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A NEW MISSION?

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In the following I will be describing a specific new world Christian mission. But let me begin by making a short comment on new missions generally.

So-called “new missions” come about because of new contexts, not because of a new gospel. It is the demands of a new context that drives us back to Scripture for a fresh look at what God is calling us to be and do in this place and this time. So in describing a “new” mission, we start with a description of the prevailing context.

The Scriptures are filled with moments of new missions. Indeed, new missions are like acts in the drama of the gospel story. New missions pop up as a result of some great cataclysmic event (like a worldwide flood), some great human failure (like Adam’s sin), some plan born of the nature of God (like God’s son Jesus dying on the cross for humanity), or a combination of these three. New missions are God’s desired response to the new conditions that result from these cataclysms, failures, and divine initiatives.

Adam sinned, shattering the innocence of Eden, and an alternative life of toil and trouble resulted. Babel was built, accentuating the arrogance of God’s creatures, and Noah was tapped to serve as God’s instrument of a rebooted creation. Noah’s sons couldn’t carry on the tradition of his father, so God called a people, Abraham and Sarah’s descendents, to model what a righteous kingdom could look like. Israel succeeded and failed in what seemed like equal measure, and God decided an explicit, universal offer needed to be made through a divine mediator, his son Jesus. The Christian church was born. New missions, all of them, in response to new contexts.

When missiologists take up the challenge of analyzing the new missions God’s people shoulder, they create a language to describe the changes. One important concept used to describe the periodic changes is to call them paradigm shifts, a term used by Thomas Kuhn, writing about the history of science, but whose ideas have wider applicability.¹ When one is in a paradigm, a well-defined set of theories and tools are used by almost everyone to describe what happens within the time frame defined by the paradigm. Like all theories, however, not all the events and historical facts in a particular time frame are satisfactorily explained. These anomalies (or wild facts as William James called them) are considered exceptions and usually simply ignored.²

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, third edition (Chicago 1996 [1962]). In this paper we will be using Kuhn’s tightly defined definition of paradigm (“Universally recognized achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners”, p. x) recognizing that the word is sometimes used more widely to describe almost any change in context or worldview.

² William James, *The Will To Believe* (publisher date), p. xx, and *Varieties of Religious Experience* (publisher date), pp. xx-xx..

Over time, these anomalies and wild facts increase in number and eventually church leaders recognize the need for a change—a paradigm shift, a shift to a more inclusive theory that will explain most of the wild facts. Scholars create a new theory and enlist a new set of analytic tools to explain what is happening. This is difficult work. While working within a particular paradigm it is extremely difficult to acknowledge the presence or, more precisely, the importance of wild facts. People become comfortable in their perceptions of reality and resist the hard work of new paradigm creation.

Consider a simple example: Frances and I spend our summers at Wood Hill, a five acre lakeside retreat in the north woods of Wisconsin. Surrounded by acres and acres of uninhabited forest, during the course of the summer we see wolves. The prevailing paradigm, however, is that wolves are all but extinct in the mainland United States (except in National Parks). Thus, when guests come to see us, they not only refuse to believe our wolf sightings (“Are you sure it wasn’t a dog or a coyote?”) but have several times “not seen” the very wolves we have pointed out to them. These “wild facts” are not part of most people’s paradigm.

In his book on paradigm shifts, Thomas Kuhn uses many scientific examples of paradigm shifts, but one of his primary examples, one he wrote an entire additional book on, was the paradigm shift that is known as the Copernican Revolution, the astronomical shift from considering the earth to be the center of the universe to the paradigm of seeing the sun as the center of our solar system.³ In addition to being an excellent example of the difficulty of scientific paradigm shifts, the Copernican Revolution has the added value for us of showing the powerful role religion and religious institutions play in paradigm shifts, scientific, religious, and otherwise. It also demonstrates well the idea that wild facts are often uncovered and highlighted by developments in research technology that brings new facts to light. In Copernicus’s case, the new technology was primarily Galileo’s telescope.

Thus, my assumptions are these: Christian mission is done according to prevailing paradigms. These mission paradigms are firmly entrenched.⁴ Change in mission paradigms will not occur until the number of wild facts (anomalies) accumulate and make the usefulness of the old paradigm untenable.

Today’s Wild Facts

The first part of my thesis then is this: A paradigm shift is taking place in Christian mission. Wild facts are piling up. Let me mention half a dozen. Wild Fact #1. Too often today the presentation of the gospel has unintended negative effects. The old paradigm says the gospel brings only good things. Yet more and more we see the results of mission efforts in broken families as children’s vocational expectations are shattered; in lost cultural traditions with things like filial piety, for example, proscribed; in excess wives abandoned and made destitute as the monogamous

³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* (Harvard 1957).

⁴ Note the plural “paradigms” here. Kuhn leans toward the idea that in scientific research a single paradigm dominates at any one time. Missional theologians who have used Kuhn’s paradigm construct, primarily Hans Kung and David Bosch, suggest that one of the differences between scientific and missional paradigm thinking is that Christian missions tends to operate according to multiple paradigms at any one time.

ideal takes over; even in political regimes that can become destabilized as a result of Christian missions.

Wild Fact #2. Age-old rewards and punishments of Christian faith—heaven and hell—popular staples of the older paradigms, no longer motivate people. The increasingly rare sermon on hell is swamped by oration after oration on possibility thinking. It is the triumph of *The Purpose Driven Life* over *The Late, Great Planet Earth*.⁵

Wild Fact #3. Mission workers have gone from being culture heroes to culture villains excoriated by pulp fiction writers like James Michner and Barbara Kingsolver—and almost every movie maker who casts a mission worker role. Not that the abuse is totally undeserved: Too many mission workers have gone intending to do good and end up doing evil—or doing well.

Wild Fact #4. The statistical failures of 20th century Christian missions are a matter of record. In 1900 34% of the world population identified themselves as Christian. In 2000 that percentage had dropped to 33%.⁶ Mission to Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim countries have been notable statistical failures—yet to read mission literature one would think that Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims are becoming Christian in overwhelming numbers. Was that a wolf I saw?

Wild Fact #5. One would like to think that the gospel arrives in new countries on the wings of a snow white dove of peace. Yet the Middle East, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Rwanda, and Iraq are just five recent examples of the conflict and violence that can accompany the introduction of the gospel story in a new culture.

Wild Fact #6. The self perception Westerners tend to have of being the chosen custodians of the gospel story and the senders of mission workers to the four corners of the world is being shattered by the apostolic urges of Korean, African, Indian, Chinese, and other Christian national churches who are sending mission workers to bring the whole gospel to the whole world—the West included.

We have listed some of the more important wild facts that are piling up. We have not come close to exhausting the list. Further discussion would reveal many more. All the conditions are ripe for a paradigm shift.

Paradigm Shifts in Biblical Context

Since we are going to use Thomas Kuhn's insights on paradigm shifts, we start with a brief heuristic outline of the major church mission paradigm shifts. For teaching purposes we will postulate three basic paradigms the church has used and is using to delineate its mission to the world.⁷ Each of these three, of course, could be subdivided

⁵ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan 2007); Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan 1970).

⁶ David Barrett, *World Christian Trends AD 30 – AD2200* (William Carey 2001), pp. 4.

⁷ There is no shortage of these ideal type “paradigms” parsing Christian mission. The sociologist Max Weber (who first articulated the idea of ideal type categorizations in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* [Macmillan 1947], pp. 92, 117) divided the world's religions into x types: xxxx, xxxx, and xxxx). Hans Kung discussed the concept of paradigm extensively in *Theology for the Third Millennium* (Doubleday 1988) and divided Christian history into eight paradigms: Apocalyptic, Hellenistic, Roman Catholic, Reformation, Counter Reformation, Orthodox, Enlightenment, and Postmodern. David Bosch applied the concept more specifically to mission history and identified six: Missionary, Medieval, Reformation, Enlightenment, Postmodern, and Ecumenical. See *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis 1991).

into many more. But we will focus on three: *The Chosen People Paradigm*, *The Jesus Only Paradigm*, and *The Reconciliation Paradigm*. As we describe each one, we will put it in conversation with Kuhn's teachings on scientific paradigm shifts.

The Chosen People Paradigm. The first paradigm missiologists use to describe the church's mission to the world might be called *The Chosen People Paradigm*. The Bible story tells of God choosing Israel to be a chosen people, with Abraham and Sarah as parents of a nation through which "all people on earth will be blessed." (Genesis 12:3) The nation, Israel, will be for God "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:6) Isaiah describes the mission of this tribe as being "a light for the Gentiles." (Isaiah 49:6). In the Gospels that idea is picked up, describing Jesus as the light of the world (Luke 2: 30-32) and Christians reflecting this light to others (Matthew 5:14). Paul applies the idea to the followers of Jesus whose mission is to take the story of Jesus to the Gentile world.

This is a very powerful paradigm. Throughout church history political and economic powers whose constituencies were primarily Christian have stumbled over themselves claiming the mantle of being God's chosen people at their particular time and place. The Roman Empire came to be called the Holy Roman Empire after Constantine's conversion. The Christian Crusaders of the tenth and eleventh centuries saw themselves as God's chosen instrument to free the Holy Land from the infidels. The colonial powers, for all their focus on economic empires, were in no small part motivated by their desire to bring Christian civilization to the unwashed—in their view they were called to do so. And we still see it happening today. One of the founding groups of the United States, the Puritans, used deliberate language to convey their conviction that the new chosen people were—well, Puritans.

People who see the world this way see it in us versus them terms. The "us" is sometimes an ethnic group, sometimes a nation, sometimes the church, sometimes a church. The "us" group has two primary missions: (1) to remain pure and holy so that they are worthy of being God's chosen instrument and (2) to take their message to others in such a way that they are convinced to join us—to become part of our group, our empire. They are to cross over the boundary separating the "us" and the "them" and become part of "us". Social theorists describe this kind of understanding of people groups as bounded sets. The important feature of bounded sets is the boundary lines that separate the us's from the them's. Like front lines in a military campaign, a breach of these lines constitutes the most serious threat to the well-being of the group, so great energies are expended to keep the boundaries well-defined and controlled.⁸

Of course, one of the reasons this is a very powerful paradigm is because it is a true one. Jesus had a concrete image to describe it. He called the us group the sheep and the them group the goats. (Matthew 25:31-46) The good guys were the sheep and could be distinguished from the goats by the fact that they cared for poor people and sick people and unjustly treated people ("For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."). The strength of the paradigm is that it clearly defines groups

⁸ Anthropologists and sociologists are the experts when it comes to defining these boundaries and centers. See, for example, Paul Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Baker Academic 2008), pp. 33-37.

as either in or out. This way of looking at the world helps simplify its complexity. We can clearly see the good guys and the bad guys. Spiritual warfare becomes a fightable battle, not a metaphorical lesson. The boundaries of God's people over against the world—it would be so convenient if those boundaries were coterminous with national boundaries, for example.

The *Chosen People Paradigm* usually is not the best paradigm for today's mission, however. This is not because it is not true and not because it is not biblical, but because it does not describe enough. As the church has grown and become a globalized institution including people of all nations and all languages and all cultures, and as those cultures have themselves ceased to be homogenous and become very complex, a bounded-set understanding of mission just does not work. The church has become too diverse. Theology has become too complex. People are so delightfully different. How can we possibly see only us's and them's? In the world today, *The Chosen People Paradigm* leaves too many wild facts unaccounted for. As Kuhn says, the growth of "recognized anomalies whose characteristic feature is their stubborn refusal to be assimilated to existing paradigms" (p. 97) dramatically reduces a paradigm's usefulness.

Is the chosen people motif a useful way to describe modern day Israel, for example? Probably not. Or modern day America? Surely not. Isn't this way of looking at the world responsible for much of the conflict we see in the Middle East today? Conflict that has a great likelihood of ending up in a terrorist group of one sort or another detonating a nuclear weapon?

Yet *The Chosen People Paradigm* persists in many mission groups. Once people see the world in one way it is difficult for them to see it in any other. "In science," Kuhn says, "novelty emerges only with difficulty, manifested by resistance, against a background provided by expectation." (p. 64) Mission communities resemble scientific groups at this point. When describing mission work, you can tell if this paradigm is still being used by the use of the terms "unreached people groups," the "10/40 window," "spiritual warfare" and military metaphors in general.⁹

The Jesus Only Paradigm. For centuries there has been an alternative mission paradigm at work. We call it *The Jesus Only Paradigm*. It was not the original paradigm of Scripture. Undoubtedly the original paradigm of Scripture was *The Chosen People Paradigm*. But the wild facts left roaming about by that paradigm became evident early on, helped in no little part by the waxing and waning of Israel's faithfulness to the covenant, and the obvious scriptures that testified to God's care for all humankind, not just Israel. Even in texts used by the *Chosen People* folks, the Bible makes clear that God is interested in "all nations:" "The whole earth is mine," God says in Exodus 19:6. The Psalmist says that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." (Psalm 24:1)

Since many of the problems with the *Chosen People Paradigm* had to do with the conflicts created by the hard-edged boundaries between people's necessary to the concept, the alternative paradigm has a strong center and porous boundaries. There has never been much doubt what the center should be—Jesus Christ is the heart of the

⁹ For example, see a good discussion of some of the problematic aspects of using the mission metaphor, "the 10/40 window" to describe the longitude and latitude defined area of Chinese religionists, Hindus, and Buddhists as primary mission targets, in Michael Rynkiewicz's "The World In My Parish," *Missiology* (2002), pp. xx-xx.

Christian religious tradition, and when a center was needed, Jesus Christ was the obvious choice. Sociologists call such a social configuration a centered-set. The center, not the boundaries are the non-negotiables. It is from the center, not the boundaries, that the message is sent out, instead of being defined by the boundaries. People are drawn in, sometimes landing at varying distances from the center, attracted to it like the pull of gravity. In church terms, people could belong to the church with varying degrees of commitment; the job of the church is to draw people closer and closer, but trusting that the influence of the center would hold for a long way out.

People who see the world from a centered-set paradigm are like planets orbiting around the sun. The influence of the center is both centripetal and centrifugal, both sending energy out further and further in mission, but drawing in more and more strongly in discipleship. It is not so necessary to define who's in and who's out because the center through its gravitational pull holds it all together. It is not so necessary to have long and elaborate, non-negotiable doctrinal positions. As long as one's Christology is sound and sure, the rest is of more or less importance depending on how the theologians relate it to the central beliefs around the incarnation of Christ and the resulting soteriology. Mission becomes a matter of witnessing to what Jesus Christ has done in one's life, what Jesus has done in establishing his church, and what he wants done in the future.¹⁰

This is also a very powerful paradigm. At crucial points in the church's conflict-heavy history, the indisputable center in Jesus has made it possible to arrive at compromises that lead if not to unity, at least peaceful coexistence—among Christians at least. It does raise questions about non-Christian religions, however. As long as Jesus is at the center, then other religions are bound by the same rules as secularists. Belief in and dependence upon the Son of God is a baseline requirement that cannot be negotiated. The power of this paradigm also comes from its Scriptural support. That is, like *The Chosen People Paradigm*, this one is also true. "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," Jesus said (John 14:6) And, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved," Acts 4:12 says. Paradigms have to be true to be useful. But these two paradigms paint very different pictures of the same world. Kuhn said that a "new theory does not have to conflict with any of its predecessors," (95). But even though they describe the same world, they are both, at the same time, true and incompatible. "Though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the scientist afterward works in a different world." (121).

But like *The Chosen People Paradigm*, *The Jesus Only Paradigm* suffered from an increasing number of anomalies and wild facts. For one, focusing on Christ as the initiator and enabler of salvation created some interesting theological dilemmas for people who lived before Christ. For another, Jesus, some suggested, was a man like

¹⁰ Many still see the mission of the Christian church through the lenses of *The Jesus Only Paradigm*. In my lifetime I have seen it culminate in the elite Christian theology of Karl Barth and his Christocentrism and, at the other end of the cultural spectrum, the popular Christian expression in the sixties known as the Jesus People. For Barth, reading the Bible one must read Christ into the story both forward from 5 BC to today and into the future, but also backward to creation. The Old Testament must be read through the eyes of Christ. A perfect centered-set example. For the young, sixties people, *Jesus Only* was a way to sort out a confusing, complex, and inconsistent time, not only for Western culture but for the Christian church. It was/had something all constructors of theories and theology should strive for: simplicity and parsimoniousness.

many other great religious leaders. A great man. But, perhaps, one among many great men? The problems of the world religions are not solved, or even addressed well, by *The Jesus Only Paradigm*.

So we find ourselves in the midst of a paradigm shift in Christian mission. There can be little doubt that a new paradigm is being constructed. And there can be little doubt that this new paradigm is being contested every step of the way. There are many builders at work. Many of the ideas are good ones. We see them as signs of hope. But the new paradigm is not entirely clear yet. Perhaps looking at a few of these signs of hope and both their promise and their shortcomings will give us some clues as to how the new paradigm might look. We will then propose the new third paradigm in the constructive part of the paper.

Signs of Hope and Paradigm Shifts

Surely one of the evidences that a major paradigm shift is taking place would not only be the piling up of wild facts, but that many people would be noticing the inadequacies of past paradigms and would be attempting to do something about it. And it doesn't even take a particularly close examination of the church cultural scene to see that this is indeed the case. There is no shortage of changes and movements and ministries designed to recalibrate the church's ministries. Signs of hope abound.

Let me just mention three: the theological emphasis on Trinitarian theology, the ecclesiological suggestions of the emerging church movement, and the missional emphasis on holistic mission work. All could be part of the new paradigm that is developing. They are faithful to scripture and they are effective in addressing real needs of God's people today. But many of them become caricatures of themselves because they are mistakenly seen in the context of one of the old paradigms, *The Chosen People Paradigm* or *The Jesus Only Paradigm*. When placed in one of the old paradigms as either bounded sets or centered sets, they lose their creative, anomaly solving power. Their difference becomes muted and lost. They only begin to explain and incorporate the anomalies when seen in the light of a new paradigm.

Consider, for example, the renewed emphasis on Trinitarian theology. In an attempt to address the anomalies created by prevailing theologies, new theological explanations have arisen that oriented everything around just one of the three persons of the Godhead, God the Father (theocentrism), Jesus Christ (Christomonism), and the Holy Spirit (pan-pneumatology).¹¹ Many theologians have recognized that these theological emphases tend to exalt one person of the Trinity at the expense of the other two. The solution, many are suggesting, is to make sure that all discussions of Christian transcendence are Trinitarian. This is a hopeful sign. Unfortunately, it is often used as simply another version of our centered-set paradigm, *The Jesus Only Paradigm*, only instead of having Jesus at the center, the Trinity is put at the center. As an operating paradigm it thus falls prey to all the problems of that paradigm, i.e. it is hierarchical and does little to solving the problem of the other religions. In addition, placing the Trinity at the center of a centered-set paradigm denies the relational nature of the Trinity itself, the very reason it is a sign of hope. In order to realize its potential as a sign of hope, Trinitarian theology needs to be located in a different paradigm altogether.

¹¹ This was H. Richard Niebuhr's great insight in xxxxxxxxx (publisher:date), pp. xx-xx.

Some of the signs we are seeing are more institutional in nature. A movement called the emerging church is one that has explicitly acknowledged the anomalies that are accumulating around the institutional church as we know it.¹² The weakness and aging of the traditional denominations, the lack of relevance of worship to many people, and the sharp division between personal piety and social concern are a few of the emerging church's concerns. But if the emerging church explains itself in terms of traditional polity—or sets itself up as the one valid alternative to the other forms the church takes in our day and age, it hasn't gained much.

Still other signs of hope are more explicitly missional: a rediscovery (a renaissance) of holistic mission and an emphasis on the importance of contextualization of the gospel as it is introduced (and reintroduced) in different cultures.¹³ Put in the proper paradigm, both of these movements are signs of hope. Put in bounded or centered sets, they fall prey to the same problems all bounded and centered sets experience in our day and age.

We could mention and evaluate others: the new monastic movement, the movements of women leadership and full participation in the church, the growing interest in environmental concerns. All of these can be considered signs of hope, especially if they are located in a paradigm that will allow their creativity and faithfulness to be clearly seen.

It is that new paradigm that is slowly but surely emerging. Some of its features are fairly clear, others are still being hammered out. Let's take a look at what we do know and don't know about *The Reconciliation Paradigm*.

The Reconciliation Paradigm for Christian Mission

The old paradigms we have been considering, *The Chosen People Paradigm* and *The Jesus Only Paradigm*, had some foundational assumptions that made them useful in previous ages—and perhaps they are still helpful under certain conditions today. But one of their fundamental assumptions, that cultures and people groups are essentially simple, undifferentiated societies, has changed. The most useful maps today make a different assumption—they assume a new reality of highly complex, differentiated societies. That is why bounded set theories, and centered set theories are no longer as helpful to us.

What is more helpful is what we might call *The Reconciliation Paradigm*. This paradigm is hinted at by many, and understood by few. The ideas of *The Reconciliation Paradigm* are too often argued for and implemented based on features of the two older paradigms with which we are so familiar, and thus the value of those otherwise good ideas are lost because they are nested in paradigms that do not do them justice. *The Reconciliation Paradigm* must be based on a relational map of the world. It maps the relationships of the world, not the beliefs of the world; it does not show boundaries as much as it shows networks, relationships within and across boundaries. It has no center, unless we consider all points centers at the same time. In Scripture, *The Reconciliation Paradigm* is spoken about metaphorically as the “new heaven and new earth,” (2 Peter

¹² See Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: When the World's Biggest Problems and Jesus's Good News Collide* (Thomas Nelson, 2007).

¹³ See, for example, Frances S. Adeney, *Graceful Evangelism* (Baker 2010).

3:13, Revelation 21:1) where “the wolf will live with the lamb” (Isaiah 11:6) in peace. It is the ultimate unity Jesus talks about in John 17, “that all may be one.” It is the relational reconciliation Paul talks about in 2 Corinthians 5, the ministry of reconciliation, and waxes eloquent about in Ephesians 1: “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together.” It will be a time when “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)

A Theoretical Map

If we could imagine a relational map of the world, it would not be a map that shows the countries which are Christian in red, the ones that are Buddhist in blue, and so forth. It is still possible to draw such maps, but it is becoming less accurate. What such maps don't show is that there are Christians in xxx of the xxx countries in the world, and that there are Buddhists in xxx of xxx countries in the world, and xxx Muslims in xxx of xxx countries of the world. The religions are everywhere. The religious are mixed together in most of the countries of the world. And, as far as numbers and percentages are concerned, the demographics change daily.¹⁴

One of the most prescient describers of the modern social scene, Zygmunt Bauman, has developed a delightful term to describe this cultural and religious demographic complexity. He calls it “liquid modernity,” and he makes the point over and over again about what might be called the radical transience of the world in which we live.¹⁵ By transience we mean not just the physical impermanence of people's residences, but the impermanence of their identities, their religious allegiances, and the ever-changing nature of their vocational commitments. Whereas once stability and permanence were considered among our highest values, they are now seen by many as an impediment to growth, and values such as flexibility and breadth have taken stability's place as desired states of being. This new way of seeing is not well described by fixed boundaries and ideological centers. Boundaries don't endure and centers depend on perception and location. What is characteristic of this map is relationships.

Our theoretical map of *The Reconciliation Paradigm* also needs to show the spread of religions in our day. Most world religion texts have such maps, with arrows sweeping around the world from a point of origin in the Middle East, or India, or China. A map of religious spread today, however, would need to show many centers of spread, and the arrows would have pointers on both ends of the lines of growth rather than just one. The gospel does not spread from West to East, but also from East to West. It spreads not just from North to South, but also from South to North. And so on. Mutual missional influence among all Christians and non-Christians of the world today is the reality.

Our relational map must also show this dynamic quality of influence. According to *The Reconciliation Paradigm*, every person sees reality in their own eyes, and all of them have the potential of being good. Sociologist Manuel Castells shows how individual identity in our world is complex and changing, made up of certain unchanging parts (where you were born, your parents, your DNA) and project parts, the parts of our identities that we feel increasing power to shape and change.¹⁶ In religious terms this

¹⁴ Note the sources of the statistics.

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living In an Age of Uncertainty* (Polity 2007).

¹⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Wiley-Blackwell 1996).

means that we can consider part of our identities to be Christian, but that does not exhaust the options: we can be devoted Christians or nominal Christians; we can be former Christians or present Christians or future Christians; we can be Buddhist Christians, or Jewish Buddhists (JewBus); or we can be Christian mystics or Christian nationalists. The options are endless. How does one map that?

Finally, our map must show that the earth itself, the creation, and our environments have become prominent players in the gospel drama. The creation has always been a player of course. But in past paradigms it has been a bit player because it has been seen as a given—seemingly unchangeable by human action. But now we see that human action can change the earth, by either degrading it or by nurturing it. This has created a theological dilemma of the highest order. Put another way, reconciliation and relationship refer not just to reconciliation with god and among human beings, but also with the earth.

New Tools, New Rules

At this point we might ask the question, why is this a new paradigm? Or why has it come to the fore now, when these Scriptures we cite are centuries old? It is a question worth asking. Part of the answer would probably be that if we went back and mined the church tradition, looking just for evidences of this paradigm, we would find them in the writings of the same theologians and church historians we have used to support the other two paradigms. But because we were in one of the other two paradigms, we did not see them—one of the prime effects of a paradigm, remember, is we don't see the unexpected, the wolves, even when they are right in front of us.

But another reason could be forwarded. We now have new tools that enable us to implement this new construct, *The Reconciliation Paradigm*. Copernicus had Galileo's telescope. What we have are tools that allow us to see worldwide networks and their effects as never before. I'm thinking of the internet. I'm thinking of our common language, the language of science. I'm thinking of the global marketplace, in which all markets are dependent on the others. For good and for ill, these new tools and realities allow us to communicate across previously uncrossable boundaries, and to put forward what used to be centers of our theologies in ways that allow them to be in conversation with other so-called centers of other theologies—all theologies ending up the richer for the discussion.

These new tools lead inexorably to some new rules—or perhaps better to call them operating procedures. First, in a relational map, operating procedures tend to be derived from practices rather than beliefs. The network of God's creation already exists. We don't need to "believe" in it. We need to glorify God from within its web. In a network, we are interested in how the pieces fit together, not what the boundaries separating them are. We are not as interested in creating hierarchies of doctrines, delineating the better and best, as we are in knowing how to relate to other people in ways that will bring glory to God and God's kingdom. Practices do that. The Bible is filled with teachings on practices, practices that bring blessings (the beatitudes), practices that nurture love (1 Corinthians 13), practices that reveal the Holy Spirit of God at work and that lead to the Holy Spirit of God when practiced (the fruits of the spirit in Galatians 5:22-25). Frances and I in our new book give a list of eleven missional practices that lead

to the glorifying of God when implemented.¹⁷ In such a system, of course, beliefs are still important. Not as boundaries separating us, but as ways of articulating our deepest experiences of God.

The second operating principle is that in *The Reconciliation Paradigm* all of us are mission workers. The days of the professional missionary, the missionary trained to go overseas to the “darkest” parts of the world with the light of the gospel, are not extinct, but the mission of God today must be seen in a much wider context. We are all of us witness to the good news of the gospel. This is a shift in perception every bit as important as Martin Luther’s insight during what has come to be called the Reformation, that all of us are “priests” accessing God’s grace. Luther’s insight is called the “priesthood of all believers.” Similarly, we might call this new insight, the “missionhood of all believers.” In the kind of complex societies in which we live, where our neighbors are as likely to be Muslim as Presbyterian, the minute we identify ourselves as Christians, we become mission workers. We are seen as Christians and our very lives become witnesses, one way or the other, to what the righteousness of God stands for.

Third, in *The Reconciliation Paradigm* we operate with a bias toward inclusion rather than exclusion, toward acceptance rather than rejection, and toward complementarity instead of either/or. In his book, *Inclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf shows how this works out in the context of ethnic conflict, one of the enduring problems of our world.¹⁸ Sadly, the gospel has sometimes been used to encourage ethnic exclusion rather than as a rationale for ethnic inclusion. Since the Christian church views itself as an agent of reconciliation in all areas of life, this paradigm directly addresses this self-perception and gives it a focus it has rarely had in church history.

Standards: Using the Paradigm Correctly

Not just anything that goes by the name of reconciliation fits a biblical paradigm that advocates the restoration of these relationships. Christian mission has always been beset by three interrelated temptations that draw us away from God’s intent: the temptation to pride, the temptation to power, the temptation to violence. These three temptations have taken different forms throughout the church’s history. Colonialism/imperialism was a caving in to the pride of ethnocentrism. And even though we hope that we have learned lessons from our colonial era, it is likely that the root sin behind this, pride, will rear its ugly head in other ways in the coming days.

The inquisition was a temptation to use violent force to accomplish the redemptive aims of the church. Good goal, horrendous method. We recoil at the idea of the inquisition—that abhorrence is a good thing. But have we expunged our temptation to force and violence so completely that it will not appear in other forms? (Our country’s current controversy of the use of torture in military matters reveals that this is not a settled matter, in our civil life at least.) And the crusades were a temptation to amass power, in this case political power, to further the aims of the church. Yet Paul is clear that it is weakness, especially the recognition of our weakness and God’s strength, that makes the church grow, not power.

To avoid these temptations, whatever the paradigm we use, we must check the elements of our paradigm, the theory and methods, to make sure they are faithful to

¹⁷ Terry Muck and Frances S. Adeney, *Christianity Encounters the World Religions* (Baker 2009).

¹⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Inclusion and Embrace* (publisher:date).

Scripture and instructed by history so that we can avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Only then will we step up to the challenges of the new mission. Only then will the lions lay down with the lambs in peace. Only then will the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.¹⁹