

An Emerging Christian Way

Marcus Borg

A new way of being Christian is emerging in the churches of North America in our time. It is most visible in mainline denominations, now sometimes called the "old" mainline. These include Anglicans (Episcopalians in the United States), United Church of Canada, Presbyterians, Methodists, United Church of Christ (Congregationalists), the largest Lutheran denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and a small minority of Baptists. It is also found among Roman Catholics, and is a minority voice in evangelical circles, where it is commonly known as "the emergent church." There its most prominent proponent, Brian McLaren, speaks of "a new kind of Christian."

This "new kind of Christian," this emerging vision, exists side by side with an earlier vision of being Christian that has been the most common form of Western Christianity for the past 300 to 400 years. The two visions are so different from each other that I sometimes speak of the story of the church in North America today as a tale of two Christianities. To echo the opening sentence of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, it is the best of times and the worst of times in the church. Perhaps "best" and "worst" are a bit hyperbolic. But it is a time of exciting Christian renewal and deep Christian division.

The division is not only deep, but often acrimonious. Followers of the earlier vision (fundamentalists, many conservative-evangelicals, and some mainline Christians) see the new way of being Christian as a watering down or even abandonment of Christianity. From their point of view, it makes too many concessions to modern thought, producing an anemic, politically correct, and vaguely theistic humanism. On the other side of the divide, emerging Christians often see the more rigid forms of the earlier vision as anti-intellectual, literalistic, judgmental, self-righteous, and uncritically committed to right-wing politics.

The division is so great that it virtually produces two different religions, both using the same Bible and the same language. It is most publicly visible around specific controversies that make headlines, such as creation versus evolution, and the status of gays and lesbians in the church. But beneath specific issues is a larger conflict between two very different visions of Christianity and what it means to be Christian.

To reduce the manifold forms of Christianity in our time to two is a grand simplification, of course. But sometimes such simplifications are illuminating. Albert Einstein once said that it's important to be as simple as possible - and then he cautioned: but no simpler. And I think he also said that anything that can be put in a nutshell probably belongs there. Nevertheless, I will take the risk and speak of two primary visions of Christianity in North America today, in deep conflict with each other.

A Paradigm Conflict

The conflict is a paradigm conflict. Because this term is central for understanding what is happening in the church today, I concisely define it with three simple synonymous phrases: a paradigm is a way of seeing a whole; it is a comprehensive way of seeing; it is a large framework that affects the way particulars are seen. *We see with paradigms, see through paradigms; they function as lenses.*

To illustrate briefly from the history of astronomy: both the Ptolemaic and Copernican ways of seeing the earth in relation to the sun were lenses, paradigms. The former was geocentric; it saw the earth as the stationary center of the universe and understood the motions of the sun, moon, planets and stars accordingly. It worked quite well. Eclipses of the sun and moon could even be accurately predicted within it. Then, in the 16th and 17th centuries, largely through the work of Copernicus and Galileo, it began to be replaced by a heliocentric paradigm that placed the sun at the center of what was now a solar system, and that understood the movements of the planets (including the earth) accordingly. This change illustrates the difference that paradigms make. Both the Ptolemaic and Copernican paradigms are ways of seeing a whole. But the

whole is seen differently because of the shift in paradigms. Importantly, the same data are being seen - the motions of the heavenly bodies - but the data look different because of the change in paradigms.

This is what is happening in the churches of North America today. Two very different Christian paradigms, two very different ways of seeing Christianity and the Christian life as a whole, are in conflict with each other. Importantly, both are ways of seeing the same particulars, the same "data" - namely, the Bible, Christian theology, and Christian tradition - but they look different because of the different paradigms.

Naming the Paradigms

In my book *The Heart of Christianity*, I call these two ways of seeing *an earlier Christian paradigm* and *an emerging Christian paradigm*. I chose these phrases because I was seeking relatively neutral language that also suggested a chronological transition. I could perhaps have used the terms "conservative" and "liberal," but decided not to for more than one reason. There is, as we shall see, much about the earlier paradigm that is innovative and not conservative; and the emerging paradigm is conservative in the sense that it conserves what is most central to Christianity. Moreover, the term "liberal" has acquired such negative connotations in the last few decades that it may be a half century or more before it can again be used as a descriptive (and not negative) term.

As just mentioned, "earlier" and "emerging" paradigms are chronological terms. I continue to use them in this chapter, and I also now name them in a way that suggests not only chronology, but content. The earlier paradigm is *a belief-centered paradigm* and it generates belief-centered Christianity: Christians are people who believe in the central claims of the Bible and of Christianity.

The emerging paradigm is *a transformation centered paradigm* and it generates transformation-centered Christianity: Christians are people committed to a way, a path of transformation, as known especially in Jesus.

Before I turn to describing these paradigms more fully, it is important to realize that both are the product of the last three to four centuries. Though both have roots in antiquity, neither is simply a continuation of traditional Christianity. Rather, both are modern; they are different Christian responses to the encounter of Christianity with the Enlightenment, the birth of modern science and scientific ways of knowing in the 1600s that revolutionized Western culture. The perspectives represented by the Enlightenment have become, in the centuries since, the dominant mindset of modern Western culture. As we shall see, the belief-centered paradigm is a defensive (and sometimes aggressive) rejection of the Enlightenment, whereas the transformation centered paradigm involves an appreciative and discerning integration of the Enlightenment.

The Belief-Centered Paradigm

As I describe the earlier belief-centered paradigm, I intend that my description will make it familiar rather than a caricature. It has been the most common form of Western Christianity for the past three to four centuries. Most of us over age 40 grew up with it, as have many under 40. The majority of Christians in North America, with varying degrees of confidence, think that being Christian means affirming this vision of Christianity. And many who are not Christian think this is what it means to be Christian.

The uniqueness of Christianity

For the belief-centered paradigm, the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity are unique. Their uniqueness is understood to mean that only here has God truly become known: the Bible and Jesus are the exclusive revelation of God. From this it follows that Christianity is the only way of salvation.

Salvation as afterlife

Salvation is seen as being primarily about the next world. "Are you saved?" means, "Are you confident you will go to heaven when you die?" Salvation and the afterlife are virtually identified. So central was this identification in the Christianity I learned growing up that if you had been able to convince me at age ten or 12 that there was no afterlife,

I would have had no idea why I should be Christian. Heaven was what it was all about.

Requirements and rewards

For this vision, Christianity is a religion of requirements and rewards. This is true even though the language of grace is commonly emphasized. The reward, of course, is heaven. The requirement is what you need to believe and/or do to get there. This flows directly from the emphasis on the afterlife; if there is a blessed afterlife, it doesn't seem fair that everybody gets one, so there must be something that differentiates those who do from those who don't. Unless we think that God arbitrarily decides who will be saved, that "something" must be something we believe or do. Thus, this vision sees Christianity as a religion of requirements. There are those who meet them and those who don't, those who will be saved and those who won't, those who will be taken to be with Jesus and those who will be left behind.

Sin, guilt, and forgiveness

The emphasis on requirements leads to an emphasis on sin, guilt, and forgiveness as the central dynamic of the Christian life. We fall short again and again of measuring up to God's requirements of belief and behavior, and thus need forgiveness. This understanding of our predicament shapes its way of seeing the significance of Jesus: his primary purpose was to die for the sins of the world so that we can be forgiven. Because Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* so graphically portrayed the huge cost of our redemption, it was enthusiastically received by many earlier paradigm Christians.

The Bible

At the center of this vision is a way of seeing the Bible. Indeed, conflict about the Bible - its authority and interpretation - is the most divisive issue separating the two paradigms.

Biblical authority

For the earlier paradigm, the Bible's authority is grounded in its origin: it

comes from God as no other book does. For these Christians, affirming that the Bible is "inspired by God" and "the Word of God" means that it is a divine product. This is the basis of the Bible's truth: because its ultimate author is God, it has a divine guarantee to be true. This understanding has harder and softer forms. The hard form, fundamentalism, affirms the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. The softer form does not insist that the Bible is inerrant in every detail, but understands "inspired by God" to mean that the Holy Spirit guided the writers of the Bible so that they did not make any serious errors - nothing that would interfere with our salvation. Thus the softer form also sees the Bible's authority as grounded in a divine guarantee tied to its divine origin.

Biblical interpretation

The earlier paradigm affirms that the Bible is to be interpreted literally, factually, and absolutely. If the Bible says something happened, it happened. In the hard form, biblical literalism leads to opposition to evolution; biblical factualism leads to a vigorous defense of stories of the spectacular; and biblical absolutism leads to sharp moral boundaries. If the Bible says something is wrong, it's wrong.

The softer form is willing to grant that biblical language is sometimes symbolic (and thus it does not need to oppose evolution), but affirms that the really important events happened more or less as the Bible reports them: that the sea really *did* divide in two at the time of the exodus; that Jesus really *was* born of a virgin; really did walk on water; and so forth. The softer form is also willing to grant that some of the Bible's teaching about behavior was meant for the ancient world, not for all time. But the burden of proof lies with those who want to say that a particular biblical teaching is not absolute.

Faith as believing

Finally, the earlier paradigm understands the primary meaning of "faith" as "belief " or "believing." This follows directly from its way of seeing the Bible and Christianity as a whole. The central claims of its way of seeing have become questionable in the modern world and that's why "faith" is

required to believe them. To be Christian means believing that the Bible and the central claims of Christianity are (in harder or softer forms) literally, factually, and absolutely true.

As mentioned earlier, this paradigm - especially its view of the Bible and its understanding of faith - is not ancient, but the product of Christianity's encounter with the Enlightenment, which called many conventional Christian understandings into question, including the literal factuality of the Bible.

- The notion of biblical inerrancy is first mentioned in a book of theology published in the second half of the 1600s. It took two more centuries (the second half of the 1800s) before the notion became relatively common in some Protestant circles (about the same time that papal infallibility was affirmed by the Roman Catholic Church in 1870). Fundamentalism, with its emphasis on biblical inerrancy, is even more recent, born in the early years of the 20th century.
- An emphasis on the literal factuality of the Bible is also modern. Prior to the Enlightenment, the more-than-literal meaning of biblical texts - what I will later call the metaphorical meaning - was most important. The literal-factual meaning was seldom emphasized.
- An understanding of the word "faith" as meaning primarily *believing* biblical and doctrinal statements to be true is also modern. Prior to about the year 1600, Christian faith did not mean believing statements, "propositions," to be true. Rather, faith meant *trusting* in God and *loyalty* - giving one's allegiance - to God. But when the Enlightenment raised questions about the truth of central Christian claims, the response of some Christians was to say, "This is why you need faith"; faith is what you need when modern knowledge calls Christian beliefs into question.

To say the obvious, this is the reason for the name "a belief-centered paradigm." Being Christian is about believing: believing that God exists;

believing that the Bible is the Word of God; believing that Jesus is the Son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he died for our sins, that he was raised physically from the dead, that he will come again, and so forth. Of course, for these Christians, the Christian life is about *more* than believing. It is also about prayer, worship, good behavior, and deeds of kindness. It (like the emerging paradigm) is about transformation. But this vision frontloads Christian transformation with a set of beliefs to be believed. Belief is foundational: believe in Christianity *now*, for the sake of eternal salvation *later*. It is the only way.

This paradigm has serious problems and they have grown more acute in recent times as more and more people have become aware of them. The issue is not that belief-centered Christianity does not work. For the last few centuries, millions of Christians have lived within it, including my parents and perhaps your parents. The Spirit of God worked through it and touched their lives.

The issue is that the belief-centered paradigm has become an intellectual and moral stumbling block for millions of people in our time, inside the church and outside of it. On the level of what many people think of as "common sense," the problems include the following.

- Biblical literalism is very hard to believe. It generates conflicts with what we have come to know through science and history.
- The claim that biblical teachings about behavior are the absolute will of God is also difficult to believe, to the point of impossible, for many people. Texts in the Bible accept slavery and regulate it, affirm the subordination of women, specify capital punishment for a wide range of actions (including adultery and cursing one's parents), and order the slaughter of men, women, children, and infants. Were these ever the will of God? Moreover, some (many?) laws in the Bible seem too trivial to be of concern to God. Does God really care about whether we wear garments made of two kinds of cloth (blends), or plant two kinds of seed in the same field?

- Its claim that Christianity is the only way of salvation is also impossible for many people to believe. Does it make sense to think that the creator of the whole universe has chosen to be known in only one religious tradition; namely, our own?

- The emphasis on "believing the right things" as the way to be saved seems strange. Is "correct belief " what God most wants from us? Does "correct belief " mean "using the right words"? And believing them? Is this what will save us, transform us?

Indeed, the belief-centered paradigm is the single biggest reason for the decline of mainline denominations over the past 40 years. Why have so many people left mainline churches? Most did not join more conservative churches, but either dropped out or turned to alternative spiritualities. So why did they leave? For the most part, because the Christianity they grew up with - belief-centered Christianity - ceased to make sense to them, ceased to be persuasive and compelling. And for most people outside of the church, the belief-centered paradigm has made Christianity unattractive, easy to dismiss, indeed incredible.

The Transformation-Centered Paradigm

Thus it is good news - gospel for our time - that there is an emerging Christian paradigm. In a sentence, it sees the Christian life as a relationship with God as known in Jesus that changes us, that transforms us - and hence the name *a transformation-centered paradigm*. The Christian life is not very much about believing a set of claims to be true, but about a path, a way of transformation that leads to God and to participation in the passion of God. It resolves the intellectual obstacles generated by the belief centered paradigm, and it does so without watering down Christianity. Rather, it robustly affirms the central elements of Christianity, but sees them differently.

Like the earlier paradigm, the transformation-centered paradigm is a Christian response to the Enlightenment. But instead of rejecting

modern knowledge when it conflicts with the Bible, it involves an *appreciative* and *discerning* integration of what we have learned in the last several centuries about nature, history, culture, religions, and ourselves.

Importantly, the integration needs to be *discerning*, or it risks reducing Christianity to what can be affirmed within the confines of modern thought. Reductionism is the perennial temptation of modernity. But much of what we have learned from the Enlightenment can be integrated with a robust Christianity. This includes what we have learned from science, which has led to an understanding of the universe and ourselves much different from what our pre-modern ancestors thought.

To illustrate with what was once controversial but is now commonplace: the earth is not at the center of the universe; the universe is huge; it and the earth are billions of years old; human beings have been around for millions of years. Among the vast majority of people today, these are not questionable claims, but true. If we take them seriously, the biblical portrait of a "young earth" - the earth and the universe as created in more or less their present form a relatively short time ago - cannot be understood as a literally and factually correct account of origins.

The Enlightenment also generated a historical approach to the study of the Bible. We became aware that the biblical documents have a history. This approach was first applied to the Jewish Bible in the second half of the 1600s. The Dutch Jewish scholar Spinoza and the French Catholic scholar Richard Simon argued that "the five books of Moses" are actually a combination of a number of sources written several centuries after the time of Moses. They thus tell us how ancient Israel told her story at different points in her history, and they reflect *that* history, not primarily the past history that they purport to report.

In the 1700s, this approach began to be applied to the New Testament, including the gospels. Instead of seeing the Bible as a divine product, the Bible was now seen as the historical product of ancient communities. In the 1800s and 1900s, this approach began to be taught in most mainline

seminaries and divinity schools. All of today's mainline clergy have encountered it.

The centuries since the Enlightenment have also generated a deeper understanding of how culture shapes consciousness and knowledge itself. We - including the way we think and what we consider to be knowledge - are very much shaped by our location in time and space, our place in the historical and cultural process. There is no vantage point completely outside this process. Of course, we are not completely confined to our time and place; the study of history and other cultures enables us to some extent to transcend time and place, but we nevertheless see from where we are. Thus there is no "absolute" knowledge. All knowledge (even scientific knowledge) is historically conditioned and relative. This does not mean that all claims to knowledge are equally valid; some understandings clearly work better than others. But it does mean that no expression of knowledge, whether religious or scientific, is absolute truth for all time. We always have the treasure of knowledge in earthen vessels.

The Enlightenment has also brought a transformation in our understanding of religions. Some of this is the result of the academic study of religion, and even more so in the last half century through increasing contact with other religions. To many people, it now seems clear that all religions (including Christianity) are shaped by the cultures in which they emerged. Rather than one religion being the unique and only adequate revelation of *God*, all are seen as cultural products. For some, this means that all religions are of little value. But for many religious people, including emerging Christians, this means that the religions of the world that have endured, that have stood the test of time, are different cultural responses to the experience of the sacred.

The Bible

We turn now to how these understandings have shaped the emerging Christian paradigm, and we begin with the Bible. The emerging Christian paradigm sees the Bible as the human product of a historical and cultural

process, not as a divine product. The Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament) is the product of ancient Israel, and the New Testament is the product of the early Christian movement. Seeing the Bible this way does not deny the reality of God or of revelation, but it sees the Bible as the response of these two communities to their experience of God, and as their understanding of what life with God involves.

The Bible's authority

The emerging paradigm sees the Bible's authority as grounded not in its origin in God, but in decisions made by our spiritual ancestors in these ancient communities; they declared this collection of documents to be sacred, to be authoritative, to be the most important documents they knew. The Bible is thus sacred in its status and function - and this is its authority. To be Christian means to be in a continuing conversation with the Bible as our foundation document, identity document, and wisdom tradition. Its vision of life is to shape our sense of who God is, who we are, and our perception of God's intention for the whole of creation.

The Bible's interpretation

The emerging paradigm interprets the Bible historically and metaphorically, rather than as the literal-factual-absolute revelation of God. The historical-metaphorical way of seeing the Bible is crucial for seeing the difference between the two paradigms. So, while still seeking to be concise, I describe and illustrate it at somewhat greater length.

Historical interpretation. Here, "historical" does not mean "factual." Indeed, this way of interpreting the Bible is not very much concerned with the issue of how much of what the Bible reports really happened. That question is seldom of great importance. Rather, a historical approach emphasizes the illuminating power of setting these ancient texts in their ancient contexts - in their ancient literary and historical contexts. For example, the language of the second half of Isaiah comes alive when we realize that it was addressed to a small community of Jews in exile in Babylon, in the sixth century BCE. Forcibly removed from their homeland about 50 years earlier, they were impoverished, oppressed, and

disheartened. In this setting, the language of Isaiah 40, familiar to many people from Handel's *Messiah*, has extraordinary power. "Comfort my people,' says your God, 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her time of suffering is over.'"

The passage continues: "A voice cries out, 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" A way of return, of going home, is being prepared. The image of a way continues: "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." A superhighway, an interstate, an autobahn, is being built (metaphorically, of course) through the wilderness separating the place of exile from the homeland. The chapter concludes: "God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not grow faint." We hear these ancient words best when we hear them initially in their ancient context: they announce and encourage the return from exile.

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