating the category *Adventist*. A category in a centered set is not defined by intrinsic characteristics, but by extrinsic characteristics. This means that we group things on the basis of how they relate to other things, not what they are in and of themselves.

## Characteristics of Centered Sets

A centered set is created by defining a center and the relationship of things to that center. Things related to that center belong to the set, and those that are unrelated do not.

Centered sets have sharp boundaries, but are not created by drawing boundaries. It all depends on how things are related or how they are moving toward or away from the center.

Two things are important in a centered set: membership, which is always full, and distance from the center. There is one type of change in a centered set: you either start heading toward the center or you start heading away from it.

## Hebrew Culture as a Centered Set

In the Bible, we find that the Hebrew worldview of the prophets and of Christ was essentially extrinsic, based on relationships.

The Greeks, as I noted, viewed God in intrinsic terms, as supernatural, omnipotent, and omnipresent.

The Israelites, in contrast, knew God in relational terms, as Creator, Judge, and Lord. They also referred to him as “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, our forefathers.” During the Exodus, people camped around the tabernacle where God dwelt. In Palestine, people came three times a year to the “house of the Lord.”

The Israelites saw themselves as people in a covenant relationship with God, and therefore as people in community. They were to marry insiders, not outsiders. The blessings of the faithful, and the punishments of the unfaithful, were passed on to their descendants. The primary values were relational in character: justice, shalom (peace), love, and mercy.

The teachings of Christ and Paul also emphasize our relationships with God and to one another. Jesus said, “But you know him for he lives with you and will be in you” (John 14:17b). Paul wrote, “I want to know Christ” (Phil. 3:10).

They did not talk about an objective knowledge of God, but about knowing him intimately as one person knows another. The New Testament writers must be understood within that Hebrew relational worldview, rather than the Greek structural worldview.

## Adventists as a Centered Set

It would be very interesting to see what happens when we look at being an Adventist within that centered-set view.

1. An Adventist would be defined as having Jesus Christ and the biblical teachings about him at the center of their lives. Private agreement with biblical facts would not be enough. There would be a personal relationship to Jesus, and all his teachings would be understood in terms of that relationship. An Adventist in this way lives in a

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- covenant relationship with Jesus and other Adventists. It is not just about a contract to join forces to accomplish a task.
2. Yes, there would be clear separation between Adventists and non-Adventists. The emphasis, however, would be on exhorting people to follow Christ according to Adventism's understanding, rather than on excluding others, in order to preserve the purity of the set. Salvation would be open to everyone, no matter who they are, what they know, or what baggage they brought with them, if they became followers of Jesus Christ.
  3. There would be a recognition of variation among Adventists. Some are closer to Christ than others. Some understand the amazing things about salvation that Adventism has discovered. But we are all called to grow in the fullness of Christ.
  4. There are two important types of change that can take place within this kind of understanding. The first is conversion—that means entering or leaving the set. That is the turning around, the turning away from evil and turning to righteousness, heading in a new direction: to Jesus and his teachings. The second change is the movement toward the center, or the growth in the relationship to Christ. An Adventist is not a finished product the moment that he or she is converted. Sanctification cannot be separated from justification. They go on throughout life. Evangelism and discipleship are connected

and are of equal importance. Every decision an Adventist makes in life moves him or her toward Christ or away from him.

### Church as a Centered Set

How would church look in a centered set?

1. The church would be defined by its center: Jesus Christ and the Adventist understanding about him. It would be an Adventist church that in all its beliefs and practices had Jesus at its center. Every Adventist doctrine and Adventist lifestyle would have its ultimate purpose in Christ. A relationship to him would define membership. Doctrines and behavior would follow within that relationship. Church would be a real fellowship of the same Lord. We could not exclude from the congregation those who were true disciples but who differed from us in race, class, gender, or theological views. Because membership would not be at stake, differences in personality, language, culture, and worship style would be affirmed so long as they did not divide or discredit the family. The church would focus on people and relationships of love and mutual submission, more than on programs and the maintenance of order. In running the church, we would seek consensus and mediate conflicts. We would also encourage one another to use our spiritual gifts creatively, rather than demand conformity to dead tradition.
2. There would be a clear distinction between Adventists and non-Adventists, but also recognition of the priesthood of all believers. However, we would recognize differences in spiritual maturity—depending on one's closeness to the center. We would recognize spiritually mature persons as leaders, and hold them accountable, while on the other hand we would be more tolerant of young believers. Every voice would be heard, but not all voices would carry equal weight. Yes, there would be church discipline, but its goal would be restoration and not throwing out the sinner.
3. Evangelism would go hand in hand with discipling new believers, encouraging people

not only to privately agree with the truth, but also to surrender to the truth.

4. The primary task of the church would be to uphold Christ, so that he might draw all people to him. Its second task would be to build a community of faith that incorporates new believers, and manifests Christ's reign on earth, awaiting the return of their Lord for the completion of his reign. Its third task would be to invite people to follow Christ according to the eternal gospel, and to join the Adventist Church as God's special people in the end time. Theology would be a task not just for specialists, but also for the whole worldwide community, and we would learn from the insights of each other.
5. The greatest danger to this kind of church would be worshipping other things or people that start to become the center, e.g., the leader.

### Missions and Centered Sets

How would such a centered set approach work in missions?

1. We would affirm the uniqueness of Christ and his truth. Our primary aim would be to invite people to follow the truth, to follow Christ and the wonderful teachings about him as we as Adventists have the privilege to understand them, and not to prove that other beliefs are false. Personal testimony would be more important than arguing the superiority of Adventism.
2. We would baptize those who make a profession of faith and not wait until they show signs of perfection.
3. We would recognize that evangelism involves both a point of decision and a process of growth.
4. We would turn over leadership to national leaders from the beginning, and not wait until they received a doctorate in theology at an Adventist institution. We would choose natural leaders who demonstrate the power of God in their lives. For long-term direction we would, of course, train them as theologians and other leaders.

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## Conclusion

We have seen two different ways of looking at the Adventist category in terms of the believer, the church, and its mission. These differences are based on specific ways of thinking which are prevalent in different cultures. Which way is the better way?

We must acknowledge that this set theory can help us understand how our cultures shape the way we interpret scripture and carry out our mission. But the question in the end is, what is reality according to divine revelation?

It is true that people have found Jesus and salvation in each of these two sets. Churches have been built in bounded-set cultures and in centered-set cultures. But these two different worldviews do not equally communicate the essential message of the gospel. Adventism was founded in a culture that was very strong in bounded-set thinking. It is important, however, to look at the Bible's worldview, because in the end it was the Bible that brought about Adventism; only a biblical worldview can prevent Adventism from a distorted theology that skews our lives of faith and weakens our mission to the lost. In knowing this, we can come to a few conclusions, as follow.

If we are not clear about our categories, we will often talk past each other, and our disagreements will arise from different subconscious presuppositions, rather than different theologies.

In studying the Bible with set theories in mind, we will find that scripture is primarily based on a centered-set approach to reality. Relationships are at the heart of its message, our relationship with God, and our relationships with one another. The Bible is primarily a book about the history of relationships, not a lecture on the intrinsic nature and operations of reality.

Having said that, there are two questions that arise.

First, how do we know in a centered-set approach when a person is really an Adventist? God looks at the heart, but we have only

external criteria. It is a limitation of our human perception. It is true that we can see spiritual realities through God's revelation, but—as Paul said—only through a glass darkly. We do not see fully as he does. Somehow we must contend with this situation for now.

The second question is, how can we organize a church on centered-set principles? This is a problem for us, not just because we are in the West and emphasize institutional order and planning. As Adventists in a world church we are confined in an organizational structure that is built on bounded-set principles—it was founded in America!

It is not an easy thing to accomplish, but let me simply state it: we must make people more important than programs, give relationships priority over order and cleanliness, and spend more time in prayer than in planning. We can learn this from churches in relationally oriented societies.

When we have realized how our hidden worldview shapes our understanding of scripture and how this exercises a subtle control over our thoughts, we can try to look at scripture with new eyes and let it speak to us in new ways. Then we can begin to reshape our worldview and make it more biblical.

Amen! ■

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## References

1. My discussion is based on the work of a missionary-anthropologist and professor emeritus of missions, Paul Hiebert. For more information, see Hiebert's book, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).