



How Will They Know

By: Rev. Dr. Robert Newton

Those of you who either read my little column or have been subjected to one of my presentations know that I am stuck on the notion of "paradigm shifts." Paradigms are big deals; they serve as our cultural and social roadmaps, helping us navigate everyday life with some level of success. They answer the big question, "Why?" and give us a sense of sure footing in changing times. However, when a community's map changes radically and quickly we feel confused and unsure. It's like trying to drive in San Francisco with a map of Chicago. While there are some similarities—large bodies of water nearby and many streets share the same names—something is not quite right. We feel lost most of the time.

A great paradigm shift has hit our churches and left most of us scratching our heads. From our local congregation all the way to our entire synod, we recognize the huge shift has taken place from a "churched" oriented society to one where "church" is not on most peoples' radar screen. Such a change in context calls on the church to make changes in the way it approaches Christ's mission while maintaining the purity and integrity of the Sacred Gospel. We cannot change our thinking about whether God wants all people to be saved. We confess that He does (1 Timothy 2:4). Nor can we change our understanding about how people are saved: People must hear the true Gospel in order to believe and be saved (Romans 10:17). The change in paradigms must come not in "Who should hear" or "What they should hear" but rather in answering the question St. Paul asked, "How will they hear?"

Our traditional way of thinking answers Paul's question in this way, "The unsaved need *to come* to church in order to hear the Gospel." We assume that Gospel proclamation locates primarily *in* the church building around the ministry of the called pastor. The paradigm change requires that we answer Paul's question by recognizing that rather than the unsaved first *coming* to us to find the Gospel, the Gospel needs first *to go* to the unsaved in order for them to hear it. That means that Gospel proclamation locates primarily in the world around the ministry of the baptized in their everyday lives. The paradigm change is from a "coming or attraction" model of Gospel proclamation to a "going" model. That's why Jesus made "going" an important aspect of making disciples (Matthew 28). When Jesus' disciples asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel" (traditional paradigm), Jesus responded with a new paradigm, "You will be my witnesses . . . to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8). The disciples were operating with the ministry paradigm that assumed the complete restoration of David's earthly Kingdom, which under Solomon (David's son), had attracted the whole world (1 Kings 10:24). Such restoration made perfect sense, seeing that David's "greater Son", the Messiah, had now come. Jesus exploded their paradigm by promising to restore the Kingdom not only to Israel, but to the whole world. Furthermore, God's Kingdom would not be restored by the world *coming* to Jerusalem to hear the Gospel, but that the Gospel would *go* from Jerusalem into all the world.

The "going" paradigm in the book of Acts included both a scattering of the baptized in the world (Acts 8:1-4, 11:19) and the call and sending of missionaries by the Holy Spirit (Acts

13:2-4). Both were intentional acts of the ascended Lord in the fulfillment of His missionary plan. The scattering of the Christians in Acts 8 should not be understood as accidental or tragic. It was deliberate on the part of God and, therefore, dynamic like a sower scattering good seed on the soil. Such a scattering of saints follows our Lord's parable of "the wheat and the tares," where the Son of Man sows the children of the kingdom in the world (Matthew 14). It also reflects His words regarding true discipleship: "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit*" (John 12:24). The baptized are scattered by Christ in the soil of their everyday world for the express purpose that many will hear the word; and in hearing, believe; and in believing, be saved.

Jesus calls both laity and pastors to *go* with Him into the world to "proclaim" the Gospel to all creatures. Pastors and people have specific and complimentary roles to play in that going. So St. Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus living in a ministry context much like ours today: And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). God's goal was that His Body grow as it builds itself up in love. And such growth God will accomplish regardless of the paradigm in which His church is planted.

Rev. Dr. Robert Newton is the President of the California-Nevada-Hawaii District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

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Questions for Reflection

1. What evidence do you see of the paradigm shift from a "church" oriented society to a culture in which the church is not on most peoples' radar screen?
2. How is your church framing its ministry to "go" to the people and proclaim the Gospel?
3. What is your church's Jerusalem? Judea? Samaria? (Acts 1:8)
4. How is your church's mission designed to go to each of the above mission fields and proclaim the Gospel?
5. Who in your church is responsible for sending people out into the World? How are the saints equipped to go?
6. How can your church learn more about the paradigm shift and how to be effective in taking the Gospel to the society?
7. What one thing will you do to help move your church forward into the mission field?

Links

[Missional Bible Studies](#) [web page] - The Center for U.S. Missions has a number of Bible studies to help your church focus on mission. The studies include both a leader's guide and participant handout.

[Paradigm Shift: Ecclesiology and Eschatology](#) by Jeff Ziegler [web page] - This article is an extended conversation on the challenge the church faces in shifting its paradigm. Ziegler discusses it from the point of view of a shift from eschatological focus to one of ecclesiology.

[Leading Change in the Local Church](#) by Tad Thompson [web page] - In this brief article Tad Thompson shares insights in leading change in the parish after he took the position of lead pastor at a church.

[Early Church Liturgics: Church, Empire, and Culture](#) from Liturgica.com [web page] - This article contains an interesting discussion about how the worship and liturgy shifted as it became "legal" and more central in the early centuries

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