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## A Protestant Reformation at Its 500th Birthday: Time to Clean House

In 2008, Christian historian Phyllis Tickle wrote the book *The Great Emergence*. This book makes a good case for a reconstruction of the Christian church taking place every 500 years throughout history.

We are there now! October 31, 2017, marked the 500th birthday of the Protestant Reformation. We are at a hinge point of history.

Protestantism has existed for 500 years without a major restart. Like other 500-year milestones in the history of Christianity, it is time to clean out the clutter in the attic of the local church and recalibrate the normal drift that occurs about every 500 years among Christians. The drift issues are not always the same. In history, God responds when His people get back to biblical basics. The theses below are the result of more than 30 years of diagnoses in 1,500 congregations in 65 denominations, independent, and nondenominational churches in the U.S. and Canada, as well as teaching events on six continents.

At the time of the Reformation, God provided a vehicle that allowed Protestant reformers to communicate to large numbers of people. In that era, it was the printing press. Today, it is social media. Every major move of God seems to occur with a communication breakthrough.

When Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on October 31, 1517, his intention was to

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start a discussion with those in his immediate area, allowing for those in faraway places to add to the discussion through letters. The purpose of his 95 theses was to begin a discussion, not a debate or argument.

This new set of 95 theses is for Christians who are sold out to the mission of Jesus Christ, to ask hard questions and consider difficult realities for the effectiveness of the mission of the church: to make disciples of all people.

Author and Christian leader Elmer Towns commented at a recent meeting of the Great Commission Research Network: “The Protestant Reformation was the Gutenberg Printing Press approach: top down. The New Reformation is the Google approach: bottom up.” Today God is moving through relationships, not a reformation, but a movement, a search-engine approach to meaning for life, an engaging, interactive discovery of Jesus Christ. It is not about an organization, the Roman Catholic Church. It’s about an organism, the Body of Christ.

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## **95 Theses for the New Reformation: 2017**

1. The God of the Bible is the God of today.
2. Anything God did in the Bible can and does occur today.
3. The Scripture is the only operational manual God has given to His people.
4. Biblical illiteracy is rampant among many Christians, especially when it comes to the purpose, function, and mission of the local church.
5. Jesus shaped His followers by teaching the culture of the Kingdom of God.
6. Drift from Kingdom culture greatly diminishes the mission effectiveness of Christians and churches.
7. The primary mission of the Christian church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
8. Jesus intends His disciples to become disciplers.
9. Most churches make church members; few Christians make disciples.
10. Most pastors do not disciple Christians but rely mostly on teaching and preaching.
11. No one, not even Jesus, can disciple a crowd. Discipling is an up-close and personal process. One-on-one discipling is the platform for spiritual renewal. Jesus modeled this.
12. Discipling disciples leads to growth by geometric progression.
13. Geometric progression is the pattern for recapturing the movement dimension of Christianity.

14. Ministry is the primary calling of every Christian.

15. Equipping Christians for ministry is the primary calling for pastors and church staff.

16. The primary way pastors and staff equip Christians for ministry includes on-the-job discipling.

17. When pastors and staff equip God's people for the work of ministry, the impact of ministry multiplies.

18. When ministry is multiplied, it extends to the social networks of all of the Christians in the church.

19. The primary mission field for your church is the sum total of those within the social networks of those in the church. The secondary mission field for every church is the rest of the world, which requires a secondary sending strategy.

20. Evangelism is not a committee or a program. It is a spiritual gift given only to some by the Holy Spirit.

21. Every Christian is a witness. A witness is one who tells what God has done in his/her life.

22. When Christians are equipped in the culture of witnessing, they tell their "God stories" in response to the needs, hurts, and challenges expressed by those in their social networks.

23. Christians learn to share "testimonies" when sharing "God stories" is the culture in their church.

24. Christians become effective witnesses when they learn the signs of receptivity, the "fertile soil."

25. Meeting felt needs is not the primary mission of the church.

26. Christians often feed the hungry without providing the Bread of Life. This is also accomplished by atheists and Muslims. Good works are great, but Christians uniquely point people to Jesus. Feeding the hungry or teaching little children in preschool are *good things* to do, but without the mission commitment, they are not *God things*. Christians often do *good things* as a feel-good placebo, but fall short of the eternal opportunities to introduce the Savior and bring real change beyond the symptoms.

27. Charity efforts in the name, by the motive of faith, are not acts of mission. Acts of mission include acts of charity, but also focus on eternal salvation as the ultimate objective.

28. Charity and acts of mercy create an excellent platform for sharing the saving good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

## KEY RESOURCES

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29. The church facility is not the destination for the Christian movement. It is the training ground and launchpad. The world is the destination.
30. Most churches will continue to be less effective unless they turn their church inside out, with focus toward the world.
31. The best place for the church office is in a strip mall where the church engages the marketplace.
32. The biblical strategy for the church is to “go,” not “you all come.”
33. Most Christians do not understand the secular nature of those who are unbelievers, or the marginalized position of the church. If Christians are in the process of reaching out to unbelievers, it is more effective, at first, to invite them to coffee and share personal stories of faith than it is to invite them to a worship service.
34. The primary platform for reaching unbelievers is relational, not institutional. Christians should consider the question, “Why would an unbeliever attend a worship service which has the purpose of worshiping a God they don’t believe in?”
35. Assimilation of an unbeliever into the life of faith occurs best prior to attending a worship service. The most productive environment for assimilation is a small group of Christians who develop relational connections and share God stories.
36. The key to productive outreach is the worldview that every Christian is a missionary, one who is sent by Christ, every day, to every place, to every person.
37. Most training institutions for pastors are contextualized to target a world that hasn’t existed for several hundred years.
38. Most equippers of pastors at seminaries do not model discipleship, which is more caught than taught.
39. Most of those who teach and train pastors place too much emphasis on academics and too little emphasis on character, Christian culture, and practical aspects of mission.
40. For every seminary-trained, ordained pastor, the Christian movement — to be effective — needs 20 to 30 “foot-soldier missionaries” equipped in a short-term (10 months) boot camp training, like SEND North America.
41. All Christians should be discipled to discover, develop, and use their spiritual gifts.
42. Spiritual gifts define the Christian’s role in the body of Christ.
43. Churches should abolish volunteer programs, which cheapen the work of ministry.
44. Volunteer efforts use people to meet the needs of the institution. This approach is foreign to the culture of the Kingdom of God.
45. Recruiting or pleading for Sunday school teachers, for example, is not the biblical pattern. The biblical pattern is for each Sunday school teacher to pray for and look for, until they find, a gifted potential disciple and invite that person to “come follow me.” This is one of the primary efforts of every Christian in ministry. It is followed by the steps of discipleship: I do/you watch, I do/you help, you do/I help, you do/I watch. The last step is to repeat the process of discipling — forever.

46. Christians are given supernatural gifts by the Holy Spirit and *called* into ministry. There are no “jobs” in the Kingdom of God, only callings.
47. Christians are disciplined into ministry through on-the-job equipping.
48. There is no biblical precedent in Scripture for elections to positions of leadership in Christ’s church. No one *called* to Christian ministry should “lose” an election in the presence of their Christian family. This is counterintuitive to the love of Jesus and the limitless opportunities to serve demonstrated by Jesus Christ.
49. Biblical churches are not operated by elected boards and councils, or by congregational meetings with votes. Those chosen to lead the congregation should be identified according to a lifestyle of demonstrated commitment to Bible study and the passion to become more like Christ, as well as the spiritual gift of leadership.
50. Decisions made by leaders are driven by consensus. When consensus is not achieved, the directive is to focus on Scripture and prayer. If consensus is still not achieved, the decision is delayed, with the intent to “wait on the Lord.”
51. The lead pastor of a congregation is called by Christ to lead the decision-making process.
52. Christians must to be liberated from the “busyness” that plagues most churches.
53. Rummage sales, craft sales, parade floats, bazaars, etc., rob energy and time from the mission of Christianity.
54. Fundraising activities drain the energy of those in the church, energy that should otherwise be directed to the primary mission of Christ, to “seek and save the lost.”
55. Jesus talked about money more often than prayer. Money represents our crystallized sweat. Many churches abuse the sensitive issues about money. For example, the youth sponsor a spaghetti dinner to earn money for a mission trip. The trip is a good idea. The way to finance it is horrible! Church people invite their unchurched friends and neighbors to the spaghetti dinner. Why? To pay for the mission trip! For many, it’s the only time unbelievers are invited to the church (except for rummage sales, bazaars, and a host of other fundraisers). The result? Non-Christians conclude, “All the church wants is my money.” Why wouldn’t they?
56. Research shows half of the Christians who attend churches are unclear about the primary purpose or mission of the church: to make disciples, by going, baptizing, and teaching. The majority of people in churches view the primary purpose as providing a place for fellowship to share God’s love *with one another*. This is the definition of a spiritual country club.
57. Most churches try to grow by advertising, providing the latest technology and signs, the best locations, and awesome websites. These methods most often attract: (1) Christians who are unhappy with their present church or (2) lapsed Christians who have been away from the church and have had a recent traumatic life challenge. To reach the *unchurched*, congregational leaders will equip every member to cultivate their own mission field of relationships, their social networks.
58. Many Christians, as well as some experts, consultants, and authors, support *programs* that will grow their congregations. Yet, Jesus clearly told the disciples: “I will build My church,” implying that His followers do NOT grow the church. Jesus did command them to “make disciples,” which is a process of enculturation away from worldly or secular culture. It is counterintuitive to most Christian leaders that if they focused on growing disciples, their church would grow exponentially, as disciples live the life of “being church” in mission for Christ, 24/7. It just works!

59. Many Christians have come to believe two lies: (1) It is the pastor's (or staff's) job to grow the church, and (2) most unchurched people are not interested in spiritual matters.
60. Consequently, Christians abandon thousands of opportunities every day among the relationships in their social networks and fail to recognize those relationships as divine appointments for the life-changing gospel of Jesus.
61. The majority of churches have failed to contextualize the styles and delivery systems of faith to the contemporary culture in which they live. One contextual issue is the use of outdated words that feel warm and fuzzy to lifelong Christians, but communicate to unbelievers that God is old, out of date, and foreign. Unbelievers do not have a Christian history, yet represent the majority of those in our primarily secular culture.
62. Many church buildings reflect "old style" architecture. This medium sends a message. Some churches still have pews — an outdated approach to seating. Many worship spaces are long and narrow, a style of cathedrals built for a century without voice amplification.
63. Christianity in every nation goes through spiritual cycles. When Christianity flourishes, the defining element is *faithfulness* by the majority of people to the culture developed by Jesus Christ: They are citizens of His Kingdom. In time, drift occurs from the basic beliefs and practices of Christian faith.

God raises prophets who call His people to "repent" — to turn around, turn back. For a while, most people ignore the prophets. Predictably, civilization deteriorates, crimes escalate, morals disintegrate, and corruption disrupts the quality of life to a degree that discourages most people. This leads to massive hopelessness. "I don't think it's going to be very good for my grandchildren," people say.

This is followed by a period of receptivity. Among Christian believers, some begin to express "holy discontent," or "spiritual restlessness." These are early adopters for church renewal who believe, "What we do isn't working anymore and doesn't match up with Scripture. Our church is declining — and the median age is rising. We're not reaching the youth. We're not keeping the younger generation."

This leads to repentance — a willingness to change worn-out styles and approaches. This leads to more renewal, which impacts middle adopters and late adopters in the church.

As many churches experience renewal, God responds to the prayers of the faithful. He brings revival — the exponential, unexplainable, explosive growth of the Kingdom of God.

64. During seasons of spiritual downturn, many Christians lose the element of "miracle faith," as described in Hebrews 11, even though they may retain personal faith for salvation. This miracle faith is symbolized by evidence of supernatural occurrences like healing, so that the prayers of Christians focus not only on God guiding doctors and nurses, but also asking for God's direct intervention. Preaching and teaching drifts away from Scripture passages that radically challenge secular narratives. In the process, Christians wane from their "confidence" (a word, from the Latin, which means, "with faith") to share their spiritual beliefs boldly among unbelievers in their social networks. The Christian movement loses impact.
65. Prayer is formalized with routine formulas spoken from rational memory rather than spiritually moved hearts. Christians are intimidated by secular culture and refrain from sharing their faith or praying with someone in public. This fear is imagined and unfounded.
66. Most Christians have not been disciplined (equipped) to share their faith or pray for someone

spontaneously. These are behaviors learned by being disciplined under the guidance of a more seasoned Christian.

67. Every revival is preceded by fervent prayer. Few Christians pray for revival on a regular basis. Few Christians are challenged by church leaders to pray for revival.
68. Few Christians, pastors, or staff leaders have ever been trained to pray by laying on hands and anointing with oil, even though this is practiced in Scripture.
69. Most pastors and Christians have not been trained in deliverance ministry. Many Christians have subconsciously relegated Satan to the category of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.
70. Many Christians find preaching to be aloof, academic, sterile, and lacking engagement. Most Christians report having the same Gospel message, packaged in fifty different ways each year.
71. Church people are masterful at symptom-solving, but few deal with the root causes of what ails the church and society. Ironically, the causative issues Jesus died for revolve around spirituality. Christians swat flies while camels are marching.
72. Jesus is the Master of change: new life, darkness to light, despair to hope, healing for hurts. Ironically, Christians are notorious for perpetuating systems, songs, prayers, habits, styles, and traditions, long after their usefulness has been exhausted.
73. Many Christians confuse style and substance. On the one hand, they perpetuate style as if it is sacred. But style is the packaging, the delivery system. Jesus came in the flesh, looking like the people He reached in first-century Israel. This is a huge change for the Son of God: from heaven to earth. It is the ultimate demonstration that God wants no foreign style to get in the way of salvation. Ironically, many Christians are resistant to changing styles, in order to present the Gospel in a relevant way.
74. The substance of faith is the Word of God. The substance is the Word who became flesh, but Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Sadly, there are churches and Christians who want to fit in with culture. They sync up with cultural norms in a way that departs from the Word that never changes. It is really strange that some Christians — whole denominations — perpetuate out-of-date styles, but reshape substance to avoid “offending” some cultural trends. This is a certain formula for decline and death of congregations and whole denominations. Some forget that Christ and His truth are offensive to unbelievers. You can't get around the substance, or you lose the purpose of faith. But you can ease the message by delivering it in a system (packaging) that speaks to the heart language of those you are trying to reach. It has often been said, “Methods are many; principles are few. Methods change, but principles never do.”
75. The heart language of a target group is the language in which they dream. To force Spanish-speaking people to learn English to hear about Jesus is cultural chauvinism.
76. When a proposal is made by church leaders to add staff or facilities, some Christians immediately ask, “What is it going to cost?” Leaders then feel obligated to explain the costs and their plans and hopes to fund the project. Almost always, no one says, “What is God's will?” If God's people believe what they pray in the Lord's Prayer (“Your will be done”), then what God wants is most important. It is the first issue to be addressed. If it's God's will, it will be financially covered. God pays for what He orders.

77. God's approach to generosity is not equal giving, but equal sacrifice. In practical terms, this is reflected by giving to God's work by a percentage, not a dollar amount. Only 26 percent of Christians approach financial support for Kingdom work as a percentage. The majority, 74 percent, look at it as a dollar amount. This is devastating for funding God's work. The majority of Christians are ignorant (or defiant) of God's plan and approach to funding mission and ministry.
78. Congregations struggling for financial support often turn to fundraisers. This becomes a deterrent to mission and ministry. Leaders ask people to bake pies to sell. This becomes a distraction of time, energy, and money to the primary purpose of the church. Many Christians treat this distraction as sacred.
79. Many congregations add a deterrent to effective missions by selling pies, used clothing, and car washes to non-Christians. The message to the "buyers," who may not be believers, is that the church "goes public" only to support its own administrative needs. It gives the impression that the mission of the local church is to perpetuate itself. How does this relate to Jesus' teaching, "Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it"?
80. Christians often baptize fundraisers as "spiritual" by using the money for missions. They sell baked goods at the local fair to sponsor the youth mission trip. This becomes a financial transaction with the people at the fair, many of whom are unbelievers. Biblical mission in the spirit of Christ is totally absent. Jesus says, "My Kingdom is not of (not like) this world." But the church becomes, in the perception of the "buyers," no different than the rest of the vendors.
81. When Christians support a youth mission trip by selling baked goods (or whatever), it robs the Christians involved from the spiritual privilege of mission investment. If Christians in the church personally support each young person, it provides a spiritual partnership. It should also provide a support accountability lesson for the youth, who would report results to support partners after the trip. Those reports would reinforce mission zeal among support partners. Feeding strangers baked goods at the fair enhances a secular commerce worldview. It actually detracts from the mission mentality of those in the church.
82. Jesus invested three years, devoting much of His energy to developing Kingdom culture in the lives of His disciples. They became Kingdom people. It was not a "program you do." It was all about being transformed into someone you are, 24/7, for life.
83. While many churches are infatuated with quick-fix programs, Jesus focused on growing the children of God.
84. Jesus developed a following who were, by definition, different from the ways of the world. Many churches have drifted into a maze of approaches, activities, and directives imported from the secular world. These secular efforts, baptized as sacred, represent a culture that is ineffective in reaching the world for Christ — which is the (theoretical) objective of most churches. These secular nuances are subtle, but deadly — they kill churches, slowly, over time.
85. The movement launched by Jesus uses the infectious principle. Christianity is designed by its Leader to be a Jesus epidemic.
86. Unbelievers rarely become believers by a process of membership into an institution. Christianity is "caught," not like you catch a ball, but like you catch the flu.
87. The expansion of the Christian movement occurs when spiritually infectious Christians relationally interact with those in their relationship circles.



88. Christianity grows by exponential explosion, like an epidemic. Church leaders focus on nurturing this holy infection in the lives of Christians. Then Christians nurture this holy infection in one another.
89. Programs and activities that duplicate the secular world exhaust Christians and inoculate them from the discipleship model of Jesus. He commanded the model when He said, “Go, make disciples.” This approach is not a quick fix. It is more like raising a family.
90. The church is not a corporation, even though it is “not for profit.” The metaphors used in the New Testament describe the church as a living organism. When all the parts work as they should, under Christ — the Head of the body — the body grows and builds itself up in love.
91. Developing Kingdom culture focuses on the deconstruction of the culture of the world and imprinting followers of Jesus with His DNA, clearly described in the New Testament.
92. Many Christians are biblically illiterate about Kingdom culture. Only 36 percent attend a regularly scheduled Bible study. The evidence indicates that, while listening to a preaching message once a week is helpful, Kingdom culture is more effectively caught and nurtured when there is relational discussion about spiritual issues, the opportunity to hear God stories from other disciples, and encouragement to share challenges and wrestle with spiritual difficulties. Preaching is great. It is just not enough.
93. Kingdom culture includes Kingdom values: what is really important and what is not — in life, at work, with money, about the use of time — all aspects of daily life in this secular world.
94. Kingdom culture is what you demonstrate as truth, not in theory, but in practice. It also reveals your attitude — your posture before God. Christian culture reflects your priorities, what you will consistently do first. Discipling presents the impactful platform for developing worldviews: how you see the world — through the eyes of Jesus, the King, the Ruler of the universe — and the way you understand the world of the church and how it works.
95. The hope for any society is not the government, science, or personal development. Jesus came to redeem this fallen world. He prepared disciples to be influencers of what is best for humankind, for society, for the planet. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowered the community platform for disciples: the local church. It is the gathering of believers equipped and commissioned to impact others. The healthy church is the hope of the world.