Newbigin’s first few chapters analyze the environment in which westerners have grown used to interpreting the Christian faith. His selective tour through recent historical and contemporary intellectual history describes a cultural context, often called *modernity*, in which claims are sorted into two separate and hard-to-relate categories. The first is absolute, objective, public fact, which exists regardless of whether one (or anyone) recognizes them (“2+2=4” is an oft-cited example). The second is relative, subjective, private value, which lies entirely of the minds of specific people (“God is love” is a more rarely cited example).

For our purposes it is important to note several features about this *paradigm* or way of ordering, gaining, using, and teaching knowledge.

It is not the only such way. In fact, historically it is not even a very popular one. While this paradigm is ‘dogmatic’ in claiming to be a universal arrangement (10, 18), in fact it arises through peculiar historical circumstances in recent Europe (1-3).

It has arisen out of, challenged, and begun to eclipse the Christian way so successfully that today it provides the ‘plausibility structures’ even of Christians (8-9). This is ironic, for while modernity is proud of scientific culture, in fact science predates it and (as Michael Polanyi shows) cannot work according to its structures. (We shall see that the same is true of history.) Traditions such as science have direction and require commitments, faith, doubt, intuition, and engagement (19-22, 30-35) – as does Christian faith.

While modernity claims to offer freedom of conscience, in fact it coerces the acceptance of the things it calls ‘facts’ (through mandatory education, for instance) and discourages universal claims about the things it calls ‘values’ or ‘opinions’ (by making it ‘oppressive’ or ‘judgmental’ to commend one’s values on others) (14-16). Since according to its paradigm, only values communicate purpose, this coerces its societies’ ethics: The universe becomes amoral while the human will is thought of as sovereign (16-18, 36-38).

In this environment, the question of which claims count as which becomes a major social battle. For instance: does the Christian doctrine of creation belong in the public or private domain? Should French Muslim girls be allowed to wear headscarves in school? Is evangelism intolerably rude? Is sincerity what really matters in religious belief? (25-26).

Here is modernity’s most fundamental problem for our purposes: Neither category fits the character of Christian claims such as “Jesus is Lord,” which are ‘public’ in being universal yet ‘private’ in not being coercive (10-11), and which are basic to the Christian mindset (5-6, 11-12).

The modern paradigm relativizes the claims of Christian faith, domesticating it and turning it into something other than the apostolic traditions we call biblical Christianity: ‘a religion’ (9-10).

Not coincidentally, this paradigm seems well suited to explaining religious diversity in multicultural contexts and keeping the peace among different religious groups (25). Yet it is responsible for the existence and destructive divide between ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘liberal’ Christianity, which take sides roughly for Christianity-as-objective-fact versus Christianity-as-subjective-interpretation (24). Christian apologists who have tried to show that Christianity is ‘reasonable’ by its standards have generally retreated and hastened Christianity’s demise (2-3). The only diversity it actually tolerates is the kind it finds benign to its own goals.

*The tradition of Christian theology offers us a different paradigm to look through in the story of God in Christ, and invites us to indwell it (and vice versa) as a tacit means of focusing on the world in order to live confidently though not infallibly – that is, faithfully* (38).
Lee Camp has a different but related diagnosis for Christianity’s mutation from good news for the whole world to socially conventional religion. The early Church forged an alliance with the state in the fourth century that has characterized “Constantinian” Christianity ever since, and which despite appearances characterizes the faith in America. The “Constantinian cataract” is a distortion of the gospel’s paradigm. According to Camp, Constantinianism shifts the Christian message in a variety of ways.

Constantinianism obscures the totality of demands that Christ’s lordship makes on his disciples, twisting the faith from “the Way” that qualifies all other human loyalties into “a religion” that respects its boundaries and limits in society. This gives Christians false and shallow impressions of faithfulness (35). It narrates history (with Eusebius, even Christian history) as contests among the powerful which are primary, determinative, and even holy (46-52). It thereby authorizes Christians to ignore God’s commands out of allegiance to the state, the tribe, or some other authority. This is taken as appropriate because more effective and thus socially responsible than Jesus’ “impractical,” “idealistic” (30-34), or “unrealistic” teaching (38).

Constantinianism’s premodern form trained Christians to use coercion to produce adherents to the faith, which was thus reduced either to confessionalism (affirming a set of propositions) or moralism (28-30). Its modern form, especially in America, trains Christians to consider Christ’s lordship a “value,” the freedom which to “believe” (but not necessarily to practice! 41-43) is a “fact” guaranteed by Constitutional rights defended by coercion (32, 45). Accordingly, it makes national identity more fundamental than Christian identity (44).

As a Southerner, Camp knows that Constantinian Christianity seems biblical in Constantinian and post-Constantinian societies. It probably seems biblical to many of you. The cataract, he says, has blinded us to all the contrary evidence. The rest of his book is an exercise in alternative storytelling, witnessing and trusting that “it is not through the power brokers of human history that God will effect God’s purposes, but through the little minority band of peoples committed to walking in the way of Jesus of Nazareth, bearing witness to the new reality, the new creation, the kingdom of God” (54).

Q: How are these two paradigmatic distortions of the Christian faith related?

Telford Work read the material, wrote the presentation, edited it, and fact-checked. (You will ‘credit’ the people in your small group here for what roles they have played in producing the presentation.)