

Toward a Classic Strategy for Evangelical Renewal

Version 3.2

While a vibrant Christianity continues to thrive in several contexts throughout the world, there is a widespread concern that much of the North American evangelicalism lacks both spiritual vitality and missional impact (cf. John Dickerson’s *The Great Evangelical Recession* for a recent and typical lament). Though some churches are growing numerically, many believers are marked by a disconcerting superficiality of commitment that belies the life-changing power of the Christian gospel. Compromise can also be detected in failures to resist cultural pressures to dilute those key theological truths and ethical commitments that have characterized historic Christian orthodoxy. This situation is not unique to our present time and culture—it is a pattern that has expressed itself one way or another in nearly every generation.

How should Christians respond when the beauty of biblical Christianity is largely eclipsed by a spiritually compromised Church? Both biblical precedent and subsequent church history commend the path of a fresh commitment to the prayerful pursuit of God’s renewing grace in reformation and revival, with a special emphasis on restoring the biblical gospel to its rightful place of centrality in our faith and practice.

We understand the biblical gospel to be the good news of God’s glorious victory in Christ over the powers of sin and death, the saving benefits of which are received by faith alone in Christ alone. This gospel is central to the biblical revelation, described in terms of promise and fulfillment. The progression of creation/fall/redemption/consummation thus comprises the essence of the biblical story and must be central in our interpretation of it. Furthermore, the biblical text reflects the centrality of the gospel and its major themes not only with respect to salvation but also to matters of sanctification and ministry methodology. The recognition and replication of this multi-faceted emphasis is what we mean by “gospel-centered transformation.”

The following document is an expression of Western Seminary’s attempt to stimulate and support the effort of restoring gospel-centeredness to the Church so that we more faithfully do God’s work in God’s way, regardless of generational or geographical setting

A Working Definition of Key Terms

“Reformation” = “the ongoing process of bringing the Church’s faith and practice into closer conformity to biblical truth”

“Revival” = “an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit bringing, for a season, a dramatic and widespread redemptive impact upon a region (i.e., both the evangelism of non-believers and the sanctification of believers rapidly increase in both breadth and depth)”; the initial out-breaking, intensity, and duration of this special work of God are governed by His sovereign will (in contrast to “revivalism,” which conditions them either solely or primarily upon human activity)

Both reformation and revival are key components of what we understand to be “spiritual renewal.” “Renewal” thus speaks of the truth-driven, divinely-empowered revitalization of the faithfulness and fruitfulness of God’s people. While it encompasses bringing this fresh vitality to existing congregations, it is not limited to them in scope (i.e., planting new churches is also a key element of this strategy).

Because both are ultimately dependent upon God’s grace, we prayerfully work towards reformation while prayerfully seeking revival.

What Are the Key Elements in Promoting Renewal?

A climate in which renewal is sincerely desired and passionately sought

An external, missional focus that is kingdom-based, holistic and global in scope, and has at its heart a simple process for nurturing disciples of Christ

An affirmation of believers exerting salt and light influence through a wide variety of vocations/roles, and an emphasis upon pastoral ministry’s responsibility to equip these believers for that influence

Church structures that incorporate biblical essentials in a form contextualized for optimum missional effectiveness

The systematic proclamation (both preaching and teaching) of God’s word that:

is expository in content, transformational in intent and authentically earnest in delivery

emphasizes those doctrines that appropriately exalt God and humble humanity (e.g., God’s holiness and grace; human depravity; justification by faith alone; God’s sovereignty/human responsibility; the supremacy of Christ and His imminent glorious return; the inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture; et al.) with a view towards converting the unregenerate and further consecrating the regenerate



is sensitively contextualized so that God's revelation is made more understandable without being compromised to become more acceptable

Worship that is shaped by God's self-revelation in Scripture and focused upon His person, power, holiness, majesty and beauty, while uniting every human faculty in grateful devotion

Extraordinary prayer (both individual and corporate) that is evangelically ecumenical and focused on pleading the promises and power of God

Pastoral leadership that is well-trained (with respect to exemplary character, biblical knowledge, and ministerial skill), stable (vs. serial short-term stays), and committed to leading the church towards spiritual renewal and missional faithfulness

Pastoral care that ministers to people individually according to their spiritual need, supplemented by the involvement of believers in small groups/micro-communities that focus on practicing the biblical "one anothers" so as to promote both visible unity and spiritual growth

An intentional focus on leadership development so that future generations have an ample supply of faithful shepherds

Utilizing "ecclesiola in ecclesia" ("little church within the church"), viz. nurturing a group of like-minded renewal agents who progressively spread enthusiasm for renewal from within until it reaches critical mass; thus church leaders should be encouraged to begin renewal work with small supportive groups within the congregation and encourage those within that group to redeem opportunities to enlist others

Maintaining, to the extent humanly possible, a regenerate church membership kept pure and healthy by the regular practice of biblical discipline and the means of grace provided by God to sanctify His own (including the consistent practice of the ordinances)

What Are the Most Dangerous Perils That Hinder Renewal?

Historic roadblocks to the experience of renewal include pessimism about its possibility (sometimes sourced in theological convictions, especially in the areas of eschatology and/or pneumatology) or complacency that is overly comfortable with the status quo. Richard Lovelace introduced two useful categories of additional hindrances for which we must also repent if present:

Destructive Enculturation (i.e., allowing worldliness to shape Christian faith and practice)

Relativism (denial of moral/theological absolutes)

Subjectivism (making individual preferences or experience the touchstone of “truth”; e.g., some forms of mysticism)

Liberalism (disparaging/redefining Christian truths that are incompatible with the prevailing thought forms of a given age)

Materialism (failure to fulfill stewardship responsibilities by instead hoarding possessions and overvaluing financial wealth/security)

Sensualism (pursuing various forms of physical pleasure that violate God’s moral safeguards)

Nominalism (professions of Christianity that do not seem to be genuine, or which fail to have the expected impact upon one’s life; also includes various expressions of syncretism)

Pragmatism (giving supreme value to, and trust in, what appears to “work” in ministry; defining success and seeking to achieve it according to cultural values and faddish trends rather than according to the transcendent, counter-intuitive and counter-cultural ways in which God accomplishes His work)

Protective Enculturation (i.e., Christian insularity, isolation or myopia caused by an over-reaction to the perils of worldliness or some other perceived threat prompting fear and insecurity)

Hyper-fundamentalism (i.e., extreme separatism, anti-intellectualism, and counter-productive emphasis on secondary matters of faith and practice)

Traditionalism (inability to adapt wisely to changing contexts by preserving forms and functions of ministry that are at best incidental rather than biblically essential)

Supplemental Notes

To overcome widespread biblical illiteracy, additional strategies that help others understand the major themes and movements of Scripture will likely be needed (e.g., the centrality of the gospel as it unfolds in biblical revelation). These strategies may include restoring “Bible Readings” to worship services; distributing personal Bible study materials; preaching and teaching that is Christ-centered; etc.

Especially in churches with congregational polity, lay leaders must have sufficient theological literacy and spiritual courage to provide a protective buffer between a pastoral leader/staff trying to effect



renewal and those in the congregation who may use their influence to resist such efforts. It is thus critical that biblical criteria for lay leadership be honored in selecting those leaders.

“The brightest light attracts the most bugs”—so expect Satan to try to discredit genuine renewal by introducing elements of distortion or distraction (e.g., fanaticism), or to discourage it by overt or covert persecution.

Healthy family units are disproportionately significant to cultural/societal renewal, so a ministry priority needs to be placed on strengthening family relationships.