

Foreword by Brian McLaren

KEN HOWARD

PARADOXY

*Creating Christian Community
Beyond Us and Them*

Afterword by The Very Rev. Dr. Paul Zahl



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Paradoxy: Creating Christian Community Beyond Us and Them

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In memory of my great-grandfather,
Rabbi Reuben Minkoff

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F O R E W O R D

In this exciting new book, Ken Howard does what good leaders do in times of change and challenge. First, he describes where we are. Then he tells the story of how we got here. Then he gives us a vision of where to go from here.

In describing where we are and recounting how we got here, Ken strikes a beautiful and difficult balance: he simplifies, without oversimplifying, complex historical and philosophical developments. His approach provides a good on-ramp if we don't have a lot of historical, theological, or philosophical background, and yet it won't insult our intelligence if we're more knowledgeable in these matters.

The vision Ken proposes isn't a step-by-step plan. It can't be, because we live in vastly different settings and face different opportunities and different obstacles. Instead Ken offers an intriguing vision, evoking a twist on Robert Frost's famous poem. Where Frost pictures two leaf-strewn pathways diverging in the yellow wood, one of which is "less traveled by," Ken sees two wide and well-traveled roads, but between them, a barely visible path. That's the one he invites us not only to explore, but to widen by our walking it so that others may follow.

Along the way, he provides apt and intriguing quotes, much like roadside rest stops with interesting historical markers, to remind us that though we may feel like pioneers moving into uncharted territory, we are part of a long tradition of pioneers who blazed trails of their own in the past, making possible the future we know as the present. Seen in that light, suddenly it matters very much whether we seek to preserve the church in its current state, abandon it altogether, or help it become a creative agent for a better future—the world that will be the present for our great-grandchildren.

The key to that creative work is not simply good ideas, but true faith, hope, and love, rooted in the living God in whom we trust and love, and by whom we seek to be empowered. It's at that point of connection with God, not just in theory, but in experience and practice, that Ken's proposal—what he calls *Incarnational Orthodoxy* or *Paradoxy*—offers a vision that transcends old polarities between liberal and conservative.

As a person from a very conservative background, I know that what conservatives cherish beneath their arguments and divisions is the experience of God, the nearness of God. It's their pearl of great price, and in defending a lot of other things, I believe this is what they really are seeking to defend. And as a person who has grown first to accept, then begrudgingly to respect, and eventually to love liberals, I also believe the same is true for liberals. On both sides a lot of other issues get mixed in, but in appealing to this core treasure, this core desire—and not only in appealing to it, but more, in embodying it—Ken offers a way forward that I believe has the only real hope.

It's no accident that Ken "gets" this way forward and embodies it, because it flows from his own biography, spanning Jewish and Christian, conservative and liberal, Pentecostal and liturgical, academic and pastoral. And beyond that, as you'll learn in these

pages, Ken also knows this way forward because he has seen a church polarize and divide, and then saw another church take shape beyond schismatic polarity.

For Episcopalians and for all mainliners, this book holds great value, and for evangelicals and charismatics, I believe the same is true. It can help us discover an identity where those terms become less like epithets applied to enemies and more like family names applied to neighbors.

May that better day come!

—*Brian McLaren*

I N T R O D U C T I O N

May You Live in Interesting Times

A Conservative/Liberal Schism?

"May you live in interesting times. . . ." This ancient Chinese aphorism, that is said to be both blessing and curse, certainly seems to have come true for the church.

It seems that in almost every denomination, conservative-liberal conflicts that have simmered for decades have come to a boil. Mainline liberal denominations are in turmoil. In my own denomination, the Episcopal Church (a part of the worldwide Anglican Communion), following the consecration of the first openly gay bishop and the first female presiding bishop, dozens of conservative congregations and several dioceses (representing about 3.5% of U.S. Episcopalians) have severed ties to align with conservative bishops and archbishops on other continents. While we may have the most visible and vociferous conflicts at the moment, we are not alone. Just about every mainline church is experiencing similar conflicts and departures.

Moreover, this is not a one-way, liberal church phenomenon. Mainline conservative denominations are also experiencing turmoil. The Southern Baptist Convention, following the takeover of the seminaries by hard-line conservatives, lost more than 7% of its membership to moderate-liberal groups such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Contrary to the popular belief that growth rates in conservative denominations are increasing, while liberal ones are decreasing, recent research has shown that both have experienced steadily decreasing growth rates since the late 1950s, and if current trends continue, conservative denominations will follow liberal ones into decline within a generation. If you factor out that portion of conservative denomination growth that is due to higher-than-average birthrates among conservatives and "conversions" of mainline liberal Christians to conservative denominations (as opposed to growth by attracting the unchurched), real conservative church growth rates are already in decline.¹

A potential liberal-conservative fault line exists in almost every congregation in every denomination. If left unaddressed, might not this rift eventually split these denominations? That we are living in interesting times may be the only thing everybody in the church can agree on.

Slicing and Dicing and Slippery Slopes

At a recent official gathering of the churches in my diocese, I watched with astonishment as an exchange between a conservative delegate and a liberal delegate became both brutally hot and cruelly cold at the same time. First, the conservative delegate submitted a resolution angrily demanding that our largely liberal diocese insist that our national church legislative body fall into line with the demands of conservative churches worldwide (a resolution

he had to know would either be voted down or amended). This was followed by an amendment from the liberal delegate, that was gracious in its words but seemingly patronizing in its intent: couched in words of toleration of differences and respect for "my conservative brother in Christ," but that would have cut the guts out of the conservative's resolution. As the exchange wore on, the conservative's remarks grew more and more sarcastic and condemnatory, while the liberal's grew more and more icy and smugly tolerant. In the end, the amended language passed, effectively reversing the intent of the original resolution. At one level, it seemed like the liberal had won and the conservative had lost. But at another level, both had won: they got to walk away from the meeting with their preconceived prejudices about each other's side confirmed. Both appeared to feel justified by the exchange.

It is astounding how rapidly discussions become heated these days when the topic turns to religion, perhaps even more so when the topic is Christianity. It is shocking how much vitriol, invective, and good old-fashioned abuse are being doled out in the name of the Prince of Peace, especially between his followers. It is disturbing how deeply divided the body of Christ has become, with its "right" and "left" arms each growing more and more willing to amputate the other.

Not that this is anything new. In many ways, the church has been dividing itself in the name of unity since the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" first opened its doors. It was probably to counteract this very tendency that the apostle Paul, in the first century, employed his "body of Christ" metaphor in the first place. It was likely in response to this tendency that Richard Hooker in the sixteenth century urged his fellow Anglicans to view "even heretics" as "wounded Christians," rather than as heathens.² Is it any wonder that many Christian leaders both on the left and

the right have so often asked themselves why the Christian church is one of the few armies that shoot their own wounded?

Even so, things do seem to be getting more heated of late. It is as though those on either side of the divide view the other's most distinctive feature as a slippery slope to be avoided at all costs. Conservative Christians seem to view liberals' emphasis on love and acceptance as the first step toward a Christianity without the truth of Christ at its center. And liberal Christians seem to view conservatives' emphasis on Scripture and doctrine as the first step toward a Christianity without the love of Christ at its center. On any of the issues that ostensibly divide them, the two ends of the theological spectrum divide the spectrum into "sides" that view each other's words and actions with suspicion, filtering them through judgments they've already made about each other and through reacting against them.

It sometimes seems that each "side" is more interested in "winning" than in hearing any truth its counterpart might have to share. Having declared the other side the "enemy" and labeled it either "heretical" or "devoid of love" (having failed their own side's test of orthodoxy), each then feels free to defeat the other by any means necessary: name calling, misrepresentation verging on libel, ad hominem attacks, even outright harassment. On issues of human sexuality, for example, conservatives accuse liberals of being "revisionists," while liberals call conservatives "homophobic." These knee-jerk reactions only serve to reinforce existing suspicion, providing each side with ammunition for further attacks and thus widening the gap between them.

In my denomination, these divisions have tended to be over sexual orientation and gender roles. For some, the issues represent choices between stark opposites: whether to affirm or condemn same-sex relationships, whether to permit or deny the ordination of gays and lesbians, whether to permit or deny the ordination of

women, or some combination thereof. For others, the issues are more nuanced: whether or not to ordain “practicing homosexuals” or whether or not to allow female bishops. I have seen liberals vote down resolutions affirming the authority of Scripture, not because they disagreed with the proposition, but because of who proposed it: they feared that it was some kind of setup by their conservative opponents. I have seen conservatives reject alternative Episcopal oversight plans, not because they had objections to any of the candidates suggested as potential overseers, but because of who would be choosing them: the presiding bishop (or as some of them have called her, “The Presiding Heretic”³)—whom they see as “too liberal,” rather than someone on their side. The fear and loathing expressed by bloggers on both sides is very disturbing. A parishioner of mine, a former JAG commander with the Navy, calls this way of interacting the Tribal Narcissistic Tendency (T.N.T.), and suggests that it is at the heart of most conflicts.

I Agree with My Friends: The Lessons of Personal Experience

Despite the uncharitable behavior I have witnessed, there are people on both sides that I have come to know, respect, and count among my friends. I know these people to be my brothers and sisters. I know their commitment to Christ and to the church, and their love of the gospel.

Back in my seminary days, my theology professor, whenever he was asked his opinion about a contentious theological issue, would say, “Some of my friends say [*insert opinion here*] and some of my friends say [*insert opposite opinion here*]. Me? I agree with my friends.” I, too, agree with my friends. In fact, even on the issues that divide them, I’ve been surprised by how many points of agreement

I have with my friends—and thus they with each other—on both sides of these issues. It is exceedingly frustrating—even painful—to watch my friends focus so single-mindedly on what divides them, while living in denial about the many points of agreement that they share.

Having a foot in two camps is a familiar experience for me. I am to many a living contradiction: a Jewish Christian. Born the son of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father, I am by Jewish tradition and Halakhic law a Jew. Being a follower of Jesus Christ makes me a Christian. As usual, agreeing with my friends, I claim both traditions and the best of both faiths.

I became a follower of Christ through the actions of a conservative, evangelical, Pentecostal friend, who challenged me to consider the claims of Jesus. I took up the challenge and tried to prove him wrong, wanting to shut him up, and the rest, as they say, is history. While my friend's approach could be quite annoying, the challenge he offered was one I needed to take seriously, because I couldn't make a commitment to follow and worship Jesus Christ unless I was convinced that Christ was God. The fellowship Christianity offered was necessary but not sufficient for me to make such a commitment (not when it meant I would have to give up the fellowship I could have in a synagogue).



**Generosity without orthodoxy is nothing.
Orthodoxy without generosity is worse than nothing.⁴**

Hans Frei *German-born, American postliberal theologian, 1922–88*

Over time, I came to find that while doctrine was necessary for me to start my journey into the Christian faith, it was not sufficient to sustain me in that journey. Doctrine couldn't feed

my spirit. I needed to experience the love of Christ and to experience the transcendent yet immanent mysterious presence of God. Moreover there was truth and value in my Jewish heritage that I didn't wish to leave behind. I found these qualities more present on the liberal side of the church, and most present in the Episcopal Church. Not only did it allow me to experience the Divine Presence in the Eucharistic liturgy every Sunday, it was also, as I have often told people, "the most Jewish church I could find." Yet sometimes I find the reticence of many of my fellow Episcopalians and many liberal Christians to make doctrinal truth claims frustrating as well. I often find myself caught in a tension between love and truth, heart and mind, spirit and doctrine.



**If . . . you are truly my disciples . . .
you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free
By this everyone will know you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.**

Jesus of Nazareth (John 8:31–32, 13:35)

I appreciate—though don't always agree with the conclusions of—the biblical rigor of my friends on the conservative side of the church, a rigor that my friends on the liberal side seem to fear. And I often feel that my friends on the liberal side of the church operate out of a spirit of acceptance and tolerance that I frequently find lacking on the conservative side.

I'm generalizing from my own journey, of course. Even as I make this generalization, I recognize that it does not completely describe even my own experience: I count among my circle of Christian friends both tolerant conservatives and biblically rigorous liberals. But isn't that the nature of human learning, that we generalize from our journeys? In fact, it would be nearly

impossible for us to engage in a serious exploration of new ideas and concepts without making all kinds of generalizations. But as we will see as we continue this particular journey of exploration, the problem is not that we make generalizations about the world around us, but that we mistake our generalizations for the truth.

Yet our generalizations must have some truth to them or they would be of no use to us. Both sides of the conservative-liberal divide do have their predominant tendencies and these tendencies do have characteristic strengths and weaknesses, though they are often flip sides of the same coin.

So I want to say to my friends on both sides that each has something of value to share with the other. I want to remind my liberal friends that Jesus said, "[If] you are truly my disciples . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). And I want to remind my conservative friends that Jesus said, "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

In Christ There Is No Us and Them: The Lessons of My Congregation

My own congregation has experienced both the curse and the blessing: a premature and painful death, followed by a resurrection. The first St. Nicholas Church (Version 1.0), planted in the early 1990s, experienced the curse. A relatively conservative congregation, it grew quickly at first but within two years had "crashed and burned," ostensibly in conflict over human sexuality issues, but really over issues of power and control.

Two years later, blessing followed curse. Version 2.0 of St. Nick's rose from the ashes of 1.0. And as is often the case, Version 2.0 was a bit more stable, with a newly ordained leader (me) and

composed largely of “survivors” of the first plant. Determined to learn from painful experience, we dedicated ourselves to discerning and living into a new way of being church, in which conservative and liberal Christians could live together in love, and that conservative-liberal theological differences could not kill. We have been engaged in this journey of exploration for more than a decade.

We tried to be good interpreters of the spiritual signs of the times (see Matthew 16:1–3), looking critically at ourselves, our church, and the church at large. We discovered that neither we, nor our denomination, nor its parent body, were transiting these turbulent times alone. Churches everywhere are wracked by these conflicts. It’s just that we Anglicans tend to be more public in our disagreements than others. (A healthy sign, we thought.)

In time, it dawned on us: this conflict was not your average, everyday schism, but a paradigm shift—and not just one paradigm was shifting, but several. Realizing that we live in—and what we should expect in—an age of collapsing paradigms has helped our congregation respond to changes around us with less anxiety and more compassion. Realizing that what we had thought was a field of battle between unalterably opposed sides was really an emerging landscape, helped us understand that we needed each other’s eyes to find our way safely through.

We learned that major paradigm shifts are almost always accompanied by turmoil and disorder. Take science, for example. The primary mission of science is the discovery and integration of new knowledge. Yet studies have shown that, when confronted with data that conflict with the dominant paradigm, scientists reacted anxiously. Warring camps developed: “liberal” camps prematurely proposed new paradigms based on insufficient data; “conservative” camps defended the old paradigm by attacking the new data and the proposed paradigms. Eventually, the old paradigm fell,

yet neither camp really won. Some aspects of the liberal camp's proposals found their way into the new paradigm, many did not. Some aspects of the old paradigm, that the conservative camps were protecting, remained standing, many did not. Because their vision was still limited by the old paradigm, both camps were blindsided.⁵



**World views, in fact, are not very often exclusive.
Most of us carry two or three around with us all the time.⁶**

E.P. Sanders *Theologian and scholar of Jewish Christianity*

Major paradigm shifts have been even more traumatic for the church, provoking anxiety, anger, and reactivity in the form of conflict and even violence. Yet somehow, with God's help, the church has always found a way to survive the fall of old paradigms and eventually to adapt to new ones.

Coming to terms with our natural anxiety has helped the members of my congregation develop a sense of humility about what they know to be true, and to exercise a greater degree of tolerance toward those with whom they disagreed than they had previously. Conservatives learned to ask: "Are we truly acting to protect God's will (as if God needs our protection) or merely protecting the status quo?" Liberals learned to ask: "How do we know we are prophetically promoting God's will (as if God needs our promotion) or merely our own innovations?" Understanding our own propensity for reactivity has tended to give us pause about attributing evil intent to those who oppose our point of view. Recognizing that the dominant paradigm has created blind spots in our vision helps us realize how much we need the insights of those who disagree with us.

We began to realize that our paradigms are really our finite, human attempts to domesticate God. Because we cannot handle our reality raw and unfiltered, humanity creates paradigms in order to impose meaning, stability, and predictability upon wild and untamed reality. As long as we realize that our theological concepts must be provisional in nature, and are only our best attempts at expressing what we know about God and reality, this is okay. The problem comes when we begin to believe that our concepts are the full expression of God's reality, and then refuse to modify them. There is a word for trying to domesticate God. It is called *idolatry*. Yet over and over again throughout their histories, church after church has found itself doing precisely that.



**Orthodoxy:
What God knows,
some of which we believe a little,
some of which they believe a little,
and about which we all have a whole lot to learn.⁷**

Brian McLaren

We have come to view changing paradigms as God's way of telling us, *There you go again: trying to put me in a box*. We have come to understand that the dis-ease we feel when we experience such change is God's way of showing us that we have become so attached to our paradigms that we have rendered them impervious to change, so brittle and inflexible that the tiniest new breath of God's Spirit crumbles them to dust. We have come to recognize that when a familiar paradigm begins to fall, we have an opportunity to release God to the wild of mystery and paradox (actually God never left it) so that God can un-domesticate our faith.

This involves curbing our dogma.⁸ Back in my seminary days, one of my theology professors said the functional definition of the word *dogma* was “let’s stop talking about this and move on.” The core dogmas of the church, as described in the great creeds—the overflowing love and grace of the Triune God, and Christ’s human-divine essence as the conduit for that love and grace—were the best that humanity could do to describe the infinite essence of God after almost 400 years of grappling with the issue. It wasn’t going to get any better than that. After all, the essence of the infinite (God) is that it is beyond the finite (humanity). It was time to stop trying to refine the dogmas and to instead get on with living them out “with God’s help,” as the baptismal formula goes.

My congregation and I have learned that, as much as our concepts of orthodoxy are intended to express truth, they are not themselves truth, and they certainly are not The Truth. They are human constructs, subject to the influences, understandings, and assumptions of culture, as well as the limitations of the finite human mind, and to the extent that they contain such imperfections they are less than sufficient as organizing principles of Christian community.



Orthodoxy is my doxy—heterodoxy is another man’s doxy.⁹

William Warburton *English literary critic and churchman, 1698-1779*
(*Bishop of Gloucester from 1759*)

I am not advocating dispensing with dogma, but limiting its use to where it’s constructive to Christian community, rather than destructive. In other words, we would do well to distinguish more clearly between our dogma—those primary doctrines that form the core of our common Christian faith—and what some have

called our doctrinal distinctives—doctrines that are secondary—and not to allow what is merely distinctive to separate us. This is not to say these distinctives are without value. The doctrinal distinctives of a particular denomination or group might best be understood as part of its unique calling. As such, they may have great value as a witness to the whole church. However, the more of these distinctives we raise to dogmatic significance (i.e., make accepting them mandatory for membership in the body of Christ), the more we splinter our churches. Our congregation has been trying to learn the difference between essentials (things that truly matter) and nonessentials (what Augustine called *adiaphora*) and to be very, very cautious about what we put in the first category.¹⁰

An Invitation to a Journey of Exploration

So interesting times come with a blessing as well as a curse. The curse of a paradigm shift is the loss of a familiar way of organizing life. Like any death, it gives rise to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety about what the future may hold. Yet, while the death of a way of life is not to be pursued for its own sake, when it does occur it always brings with it the possibility of the birth of a new way: the rising of a new paradigm more complete and encompassing of the fullness of reality than the one we lost.

I believe that there is a new paradigm emerging: one that will transcend our current US/THEM attitudes; one that will bridge the increasing chasm between the "right" and "left" arms of the church; one that will reconcile the parties in this divorce between truth and love. But there's one big problem with this paradigm: it is still emerging. Because our eyes have been trained by the old, we cannot yet see clearly what the new will look like. But we can begin to explore its outlines. That's the purpose of this book.

So I would like to invite you to join me on a journey such as the ones taken by the explorers of old; a journey into an as yet undiscovered country; a journey of exploration to map the boundaries of the new world. We will start by digging deeper into why the current paradigms of Christian community seem to be collapsing, so we can stop “looking for love (and unity) in all the wrong places.” Then, since there is nothing entirely new under the sun, we will begin to train our eyes to recognize the new paradigm by exploring several “Christianities that might have been”—movements in the early church that had different ideas about what it meant to be a community of faith. Our journey concludes with an exploration of the possible outlines of a new way: thinking about orthodoxy that unites rather than divides; a concept of orthodoxy that transcends the distinction between liberal and conservative, yet captures much of what is at the heart of each; an incarnational orthodoxy anchored in the love of Christ.



**Biblical Reflection
and Group Discussion**

Whether you are reading by yourself, or as part of a study group, you may want to supplement what I am asking you to consider with reading in the Bible, and reflecting and praying about what you discover there.

If so, read the following texts. And if time permits, look them up in the Bible and read them in their fuller contexts. Then consider the questions that follow.

John 17:22–23

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Jesus called us to be one in the same way that he (God the Son) and God the Father are one. In what manner are God the Father and God the Son one? What then are the implications for how we, as the followers of Christ, are to be one?

1 Corinthians 13:12

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

How confident can we be that our knowledge of God's will is complete and correct? What does this say about the attitude we should hold toward those who disagree with us?

Luke 24:30–33

When [Jesus] was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught the disciples from the Scriptures, but it was not until he communed with them in the breaking of bread that they recognized him. What does this say about the relationship of doctrine and common worship to our recognizing that Christ is among us?



Questions to Consider

- 1 What was your image of God as a child? . . . As a teen? . . . As a young adult? At the age you are now? How has your image of God changed?*
- 2 In your opinion, which do you believe is more important to the church: correctness of belief or the unity of the body? How are they related?*
- 3 Draw two large circles that overlap side by side. Ask the group to divide itself into two sections: one composed of people who identify themselves as theologically liberal, the other composed of people who identify themselves as theologically conservative. Identify the things upon which you agree and the things about which you disagree. Write the things upon which you agree in the area of overlap. Write the things upon which you disagree in the outer circles (liberal ideas/issues in the one circle, conservative ideas/issues in the other). Are there other circles? What did you learn?**

**Question 3 is an important one for a study group that includes people holding opposing viewpoints. A facilitator should allow sufficient time for a full exploration of views on the part of all who are present.*

P A R T I

Does the Future Have a Church?

The End of the World as We Know It: Collapsing Paradigms

par-a-digm [pār'ə-dīm', -dīm'] *n.* 1. One that serves as a pattern or model. 2. A set or list of all the inflectional forms of a word or of one of its grammatical categories: *the paradigm of an irregular verb.* 3. A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline. From *paradeiknunai*, "to compare": *para-*, "alongside," *+deiknunai*, "to show." USAGE NOTE: Since the 1960s, *paradigm* has been used in science to refer to a theoretical framework.¹¹

I know. I know. The term *paradigm* sounds a little clichéd these days. In the world of business it seems like every other week somebody is promoting some new management technique as the newest paradigm in leadership. Yet while the term may have been overused (or even abused) of late, it is of great importance to understanding the turbulent times we face. If the word *paradigm* is a little hackneyed to you, just substitute *world view*, *conceptual model*, or some other equivalent term. Whatever you want to call it, if we want to understand how human beings learn and practice truth, we have to talk about paradigms. Because paradigms are the way we think and the way we interpret our perceptions of reality. It's in our DNA.

The words *truth* and *reality* are commonly used as though they were interchangeable. But while they are integrally related, they really are two very different things. If we were to look at them in the form of a mathematical equation, the relationship might be expressed like this:



$$T = R + M$$

Truth Equals Reality plus Meaning

(what we seek when we seek what we call truth)

With apologies to agent Fox Mulder of *The X-Files*, it's not the "truth" that is "out there" but "reality." And while we are borrowing phrases from old TV shows, we might borrow a line from officer Joe Friday of *Dragnet* and say that reality is "just the facts," without any meaning attributed to them.

We do like our reality filtered. Our minds seem "hard-wired" to develop paradigms. We are meaning-seeking creatures, determined to understand how and why things relate together the way they do, and we are driven to create conceptual systems based on our experience and observation of the world. It is this understanding of the hows and whys and relationships of reality that is what we mean by "truth."

In fact, we so depend upon such understanding that we will create conceptual systems even in the face of minimal experience and a paucity of observations. For example, rather than accepting that major natural disasters are just expressions of random chaos at work in the world, we call them "acts of God." Some find it easier to attribute poverty to character traits of the poor than to accept that their poverty and our prosperity might be as much a product of luck as of anything else. When a woman is sexually assaulted by a stranger, some are tempted to ask if she was wearing something

revealing or acting in a seductive manner. In this way, creating paradigms gives us the illusion of predictability and control.

Paradigms help us negotiate our way through the world more effectively. As with walking, if we had to think about each step before we took it, our minds would be preoccupied with putting one foot in front of the other. We wouldn't be able to chew bubble gum and walk at the same time. But once we "get" how walking works, we can move the activity out of our conscious minds and focus our conscious thinking processes on more important questions, such as "Where are we going?" and "Are we there yet?" Paradigms are the conceptual models we've developed to explain and predict how reality works. They provide a framework within which we can organize and integrate new experiences and observations.

The Problem with Paradigms: Confusing Truth with Reality

Paradigms seem to work so well for us so much of the time that we sometimes confuse our paradigms of reality with reality itself. Just like the glasses or contacts many of us wear, we forget that we have them on.

Similarly, when we lose sight of the provisional nature of our paradigms and begin to think of them as timeless and immutable, we can become reactive when faced with new experiences that don't fit our old way of thinking. We may be tempted to deny them. We may be suspicious of anomalous observations that threaten the old way of seeing things, or of the motives of those who bring them to our attention.

But our denial cannot stop the accumulation of discordant observations and experiences that the old paradigm no longer

explains. Sooner or later—usually later, human nature being what it is—the weight of the evidence becomes so great that the old paradigm collapses it. It is only then that a new paradigm can arise.

Physicist and historian of science Thomas Kuhn¹² once explained the process of individual and collective denial that historically happens when major paradigms shift in fields of scientific knowledge. Some scientists dismissed discrepant data as measurement errors, even when they arose in their own experiments. Others attacked the competence or motivation of the researcher (when anomalies arose in other scientist's experiments). Some appeared to "adjust" the data (mostly unconsciously) to fit the ruling paradigm. Others worked heroically to adapt the old paradigm to fit new data by introducing corollaries or constants. In some cases, researchers' commitment to the old paradigm was so strong it actually rendered them incapable of perceiving the data that didn't fit. These reactions were not limited to individual scientists. Resisters of change tended to be drawn to other like-minded scientists, eventually forming factions to oppose any consideration of abandoning the old, ruling paradigm of knowledge.



**Rather than being an interpreter,
the scientist who embraces a new paradigm
is like the man wearing inverting lenses.¹³**

Thomas Kuhn

Meanwhile, Kuhn noted, other scientists would react in the opposite direction, intuitively formulating and often aggressively proposing alternative paradigms to account for those discrepancies. Often, several alternate paradigms would be formed. Some of

these would be truly radical departures from the ruling paradigm; others merely an artful repackaging of the old way. Sometimes several of these alternative paradigms would be mutually exclusive of each other. The one thing they shared was that each would be championed with great hubris by their promoters. And as with the *conservative* scientists, factions of these *progressive* theorists tended to form to defend their positions.



**Do not confine your children to your own learning,
for they were born in another time.¹⁴**

Talmudic proverb

But when the new paradigm finally emerged, it was neither exactly what the reactionaries feared nor what the radicals were advocating. Rather, the new paradigm usually contained some aspects of the heavily defended ruling paradigm, some aspects of the heavily promoted proposed ones, and—this is the interesting part—some aspects that neither side expected. Obviously, if scientists, who are in a field of understanding that is supposed to be the epitome of open-minded objectivity, respond to shifts in understanding reality with such a high level of reactive subjectivity, how can we expect the rest of us to be any less reactive and subjective in our responses?

It is our nature to resist change of any kind. When our paradigms are challenged, we fight tooth and nail. The greater the shift required, the stronger we tend to react against it, even when the loss of the paradigm would not threaten core operating principles.

Historically, the church has been especially prone to these reactions. Take the case of *Church v. Galileo* in 1616. Galileo's observation that the Earth orbited the sun was contrary to

long-standing church teaching. Yet Galileo's discovery was not exactly new to science, nor unknown to the church, it was only a confirmation of earlier observations by Copernicus. Nevertheless, Galileo's announcement of his "discovery" was met with angry denunciations from the church in a manner that Copernicus's observations were not.

Why did the church react so "reactively" to Galileo after virtually ignoring Copernicus? The answer probably lies in the way human organizations react when a dominant paradigm collapses, especially when the collapse of the dominant paradigm would diminish their own dominance. Copernicus had published his observations among his peers, while Galileo announced his "discovery" publicly. Galileo's pronouncements of his findings were sarcastically dismissive of the church's position on the matter, while Copernicus did not "connect the dots" from his findings to the church's teachings. Galileo's observations—because they were brashly and publicly defiant—threatened the church's dominance in a way Copernicus's did not.

To be fair to the church, before Copernicus, most scientists also believed the Earth was at the center of the universe, and their initial reaction to the new findings was not all that welcoming. Scientists had the luxury of less publicity and a few extra years to get used to the change. Otherwise they may have reacted to Galileo just as badly as the church.¹⁵ The bottom line is that the hardening reaction to public criticism is typical of institutional reactions to the attacks on dearly held paradigms that often precede their collapse.

We live in an age of rapid change when paradigms that have served us for centuries no longer adequately describe the reality we are coming to know. Our knowledge is changing faster than the capacity of many paradigms to adapt. Just about every field of human endeavor—from physics to politics, from art to

psychology—is experiencing this shifting of the sands underfoot. Theology, which monk and theologian Anselm of Canterbury once called “faith seeking understanding,”¹⁶ is no exception.

Theology is the church’s division of paradigm development. We seek to develop paradigms to describe the nature of the spiritual realities that we have experienced; things such as the nature of God, the nature of Christ, the nature of God’s Spirit, the nature of the world, the nature of humankind, and other issues.

Understandings that have emerged from theology have in turn profoundly affected the way the church has understood its role and mission in the world, its understanding of faith and what it means to be a community of faith, its relationship to other faith communities, and more. But just as in other fields of knowledge, theological paradigms are still only human approximations of a reality that only God can fully know. They are not the reality they seek to represent.

The End of the World as We Know It

I believe the church is facing a particularly rough patch this time around, because it is losing several familiar paradigms of Christian community:

1. **Christendom.** An approach to Christian unity grounded in institutionalized power and control that came into full play when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. While Christendom may no longer be the “official” paradigm of Christianity, its memory still has an influence on the Christian imagination.
2. **Foundationalism.** Conservative and liberal Christianity, as we know them today, have their roots in the Enlightenment paradigm of Foundationalism that assumes that ultimate

truths can be grasped through human rationality. Foundationalism had two main schools of thought: one that sought to establish universal truths by objective observation of the outside world, and another that sought to discover universal truths through objective analysis of internal human experience. The modern conservative belief in biblical inerrancy grew out of the first approach. Modern liberal Scripture analysis grew out of the second. Both forms are now collapsing.

3. **Religion.** Organized religion is itself a paradigm based on the assumption that spiritual unity requires the security of an organized, centralized system of beliefs and practices. Where Foundationalism sought unity in certainty about truth, those employing the paradigm of Organized Religion have sought unity in the security of organization. If the increasing number of people identifying themselves as "spiritual, not religious" is any indication, Christianity conceived as organized religion would seem to be in some trouble.

The collapse of these paradigms presents the church with danger and opportunity. The danger is obvious and immediate: schism. When the church's governing paradigms have shifted in the past, the process has been chaotic, if not violent; the emotional climate confused, if not angry; the outcome has been the tearing of the fabric of the church, if not actual schism. The Reformation, the church's last great paradigm shift five hundred years ago, was a violent and disruptive affair. Protestant–Roman Catholic schism was just the beginning: after the separation Protestantism rapidly began to splinter into dozens of smaller denominations whose members were willing to die (and kill) for their distinctive doctrinal visions. Many today fear that the rapidly disintegrating consensus around the nature of Christian community will result

in increasing schism: a rapid cell division spreading through the body of Christ like a cancer, that in the end will prove deadly to the unity of the church.

But is our rapidly disintegrating consensus really such a bad thing? It all depends on the meaning we assign to uniformity. If we view agreement on things as an indicator of health, and disagreement as a sign of pathology, then the loss of consensus we are facing is very frightening indeed. But what if those valuations were reversed? What if we viewed difference and differentiation as a positive thing and conflict as a natural part of life—a sign of health? What then? Maybe what makes cancer such an unhealthy condition is not that cells are dividing rapidly, but *how* they are dividing. Cancer is one kind of cell division: mitosis.

But mitosis is not the only form of rapid cell division. There is another kind that is completely healthy and much more hopeful: meiosis. Instead of creating a duplicate of itself, the cell divides in two and redistributes half of its DNA to each of the two new cells, so that each new cell carries half the encoded traits of the original cell. This kind of rapid cell division is essential to healthy biological reproduction. Whenever we have tried to defeat it in the hope of maintaining uniformity—in the breeding of pedigree dogs or royal families—the results are frequently detrimental and sometimes deadly. Meiosis ensures a level of diversity in our DNA that keeps us healthy.

What if we viewed the diverging consensus in the church in a different light: not as mitosis gone wild, but as a return to healthy meiosis. Could it be that the Holy Spirit is moving in the church to initiate a kind of spiritual-theological meiosis? Could the Holy Spirit be preparing to birth something new? A new way of being church? A fresh, new basis for Christian unity? One that depends on the welcoming of differentiation as a way of becoming a more whole and complete body of Christ?



It is an old maxim of mine that when you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

Sherlock Holmes *From "The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet" by Arthur Conan Doyle, 1900*

Deuteronomy 8:2

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.

As the old saying goes: it took God a day to get the Israelites out of Egypt, but it took God forty years to get Egypt out of the Israelites. Why is it so difficult to leave behind even a paradigm that has ceased to be healthy? A whole generation of Israelites had to pass on before the Israelites were prepared to enter the Promised Land. What has to die before we are able to enter a new paradigm?

Acts 10:11–16

[In a dream, Peter] saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." The voice said to him again, a second time,

"What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

In a dream, God revealed to Peter a new paradigm for a community of faith, yet Peter was resistant to giving up the old way. If God were to reveal to us a new way of being a Christian community, what might hold us back from living into that revelation?

Matthew 7:3–5

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye.

Imagine a conflict that you have experienced in church. To what extent was each side criticizing the other for things they are overlooking in themselves? In what ways do we engage in this dynamic on a routine basis?



Questions to Consider

- 1 Which part of your church's liturgy would you be most resistant to changing? Which item of liturgical "furniture" (e.g., altar, baptismal font, etc.) would you be most resistant to moving? What does this say about the spiritual meaning you invest in the action or item in question?*
- 2 List several things you value about the nature of spiritual community in your congregation. Which thing on your list do you consider the most important? The least important?*
- 3 Which of the above would you be willing to give up for the sake of Christian unity? Explain. Answer the same question for your congregation and/or denomination.*

Constantine's Ghost: Christendom

Chris-ten-dom [krɪs'tən-dəm] *n.* 1. Christians considered as a group. 2. The Christian world. From Old English *crīstendom*: *crīstēn*, Christian; see Christian + *-dom*, *-dōm*: kingdom.¹⁷

Christendom. In its wider sense this term is used to describe the part of the world which is inhabited by Christians. . . . But there is a narrower sense in which Christendom stands for a polity as well as a religion, for a nation as well as for a people. Christendom in this sense was an ideal which inspired and dignified many centuries of history and which has not yet altogether lost its power over the minds of men.¹⁸

An interesting thing about paradigms is that once one becomes dominant it eventually becomes so pervasively engrained in our subconscious mind that not only does it become invisible to us, but it continues to influence our thinking, behavior, and social interactions long after it has fallen. Given the right set of cues—especially in times of conflict—we find ourselves slipping back into them like a comfortable old shoe: a kind of paradigm regression.

Garrison Keillor tells a story about going home for Christmas.¹⁹ He left his own home a fully grown, mature adult, but as he drove toward his parents' home it was as though he grew smaller with

each passing mile, and had more and more trouble reaching the gas pedal and seeing over the steering wheel. The story ends with him hopping down out of his car, skipping up to the house and into the living room, climbing up onto the sofa, dangling and swinging his legs, and shouting, "Hi Mommy, what's for dinner?" That's often how it works with us and it's one way of understanding what has happened with the paradigm of Christendom.

The ideal of Christendom may have reached its most complete fruition with the near-complete merger of church and state under the Roman Emperor Constantine—that is why some call it Constantinianism.²⁰ Yet Christendom neither started with Constantine in the fourth century nor ended with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth.

The seeds of Christendom were actually planted in the early second century. Christianity was still illegal in the Roman Empire, largely due to the efforts of politically conservative defenders of the Empire who sought to depict the church as threatening the stability of the Empire by undermining its values. In an attempt to soften the resulting persecution, Justin Martyr and other so-called "apologists" wrote and published tracts portraying the church as having no axe to grind against the Empire. Later that same century, the apologist Tertullian went a step further. Instead of portraying the church as merely nonthreatening to the Empire, Tertullian argued that the virtues of Christianity were supportive of the virtues of Imperial Roman culture.²¹

The third century found the church fathers venturing even further down the path toward the syncretisation with the state, adopting in their writings the metaphor of God as the church's heavenly Emperor and suggesting that the heavenly emperorship of God ought to be mirrored on earth by a human emperor over the church. By the end of the century, many were arguing that, for the good of the church, Christianity ought to be the unifying force

behind the Empire. So when fourth-century emperor Constantine attempted to unify the rapidly disintegrating Empire and quickly crumbling culture of Rome by making Christianity the official religion and himself head of both church and state, it was a small leap rather than a radical departure.

To be fair, the larger God-King paradigm did not originate with Christianity, having been the worldwide cultural norm for millennia prior to the birth of the church. Long before the birth of the Prince of Peace, God had already fought a losing battle with the people of Israel and gave in to their demand for a king to rule in God's name like the nations that surrounded them (1 Samuel 8:4–22). So it's hard to blame the church for falling prey to the temptation of the God-King paradigm. Perhaps the only surprise is how fast it fell.

Unity through Uniformity, Enforced by Power

Constantine's goal was to bring unity to the Empire by bringing uniformity to civil affairs, with the church as the new civil religion. But first, by the power of the Empire if necessary, he had to impose uniformity. As a result, uniformity of doctrine and practice increasingly became the paramount concerns of the church. And for the first time in its history, churches were able to pull the levers of power to enforce such uniformity. This was the heart of the Christendom paradigm: unity through uniformity, often enforced by power.

It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which the church allowed itself to be re-shaped and re-purposed by the Christendom paradigm.²² It is difficult to overstate the degree to which, once adopted, the paradigm rendered the church unaware of the scope of these changes.

Ironically, it was these first attempts to employ the power of the Empire to unify the church that would sow the seeds of the first schism. Before Constantine's unilateral decision to call the Council of Nicaea, the great ecumenical councils of the church were called and their issues considered and decided in a conciliar (i.e., consensus) fashion among the representatives of the various "Apostolic Sees" (major centers of Christianity thought to be established by the apostles). But his heavy-handedness did not end there. He lobbied hard for (and later won) the excommunication of Jewish Christianity from the church, not on the basis of heterodox belief, but because he misunderstood their desire to worship in the same Jewish style as did their Lord and Savior.

The effects of the Christendom paradigm were perhaps most keenly felt in the church's attitude toward war and violence. For its first three centuries, Christianity understood violence and war as incompatible with the teachings and example of Jesus.²³ I am not sure early Christians would have thought of themselves as *pacifists*: they did not always remain passive in the face of violence but were willing to actively resist it at the cost of their lives. But the resistance offered by early Christians was almost always non-violent. In fact, they refused to respond violently, even when their lives were at stake. Until the time of Constantine, imperial soldiers who became Christians resigned from the military at the first opportunity. Because of this, the Roman army banned Christians from its ranks in the fourth century. Yet by the fifth century, writers such as Augustine were justifying military service²⁴ and Christians began joining the military in increasing numbers, and by 416 CE it was illegal for anyone *but* Christians to serve in the Roman army. It is astonishing to think that it took only a century for Christianity to morph from a religion that abhorred violence into one that came to believe in, as Walter Wink called it, "the myth of redemptive violence."²⁵

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