



Improving Our Practice of Mission: *An Exercise in the Semantics of Church*¹

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PART I—Bugged by Paradigm Shift?

Many of us have had “paradigm” right up to *here! Not again! Please.* Sorry about that, but to understand “improvement of our practice of mission,” we must look at how the present practice of mission came down to us. Assuming that the conference title, “Improving the Practice of Mission,” is based on reality—we now accept even the practice of mission as needing change. How did our viewpoints and presuppositions about what we should do and how we should do it get lodged in our thinking about the mission of the church? How do we exercise good judgment and decide what needs changing and what needs preserving? Where do we start?

So I decided to start with a lecture on “paradigm shift.”

No, not quite. But may I make a case for the over-used term under which we hide a very old and very important truth? The concern for *paradigms* and especially for *paradigm shift* is based in the homely word “habit”. Paradigms are habits of the mind. But there is much more to it. Habits of the mind are the basis of prejudice, of faulty behavior, of ineffective response to new situations and, would you believe, *bad theology*. It is no exaggeration to say that habits, unexamined, go hand in hand with evil. So there! Paradigms, like snakes, can be very important.

Understanding what we confront is only part of it. How do we get from endless discussions of paradigm change to break loose and do what needs to be done in order to evangelize the lost and to plant and nurture the church? Easy. First, we can look at the logic of the task. Can we agree that we are *not* accepting the following purposes as having intrinsic value?

- ☐ Keeping the organization running no matter what.
- ☐ Keeping all the donors and supporters content and reassured that all is well.
- ☐ Recruiting people that look exactly like the people God used last time.
- ☐ Keeping things organized in a manageable structure.
- ☐ Counting the beans into the same bins we used last year.
- ☐ Keeping our respective rears covered in case something goes wrong.

The logic of our task suggests that we may tend to slide into habits that are counter-productive. Sometimes they are far less plain to see than the six just listed, above. Think about these:

¹ Ted Ward. Improving Our Practice of Mission: An Exercise in the Semantics of Church. For EFMA/IFMA Personnel Conference, December 1-2, 2000. See related document in the Archives: “Paradigms: One Dime Short of Thirty Cents, 2000”

- ☐ In our mission agency we tend to assume that if someone gives us a bundle of money to do a certain thing that God is telling us that we should *do* it.
- ☐ We favor making assignments to places where our workers have already been effective.
- ☐ When the church on the field differs from us in the home office, we assume that they are right and that we are wrong.

Paradigm Change

What we have already come to believe determines whether or not we are open to another way of looking at things. And that quickly explains why truth is rather limited by what a person believes to be true. But anyone with half an ounce of wisdom will raise a related question: What makes “another way” a *better* way, or possibly, the *right* way?

One of the most common presuppositions that undermines the value of discussing paradigm change is the contemporary and, yes, *postmodern* notion that change is inherently good. Or, in another version, “Change is probably good because we have more wisdom than before.” (Sure we do.)

Here is the rub: since paradigms of thought are so very hard to change, perhaps we would be wise to put our major effort on matters that we are beginning to see *need* to be changed. Are there things you have learned in recent years which seem to bear out the current wisdom that we really cannot be as slow and deliberate as once we thought necessary?

Name at least one or two mission/church² issues about which your mission is learning to be more cautious?

1. _____
2. _____

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Improvement of the Mission Procedures

Improving mission practice and procedure usually calls for changes in our paradigms of reasoning and planning. Sometimes new insight about a paradigm that needs updating *follows* an experience or activity carried out in a fundamentally different way. In other words, experience is one common source of new insights.

² Refers to sponsoring/supporting church or churches “at home”.

³ Refers to church or churches on the field.

If there are new paradigms with wisdom underlying them, to what sectors (or aspects of doing the business of a missions manager) are they relating, as you watch what is going on?

1. _____
2. _____

But more than experience is needed. We must be self-critical about why we see things in terms of habits and “comfort.” Productive interaction with colleagues is essential. It requires of us two qualities: *honesty* and *exploratory curiosity*.

Here are several very short stories. You can fill in the rest of each scenario without much difficulty:

“I don’t see it like you do. You can’t really be serious—it sounds crazy to me.”

“I’ll never believe that. My experience tells me something very different.”

“But I’ve always done it the other way. I like it better the way I’m accustomed to.”

“I don’t think you can get there from here. At least I’ve never done it.”

Notice the common factor in each of these? Each judgment is based on the idea that what is right and true is centered in *my* experience.

The Post-modern explanation: If there is truth to be found it will come through tested experience. You cannot trust the past. Thus our paradigms all need to be examined and many will be found wanting. We must adapt ourselves to the realities which our experiences show us.

The Limitations of Experience explanation: All my interactions with truth are in one way or another based in my experiences. But my experiences do not add up to a whole universe. They are incomplete and often inadequate, especially in terms of meaning and quality. Thus I need constantly to be adding to my experiences, especially to add the propositional components that inform me about God as source of life, motive, righteousness, and wisdom.

PART II—What Do We Want to Change?

Whenever we talk about the church, the distinction between ancient and modern becomes important. What was the church in its early years? What is the church as we know it today? The contrasts between these two are the source of many of our dissonances as Christian. Some of us live in the past; others live in ignorance of the past. Each of the resulting biases leads to misunderstandings.

Whenever we talk about missions, these same distinctions come into it. But worse, there is a sort of technological foundation drawn from what we know about the way cultures interface. This shifts the

conversation beyond the then and now into the realm of procedure. While church is a concept of *is*-ness in contrast with *was*-ness, mission is a concept of an image in contrast with a concrete action--better to say in contrast with a whole array of different concrete actions. The image of missions is not clearly tied into particular semantic examples in the Bible. We create it for our practical theology by organizing something that was always exemplified in Scripture as a part of the ordinary of being a Christian: "As you are going about your life, make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). This does not make our current concept of mission and missions wrong, but it does set in place some potentially bad habits.

For my part, I believe that much of the present realignment and recasting of the missionary paradigms are arising from this sort of re-thinking of the biblical precedents for mission activity. As "people of the Book," we can do no better than to return again and again to the two best-documented sources: the life of Christ and the life of the Apostle Paul.

Granting that although many of the functions and procedures of the church are exemplified in the community of believers surrounding our Lord, the church-era comes alive after the post-resurrection empowerment by the Holy Spirit. With this in mind, it behooves us to give very close attention to the Apostle Paul's activities as he was "going about, making disciples."

In what ways are the missionaries that our organization supports doing mission most nearly like the examples set by Paul?

In what ways are they . . . least like the examples set by Paul?

At this point, our paradigm of missions often shows its pragmatism. "We don't do things exactly like the biblical examples *because* . . ." Need I say it again? *Paradigms are habits of the mind.*

Try to loosen the habits! Try this exercise: with three or four companions (no more, please) do a responsible brain-storming discussion on this matter:

What could we possibly do to encourage our missionaries to carry out their work more like the Apostle Paul?

Observe these guidelines as you talk together:

1. Before you say anything to each other, spend about 5 minutes jotting down three to six events, experiences, or moments in which Paul exemplifies something remarkably honoring to God yet uncommon among missionaries in your experience.
2. Starting with a person whose watch has a second hand see how much you can tell of one event in no more than one minute.
3. At the end of this synopsis, let the person to the left and to the right make short comments on the starter event. *No one* is to talk longer than two minutes!
4. Then add comments from others in the group and try to wrap it all up in a total of six minutes.

Now for the second event: Let a volunteer start it, but use the same pattern and timing. Perhaps there will be time for each person to volunteer at least once, but through it all try to come up with enough shared observations that you can answer these questions together: (Not to write the responses.)

What qualities in Paul are most commonly needed by missionaries today?

What can we do, as mission recruiters and assignment coordinators, to assure that a greater proportion of our missionaries exemplify these characteristics and qualities?

Suggestion: Start with these two, then make your own lists.

Relational

Responsive To Differences In Culture

PART III—Where Do We Get These Ideas?

The purpose of the following exercise is to encourage a discussion of the sources of the beliefs that hold our practices of mission in place. The assumption is that there are roots and reasons underlying everything an organization does. These are the sources of the habits of the mind that become the controlling paradigms. Reflecting on where these “roots and reasons” come from can assist in the “loosening” process. A hard look at the habitual way of thinking about something can assist in the reasoning process and will commonly stimulate discovery of deeper and more creative alternatives.

Learning is essentially a social process. The human interactions and sharing of creative thought are the very core of learning. Thus this exercise is intended to provoke learning, not just talking and imagining.

The exercise: *Sources of Mission Practices* is a group experience in which four to six people first read and discuss the format—the left margin consists of nine *categories* of characteristics (decisions, procedures, and criteria) which any missionary sending-and-support organization is likely to have in place. Across the top of the matrix is a list of four *probable sources* from which the organization’s practices are drawn.

These categories are often represented in combinations. In other words, some practices have as their source more than one of the labeled boxes.

The *first version* of the exercise presents a list of nine categories already identified. The task is to discuss, one by one, examples of how the organization *clearly* bases one or more of its purposes on a biblical source. In the upper left box use a pencil to describe the *purpose* that indicates this source. Similarly write in each of the boxes across the page. Then move to another category. You do not need to do each line in order, but do move across the page, left to right, once you have decided on a given *Category*.

The *second version* of the exercise provides only the empty matrix. The participants should decide for themselves just what categories need to be represented, one by one. You may include categories from the first version, but the creativity of the group should consider other matters which should be examined.

A. Sources of Mission Practices: Suggested Categories

Where does your mission organization get its ideas, images, and goals? *Give a strong example of an item from each category for each of these probable sources of our practices:*

Categories

<i>Purposes of the mission</i>				
<i>Selection of candidates</i>				
<i>Recruitment of the missionary</i>				
<i>Hierarchy of management</i>				
<i>Rates of compensation</i>				
<i>Roles of the missionary</i>				
<i>Tasks of the missionary</i>				
<i>Services to the missionary</i>				
<i>Expected years of service</i>				

B. Sources of Mission Practices: Set Your Own Categories

Where does your mission organization get its ideas, images, and goals? *Give a strong example of an item from each category for each of these probable sources of our practices.*

Categories
