

# Paradigm shift in the Church: New wine vs. old wineskins

(Mk.2:18-22)

*Pastor David C. Dixon*

**Introduction:** The US has a new president, and his entrance into office last Friday set off a tidal wave of protest all around the globe. There's never been so much negative reaction to a US presidential inauguration.

- Spanish commentators emphasized Trump's election as apparently the result of a "populist surge" among American voters (Spain has experienced her own "populist surge" on the political front in the past few years!). The general feeling is that Trump definitely foreshadows a "**paradigm shift**" of major proportions. The whole world is expecting to be impacted by the new US president's different style of politics and approach to problem-solving. However, our focus today is NOT on Pres. Trump or on US politics (though we should be praying!), but on the significance of paradigm shifts, from a biblical and historical viewpoint.

- Defined as a fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions, "paradigm shift" was a phrase first coined by scientist Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Science operates on the basis of working models that have to be investigated and sometimes altered and updated as new research takes place and new models emerge that better describe the data. These in turn often stretch the frontiers of our knowledge even further.

- So a paradigm shift occurs whenever there's a significant change in the way an individual or group perceives something (think of moving from inside an egg to outside the egg!). It often has to do with an enlarged perception of reality, replacing your old paradigm with a new way of thinking, an altered framework. Moving to a new country can provoke some serious paradigm shifts as you deal with a new culture, language, and customs. And of course, multiple examples can be found in how technology has revolutionized our way of communication, producing a new conceptualization of our relationships (so virtual relationships can seem as real as physical ones!). Such a new working model as the Iphone can affect every area of our lives!

- Culture, language, and life are always in the process of shifting right under our feet. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus was perhaps one of the first to meditate on this reality (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.):

“all is flux, nothing endures, change is the only constant.” He concluded that we really don’t have time to understand the phenomenon of life before it’s happened to us and it’s over!

- We can’t keep change from happening, so it often makes us nervous. Yet Jesus understood this better than any of us. He as the Eternal One was able to come to earth at a particular moment in history – in the fullness of time, Scripture says – and endure the vicissitudes of 1<sup>st</sup>-century life, content with His lot, focused on fulfilling His mission. And since He did so to perfection, He’s now ready to direct us through times of much faster change so that we can fulfill ours! (Do you know what your mission is?! I hope you believe you were made for a mission. Jesus is the One who can help you know it and fulfill it!)

**1)** “Paradigm shifts” are necessary for the church to stay alive and relevant. That’s why the Holy Spirit is always sponsoring positive change in our lives, leading us into all the truth (Jn. 16:13). A few examples will clarify.

- After Christ’s ascension, the Holy Spirit had to author a major paradigm shift in the minds of converted Jewish synagogue-goers (even the disciples). They were committed to a Jewish way of doing things: it made sense and made sense of life. But it involved Jewish customs, traditions, and ethnic dominance, so there was considerable resistance to the entrance of “new folks” into their community of faith (Gentiles). It’s why God had to work so hard on Peter to get him to go preach the gospel to Cornelius: remember Peter’s vision of the unclean animals (Acts 10)? Peter had a wrong paradigm: he thought associating with Gentiles was as bad as eating unclean animals, and God said he missed the point of those Old Testament prohibitions. God is no respecter of persons!

- Wrong paradigms were the reason Saul of Tarsus persecuted Christians till he had his own radical paradigm shift (conversion) on the road to Damascus; then he was also persecuted as he preached the Gospel to Gentiles. That first generation of believers certainly had some serious obstacles to overcome in their way of thinking. (And *this* generation? Do we think we’re exempt?)

- Centuries later the Holy Spirit used Martin Luther to author another major paradigm shift in the church when he turned back to the Word of God as his primary authority. He was incensed at the deviation from the biblical norm that had occurred in the church, and his real purpose was not to break away from the church but to reform it so that it looked like the New Testament church again: not depending on man’s word (the teaching magisterium of the church), but letting the Bible have the last word on everything. He rediscovered “justification by faith,” simplified church structures and hierarchy, and put the Word back in the center. The Radical Reformation which followed in the wake of Luther’s reform carried the paradigm shift even further.

**2)** It’s been the same pattern down through history: the Holy Spirit has never been bound to any one denomination, institution, context, or culture. He consistently “breaks out” of the molds we try to establish for Him (and for ourselves).

- The really big paradigm shift that He’s promoting is totally radical: to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord instead of acting like we are the ones in charge. It’s the same paradigm shift that we are called to promote with our testimony: **Jesus as our final Authority** in everything (Mt. 28:18). But our tendency is to try to reduce the Gospel to something more manageable by us: “Just say a little prayer, confess Jesus as Savior, ask Him to forgive you, invite Him into your

heart.” We come to the false conclusion that we can accept Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. Is that possible? To accept saving grace, but not ruling grace?

- Acknowledging Christ’s lordship is precisely how you come to experience salvation, instead of being governed by the flesh (your carnal instincts), or the influences and pressures of culture, and the prince of this world! What do we need salvation *from* if not from our own misguided fleshly rule over our lives? Confessing Christ is about submitting to Him as the rightful Ruler and Lord of all! It’s a radical new paradigm and the best thing that can ever happen to you, because it rescues you from trying to be God – you are simply not qualified!

- The so-called “emerging church” is trying out new paradigms today for how to do and be the church. They’re people who react against the “institutionalization” of spiritual truth, as if truth could be “tamed” or domesticated, e.g., reduced to a series of propositions. They’re onto something there – truth is always dynamic, it challenges us and shakes us up, calling us deeper. Truth is always personal (about a Person – Jn. 14:6); so it’s never abstract or theoretical and can’t be reduced to formulas. The emerging church says something significant with these new emphases. They show a positive openness in many areas, but the problem is they take openness too far, becoming so open-ended they don’t know where they’re headed and run the risk of dispensing with vital doctrines.

- “Doctrine” is simply another word for “teaching.” Our Savior is also a Teacher, and the truth He taught was not a matter of vague generalities! So we need to get the order right, just as He gave it to us in the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20): we’re first commanded to “make disciples” (that word means “learners,” so it’s all about being converted to Jesus as our new Ruler and King, who will teach us His new paradigm); “baptizing them” (represents our restoration and insertion into the Body of Christ, coming to know our place in God’s family); “teaching them to observe” all His commandments (the Holy Spirit constantly guides us according to the new paradigm of the Gospel).

- So at IBC this year, we’re going to experience a paradigm shift: new pastoral leadership. A new pastor always means there will be new emphases, new ways of doing things, new approaches. It’s a time of new patterns, projects, and relationships, but it’s still about the same goals and priorities, the same Gospel, the same Lord (and Pastor Tim has had nine years with us to get to know this culture and this church!). So we don’t have to be afraid of change: new things, new people, new challenges.

- We must never get too comfortable with any set of circumstances in this life. Never become enamored of any particular moment in your life (it amounts to idolatry). Don’t become too attached to one way of doing things – it’ll soon become obsolete and you’ll be out of date. That’s why God keeps His people continually “on the move” because we are pilgrims here (Heb. 11). So we are not to fixate on anything for our security except the Lord Jesus: He is the still point in a spinning world, our only fixed reference point. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “No finite point has meaning without an infinite reference point.” Even a secular atheistic philosopher could recognize that our lives need an infinite reference point to give us true meaning. And Jesus revealed what that point is when He said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will never pass away” (Mt. 24:35).

**3)** The stories in Mark 2 show intense questioning in regard to Jesus’ ministry and practices. He was so different from the typical rabbis that people of His day were used to. His ministry suggested a major paradigm shift on every front.

- One of those fronts had to do with **Jesus' way of practicing Jewish piety and religion**. It just didn't match up with the standard most people of that day were used to. They practiced their piety in ways that others could clearly see and observe, so everybody could distinguish the good people from bad people. But Jesus didn't go for that "showy" kind of piety, so He didn't impose fasting on His disciples (in the Gospels it seemed they were always having a meal – so all the eating we do here at IBC must be biblical!). Yet fasting was one of the high points of Jewish piety. The law of Moses only required it once a year (on the Day of Atonement), but the Pharisees insisted on twice a week as the minimum for good Jews. It was practiced by John the Baptist, the Pharisees, and their disciples: it showed you were serious about defeating the flesh in your life and fighting for righteousness! So why didn't Jesus fast, and why didn't He teach His disciples about this basic point of good religion?

- Jesus' response was stunning and gave a powerful clue about who He really was: "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" No one goes to a wedding party to abstain from eating and drinking – that would be absurd. Jesus implied that His disciples were at a wedding feast while He was with them, but they would fast later when the Bridegroom was gone. Notice the interesting implication behind this image: the Old Testament God had presented Himself to Israel as a Bridegroom; the prophets had spoken of God as the Husband of Israel, even though she was often unfaithful (Is. 54:5, Jer.3:14). And now here comes Jesus claiming to fulfill the promise of that **Bridegroom's presence among His people**, none other than God Himself coming for His bride! What a paradigm shift! But because of their hardness of heart, they couldn't grasp it.

- So Jesus continued answering His accusers with two more brief parables. The next one is about an old garment that needs patching, but you don't put a new patch on an old garment because the tear will only become worse. Again this was obvious to Jesus' hearers. He doesn't bother to explain the parable, but He's referring to the question about the forms of Jewish piety. The garment with the tears in it represents the Jewish religious traditions: they had been "patching" their system for centuries because they couldn't manage to live up to all the requirements of the law; so the Pharisees kept adding more rules and regulations till they had a total of 613 extra-biblical commandments to try to help them keep the law – so many patches! Their "garment" was so old and worn, so badly in need of repair, that no patch job would ever be adequate. So what Jesus brings to Israel is **not another patch** to try to mend the worn-out religious system, just like what Jesus brings to your life is not just another patch! Scripture describes our righteousness as filthy rags (Is. 64:6): that's all we have to cover ourselves, and it does not do the job! What we need is not another patch, but a totally new garment, and **Jesus is the new garment** that Israel needed to put on for her wedding, the garment we need to put on to cover our sin and nakedness!

- The last parable continues the wedding metaphor, because it's about the wine to be served at the wedding feast. You don't put new wine in old wineskins (simple logic), because as the new wine ferments, the process produces expansion and gases; but the old wineskins didn't have more elasticity – they'd already been stretched to their capacity, so if you put new wine in them, they would burst. In the same way, the old wineskins of Judaism would only burst under the fermenting pressure of the new wine that Jesus brings. The old traditions and practices of Jewish piety were not sufficient to contain the NEW dynamic that Jesus offered, because it was the Holy Spirit Himself who would come to live in the hearts of believers and work His powerful transformation on their lives so they begin to look like Jesus. That would require new forms adaptable to every culture, because God had His eye set on the whole world! So **Jesus Himself is the New Wine!**

**Conclusion:** In being the church, we are constantly called to follow the Spirit of Jesus as He leads us in dealing with all the changes that challenge us! We must learn not to worship outward forms, rituals, traditions, or people; the specific structures and methods of any church or culture are never sacrosanct. In the same way, on a personal level, we must continually get rid of old paradigms that have ruled our hearts (our selfish carnal nature), but it requires a radical paradigm shift. It's why Jesus said we need to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow Him. It's about being crucified daily with Christ ... so that He may live in us and we may look more and more like Him!