



The Lines People Draw¹

Ted Ward

Since the Fall, humankind's rebellion against God has resulted in one division after another—line after line being drawn to represent both valid and dubious distinctions. Never satisfied until the unity is pulled apart into its component particulars, the tendency is relentlessly toward reductionism and toward conflict. Linguistic and cultural lines continue to be drawn in fact, in ink, and ultimately in blood.

Accelerated by the Industrial Revolution and now exacerbated by the Information Revolution, specialization and compartmentalization are characteristics of our times. In business, industry, and surely no less in education, we manage our increasingly complex world of ideas and relationships by dividing and labeling.

Proudly discussing with mother his first day in sixth grade, the youngster said, “No, we don’t have arithmetic this year. We’re all done with that. Now we have mathematics.”

Similarly, the misguided seminarian might say, “No, we don’t study doctrine here, we study theology!” Distinctions among studying the Bible, studying doctrine, and studying theology are to some extent justified, but most evangelical seminaries try not to draw the lines quite this way. Lines so carelessly drawn separate essence from evidence, theory from practice, and idealization from realization. Worse, they tend to make people satisfied to dwell in company with the verbal and intellectual equivalents of matters which at a more vital level are substantial and transcendental experiences.

One of the marks of the educated person is the capacity to draw discriminating lines that distinguish one thing from another. As God set Adam to work in the creation, this human capacity was employed in the task of naming the creatures. Without distinguishing names there is no effective communication about things; indeed, orderly thought itself depends on reliable systems of classification. Unless one draws lines wisely and well, there can be no useful names.

As in many another human paradox, the capacity to distinguish can become exaggerated and can work against the grasp of truth. When lines are drawn that separate and isolate parts of a whole, discrimination becomes a barrier to understanding.

Drawing lines between people on the basis of race illustrates the paradox. Distinctions as to ethnicity and, especially, color can be made on the basis of empirical observation. But the fact that a distinction can be made does not license any and all uses of that distinction. The differentiation of relationships, services, or privileges to one set of persons over against another is often based upon the capability of distinguishing and drawing lines. Such a use of this God-given capacity to

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distinguish violates the wholeness of God's purposes in creation and God's provisions of redemption.

Harmful Lines

The human tendency toward pride causes people to draw lines between themselves and other people. Line-drawing so easily serves the purposes of pride and alienation: sometimes to assure a better seat at the banquet, sometimes to demonstrate superiority—at least in one's own eyes—and sometimes to avoid the inconvenience of becoming involved in the pains and griefs of a neighbor. Worse yet, a religiously drawn line that seems to justify alienation allows the learned priest to pass by on the other side of the road. What uses people can make of religion! In the realm of ideas the tendency to draw lines can become a barrier to truth. Schooling experiences that are principally concerned with words and lists, defining and classifying, accepting and rejecting can lead toward a life of verbal sorting rather than whole thought.

The cause of Christ has not been served well by the line between secular and sacred. Since “the earth is the Lord's and everything in it . . .” (Psalm 24:1), there seems to be no particularly good reason to accept a distinction between things that have to do with God and things that do not. Indeed, what is there that exists without relationship to God? Nothing in the realm of the created universe, the world of ideas, or the supernatural realm of the eternal spirit. The Bible, taken in its own terms, identifies God as creator, redeemer, sustainer, and ultimate judge of all things. Only in some limited human perspective, usually self-centered and colored by an uninformed grasp of the things of God, does intellectual narrowness serve humankind well. Especially to be pitied is the Christian who has dealt with the difficult reconciliations of theological understanding and scientific understanding by accepting dualism. Even when that neat but worthless line between sacred and secular becomes the outer boundary of a Christian's knowledge and life, the result is a sort of artificial and impotent spirituality. I shall never forget one lamentable graduate student who castigated me for assigning a reading by a non-Christian author. As a part of the disciplines of a supposedly valid theological education at a prominent theological seminary, this person had come to loathe reading anything that could not be instantly trusted on the basis of the faith claims of its author. Narrowness of this sort isolates Christians from important extensions of truthful understanding that are available because of common grace.

Do we resonate with Robert Frost's reflection?

Something there is that doesn't love a wall . . .
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out.
Mending Wall [1914]

For a Christian the most crippling line drawn is between Christian reasoning and other processes of reasoning. Dualism, the misguided attempt to separate life into sacred and secular, leads into a downward spiral of intellectual and moral inconsistencies. The line between sacred and secular may serve as a convenient basis for compartmentalization, but the line is not consistent with the way God has created His universe. The practical effect of imposing unnatural distinctions that are inconsistent with reality is deception—self-deception in this case. Indeed, because of sin the universe is divided in ways God did not intend, but to hold such distinctions as absolute belittles God's redemptive purposes.

The human being cannot be divided into natural components and supernatural components. Whenever we distinguish a sociological perspective from a theological perspective, as if the former were inherently godless, we do violence to the wholeness of truth itself. Holmes (1977) has shown that “All truth is God’s truth” is more than a cliché. For the educated Christian a sociological perspective is informed by theological substance. All so-called perspectives, all information, and all insights, if held in the mind of an integrated Christian, are subject to the same discipline of the whole counsel of God and are capable of being similarly informative. Grappling in a biblical way with the distinctions between “Christ and culture” disallows that the two ever be divorced; it is a creative tension. Sin lies at the root of the dissonances, but redemption means that there is a basis for reconciliation.

Lacking integration—intellectual wholeness—the individual Christian and the institutions of Christianity are vulnerable to apostasy. Over the last twenty years the feverish attempts in Christian higher education to get “faith and learning” back into mutual accord are a reflection of the effects of dualism in Christian thought.

Lines that Get in the Way

The lines between the subdivisions of a major field of study—theology, for example—are drawn to represent matters of territory and administrative convenience to educators, publishers, and librarians. Often these lines are the causes much more than the results of schisms and disarticulations. The wholeness of a discipline can be obscured and unbalanced by the emphasizing of its parts.

With the dramatic expansion of human knowledge has come specialization. Partly a concession to the post-renaissance reality that one can’t know everything about everything, but clearly motivated by managerial concerns about efficiency, specialized departmentalization has become the norm. The major consequence has been negative, compartmentalization of thought and literature. In many cases the academic mortals who serve as custodians of the disciplinary shrines tend to dig the lines ever more deeply as if to defend their vulnerable plot of sacred ground.

Competitiveness and pride disturb the unity of theology. Theoretical theology is placed on one side of a distinct line to distinguish it from practical theology. Old Testament is across a line from New Testament. Even within a given subdivision of theology other lines are drawn. For example, in homiletics oratorical skills and exegetical skills seem to have lost their interdependence; here and elsewhere the bits and pieces are attended to in some sort of blind hope that somewhere along the line someone else will put the pieces back together and make sense out of the whole. Thus we have learned to live with piecemeal education.

If the drawing of academic lines were merely a matter of organizational expediency, it might be easier to justify; but such lines give rise to all sorts of prideful and pompous disgraces. The “professional” disciplines, Christian education and missions, for example, are seen as less prestigious than the “academic” disciplines. Consequently, the closer one comes actually to serving the church in a concrete, contemporary action-oriented learning process the more likely one is to encounter resistance allegedly based in standards of accreditation and institutional tradition. One must wonder if the ultimate value of erudite theology is assumed to be exclusively in the brain.

Very close to my heart and to the substance of my academic career are the presumably separate sub-disciplines of Christian education and of missions. The lines that have been drawn to separate these

two fields within theological studies are less than constructive. In the first place, the Gospel makes sense only in terms of mission: the God who redeems was made flesh and dwelt among us to bring Good News of deliverance to those trapped in humankind's three types of poverty (Luke 4:18-19, quoting from Isaiah 61). Similarly, the ministry of teaching is integral with the fulfillment of godliness inherent in the fullness of God's redemptive process.

In the twentieth century missions and education have each been treated to the mixed blessing of specialization. In similar ways, in similar timetables, and toward similar ends, these two facets of the wholeness of the Gospel have been given separate status, imbued with their own rights to specialized literature, faculties, and advanced degrees. Where will it end?

It may be for the twenty-first century to pull these matters back into wholeness and comprehensive integrity; but when it happens, it will honor God and make the field of Christian education relate more constructively to the human condition.

Trapped Behind the Lines

The Christian liberal arts colleges talk to each other to some extent but show only slight capacity or interest in being influential in national and international debates of moral issues. One major kingdom assumption underlying much of Christian higher education, especially theological education, is thus in default: graduates have not gone forward in substantial numbers to infuse the academic disciplines with biblical standards of truth. The relatively few interactions between public policy and what passes for Christian thought seem largely to be in the hands of exploiters, naïve reformers, and theologically illiterate thumpers of simplistic propositions. Perhaps the time has come for evangelical theological seminaries to relate theological foundations more explicitly to socio-political and economic reasoning. Here again, the classical roles of institutions are governed by lines people draw. But what eternal truth is at stake if a theological seminary should include within its mission the providing of sound theological groundings for people in political and media leadership? The contribution of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to television commentator Bill Moyers points the way.

Pulpit or pew? Does theological education—substantial theological education—have any value beyond the clergy? The problematic line between clergy and laity confuses the church. The unfinished work of the Protestant Reformation centers on the institutionalization of meaningful roles for the laity. Pursuant to the propositional assertion of the priesthood of the believer should have come some sort of actualization of the Christian vocation of all Christians. Instead, the sacramental uniqueness of the ordained priest was replaced by a new cultural equivalent: the teaching office of the ordained minister. Rather than ushering in a radical fulfillment of the New Testament teachings on the church, the image and expectation of the docile and passive people of God was perpetuated.

The reformers, while proclaiming the priesthood of all believers, in fact elevated the teaching office in such a way as to perpetuate the gap between clergy and laity. While no longer implying the same sacerdotal uniqueness, the clerical distinction remains. Seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism replaced the authoritarian priest with the authoritarian preacher. The little people of God have become very accustomed to having their shepherds talk down to them.

Institutions of theological education, even those serving fellowships that claim a high view of the congregation, perpetuate this flaw of the Reformation. The calling of God is for set-apart servants, evangelists, pastors, and teachers who will minister in special ways to the communities of faith. But

by tradition, the clergyman is elevated and separated; his status within the hierarchy of the church derives from a system of intellectual meritocracy which divides the church into several strata from the learned to the unlearned.

Because the reformers were unable to institutionalize their theme of the “priesthood of all believers,” the stage was set for prompt return to a passive voice and behavior for Christianity’s laypersons. Claiming to believe in a slogan without having to pay much of a price for it allows cheap affiliation with a cause.

When is a ministry “full-time?” The presumption that the church can put all needed ministers on salary is very much a product of the wealthy West in the twentieth century. The historical patterns of ministry and the current realities in much of the newly churching world point in the direction of a bivocational ministry. Monovocational ministry (full-time employment, salaried by one congregation) may be more an aberration than a fulfillment of God’s best for His church. Not only does the monovocational assumption exacerbate the clergy-laity gap, but it also contributes to the image of a minister paid to do the work and meet the needs of the parishioners.

Further, the relationships between Western missionaries and congregations in postcolonial nations are strained by the often unreasonable expectations that the universal norm is for a budgeted church with a salaried pastor. In the restrictive customs of many mission organizations, a fellowship of Christians is not even allowed to call itself a church until these conditions are met. The pastor is also usually expected to be formally educated well above the congregation. The source for these standards is more in culture than in Scripture.

Who is a missionary? At this point another line that people draw needs to be considered: the line between missionary and other Christians in international vocations is based on the assumption that international and cross-cultural evangelization is the exclusive domain of persons employed by churches and by para-church organizations. This line has dubious foundation in Scripture: it is reasonable to assume that the Gospel was spread in the early centuries by bivocational persons going abroad into situations as participants in the workaday world of craftsmanship and merchandise. At least part of the sustenance of no less an example than the Apostle Paul was derived from employment in a menial craft, tent-making.

The habit of monovocational reasoning prevents certain mission boards from recognizing “tentmakers” because they allegedly will not have as much time to “be missionaries” because they will be earning part or all of their income within the economy.

In Macau just before Christmas I carefully read the long inscription on the gravestone of Robert Morrison, the pioneer missionary to China. I was struck by the juxtaposition of three lines:

The first Protestant Missionary to China
Was sent to China by the London Missionary Society in 1807
Was for twenty-five years Chinese translator in the employ of The East-India Company

Morrison’s life and callings reflect the historical pattern of outreach of the church: a dedication to the service of Christ in the world, reflected both in the employed career and in the ministry of the Spirit. The combination of vocations, professional translator in “secular” employment, and missionary to China, is a tribute to the omnipotence of God, not to the cleverness of Robert

Morrison. If he is to be called a “tentmaker,” it would be in the Pauline context of functional employment within the society, not in today’s meaning of tent-making as a sort of “cover” for being someplace that is not feasible to enter as a monovocational missionary. For many a Christian, some of them overseas, an employed vocation authenticates a valid contribution to the society, and a spiritual vocation calls them to faithful Christian witness as God provides gifts to the church. “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service . . .” (Ephesians 4:11, 12). Not always are a person’s two vocations different, but history suggests that in most cases they are complementary, reflecting the omniscience of God. In Morrison’s case, the combination of vocations to which God called him provided for just the right combination of “presence and proclamation” that was needed to open the way to China.

How remarkable it is that China even under Communist rule is open today, as it was to Morrison, to the Christian whose vocation has credibility and evident value to the Chinese.

Bivocationalism has been more the norm than the exception in the history of the church. The gifts of the Spirit to the church are differentiated; all are gifted. These facts are certain. But it is also true that this is a fallen world; not always are disciples faithful in the discharge of their gifts. Thus it is unwise to argue for an artificial egalitarian and collectivized fellowship. Not all heed the call of Christ equally.

Who is a teacher? Jesus said, “Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing . . . and teaching them to obey” (Matthew 28). Did he intend that people should draw lines between the several facets of this command? The structure of thought used by Matthew puts the “go” and the “make disciples” together as a sort of envelope that covers the whole process from the initial action (turning outward and away from the silent gaze) to its intended conclusion, the making of additional disciples of Christ. Within the envelope are two functions: *baptizing* in order to bring people into the one community of faith, and *teaching* in order to facilitate the process of spiritual growth. The sort of teaching intended is not merely a depositing of information, but with biblical epistemology it insists that true knowledge is the active use of truth—hence, being obedient.

But the church in America has tended to disconnect all of this. Traditions of this century tend to take the “go” in one direction, calling it missions, and take the “teach” in another direction, calling it Christian education. Teaching is part and parcel of the Great Commission—and not just teaching in “the uttermost parts.” Surely, teaching has been represented in the activities of missions since the earliest days of the church. On board the Ethiopian chariot there was teaching. In the jail at Philippi there was teaching.

But just as important is the emphasis on the teaching that results in obedience in Jerusalem and Judea—and in our home territory. Jesus was not talking about some sort of haphazard verbal expression in the name of schooling. He commanded nothing less than the teaching that produces life-transformation. The church at home seems too willing to settle for the sort of teaching that has little promise for making fundamental impact on lifestyle. Much of what is done in the name of “Christian education” can hardly be expected to produce obedience. It lacks missionary zeal and it lacks the commitment to thoroughness that the Gospel represents.

Being knowledgeable about the Word—even being informed about the finer points of biblical languages—provides no firm assurance of godliness. Many laity, even those who are largely self-

taught, allow the Word of God to inform their lives in submission to the lordship of Christ. Such persons have always been among the true leaders of the church of Jesus Christ. These are among the “called” by any definition.

Learning New Lines

So much of the Christian’s philosophy of life and of ministry depends on how “the world,” as in John 3:16, is understood. Holistic ministry and the Christian’s concern for the whole person are among the targets of those who draw a line between verbal proclamation and other aspects of the ministry. Their scoffing is directed partly at the catchword language—perhaps a justifiable target—but also it is intended to challenge the very idea that God expects anything more functional than evangelistic preaching. The belittling arises out of a severely delimited meaning of “the world,” the object of God’s love. Certain narrow viewpoints of the world and of the Gospel are based *de facto* on the assumption that God’s concern is for disembodied spirits, reached through intellectualized propositions in the form of rules, laws, and definitions.

Peter had to learn to draw his lines differently. Through a visionary experience on the housetop of Simon the tanner in Joppa, God provided deliverance from the narrowness that line-drawing brings. Paul’s emphasis on God’s erasing of the ordinary lines of human categorization continues to be a bother to those who stubbornly defend cultural lines that survive like cobwebs in so many churches: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Other topics are more popular in today’s more conservative churches. It is more comfortable to leave the lines where they are drawn.

Like it or not, change is in the wind—we need to learn some new lines just to keep in touch with reality. For example, the heir apparent to the mantle of mass evangelist to the world is Luis Palau, not some standard model Anglo-Saxon. Just why is God bringing all these foreigners to prominence? Haven’t we Americans always been ready? Don’t we have the know-how and the best of support? Indeed, the church today seems hard-pressed to accept the realities of a changed world in which the initiatives for evangelism and education are now multinational.

Experiences in China remind the visitor that God’s ways are far beyond our comprehension. Rather than bringing the missionary-planted church to extinction, the Chinese manifestation of communism has provided one more historical illustration that God is sovereign. This much of the church-in-China story has been well told in recent years. What may not be so well reported is a steady reduction of political tension and a concomitant resurgence of the historical cultural values and social forms within families and communities in China. Accordingly, Christians are not only allowed to worship in government-authorized churches, but a general acceptance of Christians and Christianity is spreading. Religion is once again validated as part of the social fabric of China.

In China it is evident that God reaches easily across the lines people draw. The presumed incompatibility of state socialism and Christianity has led many American Christians into anxious panic; but now that the furor has settled a bit, along with the forty-year flurry of scheming and plotting—all intended to help God out—God’s own plan is becoming evident. In the case of China, the persecuted church has survived and has expanded beyond the fondest hopes of those who presumed that God was in trouble. Elsewhere in the world, the notion of “closed country” is being seen for what it is—closed is always a human assessment; nothing is ever closed to God.

The openness of China to bivocational North Americans has caught mission societies off guard. Most missionary boards are geared to full-time career missionaries who are to be paid entirely from funds contributed through one or another tax-deductible arrangement. Such missionaries have a sort of cookie-cutter similarity in roles and job descriptions. Their work—on paper, at least—centers on church planting and/or maintenance of one or another of the institutions of the churches or the para-church structure. But many of the emerging openings, especially in Islamic and Communist-dominated regions, are for Christians who can make credible contributions to the society in something other than in religious terms. The line that prevents such laypersons and bivocational ministers from fully enjoying the support and encouragement of mission-minded fellow Christians has outlived its usefulness.

Lines We Need

None of what is said here should be interpreted as an argument for relativism or indiscretion. Surely, Jesus drew lines; his lines should become the lines of guidance for his disciples. But the Scriptures reveal that his lines were rarely the same as the lines drawn either by his followers or by his critics. His lines were different—sometimes in a different place, sometimes on a completely different plane. He did not justify untruthfulness, but while encouraging the Pharisees to draw their critical lines in more appropriate places, Jesus was quite willing to cite God's condoning David and his troops when they were given exceptional access to the consecrated bread (Luke 6:1-5). Jesus was frequently criticized, overtly and covertly, for his social behavior. He seemed neither to respect the spurious lines that had become the marks of tradition nor to encourage his followers to look backward for their images. "A new commandment I give you: love one another," He said (John 13:34). Paul saw the reconciliation to God through Christ as becoming "a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In that being educated implies the competency to draw taxonomic and moral lines, the legitimate drawing and using of lines must be understood. First, the proper use of discrimination is to facilitate self-directed discipline. The first application of one's moral and scientific reasoning should be to one's own life. A series of encouragements follows from this first principle. One's discriminatory reasoning and actions should be directed toward the glory of God and not toward self-aggrandizement. The mind of Christ should be sought in matters of human relationships. Taking account of all that we are in God's grace, we must nevertheless esteem others as highly as ourselves. In all that we are and all that we do, God should receive all glory.

One important mark of the educated person should be an inclination to lean graciously across the lines that divide people—reaching, always reaching. As it was with the Apostle Paul, we learn the distinctive that must be held; we hold them not in pride, but in self-discipline. We acknowledge the line that distinguishes what God has done in our lives through Jesus Christ, not as something that sets us above or apart, but as something profound that changes us into reconciling people—motivated not only by ordinary human appetites and passions, but by the profound awareness that we are called to pass the good news to all (Romans 1:14).

Thus we are privileged to point the way among those who lack a moral compass. Ours is a godly alternative, not in the accommodating pandering of a materialistic Christianity, but joined with Christ in the sufferings of the cross, by which we gain the capacity to identify with hurting humanity.

The lines that are really important are those that orient a moral direction in a confused era: not the verbal moralisms and simplistic politics that the world has come to despise in the Christian West, but the radiant embrace of a moral God who cares deeply about people.

Christlike relationships with people must be sought and maintained. The sobering observation here is that Jesus sought and maintained relationships with the sick, the moral outcasts, the poor, and foreigners. His purpose was clear, but he never treated a relationship manipulatively or cleverly in order to fulfill his own will. What a tragedy that in his name throughout history we find Christians behaving as goats (Matthew 25): expressing willingness to engage in good works only if they are sure that they can be reckoned as doing it for Jesus. The line we need is as Jesus drew it, between sheep and goats as a shepherd divides, on the basis of their nature. Thank God for the transformation from goat to sheep. The outreach mission of the church is to bring people into this transformation through faith in Jesus Christ; the educational mission of the church is to encourage the sort of spiritual development that will bring behavior more fully in line with the transformed nature. There can be no proper line between these interlocked missions of the church.

Reaching Across Lines

The metaphor of barriers has its precedent in Scripture in reference to the religious line between Jew and Gentile: the Apostle Paul describes Christ as “our peace, who has . . . destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14). But in some respects the metaphor of building bridges serves better to describe those little steps of redemptive process in which we engage while relating people to people, ideas to ideas, and people to ideas.

I am deeply concerned about the way Christians often use the very gift of grace as a barrier. There is something cavalier—even arrogant—about the line we draw between ourselves and others. Just two years ago in Malawi the Christians there, living as a minority among Muslims, taught me a better way to define the line between Christians and others: “We don’t call them *non-Christians*; to us they are *not-yet-Christians*. That’s why we are constantly thinking of ways to keep ourselves involved with them. They need to know Jesus and it will be from us that they learn that He loves them.” And the rhetoric associated with other such distinctions, for example evangelicals *versus* liberals and *versus* Catholics, is similarly problematic. As my experience in this diverse and complex world continues to expand, I am more and more convinced that those of us who call ourselves by the name of Jesus Christ need each other. We dare not disown those whose approach to Scripture is different or whose lifestyles are strange. There is but one Lord and but one church. The church is diverse—as it was intended to be. The lines we need are those that will place issues of Christ above issues of culture. Christians have always had trouble sorting out the cultural biases that affect their hermeneutics. American evangelicals have a long way to go on this one!

Resources

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Note: The text above is based on the Inaugural Lecture of the G.W. Aldeen Chair of International Studies and Mission in 1988 at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL. G.W. Aldeen was respected as a layperson, as the common lines are drawn, but he had a keen sense of his ministry. He was truly bivocational, responsible to the calling of God in a creative business career, but with the same vigor and motive he was responsible to the vocation of being a representative of God among the people his career and church brought before him.