



Paradigms: One Dime Short of Thirty Cents¹

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Today, the term “paradigm” is encountered frequently, often in situations and in uses which raise suspicions that the user doesn’t know what the word means. But “paradigm” sounds so with-it, so erudite, so California. The reaction is often to yawn and go back to sleep. But paradigm is a strong term that calls attention to something we need to think about. We need the term, and we need to use it wisely.

There is no good equivalent word. “Paradigm” is more specific than “viewpoint,” more explicit and more neutral than “bias.” What is a better term? The word “presupposition” gets us started but falls seriously short. Even Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary lets paradigm slip-slide: “a philosophical and theoretical framework of a scientific school or discipline within which theories, laws, and generalizations and the experiments performed in support of them are formulated.” Not very convincing. We should wonder why that word has become so frequently used and so apparently important?

Think of it this way: Start with a set of filters or colored lights that comes to play when you think about a certain thing. The word dog is a classic example of the effect of these filters and colored lights. Say “dog” and everyone sees a dog, of some sort, in the mind’s eye. No two of these mind’s-eye dogs are quite alike in color, shape, size, and disposition. The experiences one has had with a particular dog or dogs make the difference. So far, that explains perceptual differences as being based in one’s experiences. Paradigm is thus about to get off the ground and to fly into the realm of open-mindedness, closed-mindedness, conceptual blindness, and being locked into yesterday.

Paradigms are to ideas what skeletons are to bodies. The only difference is that most of us carry a generally similar image of the bony structures that give the body shape and support, even though few of us have spent much time actually looking at a skeleton or examining it all sorted out on a table. We just know it’s there. That’s like a paradigm. We just know it’s there.

Beyond that, like a paradigm, we take for granted that it’s there, and so do others. But what we are taking for granted can be the unexamined source of all sorts of dissonances and disagreements. There was a time when the skeleton’s function in producing the components of blood was unknown. The paradigm (the skeleton) included assumptions about structure and movement, but it did not include some of the crucial attributes of bones without which the chemistry and organic functions of the body are seriously misunderstood.

In the centuries of inquiry into disease processes, the roles of radiation, chemical balance, and viral activity were not added to theory until the paradigm was changed from common assumptions so that

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it could include and accommodate observed realities. Without a change in the paradigm, the filters that cause us to decide what is and is not important can lock our understanding into a blindness based on yesterday's habits of thought.

The function of paradigms is nowhere more important than with reference to social processes. The "understanding of the times," identified as a capability of the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32), gave them "knowledge of what Israel should do." This is a very early reference to what today could be called "insight." At this early moment in the history of the Israelites, flexibility of their paradigms provided creative structure as the foundation of analysis and judgment in these "sons of Issachar." So it is today. There are few mental process more important than creative imagination that is grounded in shrewd observation, coupled with godly evaluation.

Thus we speak wisely and well of the need to critique our paradigms. How we think about things, what associations and assumptions we bring into our thoughts, how skillfully we screen ideas and experiences--these are the tools of wisdom. The ultimate task is to become people who think appropriately for discernment of what the people of God should do.

So when we meet to consider "Improving Our Practice of Mission" within a conference on the tough problems of being "Matched for Ministry," we will be dealing with the paradigms of mission and ministry that control us. And if we are wise, we will open them up for reconsideration.

What Is a Paradigm? **An Exercise for Digging into a Paradigm**

Following is a handy definition of paradigm and the most useful series of questions that I can suggest to help a person self-critique the habits of thought that we call *paradigms*.

Paradigm: *How we think about something; the habits of thought and speech that are imbedded in our way of conceptualizing the principles underlying a viewpoint.*

1. Why do we tend to think of it this way?
2. What are the responsible foundations in fact (or in creedal beliefs) that support this sort of thinking?
3. What comes along for the ride in our talk and mental images?
4. Where do these associations with the central idea come from?
5. Which of these "hangers-on" can get us into trouble?
6. How do they deviate or mislead us from the truth-base of the idea?

The Key Paradigms of Twenty-first Century Mission Practice

The church. Of all leaders of the church, mission people should be the most clearly focused on the central place of the church within God's plan. Jesus taught his disciples, ". . . I will build my church." And every missionary is a partner in this process. Thus the missionary's grasp of the basic

social and spiritual ministry of people to people, of the central place of worship and spiritual development, of the commission to bring converts into the task of outreach, these are the processes that identify the church and define its mission. Church is a paradigm of mission and ministry, not merely static maintenance of tradition and standardized practice.

The western world tends to attach its history of church schisms and attempted resolutions to its paradigm of *church*. Thus we think in terms of variations and conflicts among the classical creeds; then we go deeper into complex variability by adding the ethnic and nationalistic origins of denominations. It is not surprising that the paradigm of church that we bring into the twenty-first century is loaded down with distinctions which deflect attention from the core essence of the work of Christ in the world.

By contrast, the new constitution of the People's Republic of China, while recognizing Catholicism and Christianity as different religions, denies that denominational labels or doctrinal distinctions lead to useful categories by which to classify Christians. The official position is that denominations are akin to cults in that their alleged distinctions are not needed to faithfully represent the teachings of Jesus. Conflicting paradigms? Yes. The question now is how to resolve the conflict? Does our truth-base have anything to say about this matter?

How do people see the church?

1. As the community of faith that constitutes the people of God?
2. As a voluntary affiliation of people who have a similar view of the Bible?
3. As common cause to join in order to get certain things accomplished?

The paradigms that underlie our thinking can be very strong—and sometimes the analysis of our paradigms can open us to new vigor and clarity.

The context. The *church in the world* is the way a mission-oriented Christian will understand the church. Just as the work of Christ on the cross was *in the world*, even so the church is a representation of the family of God *in the world*. Every local church is in a context which shares much with other churches in similar contexts but differs widely from churches in very different contexts.

Why should this be so hard for the people of God to understand? Quite likely the difficulty arises because the people of faith in every local church are so well acquainted with the same Lord, the same scripture, the same Holy Spirit, the same works of grace that cultural differences do not seem important. But one needs only to ask what *worship* includes to come up against the differences that culture makes. Indeed, what happens as the people of God pray, sing, offer praises and offerings is similarly motivated but very differently fulfilled across the world—and across the times of human history. We can accept that within limits this is as God intends it.

But relating to other Christians who handle matters of contextual difference in their own ways demands a special work of grace. Historically, in the “modern missionary era” as missionaries have emerged from western nations, they have carried western cultural symbols, expectations, styles of relationship, and emphases within the practice of godliness. Thus the mission-planted churches that

constituted the foundation upon which much of the Christianization of the world has been founded have brought western ways hand-in-hand with biblical ways. Especially among the leaders of the older and more established churches in various nations, this western-style way of being the church still struggles under its apparent “foreignness” and rationalizes its own traditions even when they are dissonant with indigenous traditions and values.

God really wants all Christians to behave like westerners. The works of grace cause all peoples to come together around a westernized core of practices and interests. We often sound like this, and sadly, we tend to think like this. Could it be that our paradigm is in need of change?

The mission. As organizational employees in an era of heightened management-consciousness, it is too easy to build our paradigm of mission on an organizational or institutional model that minimizes the work of God’s Holy Spirit. The mission of the church is not a committee, not a team, not a campaign, not a management strategy, and surely not a plot for expansion through subversion. Yet a good housecleaning of the paradigm could sweep up evidences of each of these faulty constructions. The mission of the church is in tight continuity with the mission of Christ: to seek and to save the lost and to do so in God’s way, with techniques that are modeled on the compassionate work of Christ and the intention of God that “not any should perish.”

There are many things that the mission of the church includes other than verbal proclamation and propositional witness. And it does these faint justice to refer to them as pre-evangelism. Better that we consider the Malawian Presbyterian and Anglican consensus that there are but two sorts of people within the influence of the mission of the church: Christians, and not-yet Christians. This rather different paradigm of mission embraces anything that does not push people farther from Christ. The seeker-church movement within the U.S. shares this paradigm of mission to some extent.

The missionary. Biblically, the missionary is a worker in a harvest. Even if the harvest seems meager and slow, the missionary perseveres. The tasks are various but the purposes are as intertwined as a well-made rope. The styles of weaving this rope are different from place to place and from time to time. We do not praise the rope, the teamwork of the harvesters, but rather we should use the rope to bring praise to the enabler and motivator of the harvest.

In these years we are especially likely to stumble on the qualifiers that we attach to “missionary.” Technical missionary, support system missionary, cross-cultural missionary, part-time missionary, lay missionary, and para-church missionary, just to name a few, are terms that make us sound like we know what we are talking about. Oh?

And then get down to the really important distinctions between *short-term* and *regular* missionaries. While we wrestle with the categories, the essence of the missionary task of the church is becoming more obscure and, in the priorities of many Christians, seriously compromised.

The pastor. Among the paradigms which most certainly need to be reexamined are several in such common use and frequent controversy, handed down from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that we must deal with them as unfinished business.

Who is a pastor? Is there to be but one per local church? What qualifications are to be demanded by the church? Who is eligible? Who is ineligible? What is the scriptural authority on these issues? By what interpretations of scripture are women included or excluded? By what authority do we institute *ordination of pastors*? What are its values and abuses? What authorities are rightly reserved to the larger affiliations of churches? What are the elements of pastoral autonomy in the local church? How variable are our paradigms of pastor?

Leadership. Among the extra-biblical terminologies of recent centuries is the notion that leaders possess some common essence that can be extracted from the contexts of leading God's people and thus described, taught, and evaluated as a common entity. Thus leadership, like seamanship and scholarship, is assumed to be an identifiable body of traits and behaviors which all leaders should possess in similar measure. Searching the scripture for support of this assumption tends to come down to two principles. Leaders, those whom God has chosen to lead his people, with only a few exceptions, tend to be people who are themselves *willing and able to follow God*, and (as one social scientist noted), are most often *Jewish*. Not much there to build into a general theory of leadership!

Yet surely we do need to pursue the issue of qualifications—skills and character—of those who emerge as stewards of the body of Christ. In fact, no issue seems more pressing for the shaping of a Biblically informed twenty-first century paradigm than what God intends for the leading and nurturing of His church in these times.

Education. The central place now being given to schools and schooling in the dominant paradigms of education, even within the church, suggests that the secular society's images and models have strong ascendancy. Paradigms of education in most developing societies presume that schools are the most important agencies of teaching and learning. This associating of learning with schools largely ignores the historical dominance of the community and family and the Biblical emphasis on the church.

What Drives Paradigm Change?

An Exercise in Relating Observed Change to Paradigm Change

Consider the following observed changes. Most of these will be within our experiences. It is not our purpose to debate about these statements, so if you find any that you do not wish to accept as truth, just skip past the item or items.

- a) Theology students are becoming older and more experienced.
- b) Experiential learning is expected by more students of theology.
- c) Postmodern thinking is affecting students and congregations.
- d) Churches are increasing faster than extensively educated pastors.
- e) The costliness of education for ministry is becoming a limitation.
- f) Extension education and distance learning are demanded; consequently campus-based education is changing.
- g) Intercultural skills are urgently needed for multi-cultural congregations.

h) Relationships and comparisons with other religions are demanding more attention

Task I: List in order, most toward least, three or four of the observations above which are *most threatening* to the *strength of the church*.

#1____ #2____ #3____ #4____

Task II: List in order, most toward least, the three or four observations above which are *most threatening* to the *vitality of missionary activity* in the world.

#1____ #2____ #3____ #4____

Task III: List in order, most toward least, the three or four observations above which are *most promising for the development of local churches*.

#1____ #2____ #3____ #4____

Task IV: List in order, most toward least, the three or four observations above which are *most promising for effective mission practice*.

#1____ #2____ #3____ #4____

Now make your own short list of things you are observing in *churches* or in mission practice which you believe are *healthy and encouraging*.

And similarly, things you are observing in churches or in mission practice which you think represent *actual or potential difficulties* in *church-mission relationships*.

Identify and list some of the paradigms which underlie your thinking about the topic of this conference: *Improving the Practice of Missions*. Place each of these paradigms in one column or the other, as you see its probability of becoming the basis of conflict. Items in second column do not need to “match” or be on the same themes as items in the first column.

Rigid Paradigms

“Rigid” paradigms are hard to discuss without arguing represent matters of deepest conviction sometimes are matters of habit more than of substantial truth

Flexible Paradigms

“Flexible” paradigms to some extent can be molded and reshaped as appropriate for meeting new needs often provide the best starting points for resolving conflict and opening up new reasoning

Rigid Paradigms	Flexible Paradigms
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.