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THE TYRANNY OF THE PARADIGM (PART 1)

By Jack Cottrell

In 1986 Michael Denton wrote *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* (Adler & Adler, 1996), in which he is severely critical of evolutionary theory. He presented compelling arguments for intelligent design, especially from the living cell, before most of us ever heard of Michael Behe.

This is significant because Denton is a respected molecular biologist and medical doctor—and a complete agnostic. Though he argues for design, he professes ignorance as to who or what the designer might be. Nevertheless, throughout this large volume, Denton offers many examples of scientific evidence that the phenomena of nature could not have developed by pure chance, or “from blind random process” (p. 345).

Why, then, do multitudes of scientists and other scholars still insist on the validity of Darwin’s theory of evolution? Because of something he calls, following Thomas S. Kuhn, “the priority of the paradigm” (pp. 344-59).

In this context a paradigm is seen as a pattern, a mold, a controlling interpretive principle, an “orientating assumption.” It is the one dominant, immovable fact around which and in relation to which everything else must be interpreted. If something does not conform to the paradigm, it must either be rejected or contorted to fit.

The problem, says Denton, is that sometimes one can be so committed to the paradigm that he does not acknowledge the conflict between the paradigm itself and the data relevant to it. That is, even when the data do not support the paradigm or even when the data actually disprove it, many will still cling to the paradigm and accept only the data that are consistent with it. This is the “priority” of the paradigm, a concept I am calling tyranny of the paradigm.

Sacred to Scientists

Denton says this is the case with Darwin’s concept of macroevolution, as it is held by the scientific world today. The paradigm is still held to be sacred, despite the fact that it has not been validated by one single empirical discovery or scientific advance since 1859, and has actually been disproved by new data about the cell in particular (pp. 345, 346). No matter how

convincing the evidence against it may be, the paradigm still exercises priority (p. 348).

Denton cites prior examples of such paradigms in the field of science, such as the theory of a geocentric universe, which “by the late middle ages had become a self-evident truth, the one and only sacred and unalterable picture of cosmological reality” (p. 348). The problem is, the more closely astronomers observed the heavenly bodies and plotted their movements, the more difficult it became to embrace geocentrism. Nevertheless, for a long time the new data were adapted to this paradigm—squeezed into it—in increasingly ridiculous ways; for example, by positing epicycles, and epicycles upon epicycles.

But as Denton observes, by Copernicus’s time this Ptolemaic system was so “cumbersome” and “monstrous” it was obvious to any objective person that it could not be true. “However, so ingrained was the idea that the Earth was the center of the universe that hardly anyone, even those astronomers who were well aware of the growing unreality of the whole system, ever bothered to consider an alternative theory” (p. 349). The paradigm took precedence!

Another such example is the phlogiston theory of combustion, which prevailed in much of the 18th century. Phlogiston was supposedly a fire-like element (in addition to earth, air, fire, and water) believed to exist in all flammable substances, though it cannot be detected since it has no color, odor, taste, or mass. When a substance is burned (the theory said), its phlogiston is released into and absorbed by the surrounding air, and the original substance becomes “dephlogisticated.”

There is, of course, no such element; yet the paradigm tyrannized the scientific world for nearly 100 years. As more and more actual facts became known about material substance and its combustion, “the properties of [this alleged] phlogiston became more bizarre and contradictory. But instead of questioning the existence of this mysterious substance it was made to serve more comprehensive purposes” (p. 351). The Antiphlogistians “would come up with an objection to phlogiston theory, and the Phlogistians . . . would modify the theory to fit the new experiment” (see Jim Loy’s “Phlogiston Theory,” www.jimloy.com/physics/phlogstn.htm).

Denton argues that Darwinian belief today is like both of the above examples. It is against all common sense, and requires mental gymnastics to

maintain. So why does Darwinian evolution still prevail? Because of the priority of the paradigm! “To the Darwinist the idea is accepted without a ripple of doubt—the paradigm takes precedence!” (p. 351).

Forcing Scriptural Interpretations

When I read Denton’s analysis of the power of the paradigm in the context of science, I could not help but think of many parallels in the context of theology. Many a theological paradigm likewise becomes tyrannical when it becomes a “controlling interpretive principle,” a hermeneutical motif or overriding theme by which everything in Scripture must be interpreted and to which everything must conform.

One of the first such theological paradigms that came to mind was the fundamental doctrine of Calvinism, i.e., the sovereignty of God. Divine sovereignty is certainly taught in the Bible, usually under the terminology of God’s lordship. But Calvinists hold to a very specific kind of sovereignty, namely, omnicausal or pancausal sovereignty. The presupposition is that God cannot be truly sovereign unless he is the ultimate cause of everything. All biblical teaching is made to conform to this philosophically defined sovereignty.

What suffers most under the tyranny of this paradigm is the reality of human free will, which is actually denied. All attempts to redefine free will to make it conform to omnicausal sovereignty are unsuccessful. (See Cottrell, “The Nature of the Divine Sovereignty,” *The Grace of God, the Will of Man*, ed. Clark Pinnock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989], 97-119.)

Another example of a tyrannical theological paradigm is the fundamental motif of Wesleyanism, the “second work of grace” doctrine. This is the idea that the initial bestowing of salvation upon the converted sinner is incomplete; thus the new Christian must seek for, yet nevertheless await God’s timing for, a second outpouring of grace to complete the salvation process.

This is variously called “complete sanctification,” or “baptism in the Holy Spirit” (with or without tongue-speaking). I once read a Holiness book on sanctification and was amazed at how many biblical texts could be twisted to fit the concept of this alleged “second work,” e.g., Acts 2!

A third example is covenant theology, a hermeneutical approach to Scripture first formulated by Huldreich Zwingli in his effort to create a new

rationale for infant baptism (since he had given up all connection between baptism and salvation, including its need to remove original sin). Zwingli's solution was to make the covenant God made with Abraham the one and only covenant of salvation. The so-called "new covenant" under which the church lives is the covenant God made with Abraham beginning in Genesis 12. Baptism becomes the covenant sign that replaces circumcision, and takes on the purpose of circumcision.

The concept of covenant becomes all-determinative, particularly the Abrahamic covenant. For example, an article written by one of my Westminster Seminary classmates declared that the "promise" in Acts 2:39 is the promise God made to Abraham (contrary to Acts 2:33). (See my chapter on Zwingli's new doctrine of baptism in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, ed. David Fletcher [College Press, 1990; Hester Publications, 2009], 39-81.)

Another example of the tyranny of the paradigm is the role given to Galatians 3:28 in feminist (egalitarian) theology. This text, interpreted to mean that in Christ there must be NO role distinctions between men and women in the home and church, is called "the foundation," the "starting place," the "central truth," the "normative text" to which all other gender texts must be made to conform. This one text is absolute and universal, all others are situational and relativistic. (See my discussion of Galatians 3:28 in *Gender Roles and the Bible: Creation, the Fall, & Redemption* [College Press 1994), 217-301.)

A final example for this article is the role assigned to the events of ad 70 in modern extreme preterist eschatology. This view says that everything associated with the second coming of Jesus happened in ad 70 in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem as an act of judgment on Old Testament Israel. This includes the Antichrist, the man of sin, the second coming itself, the rapture, the resurrection, and the Judgment Day. All these things have already happened. The world we now live in will never be destroyed; it will just continue on without end. The key to it all is ad 70. (See Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* [College Press, 2002], 541, 542.)

This article is intended to lay the foundation for my final "Reflections" essay this year, in which I will discuss what I believe is the most prominent example of the tyranny of the paradigm in modern Christendom, namely, the concept of sola fidei, "by faith alone."

THE TYRANNY OF THE PARADIGM (PART 2)

By Jack W. Cottrell

Previously I noted that Michael Denton speaks of how modern science regards Darwinian evolution as the determinative paradigm or controlling interpretive principle to which all scientific data must be made to conform—even when the data are in conflict with the paradigm. He calls this faulty methodology the “priority of the paradigm” (à la Thomas Kuhn).

In that earlier essay I applied this concept to certain faulty theological systems, which likewise are distorted by the tyranny of their respective paradigms. (I have changed the word priority to tyranny, a word that better expresses the psychological hold or dictatorial power that the paradigm often exerts over its adherents.)

I will now discuss the most prominent example of the tyranny of the paradigm in modern Christendom: the doctrine of sola fidei, “by faith alone.” Since the Reformation for most Protestants this doctrine has been the one nonnegotiable rule in the area of salvation. Douglas Moo calls it “the hallmark of the Reformation teaching” (in *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 243). Chuck Swindoll speaks of “the true message that lit the spark to the Reformation: sola fidei—faith alone” (in *The Grace Awakening* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010], 86).

My contention here is admittedly radical, and no doubt will be seen as heretical by many. But I am convinced that the doctrine of sola fidei, as interpreted in accordance with Huldreich Zwingli’s new doctrine of baptism, is (like the scientific theory of evolution) a false paradigm. This paradigm has been elevated to the level of infallibility and invested with a quality of sovereignty foreign to the Bible.

As an assumption that can’t be challenged, sola fidei is a tyrannical paradigm that is imposed upon the whole of Scripture. In the process it suppresses and cancels out common sense in the interpretation of Scripture, and it causes many to ignore ordinary rules of language and hermeneutics. It causes otherwise reasonable people to become irrational, especially in regard to the Bible’s teaching about the conditions for receiving God’s saving grace.

Let me share some concrete examples of the tyranny of this paradigm, sola fidei.

Mistreatment of Luther

First is the inconsistent, even contradictory way sola fidei folks treat the main Reformation figure, Martin Luther, compared with the way they treat anyone today who connects baptism with salvation. Luther is lauded as the origin, hero, and patron saint of sola fidei. As an example, “Justification by faith alone was Martin Luther’s great spiritual and theological breakthrough” (Joel R. Beeke, “Justification by Faith Alone,” www.the-highway.com/articlej98.html).

At the same time the sola fidei folks completely ignore the fact that Luther clearly and emphatically taught that baptism is the moment when salvation occurs. As the faith-only paradigm is interpreted and applied today, Luther’s view of baptism should be judged as a clear violation of his own sola fidei principle. Yet he is praised today, while others teaching the exact same thing about baptism are condemned.

Uncritical Assumption

Second, being under control of today’s sola fidei paradigm leads to the uncritical assumption that faith is not only the means of justification, but also the time or occasion of justification. No one doubts that faith is the sole means by which justification is received. Here means refers to the receptacle, the empty hand, the entry point through which justification enters one’s life. We are saved *dia pisteos*—through or by means of faith (Ephesians 2:8). This is the Bible’s clear and consistent teaching.

In this sense, which is the sense in which Luther obviously meant it, sola fidei truly is a valid and acceptable concept. Faith is the only means or instrument by which justification is received.

The problem, though, is that this is NOT how the sola fidei paradigm has been used since Zwingli. Rather, for most Protestants today faith is seen not only as the sole means of receiving justification, but also as the sole condition. Means and condition are equated and are used interchangeably.

An example is Norman Geisler, who is oblivious to any distinction between these concepts, and who accuses me of inconsistency because I DO make the distinction. He says, “Ironically, Cottrell accepts the New Testament affirmation of faith as the means of receiving the gift of salvation: ‘Faith is still the primary condition because it is the sole means by which salvation is received, but this does not rule out the addition of other conditions that serve other purposes’ (The Faith Once for All [Joplin: College

Press, 2002], 359, emphasis added). However, he does not appear to see the inconsistency of adding three more conditions for being saved. If faith is the only means of salvation, why is something else necessary? The New Testament lists faith and faith alone as the means of being saved. Accordingly, any other conditions (such as confession and baptism) cannot actually be salvific conditions . . .” (see Systematic Theology, Vol. 3: Sin/Salvation, by Norman Geisler [Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2004], 494).

So, he says, if faith is the means, this has to rule out other conditions.

Why would he say this? Because, under the power of the sola fidei paradigm, it is assumed that the means of something is its sole condition, including the occasion for it. I.e., “By faith” means “as soon as one has faith.” Thus, says Geisler, one is added to Christ’s body “at the moment he or she believes” (ibid., 502).

When we break free from the tyranny of the paradigm, though, we can see that the means by which something is received is not necessarily the occasion/time for it. Nor is the means the only condition. A necessary condition is not necessarily a sufficient condition. That is, if you want to watch a football game such as the Rose Bowl, you go online and buy a ticket to the game. This ticket becomes the MEANS BY WHICH you are allowed to watch the game, and thus a condition for watching the game.

But it is not the only condition. You do not begin to watch the game the moment the ticket is in your hand. You must also go to the stadium where the game is played, and you must go at the specific time on the particular day it is played. These latter requirements are not means, but they are conditions.

In a similar way, we can still hold to sola fidei IF we make the proper distinctions between means and occasion, and means and condition. But those who are slaves to the paradigm will not allow it.

Confusion About Repentance

Third, the sola fidei paradigm leads to serious confusion concerning how repentance is related to salvation. Scripture clearly teaches that repentance is a condition for receiving salvation, both in the Old Testament era and in the New Testament era (Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 2 Peter 3:9). In view of this teaching, is it possible to preserve the integrity of BOTH sola

fidei AND repentance? Judging from the views of those who hold to sola fidei, the answer seems to be NO.

Some, especially those in the free grace movement (Lewis Sperry Chafer, Zane Hodges, Charles Ryrie, et al.), simply deny that repentance (in the usual sense) is essential for salvation. The ONLY condition is faith; nothing else, not even repentance, is necessary. (This version of faith-onlyism is consistently true to its Zwinglian roots, but it trades the biblical teaching on repentance for this consistency.)

Others say that repentance is necessary for salvation; but to preserve the sola fidei paradigm they includerepentance in the content and definition of faith. Thus both faith and repentance are essential conditions for salvation; but since repentance is blended into faith, the paradigm remains intact but repentance loses its integrity. For example, John MacArthur says in *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan, 2008), “Repentance is at the core of saving faith”; it is “a critical element of saving faith” (pp. 32, 162). Geisler says the same thing: repentance is necessary for salvation, but it is NOT “a distinct and second step.” Repentance is “part of faith” (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3, 493). “True faith includes repentance; therefore, to add repentance as a distinct and separate step is wrong” (*ibid.*, 493). Faith and repentance are “two facets of the same action”; “each is a part of one saving act by which a person receives the gift of everlasting life.” This must be so, since saying they are “two separate acts . . . violates the Protestant (and biblical) principle of ‘faith alone’” (518).

Of course one COULD say faith is the sole means of justification, while repentance is simply another necessary condition. But the tyranny of the paradigm does not allow such a distinction between means and condition, or does not allow any condition other than faith.

THE TYRANNY OF THE PARADIGM (PART 3)

By Jack W. Cottrell

My thesis is that the understanding of the doctrine of salvation in most Protestant groups is captive to the Zwinglian version of the sola fidei paradigm. In the previous article (last week) I showed how this is the case in the way faith is treated as the sole condition for justification, and not just its sole means. It is also seen in the way repentance either is excluded as a

condition altogether, or is diminished by being made simply an aspect of faith—which according to the paradigm must be the sole condition.

In this article I will show how the tyranny of the paradigm forces sola fidei adherents to do violence to biblical teaching concerning confession and baptism.

Confusion About Confession

First (and fourth overall), being a slave to the sola fidei paradigm leads to serious confusion regarding how confession is related to salvation, especially as taught in Romans 10:9, 10. A literal rendering of these verses shows that Paul makes confession and faith equivalent conditions for salvation. In verse 9 he says, “If you confess and believe, then you will be saved.” In the Greek there is only one if, and it applies equally to both confession and faith. In verse 10 Paul also says that (a) with the heart one believes UNTO (eis) righteousness, and (b) with the mouth one confesses UNTO (eis) salvation.

In verse 10 the use of the same verbal formula, including the parallel use of the word eis, shows that both faith and confession precede salvation, and that salvation is conditioned on both.

But how is this text treated under the pressure of the sola fidei paradigm? Douglas Moo (in *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 57) says we should be “cautious about finding great significance in the reference to confession here, as if Paul were making oral confession a second requirement for salvation.” Faith is the crucial requirement. “Confession is the outward manifestation of this critical inner response.” (We should note that in this text Paul is silent about any sort of connection between faith and confession. The only thing he connects with confession is salvation.)

Norman Geisler discusses my treatment of Romans 10:9, 10, and acknowledges that “the Bible speaks of confession unto salvation”; yet he declares in his next breath that the Bible “nowhere lists this as a separate and necessary step to being saved” (*Systematic Theology, Vol. 3: Sin/Salvation* [Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2004], 494). If faith is indeed the means of salvation, “why should confession be seen as a condition rather than a result of salvation?” (*ibid.*, 495). “Confession is a natural outward concomitant of saving faith, but . . . saving faith alone saves” (495). While open, oral confession is a natural result of salvation, it is nowhere given as a necessary condition of everlasting life” (495).

The tyranny of the paradigm is obvious: “The New Testament lists faith and faith alone as the means of being saved. Accordingly any other conditions (such as confession and baptism) cannot actually be salvific conditions” (494).

Please note: In spite of Paul’s explicit and specific way of relating confession to salvation in Romans 10:9, 10—“confession UNTO salvation”—Geisler ignores this and reverses the order: salvation UNTO confession (i.e., confession is the RESULT of salvation). He is a slave to the paradigm.

Distorting the Purpose of Baptism

Finally, an absolute, a priori commitment to the sola fidei paradigm leads to an irrational distortion of New Testament texts that relate baptism to salvation. Examples are many, but I will cite only two. The first is a rather common twisting of Acts 2:38 under the pressure of the sola fidei paradigm. It is an argument that attempts to separate baptism from forgiveness through a blatantly faulty analysis of the Greek forms in this verse.

For example, Cal Beisner, in a little booklet titled *Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation?*, gives this interlinear translation of the Greek:

Metanoēsate kai baptisthētō hekastos humōn epi to onomati IēsouChristou

You (plural) repent and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ

eis aphesin tōn hamartiōn humōn.

for (the) remission (of the) sins of you (plural).

The argument begins with Beisner noting that the verb “repent” is plural, and that the “your” in “for the remission of your sins” is also plural. (Beisner inserts “plural” at these points.) But, he says, the verb “be baptized” is singular: “Let each one [hekastos] be baptized.” Beisner concludes, “This makes it clear that ‘remission of your (plural) sins’ is the result of ‘you (plural) repenting,’ not of ‘each one (singular) being baptized.’”

John MacArthur agrees that this is a proper interpretation. “Support for that interpretation comes from the fact that ‘repent’ and ‘your’ are plural, while ‘be baptized’ is singular, thus setting it off from the rest of the sentence [as parenthetical]. If that interpretation is correct, the verse would read ‘Repent (and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ) for the forgiveness of your sins.’ Forgiveness is thus connected with repentance, not

baptism” (in a letter from MacArthur shared with me by Don Wallace, spring 2001).

Those who use this argument seem to deliberately ignore the fact that the singular verb “be baptized” is emphatically pluralized by the immediately following words, *hekastos humōn*, “each one OF YOU” (plural). True, the verb “be baptized” is grammatically singular because its immediate subject is “each one” (*hekastos*), but the addition of the plural “of you” (*humōn*) clearly shows that the application of this verb is intended to be plural. It is the exact same plural word used in the phrase “remission of your (plural) sins.” Beisner, of course, chooses not to insert “(plural)” after the first *humōn*, because this would just call attention to the weakness of this argument. (See John 7:53 for a similar combination of a plural verb with a singular *hekastos*.) The only reason for ignoring the obvious is the tyranny of the *sola fidei* paradigm.

Another example of irrational treatment of baptismal texts as dictated by the *sola fidei* paradigm is Ephesians 4:5, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” What do *sola fidei* defenders do with this verse? Uncharacteristically, Geisler (*ibid.*, 502) says the one baptism is water baptism, which is rather strange in view of his conviction that baptism as an outward act is no more than a work and thus cannot be a condition for salvation (497). This raises a serious question: Why should such a relatively insignificant act as one of the works of the Christian life (water baptism) be included in the same list with one body (the church), one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one hope, and one God and Father?

Most *sola fidei* folks take the other view, that the “one baptism” is Holy Spirit baptism, which at least is seen as a divine salvific act and is more compatible (in significance) with the other six items listed here. (Examples are numerous; see Cottrell, *Power from on High* [Joplin: College Press, 2007], 328.)

The problem here is that most Protestants (except Quakers and radical dispensationalists) still continue to distinguish TWO baptisms in Christian experience: Spirit baptism and water baptism as two separate and distinct events. This allows them to grant that some New Testament texts connect baptism with salvation, but these are automatically interpreted as referring to Spirit baptism since water baptism is excluded by the *sola fidei* paradigm.

(My Westminster Seminary professor, Jay Adams, avowed in class, “There’s not a drop of water in Romans 6!”)

But this leaves Ephesians 4:5 just “hanging in the wind,” so to speak (cf. Ephesians 4:14). How can Paul say there is just ONE baptism, if indeed there are TWO? If Paul says emphatically that there is indeed just one baptism, what drives our faith-only friends to contradict Paul by distinguishing two separate baptisms? The tyranny of the sola fidei paradigm, of course. But when we allow ourselves to be set free from the power of this paradigm, we can affirm that there is indeed ONE baptism, which combines immersion in water AND immersion in the Holy Spirit in a single event.

My prayer is that we can all agree with Paul and with Martin Luther in understanding sola fidei as an affirmation that faith is the only means by which justification is received. To say that it refers to faith as the only condition for justification requires us to do violence to both Scripture and reason.

Jack Cottrell is professor of theology at Cincinnati (Ohio) Bible Seminary. His 20th book, *Set Free! What the Bible Says About Grace*, was published in 2009 by College Press.