

10 Theses for a New Reformation

In every generation, the church takes some steps forward and some steps backward. Some old truths are rediscovered but other foundational teachings are forgotten; some scriptural emphases are recovered while basic gospel practices are abandoned. What are some critical, fundamental areas that need reformation today?

1) We must re-emphasize the centrality of the cross with all its implications. So much of our preaching today is tangential, focusing on everything but the death and resurrection of Jesus and emphasizing everything but the cross and the blood and the exaltation of the Son of God. Not only so, but we have all but ignored the implication of the cross, namely, that Jesus died for us so that from here on we would live for Him. That's why we have produced consumers more than disciples: We have failed to preach the cross, and we have failed to take up the cross, and so the gospel has become all about us rather than all about Him. Recovering the centrality of the cross helps us regain our spiritual equilibrium, also producing a hatred of sin and a love for holiness. It also jars us back into reality: We have been bought with a price and we now live to do God's will (see 1 Cor. 6:20).

2) We must reconnect to the Jewish roots of the faith. Why do we have two separate holidays, Passover and Easter? Why do so many think that when a Jewish person becomes a follower of Jesus, he or she is no longer Jewish? Why is it commonly taught that the church is the new Israel and that God is finished with the old Israel? It's because the church has boasted against the (original) Jewish branches (to use the language of Paul in Romans 11:17-25) and cut itself off from its Jewish roots. It's because Jesus has been turned into the founder of a new, predominantly Gentile religion rather than

embraced as the Jewish Messiah who came to fulfill what was written in Moses and the prophets, thereby bringing salvation to the Gentiles. This does not mean that saved Gentiles should become Jews and submit to the Sinai Covenant, but it does mean we should build on the Old Testament rather than discard it, that we should recognize God's ongoing purposes for Israel and that we should prioritize Jewish evangelism (as per Rom. 1:16).

3) We must live out the reality of the priesthood of all believers. Although the Reformation emphasized that every believer was a priest, it did not fully implement this concept, because of which the clergy-laity contrast remains to this day. Luther wrote that "all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone. ... A cobbler, a smith, a peasant, every man has the office and function of his calling, and yet all alike are consecrated priests and bishops, and every man should by his office or function be useful and beneficial to the rest, so that various kinds of work may all be united for the furtherance of body and soul, just as the members of the body all serve one another."

Unfortunately, many believers do not recognize the divine calling on their own lives, because of which (in the words of Wolfgang Simson), "The image of much of contemporary Christianity can be summarized, a bit euphemistically, as holy people coming regularly to a holy place at a holy day at a holy hour to participate in a holy ritual lead by a holy man dressed in holy clothes [for] a holy fee." This has had a crippling effect on our mission, resulting in a tiny portion of believers doing the great majority of gospel work. And while the New Testament certainly teaches the important role played by leaders in the body, every believer is equally a child of God, a member of the body, a branch of the vine and a priest to God, called to serve Him and touch the world.

4) We must embrace the fullness of the Spirit and His power.

It is true that “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” proclaims that “the Spirit and the gifts are ours” (this is not far from Luther’s original German), and it is true that there are examples of divine healing and deliverance in the writings of the Reformers, but there was certainly not a full embrace of the Spirit’s gifts and power outside of the Spirit’s work in conversion. Because of this, practices that were foundational to the early believers (see Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 14:1, 39-40; James 5:13-16) became foreign to the later church. Thankfully, while there has been a great restoration of the Spirit’s power in the last 100 years, especially in the growing church in the developing world, there is still great resistance to key aspects of the Spirit’s work in much of the West. Regaining the fullness of the Spirit is essential if we are to make the maximum impact on the world and bring maximum glory to the risen Savior.

5) We must become Great-Commission believers. In our materialistically rich culture, with so much competing for our attention, from entertainment to sports to news to worldly pursuits, we have lost sight of eternal issues and, consequently, lost the burden to go into all the world to make disciples. Political issues enflame us, sporting events excite us, movies and TV and the internet consume us, but our hearts have grown cold when it comes to reaching the lost. Do we even believe that people are perishing without Jesus? True love for God means true love for our neighbor, not only materially but spiritually as well. And as we give ourselves to win the lost, we experience revival ourselves, as new souls are the life of the church.

6) We must abandon the performance mentality. Pastors and worship leaders are not professionals performing for an audience. They are servant leaders helping believers grow in God and encounter His presence. But in our zeal to be relevant and do all things with excellence, we have become talented performers, putting more emphasis on outward appearance than

on inward encounter and measuring success by the praise of people more than the praise of God. In the same way, many believers have become accustomed to being entertained rather than edified and coddled rather than challenged. We must change our mentality and our focus if we are to become true disciples of the Lord. Certainly, it is commendable to do God's work with excellence and diligence, but we must remember that it is only the Spirit who can save and transform and that He is looking for faithfulness more than talent and for a yielded heart more than outward response. Spending quality time in the secret place with God is infinitely more valuable than consulting with Church growth experts and keeping up with the latest Twitter trends.

7) We must learn to practice transformational inclusion. So-called progressive Christians and LGBT leaders have rightly emphasized that the church must be a welcoming place for the marginalized and the hurting, for the outcasts and for those who are different. But they have wrongly claimed that Jesus practiced affirmational inclusion, as if He reached out to sinners where they were to affirm them in their sin. Rather, Jesus practiced transformational inclusion, reaching out to lost sinners in order to change them, not affirm them. If we are to follow His example, we need hearts of compassion and backbones of steel. This will enable us to open our hearts and our homes and our meeting places to those who are different than us without compromising God's standards. Compassion does not require compromise.

8) We must become biblically literate again. Through the Reformation, the Bible became available to anyone who could read. New translations were made in the languages of the people and then distributed in mass through the newly-invented printing press. Now, 500 years later, we have more access to the Scriptures than any generation in history, with a multitude of translations to pick from and instant access to those translations on our cell phones and laptops and tablets.

Despite all this, we are losing our biblical literacy, to the point that some of the most fundamental biblical truths are barely known to professing believers. If ever a post-Reformation generation needed to get back to the Bible, it is our generation. We must recover our love for the Word.

9) We must regain a healthy fear of the Lord. In past centuries, the church often overemphasized the doctrines of hell and final judgment, producing an unhealthy and even servile fear of the Lord, depicting Him as a cruel tyrant rather than a loving Father who is also a righteous judge. Today, we preach a happy gospel about a happy God who wants to make everyone happy, with nary a word about divine judgment. God has now become the great big genie in the sky, here to do our bidding. This represents a dangerous shift in emphasis, resulting in counterfeit conversions and skin-deep believers. To restore our balance, we must regain a healthy reverence of God, remembering that Jesus taught us to fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in hell () and recognizing that our gracious, compassionate Father, the one we call Abba, remains a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29). We can love and enjoy Him without diminishing His holiness or justice. We can adore Him while also reverencing Him.

10) We must recover the organic, relational dimensions of the body. While God is moving today inside denominations and within the confines of our congregational buildings, He is certainly not limited to moving there. That's because the church is a body, not a building; a family, not a structure; an organism, not an organization. That's why the Spirit is at work in megachurches as well as house churches, in "mainstream" denominations as well as "independent" congregations. And that's why, even though our gathering together as believers is vitally important and should not be neglected (Heb. 10:25), we should focus on being the church more than going to church, on cultivating lasting relationships more than attending services and on being

intimate with God more than being informed about God. As we deepen our relationships with the Lord and with one another, we will fulfill our spiritual destiny and become what the world so desperately needs us to be. And in that place, we will find true unity.