

THE TYRANNY OF THE PARADIGM

Jack Cottrell – November 2007

Donald Petry wrote a book (actually, God wrote it through him, he says) called *I Have Found an Elephant in the Bible* (author, 1974). Once he started looking for the elephant, he found it *everywhere*. “Behold, Behemoth, which I made as I made you; he eats grass like an ox” (Job 40:15). Behemoth is an elephant (p. ii). Some of Petry’s conclusions are as follows:

Job 40:19 describes Behemoth—the elephant—as “the chief of the ways of God” (KJV). Now, “If Behemoth is the CHIEF OF THE WAYS OF GOD, then he certainly has to be symbolic of Jesus Christ” (p. ii).

Seeing Jesus as an elephant helps explain many things, e.g., Zion, Mount Hermon, the Dead Sea, Lake Galilee, the unicorn, Solomon’s temple, Israel as it camped about the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the Jonah-and-the-Whale story, and much more (1). That God’s throne is white (Rev. 20:11) means it is made of ivory. “Israel represented a female elephant who went to Egypt to be bred but wound up in bondage. . . . Then God sent an elephant boy, Moses, to deliver Israel.” “The outside of the Temple was designed so as to represent an elephant’s head” (2). “The four Patriarchal kingdoms of Asia which took form after the Tower of Babel incident” have the shape of an elephant’s head: “Babylonia would have been the left ear. The Hittites would have been the right ear. Assyria would have been the head. The Canaanites would have been the trunk”(4).

The top of Mt. Sinai, as seen in a picture in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, has the shape of an elephant. “God led me to turn to that picture of Mount Sinai and then showed me what I am trying to show you” (8).

Another important lesson from the elephant: “Man in his earthliness is compared to grass when Jesus Christ would take on his elephant symbolism. Jesus Christ is feeding on men who are some kind of grass or bigger vegetation if they have exalted themselves. Whatever man proves fit food is incorporated into Christ’s Body, but those who do not become living substance that is passed off as dung, and are not a part of Christ” (39).

Obviously, for Mr. Petry the elephant has become a monster in more ways than one. It has become the sole interpretative principle by which everything in the Bible is understood. This illustrates *the tyranny of the paradigm*.

PART ONE: THE TYRANNY OF THE SCIENTIFIC PARADIGM.

(This is based on Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis* [Bethesda, MD: Adler & Adler, 1986; pb 1996], ch. 15, “The Priority of the Paradigm,” pp. 344-359.)

In this context a paradigm is understood 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. (Think of Cinderella’s glass slipper.)

Denton is a molecular biologist and medical doctor, and a complete agnostic.

- I. Denton’s thesis is that Darwin’s theory of evolution is a scientific paradigm, especially in terms of its “two fundamental axioms”: 1) the *continuity* of nature, especially a continuity between non-living and living forms; 2) “all the adaptive design of life has resulted from blind random process” (345).
- II. 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 related to it. I.e., even when the data do not support the paradigm or even actually disprove it, one still clings to the paradigm and accepts only the data that are consistent with it. This is the “priority of the paradigm.”
 - A. Denton says this is the case with Darwin’s concept of macroevolution, as it is still held by the scientific world today. The paradigm is still adhered to, despite the fact that it has not been validated by one single empirical discovery or scientific advance since 1859” (345). In fact, the “*a priori* belief in the continuity of nature” (346) has been *disproved* by new data regarding the cell” (348). See chs. 13-14.
 - B. Yet, no one will admit the validity of the evidence; the paradigm is still the priority. “No matter how convincing such disproofs might appear, no matter how contradictory and unreal much of the Darwinian framework might now seem to anyone not committed to its defence, . . . it is impossible to falsify theories by reference to the facts or indeed by any sort of rational or empirical argument. The history of science amply testifies to what Kuhn has termed the ‘priority of the paradigm’ and provides many fascinating examples of the extraordinary lengths to which members of the scientific community will go to defend a theory just as long as it holds sufficient intrinsic appeal” (348).
- III. Earlier examples of “the priority of the paradigm” in the field of science. (For more recent examples, see the Apologetics Press periodical, *Reason and Revelation*, Nov. 2007).
 - A. The theory of a geocentric universe. “By the late middle ages [this theory] had become a self-evident truth, the one and only sacred and unalterable picture of cosmological reality” (348).
 1. Much data was accumulated that simply did not fit this paradigm, but they were adapted to it—squeezed into it—in increasingly ridiculous ways, e.g., by the positing of epicycles, and epicycles upon epicycles.
 2. By Copernicus’ time this Ptolemaic system was “cumbersome” and “monstrous.” It was obvious to any objective person that it could not be true.
 3. “However, so ingrained was the idea that the Earth was the centre 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” (349). The paradigm took precedence!

- B. The phlogiston theory of combustion, which prevailed in much of the 18th century.
1. Phlogiston was a chemical believed to exist in all material substance, which is released when the material is burned.
 2. The Wikipedia article on “Phlogiston theory” says it is “an obsolete scientific theory, stated initially in 1667 by Johann Joachim Becher, whereby in addition to the classical four elements of the Greeks [earth, air, fire, water], there was an additional fire-like element called ‘phlogiston’ that was contained within combustible bodies, and released, to lesser or greater degrees, during combustion. . . . The theory holds that all flammable materials contain phlogiston, a substance without colour, odor, taste, or mass that is liberated in burning. Once burned, the ‘dephlogisticated’ substance was held to be in its ‘true’ form.... ‘Phlogisticated’ substances are those that contain phlogiston and are ‘dephlogisticated’ when burned,” the phlogiston being absorbed by the air around.
 3. It is, of course, non-existent; yet it was accepted for almost 100 years.
 4. “As experimentation continued the properties of phlogiston became more bizarre and contradictory. But instead of questioning the existence of this mysterious substance it was made to serve more comprehensive purposes” (351). The Antiphlogistians “would come up with an objection to phlogiston theory, and the Phlogistians . . . would modify the theory to fit the new experiment (Jim Loy, “Phlogiston Theory,” www.jimloy.com/physics/phlogstn.htm).

IV. Denton argues that Darwinian belief today is like both of the above earlier examples. It is against all common sense, and requires mental gymnastics to maintain. “But to the Darwinist the idea is accepted without a ripple of doubt—the paradigm takes precedence!” (351).

A. “The Darwinist, instead of questioning the orthodox framework as common sense would seem to dictate, attempts of justifying his position by *ad hoc* proposals, molecular clocks and such, which to the sceptic [re evolution] are self-apparent rationalizations to neutralize what is, on the face of it, hostile evidence. . . . “The priority of the paradigm takes precedence over common sense” (352).

B. After citing an example from Carl Sagan (352), he continues, “Thus again the paradigm prevails and the holistic illusion is created that every single fact of biology irrefutably supports the Darwinian thesis. Hence, even evidence that is to all common sense hostile to the traditional picture is rendered invisible by unjustified assumptions.

“Of course, the triumph is only psychological and subjective. The rationalizations are unconvincing to anyone not emotionally committed to the defence of Darwinian theory. To an outsider from the community of belief, they merely tend to emphasize the metaphysical nature of evolutionary claims and the lack of any sort of rational or empirical basis.

“The anti-evolutionary thesis argued in this book, the idea that life might be fundamentally a discontinuous phenomenon, runs counter to the whole thrust of modern biological thought. The infusion with the spirit of continuity has been so prolonged and so deeply imbibed that for most biologists it has become quite literally inconceivable that life might not be a continuous phenomenon. Like the centrality of the Earth in medieval astronomy, the principle of continuity has come to be considered by most biologists as a necessary law of nature. It is unthinkable that it might not hold. To question it is an offence to all our basic intuitions about the nature of biological reality” (353).

C. Why does Darwinian evolution still prevail? Because of the priority of the paradigm! Sooner or later, though, it will become evident that a paradigm shift is needed.

PART TWO: THE TYRANNY OF THE **THEOLOGICAL** PARADIGM.

(Denton uses the word “priority,” to but I have changed it to “tyranny,” a word that better expresses the psychological hold or dictatorial power which the paradigm often exerts over its adherents.)

A theological paradigm is basically a controlling interpretive principle, a hermeneutical *motif* or overriding theme by which everything in Scripture must be interpreted and to which it must conform.

Such a paradigm becomes, as it were, the elephant.

Some examples which will not be discussed here:

1. The controlling motif of Calvinism: the omnicausal sovereignty of God.
2. The controlling principle of Wesleyanism: the “second work of grace.”
3. The paradigm of Covenant Theology: the concept of the covenant (duh!).
4. The “elephant” in Preterist eschatology is the date, A.D. 70.
5. The controlling paradigm of Christian feminism: Galatians 3:28.

The major, most prominent example of the tyranny of the paradigm in modern Christendom is the principle of SOLA FIDEI, “by faith alone.” This is the focus of the rest of our study.

Introduction. For most Protestants, ever since the Reformation the doctrine of *sola fidei*, “by faith alone,” has been the one non-negotiable rule in the area of salvation. Douglas Moo calls it “the hallmark of the Reformation teaching” (*Romans*, 1996, 243). Chuck Swindoll speaks of “the true message that lit the spark to the Reformation: *sola fidei*—faith alone” (*Grace Awakening*, 86).

Many in the Restoration Movement are being seduced by the *sola fidei* doctrine, being deceived by the fallacy that *baptism for salvation* is somehow a contradiction of *salvation by grace*.

My contention here is admittedly radical, and no doubt will be seen as heretical by many. But I am convinced that the theological doctrine of *sola fidei*, as it is usually interpreted, is (like the scientific theory of evolution) a FALSE PARADIGM. It is a paradigm that has been elevated to the level of infallibility and invested with the quality of sovereignty.

As an unquestioned and unchallengeable assumption, *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.

Now I will give some concrete examples of the tyranny of this paradigm, *sola fidei*.

- I. Being smitten by this paradigm causes many to be *inconsistent* (yea, irrational) regarding the main Reformation figure, Martin Luther.
 - A. On the one hand, Luther is lauded and praised as the origin, hero, and patron saint of *sola fidei*.
 1. “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).
 2. “We are heirs of Luther and are indebted to him for recapturing five key areas of biblical doctrine,” including “*Sola Fidei*: Faith Alone” (www.sola-scriptura.ca/its-october-31-2007).
 - B. But on the other hand, the *sola fidei* crowd seems completely oblivious to the fact that Martin Luther clearly and emphatically taught that baptism is the moment when salvation occurs. As the paradigm of *sola fidei* is interpreted and applied today, if Luther were to come back and teach what he taught in the 16th century, he would be condemned and shunned as a heretic.
- II. Being under control of the *sola fidei* paradigm leads to the uncritical assumption that faith is not only the MEANS of justification, but also the TIME or OCCASION or PLACE of justification.
 - A. No one doubts that faith is the *means* by which justification is received.
 1. “Means” = instrument, receptacle, empty hand, entry point. We are saved *dia pisteos*—through or by means of faith (Eph. 2:8).
 2. This is clearly the Bible’s consistent teaching.
 3. It is in this sense that one might make a case that “faith *alone*” is a valid concept, i.e., the only MEANS or INSTRUMENT by which justification is received.

- a. Still, we must note that the word “alone” is never applied in this sense in the Bible.
- b. When Luther translated Rom. 3:28 into German as “*allein durch den Glauben*”, he was definitely *adding* the *allein* (“alone”).
4. But if we are limiting its reference to the *means* of justification, this could be acceptable.

B. The problem, though, is that this is NOT how the *sola fidei* paradigm is used.

1. Faith is seen not only as the sole *means* of receiving justification, but also as the sole *condition*.
 - a. “Means” and “condition” are equated and used interchangeably.
 - b. Thus the concept of *necessary* condition is confused with *sufficient* condition.
 - c. An example is Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation* (494). He simply does not acknowledge a distinction here, and uses “means” and “condition” interchangeably, and 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’ (FOA, 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”
 - d. So, he says, if faith is the *means*, this has to rule out other *conditions*. Why would he say this?
2. Because, under the power of the *sola fidei* paradigm, it is assumed that the *means* of something must also be the *occasion* for it. I.e., “By faith” = “*as soon as* one has faith.”
 - a. So it is that Geisler affirms that one is added to Christ’s body “at the moment he or she believes” (ibid., 502). This is why confession cannot be a condition for salvation. Confession is a confession of *faith*, meaning that the faith must already be there *before* one confesses; “consequently a person is already saved by faith before he confesses his faith” (ibid., 495).
 - b. Another example is Grover Gunn: “When one looks in faith to Christ for salvation, he is immediately made right with God” (“*Sola Fidei: The Alone Instrument of Justification*,” www.grovergunn.net/andrew/gal307.pdf).

C. 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*. It may be a *necessary* condition without being a *sufficient* condition. E.g.,

1. 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 being 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.
2. In another scenario, you want to watch the game but cannot get a ticket. Thus the MEANS BY WHICH you will see the game is your television set. But just because you have a TV set, this does not exclude other conditions for watching the game. You must also plug in the set and turn it on, then tune in the right channel. And you must do this at the right time.
3. In a similar way, we could still hold to *sola fidei* IF we made the proper distinctions between means and *occasion*, and means and *condition*. But those who are slaves to the paradigm will not allow it.

- III. Being a slave to the *sola fidei* paradigm leads to serious confusion concerning how *repentance* is related to salvation.
- A. Scripture clearly teaches that repentance is a condition for receiving salvation, both in the OT era and in the NT era. Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3, 5; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 2 Peter 3:9.
 - B. 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.
 1. Some, especially those in the free grace movement (Chafer, Hodges, 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 is in fact the only truly *consistent* faith-onlyism, but it trades the biblical teaching on repentance for this consistency.
 2. Others say that repentance IS necessary for salvation; but to preserve the *sola fidei* paradigm they INCLUDE repentance in the content and definition of faith. Thus both faith and repentance are essential conditions for salvation; but since repentance is part of faith, the paradigm is still intact. Examples:
 - a. John MacArthur, in *The Gospel According to Jesus*: “Repentance is at the core of saving faith. . . . The Bible does not recognize faith that lacks this element of active repentance” (32). “Repentance is a critical element of saving faith” (162).
 - b. N. Geisler, *ibid.*: Repentance is necessary, but it is NOT “a distinct and second step.” Repentance is “part of faith” (493). “True faith *includes* repentance; therefore, to add repentance as a distinct and separate step is wrong” (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).
 - C. 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.
- IV. Being a slave to the *sola fidei* paradigm also leads to serious confusion regarding how *confession* is related to salvation.
- A. The discussion here focuses on Romans 10:9-10, which makes salvation *just as conditioned* on confession as on faith: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”
 1. The form of verse 9 makes confession and faith equivalent conditions:
 - a. The form is “*If X and Y, then Z.*” Both X and Y are conditions for Z.
 - b. Paul 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.)
 2. The form of verse 10 also makes confession and faith equivalent conditions:
 - a. With the heart one believes unto (*eis*) righteousness, and With the mouth one confesses unto (*eis*) salvation.
 - b. The use of the word “unto” (*eis*) requires us to understand that the confession comes first and that salvation is the result of it.

B. But how is this text treated under the pressure of the *sola fidei* paradigm?

1. MacArthur says of Romans 10:9-10, that confession “is a characteristic of true faith, not an additional condition of salvation.” It is subsequent to faith but inseparable from it” (ibid., 199).
2. Douglas Moo (ibid., 657) 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.”

[Please note: in this text Paul is *silent* about any sort of connection between faith and confession. The only thing he connects confession with is salvation.]

3. Geisler, ibid., discusses my treatment of Rom. 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” (494). If faith is indeed the means of salvation, “why should confession be seen as a condition rather than a result of salvation?” (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).

[Now note the power of the paradigm:] “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 Rom. 10:9-10 -- “confession UNTO salvation,” i.e., salvation as the RESULT of confession, Geisler ignores this and reverses the order: salvation UNTO confession, i.e., confession as the RESULT of salvation. He is a slave to the paradigm.]

V. An absolute, *a priori* commitment to the *sola fidei* paradigm leads to an irrational distortion of NT texts that relate *baptism* to salvation.

A. One example is how the paradigm has affected the *translation* of Acts 2:38a in the NIV.

1. The original (1973) NIV version: “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.’” Here, *eis* is given its natural meaning, “so that,” i.e., “in order that, for the purpose of.”
2. In the next edition, however (1978) this was changed without notice: “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins’” (the 1984 edition is the same). Here *eis* is translated with the more “neutral” word, “for.”

B. A blatant example of Scripture twisting, also motivated by the tyranny of the paradigm, is another *sola fidei* interpretation of Acts 2:38.

1. It is an argument based on a faulty analysis of the Greek forms in 2:38, as represented by Cal Beisner, *Is Baptism Necessary for Salvation*, as seen here:

- a. The argument begins by noting that the verb “repent” is *plural*, and the “your” in “for the remission of *your* sins” is also plural. (Beisner inserts “plural” at these points.)
 - b. But the verb “be baptized” is *singular*: “Let *each one* be baptized.”
 - c. So what? “This makes it clear that ‘remission of your (plural) sins’ is the result of ‘you (plural) repenting,’ not of ‘each one (singular) being baptized’” (Beisner, 14).
 - d. 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 to Don Wallace, spring 2001.)
2. Those who use this argument seem to deliberately ignore the fact that the singular verb “be baptized” is emphatically *pluralized* by the words “each one OF YOU” (plural,) *hekastos humon*. (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 paradigm.
- C. Another mistreatment of baptismal texts as dictated by the *sola fidei* paradigm is Eph. 4:5, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”
1. What do the *sola fidei* defenders do with this verse?
 - a. 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). 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?
 - b. 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*, 328.)
 2. 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.
 - a. This allows them to grant that some NT 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!”)
 - b. But this leaves Eph. 4:5 just “hanging in the wind,” so to speak (cf. Eph. 4:14). How can Paul say there is just ONE baptism, if indeed there are TWO? Only if there is indeed ONE baptism, which combines immersion in water AND immersion in the Holy Spirit in a single event, can this text be rightly interpreted. The only thing preventing an acceptance of this view is the *sola fidei* paradigm.