

**What is a “Christian?”**  
Kazakhstan Evangelical Christian Seminary  
Pastor Mark Blair  
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(Based on the article “The Category Christian in the Mission Task” by Paul G. Hiebert in “Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues,” Baker Books, 1994.)

Can Ahkmet, an illiterate man in a village where the Good News has never been preached, become a believer after hearing the message for the first time ever? When does a person really become a Christian?

A traveling preacher has told Ahkmet about a god he has never heard of, a son of this god, and this son’s death and resurrection, and he decides to follow this new god.

The preacher leaves the village and Ahkmet remains with many questions.

- Who is this god’s wife which bore him this son?
- Should he continue to fear the spirits of his ancestors?
- Should he attend prayers at the local mosque? Can he be a Muslim at the same time he follows this new god and his son?
- Should he tell his family about this god and his son?
- What about Ahkmet’s occasional practice of drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes?
- Will the traveling preacher return and tell him more about this god?

**Four Categories to Help us Understand - “What is a Christian?”**

**Natural Categories (intrinsic)** - Things grouped together because of their nature. All apples are “round, red or yellow fruits from apple trees.” All oranges come from orange trees. These categories come from the essential nature of their members.

**Relational Categories (extrinsic)** - Members belong by their relationship to something or someone. A man and woman can be brother and sister by being children of the same mother and father.

**Well-formed categories (bounded)** - Either the item belongs in the category or it does not. There is a clear, sharp boundary between what is inside and outside of the category. An apple cannot be an orange, it is one or the other.

**Fuzzy categories (not distinct)** - One category blends into another. Days turn into nights, and a mountain becomes a plain without clear points of beginning and ending.

## Natural Well-formed categories (bounded)

### Characteristics of Natural Well-formed categories (bounded)

1. Essential characteristics are always present. For example, an apple is always 1) rounded, 2) edible, 3) red, green, or yellow, and 4) the fruit of an apple tree. If something meets these requirements, it is an apple.
2. Clear boundaries are always present. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. Something cannot be 70 per cent apple and 30 per cent orange. If you found an orange in an apple orchard, it would not make it an apple.
3. Uniform characteristics are found in all members of the category. All apples are 100 per cent apple. One apple cannot be more apple than another. Sizes, shapes, and varieties may vary, but all apples are apples.
4. Unchanging nature of the items in the category. An apple is an apple all the time whether it is green, ripe, or rotten. Once it is an apple it does not change. The only change is when it turns from a flower to an apple, and when it is eaten.

### Examples of Natural Well-formed categories (bounded)

1. These categories are the basic “building-blocks” of our reality - the way we organize our world: ex. Apples, oranges, pens, pencils, dogs, cats. There are no half dogs and half cats.
2. We like order in our world, we have separate places for cars (streets) and pedestrians (sidewalks). We paint our walls one color and our floors another color. We eat soup with a spoon, not a fork.
3. Our music has precise scales and notes which must be played correctly to be music.
4. A room is considered “unclean” if dirt and papers are scattered around. Picking up the dirt and organizing the papers makes a room “clean.” Clean is more a matter of “order” than sanitation.
5. Modern science has created taxonomies of plants and animals to categorize everything according to its kind.

### “The Christian” according to Natural Well-formed categories (bounded)

1. We can only identify a person by what we see and hear, we cannot look into their hearts. We measure what the person believes and how the person behaves, their character and their confession.

2. We draw a sharp boundary between Christians and non-Christians, a person cannot be both, they must be one or the other.
3. All Christians are essentially the same, whether young or old. Once a person is a Christian, they are 100 per cent Christian forever.
4. Conversion is the most important event, the act of becoming a Christian. This is the point the person moves from being a non-Christian to becoming a Christian. Salvation is essential, discipleship is optional.
5. A Christian is one declared righteous by God, they are now not guilty of their sin.

"The Church" according to Natural Well-formed categories (bounded)

1. Churches are gatherings of believers, they are united in their doctrines and their behaviors. Churches with other doctrines and behaviors are considered "other categories." Walls between churches and denominations are important because they define who belongs to each group.
2. Clear boundaries must be maintained. It is of vital importance to know who is a "member" and who is a "non-member." Only "members" can fully participate in the life of the church.
3. Membership in the church is like a democracy. All members are equal in their importance, because all are 100 per cent Christian. There are clear rules and guidelines for the operation of the Church. It functions like a state or corporation.
4. Evangelism is the major work of the church. Conversion is the way people enter the church. Once they are inside the church, there is no major change in their status, once a Christian, always a Christian.
5. Establishing the church is the end goal. Once the church is established the members must work hard to maintain the boundaries, keep the traditions, and support the organization from any outside corruption.

"The Christian Mission" according to Natural Well-formed categories (bounded)

1. We seek to turn people from being unbelievers to believers, but we must not baptize them until they have correct belief and behavior according to the church's standards.
2. Each religion is a well-formed category. Everything in the church is true, everything in any other religion is false and pagan. Therefore, we must not incorporate any ideas from these other religions into our church, to do so would compromise our beliefs.

3. When a church is introduced from one culture to another, the new church should have the belief and behavior of the “mother” church.
4. Native leaders must be trained to strictly maintain beliefs and behavior of the church. We should be slow to appoint and approve native leaders to make sure they will not compromise or weaken the church.

### Natural Fuzzy Categories (intrinsic)

#### Characteristics of Natural Fuzzy Categories (intrinsic)

1. Like bounded categories, membership here is based on what a member is in itself. An apple is an apple because of what it is in itself, not because of its relationships.
2. This category is “fuzzy,” something may be only 30 per cent or 55 per cent in the category; nothing in the categories are sharp and distinct.
3. Because of these “fuzzy” boundaries, something may belong to more than one category at one time. A paint may be a mixture of several color pigments. A person may be half Kazakh, and half Russian.
4. Change in this category comes by degrees, like day slowly turns into night. The process may be rapid or slow, but the boundary remains “fuzzy.”
5. In the “fuzzy” world, things are not sharply divided but connected to one another. Instead of considering the sharp division between apples and oranges, both are looked at as fruits. Instead of thinking of the great differences between Kazakhs and Russians, both are looked at as people.

#### Examples of Natural Fuzzy Categories (intrinsic)

1. Many people believe that one religion is as good as another. They may have some minor differences, but they are generally the same, “all paths lead to God.”
2. Drivers on the streets of Almaty use any part of the road to travel in their direction. They do not pay attention to their own lane of traffic, but move into any open space which they think will allow them to reach their destination.
3. Music of some cultures does not follow the precise scales and notes of “Western music.” Instead they produce sounds which sound strange and off-key to some listeners.

4. The landscape of many vistas in Kazakhstan is dotted with old bottles, papers, and other disposables, and not many local people seem to mind. A side walk can be considered clean if it is covered with sunflower seed shells.
5. Some cultures consider themselves “on time” for a meeting even if they are one hour later than the appointed time.

#### ”The Christian” according to Natural Fuzzy Categories (intrinsic)

1. A Christian is defined according to a list of certain beliefs and behaviors.
2. Christian faith can be measured by “degrees.” A person might believe half of the doctrines of the faith and be considered half-Christian.
3. Conversion is not considered a decisive event. Normally conversion is a gradual movement comprised of several small decisions made along the way. There is not just one point where a person clearly becomes a Christian.
4. There is no sharp boundary between Christians and non-Christians. People could belong to more than one religion at the same time. They would not think that any one religion has an exclusive claim to God.
5. There is little emphasis on evangelism. There would be sharing and teaching about Christianity, but no demand to move from one religion to another.

#### ”The Church” according to Natural Fuzzy Categories (intrinsic)

1. Churches have “creeds” and practices which are the standard expectations to be a believer. These standards are universal and unchanging. Those who accept all these are full Christians, those who accept half would be considered half-Christians.
2. There are no sharp boundaries for the church, such as a membership list. They would encourage many people of various beliefs and practices to come to the church. There is little sharp differentiation between other Christian groups and one’s own church.
3. Churches accept great diversity on matters of faith and practice. Believers are helped to understand and accept the church’s teachings. There is a distinction between full believers and those who are in the process of conversion. Leaders are required to define and defend right doctrine and right behavior. There is a willingness to have discussions with believers from other Christian churches and even other religions.
4. Evangelism is conducted mainly through dialogue and education instead of demanding that people be converted.

5. One danger of such a church is that it would stress unity and oneness so much that eventually they have no strong convictions about the truths of Scripture. Unity would be at the expense of truth.

#### "The Christian Mission" according to Natural Fuzzy Categories (intrinsic)

1. According to this thinking, there is no sharp line between Christianity and other religions. There is less emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ as the only way of salvation.
2. Such churches would not stress the preaching of the gospel. They would not attack another religion as false, but encourage people to find truth in their own religions. They would encourage dialogue to establish the common ground of their religions. They think all religions meet the same basic human needs.
3. People are encouraged to find "Christ" in their own religions; the Isa of Islam or the Jesus of Hinduism. So for them there is no radical replacement of one religion with another, but a blending of one into the other.

#### Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic)

##### Characteristics of Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic)

1. The category is created by defining a center or reference point and the relationship of everything to this center. Whatever relates to the center belongs to the group, what ever does not relate to the center, is not in the category. All the children of Vladimir and Olga Primakov are in the group of Primakov's. They are children related to one another as brother and sister because of their connection to their mother and father. This is the same principle in geographic locations, a location may be 40 degrees north of the equator, or 30 degrees west of Greenwich, England. In science, placing a magnet in a box of sand would soon identify and pull together the iron particles. Members of this category have movement toward the center.
2. This category is not established by sharp boundaries. Anything that is related to the center is within the boundary. The boundary can be clearly seen by the orientation of the members.
3. All members of the category are equal. They all share the same function and relationship to the center. The only difference is distance from the center. Something may be close to the center, yet moving away from it. Something else may be far from the center, but moving steadily toward the center.
4. There are two types of change in this category; one is to become related to the center, the other is move closer to the center. A child of other parents can become adopted

into the Primakov family. A natural born Primakov child can reject their parents and move far away from them. These relationships are in a state of constant motion.

### Examples of Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic)

1. The Hebrew concept of God stresses His relations to us. He is known as Creator, Judge, Savior, and Lord. Greeks saw God in less relational categories like omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal. The God of both Testaments is “Emmanuel” - God with us.
2. The Hebrews saw themselves as Covenant people. They were important because of their relationship to God. They were blessed when they were faithful to their covenant. Relationships are essential like shalom (peace), justice, love, and mercy.
3. The teachings of the New Testament are addressed to believers in relationship with one another, with God as Father and Jesus as Lord, Savior, and Elder Brother. Believers are identified by their love.

### “The Christian” according to Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic)

1. Christians are those for whom Jesus is the center of their lives. Knowledge of doctrines, or practice of behaviors, does not make a person a believer – it is a living relationship with God through Jesus.
2. There is a clear separation between Christians and non-Christians. This difference is maintained by encouraging people to keep following Jesus instead of rules to preserve the purity of the church. Salvation is open to anyone who wants to turn to Jesus and follow Him.
3. There is a recognition of differences among Christians. Some are closer to Jesus by their understanding and maturity. All believers are called to keep growing closer to God.
4. There are two important changes in the life of a Christian, 1) Turning toward Jesus and 2) Growing closer to Him. Both movements may happen in many different ways, but both are necessary for true faith. Every action, thought, and decision moves a believer either closer to, or further from, Christ.

### “The Church” according to Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic)

1. The Church is defined by its center, the Jesus of Scripture. It is comprised of those who are gathered around Him to worship, serve, and obey. The primary importance is that it is a place of worship and honor to the Lord at its center. Membership is based on relationship with Him. All those with a relationship to Him are a part of His family; no matter our race, gender, or theological viewpoint.

2. We could see a clear distinction between Christians and non-Christians. And we could also see differences among Christians according to their closeness to the Lord. The center point is the person of Jesus who is defined by biblical doctrine. Doctrine defines but does not dominate the relationship. Leaders should be chosen from those who are closer to the center, and growing toward Him. All believers are important, but not all have equal authority or wisdom. The center and those who move toward Him, not the boundaries or rules, define the church.
3. Evangelism is not just having people agree to the right doctrine, but calling them to turn to Jesus and grow daily toward Him. Discipling of believers cannot be separated from evangelism, it is a necessary part.
4. The main task of the church is to “lift up Jesus” so that people could be drawn closer to Him. The secondary task is for believers to be drawn together into a relationship with one another in Him.
5. Idolatry is the greatest sin of the church. Nothing, or no one, should dare to take the center position which rightfully belongs only to God. The most subtle form of idolatry in most churches is worship of the leader.

#### ”Christian Mission” according to Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic)

1. There is a sharp difference between Christianity and other religions. Jesus is the only Lord and Savior.
2. Anyone who makes a profession of faith in Christ is eligible for baptism, and those who are baptized must be taught and encouraged to keep growing closer to Him.
3. Evangelism involves both a point of initial decision and a process of continuous, life-long, growth. All churches should study Scripture and develop their own theology for their people and culture according to the unchanging principles of the Bible.
4. Leadership of the church would be the responsibility of national leaders from the beginning. They would be selected by their close, growing, relationship with the Lord which is seen by all. These leaders would be trained to know and grow in this relationship.

#### Relational Fuzzy categories (not distinct)

#### Characteristics of Relational Fuzzy categories (not distinct)

1. Membership in a category is based on relationships to other things and the defining center.
2. The boundary is fuzzy, the defining relationships are not always clear.

3. There are two variables, 1) degrees of membership - how much has the member turned to the center?, and 2) depth of relationship - how close is a member to the center?
4. Conversion is a process of changing directions, not an instant change. This can lead to relativism with things moving in many different directions.

#### Example of Relational Fuzzy categories (not distinct)

The modern theory of evolution fits this category. All of life is seen as evolving in different directions. Everything descends from the same life force. But the boundaries between objects is fuzzy. Where does ape end and man begin?

#### "The Christian" according to Relational Fuzzy categories (not distinct)

1. Christians would be those related to Christ in one way or another. He may be Lord and Savior, Prophet, guru, or great teacher. But, no matter who he is, he is in the center point.
2. There would be no sharp dividing line between Christians and non-Christians. There would be degrees of Christians from casual followers to devoted disciples.
3. Conversion would be a small series of turns toward Christ, not one decisive step. The other variable would be one's closeness to Christ.

#### "The Church" according to Relational Fuzzy categories (not distinct)

1. The Church would be those who have some degree of relationship to Christ, from casual interest to life commitment.
2. The Church has no clear boundary, it is a loose collection of believers with different levels of commitment to Christ and one another.
3. The Church would recognize degrees of faith, it is possible to have great knowledge and only a nominal commitment.
4. Conversion is a series of movements toward Christ. Many in the church need more degrees of conversion. Maturity and discipleship are also continuous processes.

#### "The Christian Mission" according to Relational Fuzzy categories (not distinct)

1. Seekers and converts would immediately be baptized and included in the church. Once they are baptized they must be disciplined to grow more like Christ.

2. There would be no sharp distinction between Christianity and other religions. Jesus is not the only way of salvation according to this view, all paths lead to God.
3. There would be little emphasis on evangelism and conversion. Instead, you would help people find their own unique way to God.

### Conclusions

1. Need to see things from different / another's perspective / colored glasses
2. There is some truth in each of the categories, none are inspired.
3. Difference between spiritual realities (what is true in God's sight), and what we can see with our own limited vision.
4. Relational Well-Formed Categories (extrinsic) is probably closest to Scripture.
5. ex. American mission exec. & Indian church leaders, p. 135