

Some Assembly Required, Batteries Not Included

“Today we are in the midst of a paradigm shift more relationally significant than even the Copernican Revolution and its further developments. This is the shift from perceiving the Universe mechanistically, as a lifeless ‘it’ made by an otherworldly Supreme Being, to seeing the Universe as a creative revelation of divinity - as a ‘Thou’ deserving our reverence.”

This is a quote from Michael Dowd’s book, “Thank God for Evolution.”

First, Michael Dowd. (Here is a link to an article about him - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Dowd)

Michael Dowd was first introduced to me by Brooke Summers-Perry. She sent me a link to a You Tube video of a TED Talk Dowd had done. He came out on stage and in the first few minutes had me captured. I’ve quoted him before to you and will again. The quote I’ve used consists of those words he first used to capture me on that TED Talk. He came out and introduced himself as a evolutionary theologian committed to an ecological world view. Here is how he introduced himself and the content of his thought.

“I am an unabashed evidential mystic - a sacred realist, a Christian naturalist. Reality is my God and evidence is my scripture. Big History is my creation story and ecology is my theology. Integrity is my salvation and doing whatever I can to foster a just and healthy future for the full community of life is my mission.”

I’ll repeat this in a few minutes because it begins to offer some insights into one of the issues that this current theme I’m following has kicked up for some of you. (When I speak of “you,” I mean not only those of you who listen to these talks as they are given but also those who listen by live-stream and/or who listen by podcast or read the text of the talks given here later.) I’m gratified by the response and want to take time to respond to the questions and expressions of concern I’m getting.

Some people express concern or anxiety about the deconstruction I’m doing. I think this “deconstruction” is important because many people simply accept the

religious truths that they have been taught or those that are in the culture of this “Christian nation” as simply being the truth. Many accept these things as matter-of-factly as a fish accepts the water in which it swims.

For example, if you go to religious services and hear three times during the service Scripture being read from the Bible and the reading followed by someone in authority saying, “The Word of the Lord!” it is understandable that you might come to believe or take it for granted that what you just heard read is in fact “the word of God” and not some person’s experience of the Sacred that took place at least two thousand years ago in a world and culture far removed from us. More about this later in this talk.

So people wonder, “If what I have been taught or have believed for all these years is not true, what is?” We have to look at what it is that has been held as true so that we can replace it with wiser and more useful knowledge, information, wisdom and understanding. “Knowledge,” “information,” “wisdom” and “understanding” are different realms of reality. Each is valuable in its own way.

Deconstruction is essential for the new to begin to find shape and form in our lives. I for one find that shape beginning to form in what Michael Dowd claims as his creed. Listen to it again:

I am an unabashed evidential mystic - a sacred realist, a Christian naturalist.

Reality is my God.

Evidence is my scripture.

Big History is my creation story.

Ecology is my theology.

Integrity is my salvation.

A just and healthy future for the full community of life is my mission.

This is Dowd’s “affirmation of faith.” I invite you to get to know him. Get and read his book, “Thank God for Evolution.” Mark your calendar to come here on November 17 to hear him speak.

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from perceiving the Universe mechanistically, as a lifeless 'it' made by an otherworldly Supreme Being, to seeing the Universe as a creative revelation of divinity - as a 'Thou' deserving our reverence."

Living into this paradigm shift can be scary and confusing. It can also be exciting and liberating. Living into this paradigm shift is also demanding. It requires effort and that is something that, by-and-large, is not embraced as a value by our culture. Further, people don't change either their religious or political beliefs easily.

I have gone back through my files to try to locate when I first started referring to what many people refer to as "the great turning" when talking about this paradigm shift. The phrase "paradigm shift" was first used by American physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn in 1962 though the understanding of scientific revolution goes back to shortly after Copernicus.

A paradigm shift isn't a shift in the "facts of the matter" but, rather, a shift in the way the facts are understood or comprehended. Copernicus didn't make the sun the center of our universe. He simply understood that this was the fact of the matter. And, of course, he was strongly opposed.

Earlier than Thomas Kuhn the German philosopher Karl Jaspers introduced the notion of an "Axial Age." Jaspers said that the first Axial Age occurred when, without any direct contact between cultures, there was a shift in consciousness that gave birth to new religious and cultural developments on the globe. People like Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, the Jewish prophets would be examples of like-minded thinking that brought a new level of moral development to cultures around the world.

The Second Axial Age, and this is an idea put forth by Karen Armstrong, was ushered in by all of those developments we've already talked about in here: Copernicus, Darwin, Freud and those who gave us "The Age of Enlightenment."

The Jesus Seminar called the first conference I attended "Religion in the Third Axial Age." That was in 2004 and I certainly spoke a lot about that at the time.

I think it was from a man I read everyday, as do many of you, Father Richard Rohr, that I first heard the phrase “The Great Turning.” “We are,” he said, “in witnessing a great turning.”

If you look around at the people who attend Rohr Conferences, if you see the fact that his “The Living School” has had sold out registration from its inception - as do the conferences his organization sponsors each year - and if you listen to or read the people Rohr points to- Ilia Delio, Michael Dowd, Phyllis Tickle, Thomas Berry and others; a growing chorus of voices are saying the same thing. We are living at the what we can discern of the beginning of a new era. This is what Michael Dowd is celebrating in his book.

In my own way I am trying to articulate what it means to be a person of faith following the teachings of Jesus in this new era that wants to emerge. Frankly, it is emerging whether people want it to or not.

This articulation is complicated because of language. It is so easy to be misunderstood. Definition of words and terms is so important. Labels are so insidiously dangerous.

A paradigm shift is not a minor rearrangement of a few things. “Let’s put the sofa over here for a while and see if we like it. If we don’t, we can always move it back.” A paradigm shift is not even like moving to a new house. A paradigm shift is like moving to a new continent where one must learn an entirely new language, new customs and new ways of doing things. Clearly the head, at least for some people is far ahead of the heart and body when it comes to this great turning.

Because what is coming to an end and what is seeking to be born present people with such different scenarios, it has given us great conflicts in almost every arena you can think of.

I’m confining what I’m saying just to the Christian movement in North America. The conflicts are world-wide.

As you have heard me say on numerous occasions before, I don’t like labels of any kind. They are imprecise at best and dangerous at worst. To call someone a

“conservative” or a “liberal” doesn’t tell us much of anything. When Jesus came on the scene, though he would have described himself as a “conservative,” that is, as one wanting to return Judaism to its prophetic roots, he was seen as a radical. Which, of course, he was if you use the word “radical” in the original sense of wanting to get at or express the “root” of something. Of course, he was innovative in the way he went about this.

Much of what wants to pass itself off as authentically and traditionally Christian in our time is really the product of the last hundred or so years.

There are many, many issues that divide the Christian church today - among them is the ordination of women, whether those who label themselves as part of the LBGT community can be ordained (a conversation virtually unimaginable a few years ago), whether Christianity is the only true religion and other matters. None of these is minor and what you are seeing nation-wide is a variety of ways people are dealing with impending and inevitable change: people opting out of the movement entirely, new expressions of churches coming into being, old and established denominations splitting apart and other manifestations of conflict.

My point is that like the Copernican revolution the shift taking place is not just about a few matters of obscure or irrelevant belief. It is about the entire thing. Though we are still looking at matters like God, the Bible, Jesus, creeds, doctrines, rules and so forth, they are seen differently. When it involves something like the solar system, one can be either right or wrong. That is, we can easily verify that the earth rotates around the sun - though of course the church officially denied that until only recently. When, however, it comes to matters of religious faith and practice, that is another matter entirely.

When it comes to Christianity and how it is seen, the most common understanding of it is that which is affirmed by Christian fundamentalists, those who call themselves “evangelical Christians” and others to the right of some central position. The reason this is so is because this particular way of expressing what it means to be Christian is what dominates the media and has for the past hundred years or so.

The paradigm shift that I'm talking about began to find expression in some Protestant and Catholic Churches back around the time of the 1960s with the cultural upheaval of that time along with other religious matters like Vatican II, the church renewal movement, the ecumenical movement, etc.

People stick with the Fundamentalist and/or Evangelical Christian position for a variety of reasons. They see themselves as "defenders of the faith" and as "true believers," it is what they grew up with and are familiar with - this is the "we've always done things this way" position, or they simply don't know any better, they aren't aware of any other options.

There are two main ways the Fundamentalist and/or Evangelical Christian position differ in the position I am trying to articulate.

The first, and the one we are going to begin to deal with today, has to do with matters of authority. How do people of faith claim to know what is true? This involves views of and about the Bible and, then, the elements that are not part of the biblical tradition but that are nonetheless held to be normative in that particular tradition. This would include matters like the creeds and other beliefs seen as central to a particular denomination's tradition. This, of course, varies from denomination to denomination. Some denominations are quite liturgical in their worship and some are not. Christian denominations even vary as to the content of the hymnals they use in their worship services, in their approaches to Christian education and so forth. I'm calling everything in this category "beliefs about the Bible and doctrines."

The second matter of great conflict is about what it means to be "Christian." Is it about believing certain things and, if so, what? Or, is it primarily about behaving in certain ways and, if so, how? What does it mean to believe and to have faith? These are not minor matters either.

I have mentioned to you before that there is no issue that divides those who call themselves "Christian" any more than how people view the Bible.

Until the work that had been going on in the arena of biblical scholarship began to make its way into more-or-less common knowledge, and I talked about this the last

time we were together so you can go back and look at that again, it was more or less taken for granted among Christians that the Bible was seen as a “divine product.” For Protestants this was especially true. For Catholics, ultimate authority resided not only in the Bible but also in the teachings of the church, especially as conveyed by the pope. I grew up in a form of soft fundamentalism that made fun of Catholics who believed that the pope was infallible while at the same time holding it that the Bible was infallible.

In this paradigm the Bible was seen as coming from God as no other book does. It is the unique revelation from God.

I mentioned that I grew up in the context of a “soft fundamentalism.” There are “hard” and “soft” ways of understanding the Bible as “the word of God.” The hard way sees the Bible as infallible or inerrant. Whatever is in the Bible is God’s truth and there are no errors when it comes to God. What the Bible says about the origin of the earth or the history of the world is factually true. The Bible is like a “God encyclopedia.” If there is anything you want to know about God, you can use the Bible to look it up.

The “softer” way of seeing the Bible still claims that the Bible is a divine product but not that every claim in the Bible is without error or is factually true. But, in major matters, matters of ultimate concern, the Bible is without any serious errors. But both hard and soft forms of understanding the Bible agree that the Bible is true because it comes from God.

Both soft and hard fundamentalism see the miracles, especially those having to do with Jesus, as being literally true.

So some see the Bible as a divine product and thus as having divine authority. “God wrote it.”

Others, and this is a position I’ll not spend as much time on today as it is a future talk, see the Bible as a human response to Sacred Mystery. “The Bible is our family spiritual photo album.” As I’ll show you in a moment, those who take this approach to the Bible are referred to by the former as “cafeteria” Christians, as

people who pick and choose what they want. Or, they are seen as “contextualizing” the Scripture.

I will give you a contemporary example:

For some time now there has been an effort to bring the United Methodist Church into the 21st century by updating the language in The Book of Discipline to reflect a more inclusive stance toward those who have a different orientation than heterosexual. You can think of The Book of Discipline as the book of Methodist Church law. At the moment “church law” forbids that an openly homosexual person be ordained, that a Methodist clergy be able to perform a same-sex marriage ceremony or that such a ceremony be held in a United Methodist Church.

It may surprise some of you to learn that a local Methodist church does not actually own the building or property on which the building it uses for worship or education purposes. These items are held in trust by the local Annual Conference of which the church is a part. Any church or clergy who violates this current law can lose her or his credentials. Or, a church could lose its property.

Progressive Methodists have been unsuccessfully lobbying for and trying to bring about a change in the “laws” regarding how homosexual persons are regarded and treated by the church.

Things came to a real critical point when in a much more progressive geographical area of the country an openly gay clergy was actually elected a bishop. Someone brought an ecclesiastical lawsuit against this decision and it was ruled that this election did indeed violate church law. Rather than have open warfare about this at General Conference, the Council of Bishops for the United Methodist Church appointed a special commission, called “The Commission on the Way Forward,” to study the matter and come back to the denomination with a recommendation for how to resolve this matter. That report is to come sometime later this month or next month. As I understand it, no one knows what the actual recommendation will be but rumor has it that one possibility will be for what some are referring to as “the local option” position. This would enable those Conferences or churches within conferences to choose whether to ordain openly homosexual persons to ministry, to allow same sex marriages to be done by Methodist clergy or performed on church

property. This position, if put forward, is trying to create a large enough umbrella to cover everyone.

As an aside, the Methodists' success in becoming a global church has complicated this matter because there are bishops in South American and African Conferences who are, at the present time, unalterably opposed to any position other than that of seeing homosexuality not merely as abnormal but most definitely as a "sin."

There is, as you might imagine, opposition to this "local option" proposal. Fundamentalists have a tendency to see as true or possible no position but their own.

I want to read to you part of an open letter written by a very articulate and smart, but nonetheless ignorant, spokesperson for this movement. Since it is on a public forum site, I'll put a link to the entire article for those of you interested in reading the entire thing. I'm reading it to you so that you'll be informed about what is going on in the Methodist denomination and also because it reflects the Fundamentalist mindset that has such weight in so many places and ways today. This perfectly illustrates what I'm saying about how the Bible is viewed.

(Here is a link to the entire article - <https://goodnewsmag.org/2018/03/why-the-local-option-is-not-the-answer/>)

Here is the rather long quote that accurately reflects the Fundamentalist or "Evangelical Christian" position:

"Recently a progressive United Methodist pastor said to me, 'I don't understand why you can't accept the local option. It lets pastors who want to marry gay couples do so. But it doesn't compel people like you to perform such ceremonies. It allows annual conferences to ordain married homosexuals where that's acceptable. But where the context is different – in the South, for example – you're free not to. I don't understand why you can't live with that.' I think that pastor got to the heart of the matter even though he didn't realize it. And the heart of the matter is he doesn't understand classical evangelicals. It has to be frustrating for progressives to come up with an approach they believe to be very reasonable and that allows everyone to do what they desire, only for us to find it unacceptable.

After all, what could be more American than letting everyone ‘have it their way’? What do progressives not get about us? For starters, we believe the Scriptures really are the word of God. When a pastor holds up a Bible in church and says, ‘The word of God for the people of God,’ we don’t cross our fingers behind our backs, roll our eyes, or snicker when we respond, ‘Thanks be to God.’ We honestly believe the Scriptures are ‘God-breathed’ and, therefore, authoritative for our lives. We don’t think that we know more about salvation, sexuality, or the nature of God than the Bible does. We don’t believe we get to ignore or need to correct the parts of Scripture that a progressive culture finds hard to accept. Consequently, we cannot affirm any solution that allows pastors in the UM Church to teach or act contrary to what God has revealed in his written word. I know that progressive pastors who have been trained in liberal seminaries simply cannot comprehend that we would hold such a high view of Scripture. But that’s what we believe.”

He’s right. I find it hard to comprehend how someone could hold such a view of Scripture. Though, I wouldn’t describe it as a “high view.” To me it is rather like someone looking through the Hubble Telescope and then saying, “I still believe the earth is flat and the center of the universe.”

(Here a series of cartoons are shown of a person who holds to a “flat earth” belief.)

When I referred to this articulate person as being “ignorant,” not “stupid,” one of the things I meant is an awareness that this so-called “high view” of Scripture is the same one that was used to support slavery in this country before the War Between the States by Christians and their preachers who were opposed to abolition on “biblical grounds.”

When I first started railing against Fundamentalism in all religions and Christian Fundamentalists specifically right after 9/11, I took some hits for that. People got up and walked out of talks I gave. I got hate mail you wouldn’t believe. A few people said things like, “Why be so hard on the Fundamentalists. What they believe gives them a sense of comfort and security. It doesn’t matter that much what people believe.”

Yes it does!

If we hold beliefs that cause us not to care for the earth that birthed us and all of the inhabitants on it, that's not ultimately good for the common welfare of all people. Beliefs that divide and exclude are contrary to what I understand to be the teachings of Jesus. People who are in the grouping referred to by the letters LGBTQ want nothing to do with a church or religious organization that sees them less than on an equal level with all others and understandably so. The church or religious organization that holds this position will die. We change not in order to "stay alive" but in order to be "in integrity," to live in accordance with "what is," with "reality," with God.

What I'm about to say may seem far afield but it isn't. There is an incident mentioned twice in the Hebrew Scriptures. By the way, I try always to refer to what most Christians refer to as "The Old Testament" as "the Hebrew or Jewish Scriptures." It only began to be referred to as "The Old Testament" when the collection of Christian writings began to be referred to as "The New Testament." It is rather odd to refer to a collection of writings that are 2,000 years old as "new." We'll get into this later.

The same incident is mentioned twice in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is mentioned in 2 Samuel and then in 1 Chronicles. I will read them both to you. Just keep in mind that they are referring to the same thing:

"Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.'" (2 Samuel 24:1)

Here is the same incident referred to in 1 Chronicles:

"Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census." (1 Chronicles 21:)

So, which is it? Did God incite David? Or, was it Satan? One passage says one thing and another something very different. They both can't be true. Can they?

Why would a census be important? Because you want to know how many people you have in your kingdom. Why would you want to know that? So you can get tax

money. Why would you want tax money? So you can have an army. The size of your army determines how much territory you can have.

The Hebrew Scripture is a story about a new tribe that is called into being, a tribe with a calling and destiny to be different, a tribe to bless other tribes. This tribe is called upon to trust God. Raising taxes to go to war is playing the same old game as all the other tribes. It keeps violence and destruction in circulation.

What you have in the 2 Samuel passage was written several hundred years before what you have in the 1 Chronicles passage. In the first one the census is attributed to God's doing. In the second one to Satan. The first one was written out of a mindset that believed that God was angry, violent and warlike. Over time the idea and understanding of God evolved - there is that significant vital theological concept. The idea emerged that God was good and that a good God would not encourage someone to do something bad so there must have been some other force leading David to be warlike. They attributed this to Satan.

Though people mistakenly think Satan is mentioned in the Garden of Eden myth, the first time Satan is actually mentioned in the Bible is right here - unless you count the book of Job where Satan is actually seen as a drinking buddy of God's.

Obviously it takes a bit of work to understand the writings in the Bible from the standpoint I'm advocating. We don't live in a culture where this kind of work is encouraged, especially in the religious or spiritual arena.

On one of our pilgrimage trips, the one that actually ended up in Santiago, Spain, I wandered into the cathedral gift shop looking for prayer beads and was flabbergasted to see a book for sale, "The 30-Second Bible." And it seems I am frequently getting ads for books or programs that offer easy or painless paths to Nirvana. They don't exist.

That's why I've called this talk, "Some Assembly Required - Batteries Not Included."

When I went looking for a graphic to highlight this, I also found what struck me as true. "Some Assembly Required Really Means: Lots of Swearing Expected." And,

it is true that doing the work to grow spiritually and psychologically is hard and causes, initially, all the things that go along with loss: denial, anger, the desire to turn back the clock, compromising, living with uncertainty - which we'll talk about next week - and many other things I'm not listing here.

Ann Lamott, a very popular spiritual writer has a book by the name "Some Assembly Required" which is about her son's first son. Any parent knows that to parent is hard work. Growing up is hard. Being human is difficult. Committing to growing spiritually and psychologically is hard and difficult.

Jesus, whom we seek to know and to follow, never anywhere said, "Come, follow me. It's easy-peasy and won't cost you a thing." What he said was, "Following me will cost you everything you have thought holds you up, makes you safe and gives you status."

When his disciples wrote about it, they called it "Good news."

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.