

## **TUB DRAINS, PLANETS, & MOUNTAIN BIKES: ON THE NEED FOR AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL PARADIGM SHIFT**

by Christian Smith\*

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MY TUB WAS clogged for three days. It wouldn't drain. The dirty water just sat there. I had been doing work on the walls and ceiling and, darn it, pieces of horsehair plaster snuck down the drain and clogged it all up.

You can't live without a shower. At least I can't. So I spent an immensely frustrating three days working on it. Intermittently, I jammed down the drain strategically bent clothes-hanger wire and poured down four separate doses of industrial strength drain opener. I tried every brand the hardware store sold, powder and liquid, using ten times the amount the directions said to. No kidding.

When that didn't work, I trudged down to the basement, unscrewed the poorly-designed drain trap, and wrestled in and cranked around seven feet of a plumbing-snake. But those horsehair plaster pieces (wherever they had accumulated and turned into concrete) would not be punctured, dissolved, or smashed. I could get nothing more than a trickle of water to come out. Fifteen rounds of every possible emotion later, I stood in my basement, with bloody hands and aching arms and neck, covered with twenty-year old drain muck, trickling-out drain-opener chemicals, and who knows what else. I was defeated.

I screwed in the drain trap, went back up to my bathroom, sat on the edge of the tub, and began to consider a showerless life. Suddenly, I had a sinking feeling. It couldn't be. I reached over to the drain toggle and flicked it up. Instantly, the dirty water swooshed down the drain in a liquid twister. I had left the drain plug down.

After picking myself up off the floor, I went and confessed to my wife, who had endured three days of odious language about plaster, liquid Drain-O, and stupidly-designed plumbing systems. It was a classic moment in my life. Words can't describe the feeling of embarrassed hilarity.

### **1. Identify a time when not asking the right question has led to a frustrating and time-consuming experience. Within your personal life? Within the life of the church?**

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MY LITTLE CLOGGED tub fiasco is an apt metaphor for so many of the strategies and struggles to revive, rejuvenate, and renew the so-called traditional church these days ("so-called" because the traditional church cannot really lay claim to the most ancient tradition of New Testament practice). The obvious moral of my drain debacle was this: no solution, no matter how creative or high-powered, can succeed if you have defined the problem incorrectly. Put differently: more important than giving right answers is asking the right questions. And differently again: when you prematurely limit the range of possible causes of your problems, you are likely to end up with drain muck in your face.

To get my tub fixed, I need to step back and consider whether the trouble was something other than horsehair plaster. I needed to approach my problem in a totally different frame of mind, with a radically reordered interpretation of the evidence. Likewise, to get the church fixed, we also need to step back, set aside the conventional assumptions about what's wrong, and approach the problem with a radically different frame of reference. What we need, in other words, is in the language of philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn a "paradigm shift."

According to Kuhn, a paradigm is an over-arching framework of understanding. It is a particular model for analysis and interpretation, a specific lens through which one makes sense of data. A paradigm tells you what assumptions to make and what questions to ask. And it sets parameters on likely solutions to problems. Paradigm shifts occur when people reject one paradigm and embrace a new one, adopting entirely different assumptions and questions.

Consider astronomic paradigms. Medieval astronomers worked with a paradigm of the universe that assumed that the sun and the planets revolved around the earth. Even the Bible, they claimed, said so—a fact not incidental to our concerns. This paradigm informed the assumptions they made, the questions they asked, and the data they believed was relevant. The earth-centered paradigm worked adequately. But over time, pesky anomalies arose, and making the paradigm account for them required devising an ever increasingly complex system. Eventually, an iconoclast named Copernicus proposed a new, simpler paradigm of the universe, arguing that the planets, including the earth, actually revolved around the sun. That was a radical shift of thinking, an entirely different frame of reference that drastically reordered reality itself. At first, most astronomers resisted Copernicus' suggestion. They had careers invested in the old paradigm. Eventually, however, astronomers adopted the new view. And all of the old astronomical calculations, formulas, and tables began gathering dust—that's what happens with paradigm shifts.

## **2. What is a paradigm? What is a paradigm shift?**

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WHAT COPERNICUS did to medieval astronomy, grassroots Christians need to do to the traditional church paradigm today. Nothing less than a paradigm shift is the precondition for the people of God ever becoming what we know the people of God should be. The old church paradigm seems to increasingly obstruct, rather than facilitate, the expression of the kingdom of God in our world. It is stale, cumbersome, outmoded. Trying to salvage it by tinkering with it simply not work. Attempts to adjust or resuscitate the old paradigm will be no more successful in fixing the traditional church's problems than were my efforts to jam clothes-hanger wire through a steel drain plug or the medieval astronomer's attempts to make their paradigm simply explain what it should have but couldn't.

There is little use scratching around for answers to the problems facing the so-called traditional church. The traditional church itself is the problem. The central features of traditional church—the professional clergy role, the laity role, the pinched definition of ministry, the church building, the a-relational mentality, the formal programs, the bureaucracy—impose inherent limitations on ever becoming what the people of god really should and can be.

With luck, you get a traditional church heading in the right direction, chugging like a train up the mountain of renovation. But like a Little Engine That Couldn't, eventually the hill gets too steep and the wheels begin to spin in place. The pastor feels threatened. The congregation becomes resistant. The bishop gets nervous. The mortgage on the building demands payment. The old-timers never did it that way. The newcomers just want Sunday school for their children. Whatever. So the train never quite makes it over the mountain of transformation. It either stays where it halted and the passengers claim victory, or it backs down to the point where it began.

If Copernicus were here today, he might make a suggestion like this: if you can't get over the mountain in your train, try mountain bikes.

### **3. What aspects of the traditional church would you identify as “stale, cumbersome, outmoded”?**

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MANY CHRISTIANS all over the country are experiencing the paradigm shift and are abandoning their trains for mountain bikes. In so doing, they come to realize that the paradigm shift changes all of the relevant questions. You no longer ask, for example, how to get the laity to take more initiative and responsibility. Instead, you ask how to get rid of the very concept of “the laity.” They also see that the paradigm shift changes one's idea of what facts are relevant. You no longer care, for example, whether the pulpit committee has found the right candidate, whether the church has a singles' fellowship group, whether the offering plates should be walnut or silver, or whether visitors are met at the door by designated “greeters” from the church-growth committee.

What matters instead is that a community of believers is building a common life of love, grace, discipleship, accountability, and forgiveness. What is important is that people spend time together, build up each other, exercise their gifts for the good of the body, seek together to love God and their neighbors. The new paradigm is centered on loving relationships, common participation, and discipleship in community. Its main events are volleyball, singing together in the living room, and working together in the soup kitchen.

Many church-goers will probably resist this paradigm shift because ultimately its concept of “renewing” the traditional church is to dismantle it and build something very different. Most church professionals also will resist the paradigm shift because, frankly, it will make their previous careers as obsolete as medieval tables of planetary motion. That's okay. People will shift paradigms when they're good and ready. Let them fire up their locomotive steam-boilers for even more attempts to make it over the mountain. In the meantime, we need to work on becoming better mountain-bike riders.

### **4. What are some of the “right” questions to ask about the life and ministry of the church?**

### **5. According to Smith, why do we need mountain bikes rather than trains? What do you think?**