

Time for the Reformation of Churches: The New Norm Is Beckoning Us

Reflections on the Church at Corinth

Reflections Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life 29 July 2020

1 Corinthians (referenced)

The coronavirus is playing hide-and-seek with scientists and political leaders alike. When they are unable to harness it, they simply fudge the figures — a line of action keeping pace with the spread of the virus itself, in various states of our country and in other countries of the world. Local churches have mostly gone online with Sunday worship, carrying the baggage of the past with them: old wine in new bottles. God is pushed into the background, and no one seems to want to listen to Him, but only to pray to Him to take away this, so far uncontrolled, menace. I have been writing and talking about a new norm that is perhaps the will of God for us. We do not have a Martin Luther to preach reformation to us, but a reformation more drastic and profound than what he achieved then is what we should be figuring out for the members of the church of Jesus. The church of Jesus is His creation and needs no reformation, but the decaying members of the body of Jesus are, perhaps, what He wants to reform.

From a biblical perspective, Jesus often spoke of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth. The nagging question in my mind is whether this pandemic is the beginning of the re-creation of which Jesus spoke. If so, or even if it is not, how do we reform the Christian community and its constituent churches? The parishes seem hell-bent on replicating Sunday services online in the very same format they used when people gathered in church buildings.

Good news on the beginnings of reformation came recently, when a Latin Catholic church in Kerala allowed the cremation of a Covid-19 victim at its cemetery and decided to inter her ashes. If the news story is correct, the Pope also spoke of a minor change, but one with far-reaching implications, in the translation of the Lord's Prayer, changing "lead us not into temptation" — since God does not lead humans into sin — to "do not let us fall into temptation." The Creed too may need a minor change: the affirmation of belief that states "resurrection of the body" may need to become "resurrection of the spirit." Further, the Eucharist is a question looming large for believers now that church services have gone online.

Jesus asked us to do this as often as possible in remembrance of His sacrifice for us. Traditionally we are not able to receive it, since only ordained priests are permitted to consecrate the "elements," the sacramental bread and wine. Various denominations have already made alterations to the sacrament, using leavened bread in place of unleavened, and grape juice in place of wine. One step forward could be for the believer to consecrate the elements and partake, thus fulfilling the desire Jesus Christ expressed at the Last Supper. These are but a few examples of areas needing reformation.

An article I read led me to take a deeper look at Paul's epistle to the Corinthian church. He made profound assertions in it, and this epistle has always provided us with a rich resource when preparing sermons. In the present context, what strikes me most is that the church at Corinth, though a great cause of concern for Paul, should be an inspiration to us — a model better than many of the well-known, so-called better-run churches of the present time. Here are a few points along this line of thinking.

The first point to consider is that all the believers in the Corinthian church were new believers. It was, therefore, a church of new Christians: not people who had been there since its inception, not Christians transferred in from other churches. They came with no preconceived notions; there was no talk of "we did it differently in our church, and that is what this church should do." Can we possibly shed our own preconceived notions and look at worship afresh? Might that be one of the new norms?

Secondly, the new Christians in the Corinthian church participated in their faith, perhaps a little too exuberantly, but they all wanted to contribute to worship. Each had a prophecy, a word of knowledge, a tongue, a revelation, or an interpretation. They had no fixed "order" of worship to follow, service after service, as we do; they went for participation first, and order came later. Our situation at present is that we mostly have "an order of worship," which we have mechanically carried over into online worship too, but in both cases we lack much real participation. Can we come to an unformatted worship, allowing believers to worship in the true sense of reaching out to God? Perhaps this requires some unbiased thinking from all stakeholders — another new norm.

Thirdly, judged by the standards we have set ourselves, or that have been forced upon us, the believers at Corinth did everything wrong, not out of malice but out of enthusiasm. They practised communion wrongly, worshipped wrongly, bought meat from the wrong shops, flaunted their spiritual gifts, and tried to outdo one another in worship — the most enthusiastic church around. Paul had to temper their enthusiasm with instruction. There are many sections of the present-day church that are similarly enthusiastic on many matters; we do not

temper this with sound biblical instruction, as Paul did, but instead try to stifle it through authority. Can we possibly flatten the structures of hierarchy we have built for our own advantage, which those in authority are reluctant to hand down? It may sound a Herculean task, but remember that God has driven us out of the four walls of our churches in order to reform us. This could be another new norm.

Fourthly, we understand that the believers at Corinth practised their new faith while still growing in it. Their congregation was not made up of sinless spiritualists: there were drunkards, adulterers, the sexually promiscuous, those who bought from the pagan temple meat markets, and self-promoters. Quite a congregation — yet Paul never says they are not Christians. Rather, he urges them to grow in their faith by changing their inappropriate practices. We have been kept out of our churches and the fellowships we cherished, to give us time to introspect, transform, reform, purge all that is impure in us, and grow in faith and live by it. Will we take this opportunity seriously and do something about it? Or do we wish to fail Jesus? Act now — another new norm.

Paul directed the Corinthian church to adapt to the time and environment in which they lived. The temple of Aphrodite, the pagan goddess of love, stood in Corinth, so Paul sought to instil in them the true essence of Christian love. The temple of Asclepius, the pagan god of healing, also stood in Corinth, so it was no great stretch for them to believe that their new God was more powerful than their old, non-existent gods. Perhaps that explains the prominence of spiritual gifts at Corinth. Whatever the reason, the Corinthians connected the pagan world in which they lived to their newfound faith in Christ.

This is a most apt example for believers who form a minority in any region of the world, where the onslaught of a Satanic cult is on the increase, and where political masters make strategic changes that may harm believers and stifle their voices. Christians have but one rule-book, the gospel. Can we focus afresh on the teachings of Jesus Christ, in a new light and with a new purpose? Yet another new norm.

Finally, the church at Corinth was a real church. Paul patiently guided its members into practices that were more faithful expressions of their new life in Christ. We, in the twenty-first-century church, could learn a great deal from the Corinthians and from Paul. Do our bishops, pastors, elders and other church leaders have the mind of Paul? Can they relearn their theology? Or are we content merely to teach about Paul's ministry? This calls for a great reformation — another new norm.

One can hear whispers of such reformation, but we need to see real action on the ground. I wish I could witness such changes in my lifetime.

Amen.

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