



Paradigm Shifts

By David Mehlis

Open your eyes to the changes around you.

Almost 45 years ago, renowned scholar Thomas Kuhn wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and gave birth to the notion of “paradigm shift.” A student of the history of science, Kuhn argued that scientific advancement is not evolutionary, but rather a “series of peaceful interludes punctuated by intellectually violent revolutions,” and in those revolutions “one conceptual world view is replaced by another.”

Think of a paradigm shift as a change from one way of thinking to another. It is a transformation, a metamorphosis. It does not just happen—it is driven by agents of change.

For example, the printing press, the making of books, and the use of vernacular language inevitably changed our world. Johann Gutenberg's 1440 invention of movable type allowed books to become more affordable, compact, and readily available. The masses acquired direct access

to the Scriptures, and Christianity has never been the same.

Technology is a catalyst for a paradigm shift. Consider the personal computer and use of the Internet. Both our personal and business environments have been revolutionized by these tools. Witness, for example, the laptops on the table in front of many participants at the last several sessions of the International Christian Publishing Institute we have hosted here in Colorado. Delegates from India, Ghana, Brazil, Ukraine, and dozens of other nations routinely pop open their computers to take notes; many access the wireless Internet in our building.

The personal computer and the Internet are changing the way we market books. It seems like only yesterday that Web sites like Amazon.com and other online booksellers were dreams that could never work. Now Christian publishers make use of these tools, and operate with new paradigms.

Changes in technology will continue to impact us globally. They are already moving us from a mechanistic, industrial society to an organic, service-based, information-centered society. The information revolution is reshaping our book distribution channels. Scores of Christian bookstores have gone bankrupt in recent years. Chain stores, the increased shelf space dedicated to Christian books in secular bookstores, and the rise of big box stores, the Web, and alternative sales outlets, have changed the playing field. And while this shift provides many opportunities for Christian publishers, it also presents risk. These channels do not carry the same breadth of titles that Christian bookstores can offer. They require different discounts. They reach different customers. Christian publishers in the U.S. are facing more competition in an increasingly saturated market where consumers have a dizzying number of options for purchasing a

book. The need to focus—to get the information on the right book to the right person at the right time in the right place—is critical.

We could say paradigm shifts are good—when they happen to someone else. When they happen to us, that's a different story. The truth is, change is difficult. Human beings resist change. But, in Kuhn's words, "awareness is a prerequisite to all acceptable changes of theory."

Be aware. Pay attention. Open your eyes. Take note of the agents of change in your world. As people of The Book and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, our livelihood and our future success will depend on our ability to tune in and respond to the change agents and paradigm shifts we encounter every day.

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