

The New Reformation

Rediscovering Church:

John 3:5-8

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Something new is unfolding. It is affecting you and me now and will dominate our future. God is doing something as profound and as radical as when a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther, back on October 31st, 1517, tacked 95 propositions on the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. That act signaled a profound reforming of Christ's Church that has impacted the entire world. Enormous changes occurred in what people believed about Jesus, how they worshiped Jesus, how they related to one another as God's family, and how they reached out to their communities. These changes so profoundly affected the communities that the politics of nations were disrupted and history unfolded in a completely different way.

Today, Jesus' church is being radically reformed again. It is being refashioned all across this planet. Let me paint a little of the picture for you.

First, let's consider how Christianity is spreading. In 1900 one-third of the world's population confessed faith in Jesus Christ. In 2000 one-third of the world's population still confessed faith in Jesus Christ. Did nothing happen in that century? Actually, a lot happened. Christianity declined in Europe, North America and northern Asia under the influence of secularism. Some of that decline was enforced by Communist regimes. All of it arose out of the academic community which also trained Western church leaders. However, in Africa, Latin America and Asia, the church grew wildly. In 1900 there were only 10 million Christians in Africa. Today there are 360 million. Latin America has grown from 62 million to 481 million.

Around 2½ percent of Asia's populations were Christians in 1900. By 2000 that climbed to 8½ percent or some 313 million believers. In China Christianity has multiplied through illegal house churches from 1.67 million to almost 90 million believers. The contrast in vitality of the church can be seen in one denomination: the Anglican Church. The Church of England has 26 million members and its sister in the United States, the Episcopal Church, has 2.3 million members. Roughly 800,000 worship in those churches on an average weekend. Their sister church in Nigeria has 17 million members with worship attendance running close to double that, which would be 34 million a weekend. Our western form of Christianity is becoming a small anomaly.

Second, consider two changes that occurred since 1970. We older folks grew up in congregations that were related to denominations. Only 34 years ago, 70 percent of the world's churches belonged to a denomination. By the year 2000, 52 percent of the world's churches were not apart of anything that looked like or was organized like a denomination. Do you know how that happened? Who do you think planted most the churches in the past three decades? It wasn't the denominational churches, was it? What does that tell you? An additional change is harder to describe. I'll put it this way. Before 1970 not all that many people could be described as Charismatic or Pentecostal. What I'm describing are people who not only believe there is a Holy Spirit, but also believe and give attention to spiritual gifts that reveal God's presence and power. In 1970 that described about 2 percent of Christians in the world's denominations. In 2000 it described 16 percent of denominational believers. However, in the fast growing non-denominational churches it described 56 percent of the Christians in 1970 and 74 percent of them in 2000. Characterizing the expansion of Christianity and the reformation of the global church is the shedding of many denominational practices and a growing attention to the Holy Spirit.

Third, we can learn a little more about this new reformation if we examine our personal experience. Since we Americans live in a country where Christianity is declining – CBS news reported recently that Protestant Christianity is expected to drop below 50 percent in the next couple years – we have been insulated, at least partially, from what is unfolding. A third of our teenage and adult populations have no religious training. By 2013 the majority of Americans will have no active faith. Some 75 out of every 100 churches in America are shrinking in actuality or in relation to the population. Only 25 out of a hundred churches are growing at all. Of those 25, twenty-four grow from the alumni association. They grow by receiving believers from other churches. Only one in a hundred grows by reaching non-believers.

Yet, didn't Jesus sacrifice his life for lost sheep? Wasn't that his mission? We American pastors have been trained in the skills of welcoming and caring for believers. We have not been trained in Jesus' mission of finding and reaching God's lost sheep. How can we, with any integrity, claim to be disciples if we are not seeking and recovering God's lost children? Jesus did not call his followers to go all over the world and make people Christians. He told them to make disciples. Disciples are believers who know and walk with Jesus in his mission. Bethany Church is not about helping you grow as a Christian. It is about making you a disciple, and disciples do not walk in predictable ways. Jesus didn't. Consider the text we read from John, chapter three.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:8, NIV)

Jesus was born of the Spirit. The angel Gabriel said to Mary:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:35, NIV)

Jesus was born of the Spirit, and he lived directed by the Spirit. His obedience to Scriptures was guided by the Spirit who authored them. He went where the Spirit directed him, and Jesus told Nicodemus, a believing Jewish leader:

I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." (John 3:5-7, NIV)

Jesus was saying that human birth and then religious education doesn't cut it. I believe Sunday School, Bible studies and Confirmation are all helpful ministries; but they don't change a heart. Only God's Spirit does. Without God's Spirit we become focused on right and wrong, and we tend to justify our decisions. With a new heart these ministries feed a soul hungry to hear and obey Jesus. There are no substitutes for the overshadowing of God's Spirit. When God's Spirit overshadows you, most often there is repentance. Often there is a flood of tears as we face our sins and their consequences. Best as I can tell, few physical births occur without pain, and few spiritual births occur without pain. However, pain is not the same thing as the baby. The sign of birth is not the pain; the sign of birth is the baby. The sign of new birth, the sign of spiritual birth, the sign of rebirth, of being born again, of being born of the spirit is a new heart and consequently, a new life.

In this new life the passions of Jesus burn deep within you. His values grow in you. In this new life you are directed by the Spirit who authored the Scriptures. You open the Bible and discuss it with your heavenly Father. In this new life you are directed by God and not some intermediary: not some book, not some tradition, not some rules and not some structure. You may embrace some of that as God shows you, but you are not confined to it. In this new life, you live as God's family, submitted to his direction and timing. Only that kind of life is truly creative, obedient and adventurous. Only that kind of life embraces God and his reforming work.