

Paradigm Spirituality
Chapter 2

The Reversible Paradigm

Dr. Kenneth Boa

Daily the world implores us to accept what it offers, to believe that it holds our future and to chase its promises. But eternity in our hearts reminds us regularly that there is more to this life than we can see. So one day, our eyes open; our paradigm shifts, and we make a faith choice. We choose eternal life and eternal hope. But is that it? Once we choose the eternal perspective, why do this worldview and this hope so easily and so frequently evade us?

An Irreversible Paradigm Shift

The most celebrated example of a paradigm shift is the Copernican revolution in astronomy. Until the time of Copernicus, the reigning paradigm was Ptolemy's centuries-old "geocentric" (earth-centered) system. In his book, *Almagest*¹, Ptolemy had mathematically documented his argument that our non-rotating earth was the center of a terrestrial system, with all other planets orbiting around it. Theologians supposed that if man was the pinnacle of God's creative work, then it made sense for earth to be the center of everything. Based upon this fallacious understanding of Scripture, the church adopted and advocated Ptolemy's geocentric model. And while there was no warrant for this theology, they held to it (and to the Ptolemaic system) dogmatically.

For centuries, they maintained this view of the solar system. During those centuries, many observations were made that simply didn't fit that model. The most notable of those observations was the retrograde motion of Saturn and Jupiter. These planets seemed, at times, to halt and begin to move backward. Through some brilliant mathematical gymnastics, Ptolemy was able to explain these movements, and even almost predict them, by a very complicated system of what he called "epicycles," circles around the edges of which the planets rotated.

But the problem with this is obvious: Instead of revising their way of seeing, they adopted a very clever system to account for what made no sense. The concept of epicycles was brilliant; but it still didn't explain everything (not to mention the fact that epicycles don't exist). It didn't settle the matter completely, and so more and more sophisticated methods had to be developed. The result was a well-documented, elaborate mathematical system that never completely worked. Yet this old paradigm reigned, because most astronomers couldn't accept another.

In 1543, the year of his death, Nicholas Copernicus published his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium* ("On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs"), presenting his "heliocentric" or sun-centered system. Knowing that this hypothesis would meet with a good deal of hostility from the religious establishment and from his colleagues, Copernicus waited to publish his book until long

¹ Ptolemy, *Almagest*, 2nd Century (Roughly translated, "Almagest" means "the greatest" or "the greatest compilation.")

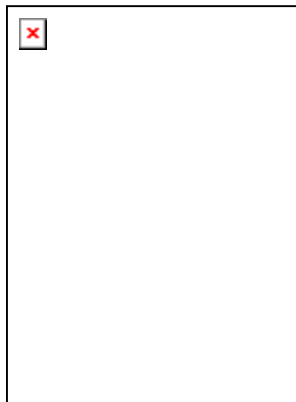
after it was written. In it, Copernicus provided a far simpler and more elegant explanation of the movement of the planets and definitively settled the question of the planetary order. In the years that followed, the findings of Galileo, Kepler and Newton provided further support for Copernicus' ideas; and by the end of the next century, information supporting the heliocentric model provided a foundation so strong that science would never be able to shift back to a geocentric paradigm again.

A Reversible Paradigm Shift

The Copernican revolution didn't happen in an instant, but some paradigm shifts do. Take a look at the two figures below. Whether you see an old woman or young woman in the first image, and a duck or a rabbit in the second, depends on your perspective - or your paradigm. But that paradigm can change when you learn that the chin line of the young woman is the nose of the old woman or when you find out the rabbit looks right and the duck looks left.

Psychologist Joseph Jastrow used the duck/rabbit figure to demonstrate that perception doesn't just depend on the object being perceived. Several other factors must also be considered, including circumstances and mental activity.² For example, one study found that, "Interestingly, children tested on Easter were more likely to see the figure as a rabbit, whereas when tested on a Sunday in October, they tended to see it as a duck."³

We've all seen optical illusions before. We look at the illusion from one point of view and are unable to see it. But after it's pointed out, suddenly we make out what we hadn't seen before. There are other optical illusions that you see for a while and then lose. Some are only one way - once you see it, you can't help but see it. There are others, like the two below, which you can see either way - reversible visual paradigms.



Christianity - a Reversible Paradigm

² Kihlstrom, J. F. "Letter to the Editor." *Trends Cognitive Sci.*, Nov. 16, 2004.

³ Brugger, P. Brugger, S. "The Easter Bunny in October: Is It Disguised as a Duck?" *Perceptual Motor Skills* 76, 577-578, 1993.

⁴ Boring, E. G. "A New Ambiguous Figure." *Amer. J. Psychology* 42, 444, 1930.

⁵ Jastrow 1899, p. 312; 1900; see also Brugger 1999.

The optical illusions above demonstrate that some paradigms can be reversed. The temporal versus the eternal is another example of a reversible paradigm. While we might hope that “catching” the message of the gospel will create a Copernican shift in our lives (and often it feels as if it has), we can become disappointed, as growing Christians, when we find that it has not. Embracing the eternal view does not ensure our hanging onto it. Instead, this perspective that we so need slips from our grasp because it’s so easy for us to return to the orientation that we had lived in so long before.

Coming to Faith- The Ultimate Paradigm Shift

A paradigm shift doesn’t generally happen on its own. One’s paradigm will only shift when the data forces it to. Face-to-face with an undeniable reality, we see something with new eyes.

Coming to faith in Christ is that kind of a thing for many people. Very few people actually grasp the gospel the first time. They must hear the message of it again and again. It’s common to find people who may not know or understand the difference between knowing about Jesus and trusting in him, between having an intellectual assent and having a real relationship. Sure they can recite the creeds, but they don’t understand what it means to know him and be known by him.

Suppose I teach through the Gospel of John or the book of Romans. Eventually, a light will go on, all-of-a-sudden. It might take several teachings, but suddenly a coherent way of seeing will emerge, whereby they can now see that this is what it really means to be a follower of Jesus. It’s not just believing in a proposition; it’s trusting in a person. There is a huge difference, because Christianity is not a religion; it’s a relationship. And while the Bible is filled with important propositional truth, the revelation was not given to inform us, but to transform us. And that revelation demands a response. The message of the gospel is a series of propositions that invite a personal response -- a cognitive response, a volitional response and sometimes an emotional response. That response is the paradigm shift that leads to Christian conversion.

Choosing to Get in the Wheelbarrow

The best illustration that I know for putting your trust in Christ is the story about a man named Blondin. In 1859, a French tightrope walker, Charles Blondin, traveled across the ocean and came to the Niagra Falls. There he hoped to accomplish something that had never been done. He strung a 1,100 foot cable across the falls from the Canadian side to the United States side and prepared to walk across.

A large crowd watched as Blondin successfully crossed. Over the course of the next year, he made several more trips across the Falls, thrilling the crowd each time with more dangerous stunts. He balanced a chair on the rope and stood in it. He took pictures of the crowd while balancing on the rope. He actually cooked a meal on a small portable cooker and lowered it to the amazed passengers of the Maiden of the Mist below. Eventually, he got a wheelbarrow and put a weight in it and rolled it back, which impressed the crowd even more. Then Blondin turned to the crowd and asked, “How many of you believe I could take one of you and put you in this

wheelbarrow and roll you across?” Everybody said, “We believe!” But when he asked for volunteers, no one would accept his offer. Tens of thousands believed; none of them trusted. Belief and trust are two completely different things.

It occurred to me, though, that there’s something wrong with this illustration. Why would anyone get in the wheelbarrow? Why would anyone do such a dopey thing? There would have to be a compelling reason for getting in that wheelbarrow.

So try this: Imagine that there was a thick forest behind the spectators and that suddenly the forest caught fire. There was no way of escape. Now things get interesting, and suddenly all the rules change. Now there are only four options for the crowd:

- Option number one: “I’m not here, and it’s not hot.” Just deny your situation until you’re burned to a crisp.
- Option number two: Try to take your chances by plunging in the raging water.
- Option number three: Try to go across the tightrope yourself.
- Option number four: Get in the wheelbarrow!

Suddenly, the offer to get in Blondin’s wheelbarrow looks very attractive. And, furthermore, it’s not a leap in the dark; it’s a step into the light. He’s already demonstrated that he could go to the other side and come back.

And so has Jesus. The resurrection was his going to the other side and coming back, his demonstrable evidence that he is who he claims to be. Entrusting myself to his life, sitting in his wheelbarrow, is really a reasonable thing to do. My paradigm has shifted, and I can see that choosing not to get into that wheelbarrow is a bad choice, as would be ignoring or rejecting Jesus. With Jesus, there are really only two options, because ignoring him is just covert rejection. At the end of the day, you only have two choices: get in or don’t.

The two criminals on either side of Jesus at the cross illustrate this point well. Remember they were both mocking him. They were both going along with the crowd, saying, “Come on down from the cross.” But then one of them came to a realization. “Wait a minute, now. We suffer justly for our cross, but this man has done no wrong.” And then he turned to Jesus: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” What was Jesus’ response? It’s a wonderful word from the cross. “Truly, I say to you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.” What a great response!

Now, the other criminal rejects Jesus. In Mel Gibson’s *Passion* film, there’s a very intriguing moment when you see the absolute hardening of the other criminal’s heart. He finally reaches a point of no return. At that point Gibson tries to artistically illustrate spiritual blindness by using physical blindness with a bird plucking out the criminal’s eyes. It’s gruesome, but a very real illustration of a spiritual reality.

For a while, we may be comfortable with the cognitive dissonance, the discrepancy between what we believe and the evidence that's there. But there finally reaches a point where we can no longer hang onto the old paradigm, and we place our trust in Christ.

Mid-Course Adjustments

An old preacher story tells of a small town that would hold a revival meeting every year. Every year the town drunk would show up on the last night of the revival and walk down the aisle to the altar crying, "Fill me, Jesus. Fill me." After the meeting, he would clean up his act for a few weeks; but it wouldn't be long before he was back to his old ways.

One year, the man came forward with his familiar refrain, "Fill me, Jesus. Fill me." Just then the voice of an older woman said, "Don't do it, Lord. He leaks!"

We suffer from the same problem: we all leak. We get it right for a while, and the Spirit's wisdom floods us. But before long, we begin to lose water. That's why it's so important to continually renew our minds and continually allow the Spirit to wash us with the water of the word.

Again, your paradigm shift will be based on implicit or explicit rules that shape your perspective. Articulated or unarticulated, you will view the world from a certain perspective, a certain orientation. Coming to faith brings us to a place of conscious awareness of what that perspective is. We suddenly realize that objective neutrality is a myth, an illusion. We understand that we all have a bias, and it would be well for us to evaluate the paradigm that we embrace so that we can make mid-course adjustments, if necessary.

So we make a huge mid-course adjustment. We choose God's promises and, with an eternal worldview, we set out to live our life in a whole new way. But after months, or maybe years, something happens. We're still going to church. We haven't renounced our faith, even expressed our doubt; but we're not able to see from an eternal point of view as clearly as we did at first. We begin to leak.

While we don't want to admit it, most Christians repeatedly forget about the price that's been paid. We forget what's been done for us and the resources that are now available to us, and we live as practical atheists. We would never acknowledge this; but it is how we live. We're not talking about a Copernican shift anymore. We're talking about a duck and rabbit situation. Now you see it; now you don't.

For a season, we see everything from an eternal perspective. But then suddenly we slip back, because it's more comfortable where we came from - we lived in it so long before - and the tide of the world pulls us back to it. This is why there is still spiritual warfare. The Christian life would be so much easier if we could just buy the message of Christ and be instantaneously transported by chariot to heaven. Wouldn't that be easier? Wouldn't it be great? But then we would never grow.

It is obvious in the Gospels that Jesus knew his followers would struggle to hang onto their faith in him. And one word he used several times gives us a clue to the fact that he knew we would too. The word? “Daily.” “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross *daily* and follow me” (Luke 9:23). And again, his request, “Give us today our *daily* bread.” The Christian life can only be lived one day at a time. We come to faith and grow a little at a time. We are *being* “transformed by the renewing of our minds,” (Romans 12:2) but we are not finished. The writer of Hebrews asks us to “encourage one another *daily*..., so that none of [us] may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.”

The choice must be made again and again: temporal or eternal? We must choose each day whether we will live as if this world is all there is. Or we can view our earthly existence as a brief pilgrimage, during which we learn and grow and are prepared for eternity. Quickly we forget that we are aliens, strangers, sojourners. Quickly we forget the brevity of life and deceive ourselves into thinking that we have all the time in the world. We forget the reality that people around us are dying all the time.

We get to a party where our old friends are, and everyone starts saying, “My word, you look great!” They haven’t seen you in 10 or 15 years, and the first thing they say is, “My, you look marvelous.” But let’s be frank: we don’t look marvelous; we look terrible when compared with how we looked in our youth. All that these people are saying when they say that you look good is that you’ve been decaying well. It can be quite depressing to see people we haven’t seen in 20 years, because they look terrible. And then it dawns on us that we look terrible too.

If we base our hope on the notion that this world is all there is, we’re going to have to deny the reality of what time is doing to our bodies. We’re *not* going to live forever. And believing that we are doesn’t provide any meaning, purpose or hope. And it especially doesn’t help when you get home from that party and look in the mirror.

Resting in God’s Promises

*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.
This is what the ancients were commended for.*

Hebrews 11:1-2

The men and women in Hebrews 11 embraced the perspective of the eternal being more valuable than the temporal. Many of them embraced it without ever seeing the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to them. They trusted that the eternal would come and bring the fulfillment of those promises.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11:13, 16

What a wonderful verse! Among these heroes of faith was Abraham. This chapter says he was “looking for a city whose architect and builder is God.” He wasn’t at home here. And neither will you be home in this world. These faith heroes were ordinary people who trusted in God and became great. They never received the promises in this life; but they died in faith, clinging to the hope that God had something more in store for them. Having seen the promises, and having welcomed them from a distance, “they confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

Their perspective was eternal. They made a commitment: “On this earth, I’m never going to embrace the promises, because my hope must not be in the transitional promises of this world, the temporal promises. It must be in the eternal promises of God, and that that is where my home will be.”

Those who have embraced a temporal paradigm, an earthly orientation, treat the temporal as though it were eternal and the eternal as though it were temporal. But we can choose to embrace a biblical paradigm, treating the temporal as temporal. We’ll hold the things of this world with a loose grip and treat the eternal as eternal by putting our hearts and all the freight of our hopes and aspirations in the promises of God, daily committing to follow him.

Keeping Your Fork

An elderly woman was approaching her last days. Her doctor told her that she had probably less than 48 hours left. She had no family, so she contacted her pastor and asked him to come to the hospital to discuss things she wanted in her funeral service. She told him what songs she wanted sung, the Scriptures she wanted read and the clothes she wanted to wear. She also said that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Then she said, “There is something else that I want done that is very important to me, and I don’t want you to think I’m just a silly old woman.”

The pastor smiled. “I won’t. What is it?”

She hesitated for a moment, and then said, “I want to be buried with a dinner fork in my right hand.”

The pastor tried not to look like he thought she was a silly old woman, but he didn’t know what to say. “To be honest, I am puzzled by your request.”

She explained, “In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say, ‘Keep your fork.’ I always knew that something good was coming – something even better than what I’d just eaten. It wasn’t going to be pudding or something soft that you would need a spoon to eat. It was going to be cake or pie – something with substance. I want people to see me in the casket with a fork in my hand so they’ll ask, ‘Why does she have a fork?’ When they ask, you tell them, ‘Something better is coming for her.’ Then tell them that they should keep their forks, too.”

At the funeral, some of the people who stopped at her casket commented on the pretty dress she had on or said something about her favorite Bible and how worn it was. But all of them asked about the fork.

Rejecting the offers of this world, we too can take up our forks daily, reminding ourselves, and declaring to the world, that we're sure there's something more.