

A New Middle Way? Surviving and Thriving in the Coming Religious Realignment

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“May You Live in Interesting Times”

This ancient Chinese aphorism—said to be both blessing and curse—has clearly come true for the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion.

Our long-simmering conservative-liberal conflict has come to a boil. Dozens of conservative congregations and several dioceses have severed ties with the Episcopal Church to align with conservative provinces on other continents. A reverse exodus of moderate-to-liberal (and some conservative) individuals and congregations have cut ties with the departees to return to the Episcopal Church. And what about all the rest: the vast majority of Episcopalians who haven't gone anywhere . . . yet? Since a potential liberal-conservative rift exists in every Episcopal congregation, might it not, left unaddressed, eventually unravel the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion? That we are living in interesting times may be the only thing everybody in the Communion can agree on.

Okay. Got the curse. When do we get the blessing?

My own congregation—actually, two successive iterations thereof—has experienced both the curse and the blessing. The first, planted in the early nineties, experienced the curse. A relatively conservative congregation, it grew quickly at first but within two years had disintegrated in conflict over human sexuality issues.

Two years later, blessing followed curse. A new congregation, with a relatively recently ordained leader (me) and composed largely of “survivors” of the first plant, rose from the ashes of the old. Determined to learn from painful experience, we dedicated ourselves to discerning and living into a new way of being church, in which

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conservative and liberal Christians could live together in love, and which conservative-liberal theological differences could not kill. We have been engaged in this journey of exploration for more than a decade.

The purpose of this article is to give you a small taste of what we have learned on this journey, and how that learning continues to help us survive and thrive in the midst of the current conflict.

Living in an Age of Collapsing Paradigms

To begin with, we realized that to be effective church leaders we could not be blind guides, but had to be good interpreters of the spiritual signs of the times (Matt. 16:1–3). We needed to open our eyes and, with God’s help, look critically at ourselves and the church. We quickly discovered that neither we, nor the Episcopal Church, were transiting these turbulent times alone. The whole church is wracked by this conflict. It’s just that we Anglicans have always been more public in our disagreements than others. (A healthy sign, we think.)

In time, it dawned on us that this conflict was not your average, everyday schism, but a paradigm shift of seismic proportions. The blossoming “emerging church” movement is one example. Originally an Evangelical phenomenon, emergent movements have sprung up in almost every denomination (ours is “Anglimergent”), critically re-examining their denomination’s assumptions of what it means to be church. Some suggest that this “Great Emergence” is part of a cyclical pattern of upheavals in the church, on a par with the “Great Schism” or the “Great Reformation.”¹

Knowing that we live in—and what to expect in—an age of collapsing paradigms has helped our congregation respond to the changes around us with less anxiety and more compassion. Realizing that what we had thought was a field of battle between unalterably opposed sides was really an emerging and still mist-covered landscape helped us understand that we needed each others’ eyes to find our way safely through.

¹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Ada, Mich.: Emersion Books, 2008).

Helping Our Congregations Interpret the Signs of the Times

What did we learn to expect in an age of collapsing paradigms? We learned that major paradigm shifts are almost always accompanied by turmoil and disorder. Take science, for example. The primary mission of science is the discovery and integration of new knowledge. Yet studies have shown that when confronted with data that conflicted with the dominant paradigm, scientists reacted anxiously. Warring camps developed: “liberal” camps prematurely proposed new paradigms based on insufficient data, while “conservative” camps defended the old paradigm by attacking the new data and the proposed paradigms. Eventually, the old paradigm always fell, yet neither camp really won. Some aspects of the liberal camps’ proposals found their way into the new paradigm; many did not. Some aspects of the old paradigm, which the conservative camps were protecting, remained standing; many did not. Because their vision was still limited by the old paradigm, both camps were blindsided.²

It should come as no surprise that major paradigm shifts have been even more traumatic for the church, provoking anxiety, anger, and reactivity in the form of conflict and even violence. The Great Reformation resulted in decades of war and thousands of deaths. Yet somehow, with God’s help, the church has always found a way to survive the fall of the old paradigm and eventually adapt to the new.

Helping Our Congregations to See Their Blind Spots

Coming to terms with our natural anxiety and reactivity in the face of paradigm collapse has helped our congregation exercise more humility and tolerance toward those with whom we disagree. Conservatives have to ask: “Are we truly acting to protect God’s will (as if God *needs* our protection) or merely protecting the status quo?” Liberals have to ask: “Are we truly prophetically promoting God’s will (as if God *needs* our promotion) or merely enamored of our own innovations?” Understanding the human propensity for violent reactivity has tended to give us pause about attributing evil intent to those who oppose our theological point of view. Recognizing that the dominant paradigm has

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

created blind spots in our theological vision has helped us realize how much we need the insights of those who disagree with us.

What Paradigms Are Collapsing?

The End of the World (As We Know It)

Many of us believe the church is facing a particularly rough patch this time around because it is losing several familiar paradigms of Christian community:

Christendom. This approach to Christian unity, grounded in institutionalized power and control, came into full play when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The church buried the Christendom paradigm long ago, but has not yet fully exorcized Constantine's ghost. Neither conservative nor liberal churches are happy about their continuing loss of influence. Conservatives seek to maintain it by beating back change where they can, liberals by accommodating it where they can.

Foundationalism. Conservative and liberal Christianity, as we know them today, have their roots in the Enlightenment paradigm of Foundationalism (a.k.a. Modernism), which assumes that ultimate foundational truths can be grasped through human rationality. Foundationalism had two main schools of thought: one which sought to establish universal truths by objective observation of the outside world; another which sought to discover universal truths through objective analysis of internal human experience. The modern conservative belief in biblical inerrancy grew out of the first approach. Modern liberal scriptural analysis grew out of the second approach. Both forms of Foundationalism are now collapsing under the combined weight of relativistic theory and quantum physics, which have demonstrated that the requisite absolute objectivity is impossible to attain.

Religionism. Organized religion is itself a paradigm based on the assumption that spiritual unity requires the security of an organized system of beliefs and practices. Where Foundationalism sought unity in certainty about truth, Religionism has sought unity in the security of organizational self-preservation. If the increasing number of people identifying themselves as "spiritual, not religious" is any indication,

Christianity conceived as organized religion may also be teetering on the brink of collapse. In light of the lack of biblical evidence that Jesus, Paul, or any of the original disciples ever conceived of Christianity as a discrete and separate religion, one has to ask if this was not bound to happen sooner or later.

From the collapse of the above paradigms of church unity we take two important lessons about what no longer works:

The conservative-liberal argument has no future. Conservative Christianity and liberal Christianity are modern creations, deeply rooted in the paradigm of Foundationalism. They are like two punch-drunk boxers locked in a clinch after fourteen rounds. The only reason either remains standing is the other's embrace. It's time to end the fight.

Unity is not uniformity. These collapsing paradigms of Christian unity share an assumption that uniformity is a prerequisite of unity. While the world certainly operates on this basis, when it comes to the church (with apologies to the Gershwins), "it ain't necessarily so." If anything, the more the church has strived for uniformity, the more it has splintered.

What Will It Take to Put the UNITY in Christian CommUNITY?

When we have sifted through the rubble of these collapsed paradigms, what will remain standing that we can rely on as our source of unity?

The Collapse of Christendom: From Power and Control to Agape Relationship. Take away power and control as the binding force of Christian community, and we are left with love: *the love of Christ experienced in common worship and fellowship.*

The Collapse of Foundationalism: From Certainty to Faith. Take away certainty as the basis for Christian community, and we are left with faith: *faith in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ.*

The Collapse of Religionism: From Security to Hope. Take away the security of a systematic set of religious beliefs and practices as the

organizing principle of Christian community, and we are left with hope: *the hope of organic and emergent spiritual community.*

Faith, Hope, and Love . . . Sound Familiar?

Individual Christians have long ordered their lives by these words of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 13:13). Yet the church has been strangely reluctant to use them to order its corporate life, borrowing instead the culture's dominant organizational paradigms. But what would it look like if we did apply them corporately?

A New Middle Way? A Different Sort of Orthodoxy?

The True Meaning of Orthodoxy (Defining Terms)

Asked the difference between "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy" (that is, heresy), William Warburton, eighteenth-century Anglican bishop of Gloucester, is said to have replied, "Orthodoxy is my doxy. Heterodoxy is another man's doxy."

Orthodoxy has come to mean different things to different people. Conservative Christians, though differing on details, understand orthodoxy as *holding the right beliefs*. Let's call this approach "Propositional Orthodoxy." Liberal Christians, uncomfortable with the term, have renamed it orthopraxy: *living right practices*. Let's call this approach "Ethical Orthodoxy." Yet orthodoxy originally meant "right praise." Informed by this meaning, we have come to understand orthodoxy as simply *appropriate response to the incarnate presence of God*, which we take to be awe, love, a yearning to worship, and desire for relationship. Right beliefs and practices are not inappropriate responses, just secondary. Let's call this approach "Incarnational Orthodoxy," or—recognizing the paradox of the Incarnation—simply "Paradoxy."

Incarnating Incarnational Orthodoxy (Practicing Paradoxy)

How do we practice Paradoxy? The principles we have discerned are both beautifully simple to recognize and a great challenge to live out faithfully.

The greatest of these is love. We believe the only force powerful enough to unify Christian community is Christ's love for us. Everything else is secondary.

- Understanding that diversity held together by Christ's love is evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our midst, we don't just tolerate it, we welcome and engage it.
- Realizing that Christ's love for us has made us family, we stick with each other no matter how severely may disagree.
- We are fundamentalists about the Law of Love: love God, love each other, the rest is commentary.

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. We understand that Christ's love, experienced in the worship and fellowship of Christian community, is transformative of the community, its members, and of creation.

- Realizing that changing hearts is Christ's job, we set aside our need to convert others.
- Realizing that our job is to make Christ's love tangible, we welcome all people into full fellowship without precondition, trusting Christ's love to make us all more like Christ.

The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. Our faith is not in doctrine (believing things about Christ), nor in practice (trying to live like Christ), but in relationship (loving the incarnate person of Christ). We understand the Incarnation as the greatest of all paradoxes wrapped in the most inscrutable of mysteries.

- Embracing the mystery and living into the paradox, we live as if we believe, while doubting our doubts.
- Acknowledging that the essential truth of Christian faith is beyond human comprehension, we "curb our dogma," refusing to make any beliefs or practices prerequisites to fellowship in our community.

You are the body of Christ and members of it. As the body of Christ, we see ourselves more as organism than organization.

- Realizing that the rules, roles, and structures of organized religion are more expressions of our need for stability than essentials of Christian community, and that the only completely stable organisms are fossils, we try to wear those rules, roles, and structures loosely.
- Realizing that a church is a living organism, our leadership is informed as much or more by the gifts and callings of our communicants as by the needs of the organization.
- Recognizing that we need those whom God sends to us as much as they need us, we keep our boundaries permeable and our barriers to entry low.

Summary and Invitation

The limitations of this kind of article are obvious. The need for brevity renders such an article both oversimplified and incomplete.³ Speculations about emerging paradigms are bound to be inconclusive. Looking through the lens of the old paradigm, we can never fully see the new. But we can begin to explore its outlines and place them tentatively on the map for future explorers to refine. At the very least, I hope I have shared enough of what my congregation has learned so far that you will want to join us as we continue to search for the blessings of these “interesting times.”

³ A more thorough discussion of these issues will soon be available in the author's forthcoming book, *Paradoxy: Cultivating an Undomesticated Church by Returning God to the Wild* (Paraclete Press).