

A Healthy Church in a Toxic Age

By: Kevin Swanson

The Pew Forum finds that only 51% of Americans call themselves Christians, down from 70+ percent in the 1970s. Following on the heels of Europe, America participates in the most pronounced apostasy in world history. Never mind the weak attempts at salvaging the church by a short-lived mega-church movement. Many of us have participated in the programs – Youth for Christ, Child Evangelism, Revival Meetings, tract distributions, Youth Groups, Sunday Schools, DVBS, Women of Faith Conferences, Promise Keepers, etc. We look back and find some of these programs marginally helpful, and others of little use whatsoever. We have seen much of the evangelical work of the church from the 1950s – 1980s turn into a whole lot of wood, hay, and stubble, and we have even less hope for the evangelical work of the 1990s and the 2000s. The Christian church is dying in America. Certainly the relevance of the Christian faith in public life and culture is now practically negligible, as demonstrated by the most recent elections. Sometimes the apostasy unfolds in slow motion, as families move from a biblical church to a more squishy, evangelical church, and then on to the latest fashionable post-modern, emergent church. . . then, it's the come-as-you-are, make-up-your-own-ethical-construct-as-you-go sort of operation. Finally, somebody asks the obvious question, “Why are we wasting our time with playing church, when we are really humanists living out our existentialist lives on a man-centered ethic?”

With the culture in moral free fall, our education systems radically man-centered and hopelessly materialist and nihilist in worldview, and the evangelical church in turmoil, Christian families are seeking answers to the church question. How does one choose a good church, and what defines an adequate reformational agenda?

Many families withdraw. They homeschool. They form their own cultures. They reform their lives by the Word within their own families and find some safety from the toxic culture and dysfunctional churches by separation. After experiencing an assortment of dysfunctional church relationships, some resort to the home church.

As a leader in the homeschooling movement, after over 40 years of participation in this movement, I believe that this is the single most important family-reformational movement in the world. The reformation of fatherhood, family relationships, family discipleship, and a distinctively biblical way of thinking in education is all important and exceedingly basic to the reformation of life. Yet, it cannot stop here. The reformation of family life is basic in our reformation agenda, but it must lead to the reformation of church relationships, church leadership, church worship, and church life. The dysfunctionality in family relationships have led to the dysfunctionality of church relationships. The failure to incorporate the fear of God in K-12 education and the worship of God into seminary learning, has disabled the church from expressing genuine reverential awe of God in Sunday worship.

So you see the problem is systemic. Without the renewal of relationships and truth in family life and in education, we will fail to see it happening in the church. When the family fails to function biblically, the church may try to compensate, producing questionable results – more wood, hay, and stubble. The duty of the church is to work with the family such that it will function biblically. Instead of separating faith and repentance (grace and law) in the presentation of the Gospel, the church ought to equip the man of God for every good work by the right preaching of the Word of God. The problem with the Christian church at large is a failure to understand the Gospel, a failure to employ biblical methodology (God's law), a failure to preach hard truth and practice deep relationships, a failure to cultivate love, a failure to wisely discern between majors and minors, a failure to honor fathers (biological fathers, church fathers, and historical church fathers), a failure to assess the worldly antithesis and present a strong enough thesis, a failure to teach the fear of God and express the reality of God, and a failure to retain the centrality of God in epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Other than that, we're doing alright.

Yet even in the middle of all of the chaos of post-modern deconstruction, moral decline, national apostasies, and radically opposing attempts to reform the Christian church, a true reformation emerges. What is this genuine reforming movement? Its roots are solidly placed in biblical soil and finds solid connections in church history. This movement is no cultic anomaly, but true heart and life reformation by the Word of God. It is both defined by a careful analysis of the antithesis set against the biblical thesis; and it is defined by other historical battles fought at Nicea, Chalcedon, Wittenberg, and Geneva. Standing on the shoulders of giants, we take on new giants that stand opposed to the faith – the giants of materialism, humanism, pluralism, evolution, cold existentialism, anti-relational institutions, and family-disintegrating socialism, individualism, and egalitarianism.

Put simply, healthy reforming churches will be defined by a renewal of a God-centered truth and deep, loving relationships in a lost and lonely age. You cannot have one without the other. Truth without fruitful relationships in which love, joy, and peace are cultivated will only yield a contentious, proud, joyless, dead church. But relationships without truth will in time prove themselves to be a sham. Moreover, attempts to live lives of love, joy, peace, and longsuffering without the benefit of organic, relational family and church life will only turn these things into meaningless words. The result will be a church of shallow, tenuous relationships with a concomitant shallow truth characterizing its teaching ministry.

This is the agenda. Post-modernism has abandoned both absolute truth and meaningful relationships. It has destroyed the family, aggrandized the socialist state, and jettisoned a God-centered, absolute truth and ethic. May God help the church to properly discern the great need of the day and address it with a biblical agenda, a biblical ethic, a biblical social theory, and a biblical way of life!

About the Author:

Kevin was raised on the mission field in Japan in the 1960's and 1970's and has now served as elder and pastor of Reformation Church, since its inception. He holds a Masters in Divinity degree and has authored several books including Restoring the Centrality of God in Christian Worldview and Life, and The Second Mayflower.