

PART ONE

WHAT WOULD A NEW REFORMATION LOOK LIKE?

— DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON —

I would like to see the beginning of a new reformation in our day, and I hope you would like to see it too and are praying for it. I hope you have become nauseated with the tawdry entertainment that passes for the true worship of God in many of our churches and, like the saints of the past, are longing for more of the deep truths of the inerrant Word of God. We certainly need a reformation.¹

- JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

For those of us who love the church, our deepest longing in this day is for God to put His glory on display in the unleashing of a new Reformation among His people. Our heartfelt desire is that we would see God usher in another history-altering movement to His church, one that would dramatically reform and restore His bride to a biblical pattern. Surely if you are a true believer in Jesus Christ, this passion lies imbedded within your soul.

This being true, the question that begs to be asked is this: What would such a new Reformation look like? If God, by His grace, should send a *new* Reformation in this hour, what would be its features? What would be its distinguishing marks? What would be the necessary evidences of a divine work come among His people? These are penetrating questions that are worth our seriously addressing and carefully answering.

My contention is this: should a new Reformation come from the hand of God again, it would feature precisely the same hallmarks as it did some 500 years ago. A new Reformation in the twenty-first century would involve exactly the same features as the

¹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1984).

first Reformation in the sixteenth century. Essentially, nothing would be different. It would simply be a returning to old paths, those that are time-honored, trusted, and true. What are the mileposts along the way of these old paths? Consider with me that they would be as follows:

EXPOSITORY PREACHING

Amid the earth-shaking upheaval of the Reformation, the sixteenth-century witnessed a dramatic return to what had long been most missing—biblical preaching. With the immergence of the Reformers, the power of the pulpit was suddenly restored. *Sola Scriptura* brought the authority of the Word of God back to the sacred desk. The supreme right of Scripture reassumed its rightful place in the lives of God's people.

The hour called for such a return. For a thousand years, the exposition of the Word had been replaced with the sterile emptiness of dead religion, sterile ritual, mindless routine, papal superstitions, and priestly sacerdotalism. The pulpit had been decentralized. The sermon, if you could call it that, was even given in a language unknown to the common people. The Dark Ages could not have been any darker.

But with the Reformation, a *new* day dawned. Suddenly, the blazing light of Scripture burst upon the horizon. An opened Bible was returned to the pulpit, and the truth was again restored. Martin Luther in Wittenberg, Germany, began to preach through entire books in the Bible – the Gospel of John, Romans, Psalms, and the like. His riveting expositions were true to the biblical text. Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, preached sequentially and brilliantly through the Gospel of Matthew. From Geneva came the extraordinary exposition of John Calvin, who preached consecutively through many entire books in the Bible.

The commitment of Calvin to a biblical pulpit is luminous. The Genevan reformer preached steadfastly through book after book of the Bible, never wavering from this approach to preaching. For almost twenty-five years of ministry in St. Peter's church in Geneva, an unending flow of biblical exposition flowed from that sacred pulpit. Every Sunday, the reformer preached from the New Testament, except for a few sermons from Psalms Sunday afternoons. During the week Calvin preached from the Old Testament every morning, every other week. Thus, on the average, he preached 10 sermons every two weeks, each involving a long book series. For example, he preached through Thessalonians (forty-six sermons), Corinthians (186 sermons), the pastoral epistles (eighty-six sermons). On the weekdays, he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, 123 on Genesis, and so on. On Easter Day, 1538, after preaching, he left the pulpit of St. Peter's banished by the City Counsel. He returned in September 1541, over three years later, and picked up his exposition in the very next verse. This was his unwavering commitment to verse-by-verse preaching.

If we are to see a new Reformation in our day, we would see such a return to consecutive biblical preaching through books of Scripture. We would witness a wholesale return to

expository preaching that gives serious attention to proper interpretation, sound doctrine, theological precision, and heat searching application. The neglect of Scripture would leave the modern pulpit and new Calvins would step forward to preach the Word.

SOVEREIGN GRACE

Secondly, if a new Reformation is to come in our day, we would witness a return to the most God-exalting truths in the Bible—the doctrines of sovereign grace. This is certainly what occurred almost 500 years ago in the first Reformation. As the church came back to the preaching of the Bible—*sola Scriptura*—they inevitably returned to the central doctrines of the Word. This meant a recovery of the absolute sovereignty of God in the gracious salvation of lost, elect sinners. The semi-Pelagianism of the church was exposed for what it was, a man-centered message of compromise. In its place, the Reformation proclaimed the God-centered truths of sovereign grace.

Martin Luther wrote his *magnum opus*, his most prized work, *The Bondage of the Will*. This theological masterpiece, so steeped in the Word of God was a devastating blow to Erasmus' *The Freedom of the Will*. In this extraordinary volume, Luther documented biblical truth that man's fallen will is fast-bound to sin and cannot believe upon Christ until it is *liberated* by irresistible grace. This sovereign work God does in the hearts of all His elect. John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Theodora Beza, John Knox and virtually all the Reformers were strong on the sovereignty of God in saving grace.

What would a new Reformation look like in our day? It would resemble the very same return to such God-centered truths. God Himself would be restored as the Author, Provider, and Completer of salvation. Pulpits now marred by a theological pragmatism would suddenly burst aflame with the grand old biblical doctrines of radical depravity, eternal election, absolute predestination, definite atonement, irresistible calling, sovereign regeneration, preserving grace and divine reprobation. These triumphant truths would be reenlisted and put back into active service. The doctrinal distinctives of divine sovereignty would no longer be neglected or, worse, demised. Instead, they would once again be proclaimed with God-given authority, and soul-saving power.

TRANSCENDENT WORSHIP

Third, the Reformation of the sixteenth-century brought about a dramatic change in the worship of the church. This is what we would see again in a new Reformation. The fleshly entertainment that has invaded the contemporary church, with all its superficial gloss, would be replaced with worshipping God as He prescribes in His own Word. It matters to God *how* He is worshipped. In the day of God's power, the Scripture once again rules the worship service. All things become regulated by His Word, even the worship.

Previous to the Reformation, the public gathering of the church had devolved into by empty ritual and rote routine. The worship service had become something the people merely observed. But in it, they certainly did not participate. At best, they worshipped

God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. In this dark hour, the Word of God was muzzled. The worship service was dead, devoid of any spiritual life and truth. The people were denied communion. Sacredotalism reigned. But the emergence of the Reformation changed all that.

With the recovery of Scripture and sovereign grace came a return to biblical worship in spirit and truth. The pulpit was moved back to the middle of the sanctuary, literally, an indication of the restored centrality of the Word. An open Bible was placed upon the pulpit, and expounded for the people to understand and assimilate into their lives. Hymns such as “A Mighty Fortress” were written and sung congregationally. There was life in the worship service again. Passion for God filled the hearts of people again, replacing superficiality, guilt, and dread.

This same change would occur *today* in a new Reformation. The Word of God would dominate the worship service again, all to the delight of true worshipers. The authoritative voice of God would be heard in the church again in the exposition of the Bible. Hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs would be sung fervently. Scripture reading would be returned to the service. So would the pastoral prayer, as God’s people would be ushered upward to the throne of grace. The fear of God would grip hearts, as well as true rejoicing.

Entertainment would be replaced with exposition. Drama would yield to the unfolding drama of redemption. Theater would give way to theology. And trivialities would be replaced with *gravitas*. The church would no longer try to be like the world in its worship, but would instead emulate the worship of heaven. *This* would be a real Reformation.

(To be continued)