It takes great strength and courage to move out of our comfort zones and claim new ground spiritually. And in fact, our greatest potential for growth lies in our areas of weakness.

—Bruce Demarest

So my form of worship and my style of prayer and my focus in service easily shapes the pattern into which I squeeze spiritual reality. The subjective, in other words, never has trouble overwhelming the objective.

—Donald McCullough

Introduction

While much has been written about both the process of Christian spirituality and discipleship, relatively little attention has been given to the paradigms that work to impede their growth and development. This neglect has been to the detriment of both disciples and discipllemakers. This chapter explores the restrictive role that paradigms can play in impeding Christian spirituality and discipleship. Since Jesus had to completely remake the disciple’s worldview and religious paradigms so they could see and understand the Kingdom of God, is anything less than that required for today? The question is: Like the disciples, what similar religious paradigms are currently impeding our capacity to see and fully understand the Kingdom of God today?

We begin with examining those personal paradigms that have become corrupted by what Luther described as the three enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh (our fallen human nature), and the devil. These forces can easily act as significant barriers to spiritual growth. They are equally effective in disrupting our willingness to be discipled, or to disciple others.

Addiction therapy tells us that a significant part of the power of an addiction starts to be broken by publicly acknowledging its presence, as well as its effects. Thus, the most helpful step an alcoholic can take is finally admitting he or she is an alcoholic. So it is with those inhibiting paradigms that restrict our progress towards full maturity in Christ. A good first step can be to finally see an inhibiting paradigm for what it is, admit it exists in our life, and invite the Holy Spirit in to break it, and then remake it.
Paradigms Shape and Control Our Lives

As previously observed in the Two Very Different Worlds chapter, a paradigm is the framework of all that we think, and feel, and then hold to be true about some aspect of our life and world. It contains all the norms, standards, rules, truths, assumptions, presuppositions, thoughts and experiences within which we form our decisions, evaluations, judgments, attitudes, biases, and prejudices. While our worldview determines how we look at everything, our paradigms shape how we look at something specific.

Paradigms Are Filters, Lenses, Screens and Boxes

Paradigms are filters through which we process certain thoughts, ideas and propositions from the outside world before letting them into the interior part of our lives. They are the lenses through which our minds and emotions see and define a part of our world. Likewise, paradigms are those screens that we use to selectively sift information as we make assessments, form opinions and judgments, embrace or reject new thoughts and ideas. Paradigms take objective reality, and then make it subjective reality by passing it through our self-constructed biases to make it conform to how we believe things should be, or perhaps how we want them to be. Our paradigms can also be viewed as the boxes outside of which we cannot think. Often times our paradigms become part of the baggage that we carry through life. Sometimes our paradigms even become our prisons. We’ve all heard the phrase, “Think outside of the box,” or a similar one, “Pushing the envelope.” Sometimes at the end of a frustrating discussion with another, we might hear that person blurt out, “Well, that’s just your perspective.” Those types of reactions usually suggest that someone’s paradigm has just been challenged.

Forming Paradigms

Our paradigms are formed by living life. Early on in this process of living we start our own paradigm creation process by unconsciously absorbing the paradigms of others – from our parents, families, churches, and ethnic cultures. By osmosis the convictions of others soon shape our own. Then as we grow, we also construct other paradigms from the experiences that shape us – the lessons we receive or observe from schools, churches, relatives, as well as the neighborhood peer group. It is a complex process, with many inputs. While paradigms continue to evolve, they are usually firmly in place by the time adulthood arrives.

Paradigms are Creational

God created us with a capacity for paradigms. All of Adam and Eve’s paradigms were perfect in the Garden. Their view of God, their view of themselves, and their view of Creation were without blemish. Then temptation entered the world, which caused Eve to want to change one of her paradigms – the way she viewed God’s creational scheme to include the potential of deity – to know for herself what God knows. As a result of that cosmic mutiny, sin entered the world and our paradigms, together with our ability to construct them, became corrupted and distorted by the consequences of that rebellion. Thus, unless our paradigms get redeemed, they are no longer trustworthy guides on how we see and objectively understand the world.

The distortions and errors that take root in our way of seeing things creates the capacity for our paradigms to constrain us, mislead us, and even destroy us. That is why I believe that Paul exhorts us in II Corinthians 10:5 to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ,” since a paradigm is but a connected series of thoughts. Likewise, David implored the
Lord: Search me, O God, and know my heart...and see if there is any wicked way (of doing things – that is a defective paradigm) in me (added). David later continues this theme where he hates “every false way.” In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates “false way” as “false propaganda.” Propaganda is often what we use to try and impregnate our paradigms into the lives of others. In *The Psalms, A New Translation*, that same verse is translated, “I loathe all deceptive paths,” which is an apt description of what faulty paradigms do to us. They do lead us down the wrong paths even though they often seem like the “right” thing to do!

**Good News and Bad News**

Like most things, there is both good news and bad news when it comes to our personal paradigms. On the plus side, paradigms do give us a degree of familiarity, safety, and security. We know how to safely function inside our comfort zones. But, like any strength, a related weakness is just a short distance away. While paradigms provide a measure of comfort and security, they can also make us closed-minded and deaf. As a result, we often become people who can no longer see and hear things for what they are. Thus we tend not to truly hear what someone else is really trying to say to us. As a result, we can become rigid and resistant to those new spiritual thoughts and experiences that would further grow and mature us, while at the same time consider our own particular paradigms to be the gold standard – the only way.

**Paradigms and Past Successes**

As a modest student of business history, it has been of interest to me through the years to observe that all too frequently the paradigms that shape the early successes of an organization also contain within it fatal flaws for its future. These fatal flaws will prove problematic when the organization becomes much larger, and the market and technological landscape starts to significantly change. As a result, those paradigms that were responsible for early organizational successes - remember a church is an organization too - now become the only paradigm permitted. They become the “we’ve always done it that way” prison that keeps needed and often-radical organizational surgery and changes from occurring as external conditions change.

The same is true with respect to our personal paradigms. Those perspectives that were most helpful in the early stages of our life may now contain fatal flaws that make them much less helpful, or even detrimental, in the later stages of our life. Since our early successes caused significant re-enforcement of those initial paradigms, we tend to defend them intensely. This makes it even harder to acknowledge their limitations, let alone recognize the need to change certain core convictions over time.

**Marketing Paradigms**

It is axiomatic that anyone who wishes to bring a product or service to the market place has first to relate it to the buyer’s paradigms. That is a process called positioning, the objective of which is to appropriately place the product in the value system of the buyer’s paradigms. Unsuccessful positioning usually results in an unsuccessful product.

Periodically a product or concept comes along that is outside of everyone’s paradigm. Instant photography, introduced by the Polaroid Corporation in the late 50’s, was just such a product. Almost by definition, the market was not ready for it, and certainly not prepared to embrace it. It was Polaroid’s marketing challenge to change people’s photography and social paradigms so that they would want to have certain kinds of pictures now. In a similar way, it wasn’t
too long ago that e-commerce was outside of most consumer paradigms. This changing of a buyer’s value system to embrace new concepts is called paradigm marketing, and is the most challenging form of marketing.

Similar issues are present when we try to encourage the spiritual growth of another believer. If something is suggested that is outside of a believer’s existing discipleship or spirituality paradigm, there is a barrier that needs to be addressed before receptivity is possible. Fortunately, in God’s Kingdom we have the Holy Spirit’s power to change the various paradigms that can so easily become barriers to becoming more Christ-like.

**The First Disciple’s Religious Paradigms**

Before Jesus called His soon-to-be disciples, they were deeply mired in the observant Jewish religious worldview of their day, together with all the religious paradigms that made it up. As was observed in an earlier chapter, some of the disciples’ paradigms that needed to be torn down and rebuilt by Jesus included:

- Cultural prejudices toward Gentiles and Samaritans.
- A belief that an earthly messiah was needed to overthrow Roman occupation.
- A ritualistic notion of prayer – there was a prescribed prayer for every function and task.
- A view of God that caused them to fear ever mentioning one of His names.
- A blessing notion that reasoned if you were pleasing God, you would materially prosper. Conversely, birth defects and barren wombs were indications of God’s displeasure with you.
- A behavior-oriented mindset that held up the self-righteous Pharisees as the gold standard.
- A social perspective that had a real concern for status together with mandatory reciprocal hospitality.

**Jesus and His Kingdom Paradigm**

Jesus came with a whole new Kingdom worldview that challenged and inverted all the foundational religious paradigms of His day. In fact, transformation can be viewed as a new way of seeing things – replacing restrictive religious paradigms with new liberating spiritual ones. As previously observed in the *Introduction*, foundational to the biblical understanding of repentance is changing one’s mind for the better. Some of the paradigms of Jesus’ radically new Kingdom of God understanding included:

- A Father paradigm that said it was acceptable to call God, *Abba*, what some have called the most radical verse in the Bible.
- A concern more about the nature of your heart than your behavior.
- An emphasis that the “first shall be last” and that it is the humble heart of a servant that gives his Father pleasure.
- A teaching that we now call the Sermon on the Mount, which inverted many of the norms of that day. Thus, an “eye for an eye” inverts to “turn the other cheek.”
- A heartfelt concern for Samaritans and Gentiles.
- An emphasis on a Kingdom of the heart and mind, not a political kingdom of this earth.
- A fundamental change in the whole way the Sabbath was understood.

**Paradigms and Spiritual Growth**

In the medical world, when a patient has debilitating symptoms, a series of tests and exams are scheduled to determine a sound diagnosis. To
facilitate a good diagnosis, X-rays, MRI’s, CAT Scans, blood work, and vital signs are used to try to find out what is happening inside the body. Until a physician knows the causative, biological issues at work, he or she can only guess at a diagnosis. And without a sound diagnosis, it is most difficult to devise an effective therapy, the objective of which is to restore the patient back to a healthy condition.

The medical analogy is a useful one when it comes to our spiritual life. We bring all of our paradigms to all aspects of our everyday lives, including our spiritual life. As a result, some paradigms can be helpful in stimulating and encouraging us to spiritual growth and “abundant living.” At the same time, other paradigms work in an opposite way to inhibit spiritual growth and maturity.

The Paradigms That Constrain Our Spirituality

Before highlighting some key paradigms that can easily become barriers to our spirituality, I want all of us to be mindful of the following:

• There are ditches on both sides of every road. The challenge is to stay in the middle!
Paradigms are not bad per se. They possess many of the helpful qualities described previously. But because they are also fallen and corrupted by our sinful nature, they have the capacity to constrain us. Thus we can too easily dismiss things that we would be well advised to embrace, as well as avoid the very things that God intends to bless us.

For example, food is both neutral and necessary. We need food to survive. In moderation, a well balanced diet is essential to healthy living. However, when food is taken to excess, either too much or too little, it has debilitating consequences for our physical condition. In a similar manner, when our paradigms distort objective reality, and become impediments to what God intends and desires for us, they slowly sap us of abundant living.

• Not every believer will be affected by the same paradigms, let alone to the same degree. Likewise, some will be more vulnerable to being constrained by certain paradigms than others. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to speak to each one of us in that “still small voice” regarding those particular paradigms that are constraining our spiritual development.

• The purpose of developing these potentially restrictive paradigms is to encourage each of us, individually and corporately, to put ourselves in a posture where we will let the Holy Spirit challenge us where our paradigms need to be changed. This may include

  • Recognizing a paradigm that has been inhibiting us unawares.
  • Realizing that a certain paradigm needs to be changed if we are to grow further.
  • Encouraging us to open ourselves up to the Spirit and invite radical surgery – an implant of a new Christ-authored paradigm – in an area where we have previously been constrained.

• My intent is to challenge some of our existing religious paradigms, and my technique will be to use hyperbole to try to break through the protective layers we have unknowingly constructed around these paradigms, to make a spiritual point or two. If I am perceived as having overdone it, I do so to emphasize something that I feel shouldn’t be missed. I trust the reader will extend me grace if and when my desire to make a point goes too far!
Paradigms as Prisons

Perhaps a few quotes from Bruce Demarest’s book, *Satisfy Your Soul*, will put an exclamation point on the critical role that paradigms play in constraining us:

- *Unfortunately there can be thick walls between us and any idea that is new and unfamiliar.*

- *The truth is, we will never change unless we are sufficiently challenged with new ideas. But it is a fact of human existence that, when confronted with the new, our natural tendency is to defend our old position from behind a wall of resistance, sometimes even when our old position is draining life out of us.*

- *The truth is, if we do not open up to ideas beyond ourselves, we run the risk of shaping God to our views and our ways – making God in our image.*

I like the visual picture of that early childhood toy which is a series of different sized boxes that all fit inside each other. That is a good image of what overlapping paradigms do to encase our spiritual life. In this analogy, the center of the smallest block is where our heart, mind, and soul reside as they look out into the world through these overlapping layers of paradigms. To the extent that we allow the Holy Spirit to penetrate these paradigm layers, and move inward to free us up, we move towards greater authenticity. To the extent that we re-enforce and protect these restrictive paradigms, we move more towards greater self-deception.

Most likely all of us will be constrained to a greater or lesser extent by many of the paradigms that follow. It is also helpful to realize that it is not just one paradigm that hampers us. Like the early disciples-to-be, we too have a portfolio of paradigms that seem appropriate to us - cultural, religious, Sabbath, prayer, body life – and, like the disciples, all of them need to be reshaped by the Master Paradigm ReMaker. As you ponder the paradigms that follow, remember my purpose is to provoke your thinking so as to penetrate some of those paradigms, which you may be unknowingly protecting to your detriment, and propagating them in the lives of others to their detriment.

YOUR VIEW OF GOD

A.W. Tozer asserts that the most important thing about a person is his or her view of God, because it shapes everything else about his or her life. A person’s view of God determines whether he or she will draw close to God, or keep Him at a distance. His or her view will shape how each person understands God – as a benign Grandfather, a critical Father, a Santa Claus figure, a good buddy, – or the God as He reveals Himself in Scripture. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, for a person to have faith, he or she “must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” While the first is true for any Christian, one can wonder at the degree to which the second proposition is truly believed, and then lived out.

Problems arise when we do not have a biblical paradigm for our view of God. All too often we have a faulty view of God rooted in a faulty understanding of God’s character and faithfulness. Thus, we have a tendency to construct a view of God that seems right for us. As a result, our sinful nature fashions an idolatrous view of God that suits our preferences. In his book, *The Trivialization of God*, and subtitled, “The Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity,” Don McCullough points out that Christians have a real tendency to try to control God, to shape a view of God that gives us a “safer deity.” Thus, he says, we “pare God down to manageable proportions.” That causes us to...
create a “God of my cause...God of my understanding...the God of my experience...the God of my comfort zone...or the “God of my success,”¹⁵ which is not the God of the Bible.

A good place to start in a renewed pursuit of spirituality and discipling is to acknowledge the false god we have most likely created of the Holy One. Then repent and rediscover the God who reveals Himself accurately in His Word for who He is and how He does things.

YOUR VIEW OF PRAYER

Closely related to a person’s view of God is an understanding of prayer – the whole nature of why and how we pray, and what we expect from God, and ourselves when we pray. There are some wide ranging misunderstandings regarding the whole process, purpose, and posture of prayer. For example, are we praying to

- A 911 rescue squad
- Get what we want
- Change God’s mind about something
- Inform God about something He doesn’t know
- Give Him some advice about how to best accomplish what we would like to see done

Or are we praying

- As an act of worship
- To continue an intimate conversation with the Lover of our soul
- To listen much more than we talk
- To conform our will and ways to His will and ways
- To invite God to change whom we are, and how we tend to see and do things

Many prayers, including the first grouping above, reflect an idolatrous view of God – a view of God we create – rather than an understanding of God as He is accurately revealed in His Word.

YOUR VIEW OF YOURSELF

Probably the second most important paradigm shaping how a believer approaches spirituality and discipling is what comes to mind when he or she envisions how God views him or her – as a person incredibly loved by God, or not? Then there is the whole issue of how a person sees himself – as a Christian lawyer, teacher, nurse, artist, plumber, janitor, or as a lawyer, teacher, nurse, artist, plumber, janitor who is a follower of Jesus Christ. The word Christian was never intended to be an adjective, it is a calling! It is a calling to be first and foremost a “Lover” (the two great commandments¹⁶). It is likewise a calling to co-labor with the Creator as priests¹⁷ serving and ministering with our gifts and abilities¹⁸ as we work to restore God’s original intent for the home, the church, the marketplace, and for all aspects of the culture.

YOUR FAMILY PARADIGM

Families can provide a substantial impetus to your spiritual life or be a significant hindrance. Someone once facetiously said that the most important decision we ever make in life is in choosing our parents wisely! Unfortunately, there are “sins of the fathers” that become impediments to spiritual growth and intimacy with Christ. Absent fathers, emotionally distant fathers, physically and emotionally abusive fathers, constantly critical fathers and workaholic fathers, all create an implicit fatherhood paradigm. That paradigm can easily become a barrier that we project upon our Heavenly Father out of our scars and our still bleeding childhood wounds.

This dynamic even extends to birth order. Firstborns tend to be the super-responsible, achievement-oriented children always trying to please, all tendencies that can easily be carried
When we start being too impressed by the results of our work, we slowly come to the erroneous conviction that life is one large scoreboard where someone is listing the points to measure our worth. And before we are fully aware of it, we have sold out our soul to the many grade-givers...then we become what the world makes us.19

The World and its Molds

In terms of academics, the concept of the grade point as a measure of worth and value manifests itself early in life. There are academic rewards given out in junior high. In some college contexts, it is no longer sufficient to have a 4.0 GPA in high school to gain admission. If you want to be considered by a prestigious school, you may also need a long list of Advanced Placement courses together with an impressive portfolio of novel volunteer experiences to demonstrate your well roundedness. The further we progress in this performance paradigm, the higher the bar becomes, and the higher we have to jump to make the next level.

Then having finally secured a first job, proving your worth starts all over again. Now we institutionalize it with annual performance reviews. The competition for a first rung supervisory or management position is becoming harder to achieve as organizational structures flatten. Not only are we working harder and longer to distinguish ourselves from all the others doing the same thing to get ahead, but at the same time we are also trying to avoid the next cut. Within this kind of performance paradigm, it is much more important how much you accomplish, what results you bring in, than it is the kind of person you are becoming. Needless to say, all of this is hardly a lifestyle of “holy leisure,” that lifestyle valued by the Puritans to try to ensure that they had both time and a nonfrazzled pace of life that

over into a firstborn’s spiritual life. In addition, we may have come from achievement-oriented families where excellence was assumed as well as from families that joylessly went through the motions of Christianity. All of these dynamics, and there are many more that could be cited, all create an implicit paradigm that we can all too easily project unto our concept of God, Christianity, worship, and prayer. Fortunately the Holy Spirit is in the renovation and re-creation business. But it certainly helps if He is invited in to start the reconstruction process because of the family paradigms that we inherited through no fault of our own.

THE PERFORMANCE – ACHIEVEMENT PARADIGM

There are times when I think we have a performance paradigm imbedded in the genetic makeup of every ounce of our being. The moment we are born, we become a percentile – already being compared to others in terms of our weight, length and size of our head! As we proceed through life, we realize that we are competing with others for just about everything our parents seem to value, and the real issue in life seems to be: How are we doing compared to everyone else? Before long, we compete to make a wide variety of teams, where there is always an A and a B squad to distinguish the best from the rest. For many, this starts with tryouts for a wide variety of school sports teams as we hope to progressively make the cut starting with junior high teams, then progressing to Junior Varsity and Varsity teams and, if you are good enough, to the college level. In the midst of all this, we can join the Scouts, where your status is determined not so much by who you are, but by the number of merit badges on your sleeves. Not surprisingly, we implicitly bring this merit badge mentality into our spiritual life. As Henri Nouwen observed:
would allow them to focus on and practice the presence of the Lord each day.

In the midst of living every day within these performance paradigms, do we somehow think that this dynamic has not infected our concept of what authentic spirituality is all about, or what being a good disciple means? There are other implications as well. Are we content with our spirituality to be in the middle of the grading curve? When we compare our spiritual lives with those around us, who may well be coasting on empty, do we console ourselves that our spirituality is better than most, and therefore mistakenly conclude that things are all right? Unfortunately, this can and does happen all too often!

THE FRENETIC LIFESTYLE PARADIGM

As if these performance paradigms are not debilitating enough to our spirituality and discipling, the frenetic lifestyle paradigm usually absorbs whatever is left. To illustrate that, let me make some observations about the Washington, D.C. mindset, within which I have lived for over 20 years. You may not live in Washington, D.C., but that does not mean you are immune from the far-reaching ripples of this paradigm. We all need to be aware of it and on guard against it.

Henry Kissinger once said that you have to live off the intellectual capital you bring to Washington, D.C. because you will never have any time to add to it once you get here! The same observation could well be made about a person’s spiritual resources! Without great diligence in this seductive environment, a person’s faith can easily erode into “life support Christianity” as the increasing levels of secular static slowly seduce our souls.

A Faulty View of Significance

Having lived in six different cities in various parts of the country over the last thirty years, and having recently returned to the D.C. area after being away from it for seven years, I can attest that there is a frenetic lifestyle in Washington, D.C. like no other place that I have lived. After a while, it imperceptibly sublimates into a destructive, self-validating narcotic that says the more hectic your life is, the more authentic you must be as a person, and the more significant your life must be as well. As a good friend of mine once observed, “Most of us believe, whether we realize it or not, that we only really become authentic when we do, or get acclaimed.” This tendency gets pushed to the extreme in the culture of Washington, D.C. Thus, anyone who desires to spiritually thrive in Washington, D.C. would be well advised to heed Bruce Demarest’s caution:

Some of us live our lives so chock-full that the Lord can’t get our attention long enough to make Himself known. Our psyches are so programmed for action and accomplishment that we’re unable to hear God speak. The static in our souls is sufficiently loud that the whisper of the Spirit gets drowned out. Our hurrying disease – our urgency addiction – sucks spiritual life out of us and turns us into hollow performance machines.20

Washington, D.C. could easily be ground zero for the 24/7 exhausted culture that surrounds us. The D.C. culture expects long work days and weeks, and touts “extraordinary work ethic required” in its recruiting ads. It expects, using military jargon, “task saturation.” It is a milieu where expectations continue to rise, competition continues to increase, and commitment overload is the norm.

The Myth of Importance

Not only is there an even higher standard of the performance paradigm in our nation’s capital, but there is also a subtle pretentious value system that says: It is important to be important. That
causes people to become self-absorbed, spending an enormous amount of time trying to either become important or to stay important. Hardly something we find in the Beatitudes! Not surprisingly, all this has come at great expense to relationships and “holy leisure” time to spend loving God and our neighbor.

**Influence and Spinning**

Washington, D.C. is also an environment that places a premium on influence. That means that a good part of your value is determined by whom you know, can access, or will do something for you. Furthermore, it is a town that feeds on illusion, where “spinning” has been elevated to a consummate art form. As a result, it values the ability to make a vice look like a virtue, a fault like a strength, and a dumb mistake like a wise move. After being immersed in it for a while, we begin to put subtle spins on our own lives, first to impress others, but ultimately we end up deceiving ourselves by believing them! And then we begin to put positive spins on the nature and quality of our spiritual lives, even when we are close to running on empty. We even construct an implicit Theology of Excellence to try to convince ourselves that our performance driven-ness, and our nearly empty spiritual bucket, is all done to honor the Lord in the eyes of the world! After awhile, we start to wonder why we are becoming spiritually impotent! Rather than standing firm with the complete armor of our faith, we slowly succumb via the slippery slope of cultural compromise.

**YOUR EXPERIENTIAL PARADIGM**

E. Stanley Jones, a long time missionary to India and a prolific writer of devotional materials, once said that we each bring to a word or a concept that which has been our highest experience. That insight warrants some further observations. First, it is almost impossible to go beyond whatever your highest experience has been in some area of your spiritual life – in worship, meditation, contemplative prayer, solitude and silence, being loved by God, or tasting the sweetness of Christ. Secondly, for many Christians, their highest spiritual experience in a number of these areas is often rather low.

Despite these limitations, we need not be held back. Demarest would encourage us by observing, “our greatest potential for growth lies in our areas of weakness.” It is in recognizing those implicit experiential paradigms that constrain our life that we can

- realize there is much more to be spiritually tasted than we have yet savored. For example, probing the depths of the spiritual disciplines and being expectant that the Holy Spirit will use them in deepening our intimacy with Christ.

- invite the Holy Spirit to 1) identify where our experiential foundation is low and 2) ask the Holy Spirit to take us beyond the current constraints of our experiential paradigms.

**THE EVANGELICAL PARADIGM**

There is an evangelical paradigm, and it is very real. If you have only spent time in evangelical circles, it may be much harder to see. In his book *Satisfy Your Soul*, Bruce Demarest develops some of the common elements found in a stereotypical evangelical paradigm:

> We assume that spiritual growth will automatically result from knowing more about the Scriptures.22

> A tendency to substitute knowledge of the Bible for knowing how to interact with God Himself or a knowledge of God’s ways.23

> We have done a superior job of defending doctrine and evangelizing the unsaved. Have we done as good a job of building spiritually mature disciples?24
It may help to remember that evangelicalism is but one of several Christian traditions. Spending all of our time within evangelical circles can cause us to fail to appreciate what other Christian traditions can teach us about expanding our experience of spirituality. As Richard Foster points out, there is much that can enrich our understanding of Christian spirituality from the Contemplative tradition, the Holiness tradition, the Charismatic tradition, the Piety tradition and the Social Justice tradition\(^\text{25}\) – when was the last time your heart was broken by the poverty and injustice of this world?

**THE RITUAL PARADIGM**

Every culture has its rituals, and so does every person and every church. From the moment I arise each day, I have a morning ritual. It unfolds in a very precise manner with no deviations. It is a progression that starts with a shower, which is its own ritual!, to drying off in a very prescribed manner, to then brushing my teeth in a very consistent pattern. Then it proceeds to shaving in an identical pattern each day, and then getting dressed in a very orderly, non-deviating manner.

One of the nice things about these rituals is they are very efficient – you don't even have to think about them as you go through them! They are rote routines, almost like being an airplane on autopilot. In fact, rituals free us up to think about things other than the motions we are going through in the ritual!

Unfortunately, we bring this same ritualization tendency into our spiritual life. All too easily we can fall into ritual ruts in our quiet time, in worship, or in prayer. We get so settled into a certain worship format that we can breeze through it without ever connecting with the significance of what is said, sung, or done. Likewise, we can so easily get into a personal prayer ritual of a constant repetition of our litany of petitions, that we completely miss extended times of adoration, praise, expressions of gratitude. Like any ritual, it is all too easy to go through our spiritual rituals without even thinking about them, often times because we are so preoccupied with other pressing issues of the moment.

Rituals do serve other purposes in the sense that they do give us a certain satisfaction, even when they are empty! That's why heroin addicts will inject themselves with an empty syringe just to get some satisfaction from engaging in the ritual of injection, even when no drug is available. In like manner, going through the rituals of worship and prayer can give us a certain satisfaction. If we do that long enough, we can too easily confuse the satisfaction from the ritual with the real thing, and miss the spiritual experience and personal encounter that God desires for us.

We really do need to ask the Holy Spirit to lead us into an awareness of when we are caught in ritual ruts, missing the spiritual reality that God intends for us. As part of that process, Fessinger – remember back to the *Do and Teach* chapter – does have some helpful insights regarding how we can approach the process of breaking these restrictive rituals. By behaviorally engaging in other approaches and being receptive to different experiences in worship, prayer and quiet times, these different realities can take us out of our autopilot modes. In so doing, these enriching experiences can revitalize our spiritual sensitivities to encounter the Lord in fresh and new ways.

**LOCAL CHURCH AND BODY LIFE PARADIGMS**

It’s been previously observed in a tongue-in-cheek manner that the most important decision a person will ever make in life is choosing your parents wisely! Similarly, one of the most impor-
tant decisions you will make regarding your own spirituality and discipling growth rests in choosing your churches wisely!

Churches, like the people in them, have paradigms. And churches, like people, have both helpful attributes that can encourage growth in spirituality and discipleship, as well as some irksome blind spots and shortcomings that can work to inhibit growth in both. Each church’s paradigms are shaped by multiple factors including the historical traditions of the church as well as the philosophy of ministry from pastors past and present. Then there are the distinctive denominational traditions, doctrines and biases that get overlaid on a church that can often result in very divergent perspectives on spirituality. In addition, its location - inner city or wealthy suburban setting - further shapes a local church’s paradigm, as well as does the nature of those who attend – successful, wealthy, achievement-oriented, upper middle class folks, or street people.

There is another variation of this paradigm that gets implicitly fostered in churches comprised of very successful people. It is one that gets subtly communicated to all who come, “We only succeed here, no failures allowed.” As a result, their members, by definition, don’t have any major personal problems and life struggles because, so this paradigm implies, in this church we all experience victorious living through Jesus. This perspective results in a well understood, but never acknowledged paradigm that forces most people to pretend things are fine, being cheery and chipper on the outside, when they are hurting and hemorrhaging on the inside.

In my travels, I have observed churches with this bias not only denigrating psychology, but also failing to provide counseling services because, as we all know, “All you need is Jesus.” This kind of atmosphere leads to real problems of discouragement and depression being denied. As a result, those real hurts and legitimate feelings get stuffed. Not surprisingly, those members who suddenly find themselves unemployed feel like social lepers within this success-oriented atmosphere. This attitude can also spawn a mutant version of the Old Testament paradigm of blessing. So this distorted logic reasons, since I’m doing very well financially and also doing very well professionally, therefore my spiritual life must also be doing just fine. What other conclusions could there be because God is certainly blessing me? Seldom do people think about the flip side of this logic – what is a disciple supposed to think who suddenly finds himself or herself unemployed? Setting aside this flawed understanding of God’s Grace, this distortion can easily lead to a strain of the “health and wealth” gospel virus that seeps into the local church’s paradigm. All of this creates a distortion of true spirituality, a faulty view of what it means to be a disciple, as well as barriers to the authentic pursuit of each.

SPIRITUAL GIFT PARADIGM

There is the whole question of how a local church views Spiritual Gifts and body life. In our travels, journeys, and relocations through the years, we have visited a number of different churches. The less-than-precise data I have collected from these visits would suggest that 90% of all the churches in America never really address Spiritual Gifts. As a result, there is little or no teaching on Spiritual Gifts, ministries are not organized around Spiritual Gifts and, as a result, body life is not particularly satisfying. In further probing the 10% of those churches that give some emphasis to Spiritual Gifts, it seems as
if only one out of ten of those churches has gotten close to the real paradigm of Spiritual Gifts and body life reality that we observe in the book of Acts. One can debate whether or not the body life observed in Acts is applicable for today, but I would suggest its precepts are timeless. Therefore Spiritual Gifts need to be rediscovered if we are to have a vital spirituality, as well as a body life oriented around disciplemaking.

Said another way, only about 1% of the churches in America have grasped the first-century body life paradigm and are actually doing something about it! And we wonder why the American church is underpowered! This means that 99% of the churches are inhibiting their parishioners’ spiritual growth by shielding them from a key element in God’s calling for their life and ministry. All of this has very significant repercussions on the spiritual life and discipleship experience for believers attending those churches.

In his book on Calling, Os Guinness states that “God normally calls us along the line of our giftedness.”26 But if we are functionally ignorant regarding Spiritual Gifts, we end up with the unfortunate paradigm of typical church life that mirrors the 80/20 rule. Thus, 80% of the programmatic effort in the church is being carried out by only 20% of the congregation and the staff. After a while, this defacto reality ends up with the 20% minority being overworked and ultimately burned out. As this works itself out, the remaining 80% sit passively by and wonder: Is that all there is to this experience we call the Christian life? The institutionalization and propagation of this unintentional 80/20-body life paradigm has serious debilitating consequences for an individual’s spirituality and discipling, whether you are in the 80% or the 20%!

And There Is More

The dozen paradigms that have just been highlighted are not the only paradigms that operate within churches creating barriers to spiritual growth and discipleship. The reader is encouraged to identify other such paradigms – worship, clergy, music, adult education – that might be at work restricting your church experience and understanding of the discipling process.

In Summary

Perhaps one of the biggest spiritual questions in life, after we acknowledge Christ as the Savior and Lord of our life, is whether or not we want to continue to grow spiritually, or whether we are comfortable coasting on a plateau. Wanting to grow spiritually comes with a price since it is usually not an entirely comfortable process! This growth is not usually easy, because to truly grow we may have to dismantle many of our paradigms, perhaps even paradigms that we have long been espousing. As my wife repeatedly observes, “It hurts to grow!”

Perhaps the best place to start is to put our heart, mind and soul in Chapter 6 of Isaiah, placing them prostrate in front of our holy and awesome God, and then echoing Isaiah’s words (added), “Woe to me, I am ruined. For I am a man with unclean lips (and paradigms) and I live among a people with unclean lips (and paradigms)” and then arising later after having been touched where our lips (and paradigms) need to be touched to say, “Here I am Lord, send me.” Such is the challenge to our existing paradigms and worldview. And such is the enormous potential if they are redeemed. The question is: Are we open to having our paradigms radically remade by God’s Spirit so we can better love Him and love others, or are we not? That is both the challenge as well as the invitation.
Reflections to Share and Journal

- Do you ever think about why you think the way you think? What significant events, family influences and environments from your formative years might have most shaped the way you think today?

- Do you agree with Tozer's thought that the most important thing about a person is what comes to his or her mind when he or she thinks about God? If so, what are the implications of that for you? How might you best expand your understanding of God and correct any misconceptions about who God is and how He does things? What misconceptions of God do you think you might have right now?

- How do you react to this whole notion of paradigms and the way they can unknowingly shape your life and the decisions you make? Would you agree that paradigms could be both comfort zones as well as prisons in the way you think? What are the implications of that for your life, your faith, your spirituality, and your pursuit of God?

- Which of the paradigms profiled in this chapter do you identify with in your life right now? Which ones do you think you most embody and live out? Which paradigms do you think you would be well advised to change?

- Agree or disagree: The church you choose, and the spirituality and disciplemaking paradigms that come with it, will have profound implications for your own Christian growth, spiritual vitality, as well as ministry. What does that suggest for the continued development of your spiritual life?

- What would you suggest as some practical ways for you to remake the restrictive paradigms that need to be changed in your life - to free you up to be more of what God intended you to be?
Ponder

If someone said to you: Every worship service should have something in it that makes each person slightly uncomfortable, something that gently nudges each person out of their comfort zones, thus keeping them out of worship ritual ruts, would you agree or disagree?

_The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me:_
_He has sent me to announce good news to the poor,_
_To proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind;_
_To let the broken victims go free,_
_To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour._

—Luke 4:18 & 19 NEB

_Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world,_
_but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed._
_Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable, and perfect._

—Romans 12:2 NEB

_How easy it is to define authentic spirituality according to my particular experience and expression of it!_  
—Donald McCullough²⁹

_We must be made aware of the call to let our false, compulsive self be transformed into the new self of Jesus Christ…Solitude is the furnace in which this transformation takes place…without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusion of false self._

—Henri Nouwen³⁰

_Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born, the place where the emergence of the new man and the new woman occurs._

—Henri Nouwen³¹
Prayer

Jesus, am I fooling myself?

Am I stuck in patterns and ways of thinking and doing things that are barriers to knowing and experiencing You more?

Lord, would You show me the error of my way?

In Your Spirit, will You give me the courage and strength to change those paradigms that are constraining me, as well as the persistence to see these changes through?

Lord, I do want to be evermore Your person, reflecting Your will and ways in my life to those around me.

Amen

Notes and Sources

1Bruce Demarest, Satisfy Your Soul (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1999), p. 87.
2Donald McCullough, The Trivialization of God (Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 1995), p. 34.
3Psalm 139:23
4Psalm 119:104
7Luke 11:2
8Luke 8:15
9Bruce Demarest, Satisfy Your Soul, p. 56.
10Ibid., p. 57.
11Ibid., p. 58.
13Hebrews 11:6
15Ibid., pp. 27-43.
16Luke 10:27
17I Peter 2:5 & 9
18Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11-13, 1 Cor. 12
20Bruce Demarest, Satisfy Your Soul, p. 126.
21Ibid., p. 87.
22Ibid., p. 23.
23Ibid., p. 25.
24Ibid., p. 49.
271 Corinthians 12:1
28I am indebted to Pastor Chuck Jacob of the Knox Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan for this thought.
29Donald McCullough, The Trivialization of God, p. 37.
31Ibid., p. 27.