


Introduction

a new hope for the church in the west

*"See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."
(Jeremiah 1:10)*

There is a time for everything under heaven - seasons come and seasons go (Ecclesiastes 3:1). So it is with the Church. Throughout the centuries, the Church of Jesus Christ has experienced such seasons - times of revival, times of apostasy, times of fruitfulness, times of barrenness, times of harvest and times of harrowing fallow spiritual ground. We are at one of the junctures of those seasons in the Western Church now, a shifting from what was to what is to come. The rapid transit of culture across the American landscape over the past thirty years has left the American church like a once-productive fishing village, which has been stranded - landlocked by a retreating ocean. The shore has moved a hundred miles and the villagers wonder why there are no fish in the desert. They say, "Why, we've always caught fish here before!" The location of the shoreline changed, but the fishermen didn't move with it. But what is truly sad is that the fishermen still expected to catch fish. It is indeed a time of changing seasons in the Western Church. Such seasons mark a beginning and an ending, an uprooting of dead things with an eye to new, green plantings springing forth with new life.

It is in one of these times we now live and minister.

For two and one half centuries the American church has enjoyed unequaled influence in the culture. We were the center-pole of the society, with all roads leading to us. But no longer. We live in a day of declining Christian witness as a percentage of American population (Olsen, *American Church in Crisis*). The church has a favorable rating of only 3% in emerging generations (Kinnaman, *UnChristian*), and the "sin stats" in the church mirror those in the culture at large (Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*). Our behaviors are not distinct, and consequently, neither is our witness to Christ. We have been locked in a culture war for the past three decades - a war which we have lost. (The previously cited statistics prove it.) Let's face it, the Church in the West is in difficult straights, and there is decline in almost all sections of the nation. That's the bad news. The good news is that while the Church in the West is in serious trouble, the Church of the Scripture is not. The Church has weathered such seasons in the past, and the Church which Jesus said He would build (ref Matthew 16:18) continues to expand and extend His Kingdom on a global scale. Just not in the West.

The pivot point of transition in the seasons has always been borne on the wind of the Spirit - the winds of change filling the sails of men and women who have rediscovered in their generation, by the grace of God, the truth of the New Testament Scriptures - and what those scriptures said about what the Church should be in focus and content. History has labeled these people reformers, revivalists, and revolutionaries - Christians of every era who have had a holy discontent with the status quo of the Church, driven by a righteous passion to see Christ more completely and purely expressed in His Body. They knew there was something more to the Christian experience than what they had encountered. They could feel the Wind compelling them forward, a harbinger of change, and these devoted men and women became the catalyst for a change of seasons in the Church. Such a change is upon us now. The Wind is blowing! Can you feel Him? Are you being moved within? Can you hear the Wind whisper "There's so much more!" If so, read on.

As the Medieval church era came to a close there was developing an ever-increasing skepticism regarding the hierarchy of the church, both in its abuse of power and utilizing the name of Christ for a personal and

political agenda. The rise of mysticism along with the impact of nominalism on scholastic theology and the humanism of the Renaissance left people longing for something or someone they could trust. The papacy had been struggling to find vast sums of money in order to continue to cover the expenses of its opulent living. According to Justo L. Gonzalez, this hierarchical decline began immediately after the peak of papal power in Innocent III (12th century). The popes and antipopes sought to secure funding to strengthen their rival claims to be the legitimate successors of St. Peter. On top of this was the influence of the Renaissance which drove the popes to spend as much of the monetary resources of Europe that they could to finance their indulgence of the arts, frequent wars and various personal intrigues.

This is the backdrop to the emergence of the young monk, Martin Luther in the 16th century. The abuse of power by the papacy resulted in anti-papalism and anti-clericalism mindset, particularly in Germany. One factor that caused anti-clericalism was the poor quality of the clergy. In Renaissance Italy, clergy had no training other than watching, helping and trying to imitate their older (not necessarily wiser) colleagues. Clergy were, by and large, illiterate and most had incomes lower than unskilled laborers. On one side, you had the rank and file in the papacy that were trained and of religious aristocracy, while on the other side, clergy were untrained, illiterate and not respected. In rural France during this same period, the lower clergy held the same status as vagabonds and were virtually indistinguishable from other itinerant beggars of the period.

The church at that time was largely oppressive and brought little hope and peace for individuals - at least very little that did not require a work or an indulgence to be purchased. These indulgences enraged Luther as an exploitation of the natural affection of the common people for their dead. Central to this practice of indulgences was the belief in purgatory made popular by Dante in book of the *Divine Comedy*. Purgatory is believed to be that place the dead go to undergo both punishment and purification of remaining sins, before being allowed to enter into heaven.

The popular marketing line that was used to sell these indulgences went something like, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." The travesty of it all was that the funding raised by these indulgences went to Renaissance Italy to fund the extrav-

agances of the papacy. For Luther hearing the Divine "yes" in Christ was enough for him to realize that one is justified by faith alone, obviating the need for purgatory and indulgences. And so, the young monk spoke out against those that asserted that a dead soul might be freed instantly from purgatory on payment of an appropriate amount to an authorized ecclesiastical tradesman or, should we say, salesman.

Our day is full of successful churches that suggest you invest in the Kingdom and for your investment, God will bring you financial success, healing and a blessed life. We are no longer pawning off indulgences for purgatory, but selling market share in the Kingdom of God for an immediate return for a better life. Much like the anti-papalism of the Reformation, we have an ever-increasing attitude against organized religion with very little trust in those who wield power within these giant ecclesiological enterprises that specialize in living life well in the now on the sacrificial giving of its constituency. On the other end of the pendulum are those pastors and clergy that have sought out a lifestyle that is "anti" everything, rejecting this life for the life to come. As a result, there is very little enjoyment to be had in this life as have an adversarial posture towards the world at large in hopes of preserving their religious way of life without interference from the Dark Lords of the underworld masked as humans outside their fold.

In all reality, the cultural situation of the church today is not only similar in backdrop to the Reformation but also much like the early church of the first three centuries, particularly like the time that Christ entered the world. The state religion of Rome was not providing the peace and salvation people were longing for and so, the Mystery Religions became quite popular, providing people with an alternative to the state religion of Rome for their hope and salvation.

Religion, however, was in the hands of the Roman Senate, and only those gods deemed as such by the senate could be worshiped. As the empire expanded and people from all over the known world moved to Rome, the diversity of religions increased. In response to this ever-increasing religious diversity, Rome instituted a new cult centered in the person of the emperor. Everyone was required to worship the emperor as deity. Deity meant the Roman emperor was to be worshiped as

"the giver of good things."

Christianity was birthed and grew within the cultural environment of the Roman state being itself a religion. The way one participated in the state religion was to recognize deity of the emperor. Of course, a true Christian could not do this, resulting in an increasing tension between the Church and Rome. Over time, Christianity would undergo several persecutions, both local and beyond, as the Church's stand on one God brought increasing challenges in the lives of the early Christians.

Like the early church, we have competing religions, a marginalized church, and pagan values. *Our season is ripe for the incarnation of Christ through His people to manifest and bring hope, salvation, justice, mercy and healing to our people and our land.*

Tippling Our Hand - Things We Are Saying And Not Saying

Reform in the purest sense seeks to return to what is primary and foundational. In this way, the Reformation of the 16th century went back to what was primary and foundational with the intent to take the Church forward. Reformation is then the precursor to revolution. In our understanding of the terms *reform* and *revolution*, they speak about a radical departure from one thing to the passionate embrace of another. More simply, it can be said that,

Reform goes back - Revolution goes forward

Before we can move forward in a spiritual revolution we must return (reform back) to the essentials of the New Testament Church. The foundation of the future Church was laid in the past (tradition passed on I Corinthians 15:3-4). The Reformation is needed to strip away all that has been added to the apostolic tradition and allow the truly revolutionary thing that is Christianity to bloom once again in the West in its fullness.

Every spiritual revolution that has its corollary in the Spirit and Scripture has involved a reforming back before there was a revolution forward. Even Jesus came to fulfill the Law ("reform back"), so that the people could move forward with a revolution that involved, first and foremost, the heart.

The Pharisees were all about reform as well. Their primary concern was the reform of Israel. God had abandoned Israel to the Roman yoke because of Israel's unfaithfulness to the heart of God in the Torah. A reform without the heart will be nothing more than a systemic shift back to original principles and foundations that lack the heart that gave birth to them.

In every generation there is a plethora of people who possess goodwill, appreciate the problems of culture, and are willing to do anything to help bring lasting change. But like so many, we feel powerless to bring change and don't know where to start. What can one individual or a collection of individuals do anyway? We remind you that it only took 120 fully devoted followers of Christ to turn the then-known world upside down with the Gospel of the Kingdom. In our day and age, it only took 18 men fully devoted to the cause of evil to change our Western world as they boarded airplanes on September 11, 2001. Apparently it doesn't take a lot of people, but it does take those who are fully devoted.

Albert Nolan in his *Jesus Before Christianity* provides some excellent commentary for us.

What we are up against is not people but the impersonal forces of a system which has its own momentum and its own dynamics. How often one hears the cry of hopeless resignation, 'You cannot fight the system.' This indeed is the heart of the problem. We have built up an all-inclusive political and economic system based upon certain assumptions and values and now we are beginning to realize that this system is not only counter-productive-it has brought us to the brink of disaster-but is has also become our master. Nobody seems to be able to change it or control it. The most frightening discovery of all is that there is nobody at the helm and that the impersonal machine that we have so carefully designed will drag us along inexorably to our destruction...The system is a monster which devours people for the sake of its profits. (9-10)

The church struggles with the same as it seeks to find a way out of the matrix (the computer generated reality in the movie, *The Matrix*). Christ has already come and broken the power of the matrix, those

impersonal forces driven by the darkness of Hell, so that we, the Church, might be able to stand as one and charge the gates of Hell bringing life, hope and salvation. May the revolution find willing participants who will do just this.

R.E.A.D. Questions

Each chapter in this book will have a series of questions. Using the acronym R.E.A.D., these questions will help you **R**eflect, **E**valuate, **A**djust and **D**o.

Wisdom in the Holy Spirit comes from reflecting on biblical truth. Evaluation allows you to evaluate your current ministry praxis in light of a biblical world-view. This allows you to adjust your life and ministry accordingly (read, repent).

The questions at the end of each chapter are framed within the context of applied theology (theology that seeks to live out what it knows) which encompasses every aspect of our life - our identity, capacity and destiny in Christ. However, we will use an artificial construct of "life and ministry practice" to help you self-evaluate within the broader, prevalent thinking in the Western Church. Prayerfully reflect upon each question and allow the Holy Spirit to nourish your soul and establish a base of wisdom that will allow you to navigate through the tumultuous waters of ecclesiological life.