

Conversations for a Modern Reformation

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Over a decade ago, the U.S. military entered Somalia on a peace-keeping mission, but threats to troops and other factors gradually transformed it into a vague enterprise. A Washington Post writer working on that story coined the phrase "mission creep," which is a good analogy for what is happening in the church today. Just as we've taken our eye off the ball when it comes to getting the gospel right, we have expanded the church's mission to include anything and everything we think might have a transforming impact on the world. Our goal is to call churches back to a discussion of the following themes. We want to get you talking, so here are some conversation starters we think will help create a modern reformation.

Our mission creep today takes many forms, but they share one thing in common: a distraction from the vision, mission, and strategic plan that Christ mandated in favor of our own. In short, we are "off point" in our message and confused about our mission and its methods. With each of the following six "conversations," we explore the core convictions that have brought reformation and renewal to the church in all ages. Our goal is not only to include you in the conversation, but also to spark your own reforming conversations with your extended networks.

Recover the "Solas"

The first topic of conversation aims at a recovery of the solas in the church's message, ministry, and mission. The five solas of the reformation are more than slogans to be recovered; they are the messages that will renew the church's mission in our age.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was an important effort to recover the biblical gospel of Jesus Christ. It was marked by a focused attempt to understand the doctrines that comprise the gospel message. Salvation is revealed in Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), accomplished by Christ alone (*solo Christo*) by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*), to God's glory alone (*solus Deo gloria*). Just as the medieval church obscured God's Word and work by inventing new doctrines and practices that lacked biblical warrant, today's Protestants are just as likely to turn to other sources—marketing principles, psychology, pop culture, sociology, and other disciplines—not merely to inform but to determine the content and methods of preaching, worship, outreach, and discipleship. The truth of Scripture can't be reduced to a few slogans, of course, but these solas are still helpful for our narcissistic age because they redirect our attention away from us and our work to God and his work of redemption in Christ.

Law & Gospel

Gospel-centered preaching that rightly distinguishes between law and gospel rescues the church from "christless christianity" while enabling Christians to grow in grace.

In God's Word we hear both law (commands to be obeyed) and gospel (good news to be believed). The perennial temptation of the church in every age is to confuse these two words. Sometimes the law is dissolved into the gospel; more frequently, the gospel becomes absorbed into the law. We often hear calls to "live the gospel" or even to "be the gospel." In effect, this means that our own conformity to the righteousness that God demands becomes the message, rather than Christ's life, death, and resurrection. When God speaks his law, we finally have a true measure of our lives. There is no room for excuses. We have all fallen short of the glory of God, not only in what we have done but in what we have failed to do.

Yet when God speaks his gospel, it is a strange and surprising announcement. Although God could justly condemn all of us, he has planned and executed our redemption at the greatest personal cost: the suffering of his own Son. In the fullness of time, the Son became flesh. He fulfilled all righteousness during his life, in our place, and then bore our curse and was raised on the third day as the glorified head of his body, the church. All of our righteousness, holiness, and redemption are found in Christ alone; and because he lives, we too will be raised in glory beyond the reach of sin and death.

The law promises life on the condition of perfect obedience; the gospel promises life in Christ alone, through faith alone. Only in Christ can any sinner dare to stand unashamed before the face of God.

The sixteenth-century Reformers recognized that this distinction lies at the heart of all true preaching, teaching, ministry, and discipleship. Martin Luther said that making this distinction clear is the highest and most difficult mark of a sound preacher, and Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, warned that "confusion of the law and the gospel lies at the heart of all the errors that have corrupted the church."

Much of the emphasis in Christian circles today is on imperatives: commands and exhortations, spiritual workout plans, and agendas for personal and social transformation. In many cases, consciences are bound not to God's law but to individual agendas. In this way, the gospel's indicatives (announcing what the Triune God has accomplished for our salvation) are taken for granted and left behind, as if the gospel itself were not the source of all numerical and spiritual growth. The gospel is not merely a message that people need to hear to become converted; it is "the power of God unto salvation" in every moment of the Christian life. The commands of Scripture continue to direct, but only the gospel gives. As we mature in the Christian life, the goal is not to move beyond the gospel but to grow deeper in it, understanding more and more what it means to be part of God's new creation: justified, sanctified, and one day glorified.

As Christians from different denominations and confessions, we plead with all churches to maintain a clearer distinction between the law and the gospel: (1) in preaching, so that God's holy claim and will may be known, and that his grace in Christ rather than our inner experience or holiness will be our confidence; (2) in baptism and the Lord's Supper, so that we will no longer reduce God's means of grace to our means of commitment or expressions of our own piety and inner sanctity; (3) in worship, so that God's speech takes priority over our speech, and God's service to us has priority over our pious intentions, expressions, and activity; (4) in evangelistic outreach, so that we no longer substitute our own ascending "steps to victory" in our own lives for the announcement of God's descent to us in mercy and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ; and (5) in preparing believers for works of love and service to their neighbors in their callings, not as a selfish concern to satisfy God but as the free embrace of others simply for their own benefit as forgiven and renewed people.

Missional & Vocational

A properly missional mind-set will identify the church as distinct from but engaged with the world, encouraging individual Christians to pursue their God-honoring vocations.

The church is a visible society, a new humanity "called out of darkness into [God's] marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). Living in exile, much like Israel in Babylon, believers are called to gather regularly in the public assembly and to conduct themselves with love and service to one another, their families, and their non-Christian neighbors. Having been baptized into a new citizenship in the age to come, we live as "strangers and exiles" in the empires of this fading age, longing for "a better country—that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:13, 16).

The visible church has always been tempted by the lure of secular power and glory, confusing the kingdom of Christ with the kingdoms of this age. No part of the world is independent of God's lordship: "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it" (Ps. 24:1). Nevertheless, the Triune God exercises his sovereignty in different ways in each kingdom, by providence and common grace in the civil realm, and by miracle and saving grace through the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Unlike the church in the Old Testament, the new covenant church is not identified with a particular race or nation. It is "a kingdom of priests" that has been "purchased for God" by Christ's blood "from every race, nation, and tongue" (Rev. 5:9). In this time between Christ's two advents, the church does not exercise a temporal dominion, driving the ungodly out of God's holy land (Matt. 5:38–48). All lands are common; only the temple consisting of Christ and his people is holy. This new international people, made one by Christ's Word and Spirit, is never to be confused with any nation, culture, race, or civil order. The ministry that Christ exercises through his church's officers is restricted to proclaiming his Word, baptizing, teaching, administering Communion, prayer, and caring for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the saints.

At the same time, the whole body of Christ—served by this ministry—is "salt" and "light" in the world, dispersed throughout the week to love and serve our neighbors in the world. Believers are called to godliness in the fellowship of the saints and to witness to God's grace by word and deed. They are exhorted to spread the fragrance of Christ also in their families, neighborhoods, and vocations. They are called to pray for their secular rulers and to obey the laws of the land and "to aspire to live quietly, and to mind [their] own affairs, and to work with [their] hands...so that [they] may live properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one" (1 Thess. 4:11–12).

There are many things that believers are called to do in the world that go beyond the mandate Christ has given to his visible church. Where Scripture is silent, believers are free to exercise their Christian liberty in judgments concerning temporal affairs. Therefore, in every neighborhood and nation, Christians should exercise their earthly citizenship with concern for the common welfare of their neighbors—especially those who are vulnerable to injustice, poverty, and sickness.

Word & Sacrament

Word and sacrament ministry realigns the church's mission and identity from program-driven pragmatism to the means of grace that Christ has ordained for the creation, sustenance, and expansion of his kingdom.

It is often said today that Christ gave his church an unchanging message with ever-changing methods of delivery. This assumption, however, fails to reckon with the fact that in his Great Commission, Jesus gave us both as inseparable aspects of a single mandate. We are bound to his Word not only in terms of what we say but also in our strategies, which our Lord identifies as proclamation of the gospel, the sacraments, and "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." These are therefore the marks of a true church. Where these marks are present, Christ is exercising his saving reign.

Perennially tempted with "mission creep," churches are easily drawn to pragmatism in their methods of evangelism, worship, and outreach. There are myriad resources for personal spiritual development, yet the means of grace that Christ identifies explicitly as essential for his embassy in the world are often marginalized or ignored. Even in public worship, human creativity (which always leads to idolatry) is often prized over faithfulness to our Lord's commands. Instead of the means of God's grace, preaching often collapses into moralism, baptism becomes a testimony to our commitment, and the Supper becomes another opportunity for us to do something: to feel, reflect, remember, experience, and rededicate ourselves. Of course, there is an important place for our response in the covenant, but it is just that: a response to what God has done and to what he has delivered to us through his *means of grace*.

Attracting our own converts (or consumers) is not the same thing as making disciples of Jesus Christ. Our prayer for all of our churches is that they will recover their confidence in the ministry that Christ has ordained for the expansion of his kingdom, gathering regularly "for the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). This is not only the description of public worship for those who are already converted, but also the means of making and sustaining disciples throughout the world.

Catechesis

In order to know what they believe and why they believe it, Christians need to be well catechized and grounded in the central doctrines of the faith.

In his pastoral visits to the homes of parishioners, Martin Luther was astounded to find that few knew the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, or the Apostles' Creed. He therefore wrote his Small Catechism. Other Reformers followed suit, and generations of Christian families have been saturated with biblical teaching through catechisms to this day. Studies show, however, a staggering ignorance of the basic teachings of the Christian faith even among professing evangelicals. We need to get

beyond shallow slogans and movements, grounding ourselves and our children in "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints."

Given the statistics we regularly encounter, Luther's description of the desperate need for serious doctrinal instruction (catechesis) in his day sounds eerily relevant. In the preface to his *Small Catechism*, the Reformer explains,

The deplorable, miserable condition which I discovered lately when I, too, was a visitor, has forced and urged me to prepare [publish] this Catechism, or Christian doctrine, in this small, plain, simple form. Mercy! Good God! What manifold misery I beheld! The common people, especially in the villages, have no knowledge whatever of Christian doctrine, and, alas! Many pastors are altogether incapable and incompetent to teach. Nevertheless, all maintain that they are Christians, have been baptized and receive the holy Sacraments. Yet they do not understand and cannot even recite either the Lord's Prayer, or the Creed, or the Ten Commandments; they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs; and yet, now that the Gospel has come, they have nicely learned to abuse all liberty like experts....O ye bishops! to whom this charge has been committed by God, what will ye ever answer to Christ for having so shamefully neglected the people and never for a moment discharged your office?

Luther implores pastors "to have pity on the people who are entrusted to you, and to help us inculcate the Catechism upon the people, and especially upon the young."

Following the example of the ancient church, the Reformation restored catechesis. So crucial was catechesis to the Reformers that they personally assumed responsibility for teaching it to their youth. The catechism was also taught in the home, usually after dinner, as parents—especially fathers—took responsibility for their "little parish," as Luther called the family. Instead of lazily accommodating superficial and nominal profession, pastors and parents accepted responsibility for raising God's people to the standard of honest Christian conviction.

It is often said today that Christians, at least evangelicals, know the truth but do not live it. Numerous surveys, however, contradict the first premise. In a recent Pew study, for example, evangelical Christians trailed atheists, agnostics, Jews, and Mormons in knowing what Christianity teaches. And as far as knowing why they believe it, most cannot articulate anything beyond their personal experience.

Many pastors, teachers, elders, and parents are preoccupied with pragmatic success and fail to take seriously the cry of their own parishioners for deeper, fuller, richer teaching. Participating in the more general cultural distractions, youth groups often fail to connect heirs of the covenant with the wider communion of saints. Not surprisingly, now well over half of those raised in evangelical churches are unchurched by their sophomore year in college. "How could they be otherwise than slothful if you sleep and are silent?" Luther's indictment should ring in our ears today.

Therefore look to it, ye pastors and preachers. Our office is now become a different thing from what it was under the Pope; it is now become serious and salutary. Accordingly, it now involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trials, and, in addition thereto, little reward and gratitude in the world. But Christ Himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully. To this end may the Father of all grace help us, to whom be praise and thanks forever through Christ, our Lord! Amen.

Confessional

Scripture not only speaks of the personal faith of every believer in Christ, but also of "The faith once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Paul gives us the proper coordinates in 2 Timothy. After reciting the gospel of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, he exhorts his young apprentice to "hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the holy spirit who dwells in us" (2 Tim. 1:8–14). We confess the faith together, across all times and places.

From the beginning, the early Christians summarized the faith together in creedal formulas. Paul speaks of such a formula in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4 as something that was passed on to him and,

through him, to the whole church. These are the things "of first importance: that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again on the third day."

The magisterial Reformers preached, taught, and defended the catholic faith defined in the ecumenical symbols of Nicaea, Chalcedon, and the Apostles' Creed. At the same time, they interpreted this common faith according to the evangelical insights and emphases rediscovered in the Reformation. Lutheran and Reformed churches bore witness to this faith in confessions and catechisms. Instead of reducing the Christian faith to a few fundamentals or private opinions, these rich statements offer a systematic way of understanding, experiencing, and living God's truth. This evangelical interpretation of catholic Christianity is confessed by Lutherans in the documents included in the Book of Concord. Continental Reformed churches adopted the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort, while the Church of England adopted the Thirty-Nine Articles, and Presbyterians adopted the Westminster Confession and Small and Larger Catechisms. Calvinistic Baptists also drew up confessions and catechisms, while Arminian Baptists generally refused to subscribe to any common creed.

As is especially evident in today's context, it's one thing to adopt a confession and quite another to be confessional—to think, witness, live, and worship consistently with our profession. A confession can be a historical document that we leave in the vault most of the time, or it can be a living witness to God's unchanging gospel from generation to generation. Furthermore, a confession can be reduced to a legal contract we use to exclude brothers and sisters, or it can be a family covenant that unites us, a hymn the saints sing to lure others to the feast. In the first use, a confession threatens to usurp Scripture's normative authority; in the second approach, it is the "amen" of Christ's body to the Word of its Living Head.

Although it places boundaries on what we affirm and reject, being confessional liberates us from the peculiar teachings, rules, and forms of worship that are promoted by charismatic leaders and powerful personalities. There are many things the confessions do not settle that are left to Christian liberty. We are not at the whim of persons or movements; no less than the rest of us, our leaders are bound to the Scriptures as they are confessed according to the settled judgment of many churches across diverse times and places.

The gospel has a particular form for its faithful repetition in the life of God's people. In Paul's advice in 2 Timothy 1, the church today hears its own imperative: "Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus." There are sound ways of stating our common faith. "Hold fast" is a command to preserve, not to innovate. "Guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us," he concludes (v. 14). The truth must be guarded so that it may be dispensed to others in ever-widening circles as the life-giving Word that it always is in its very essence. Every generation needs to return to the well of God's Word, not merely nodding to the confession of others but making it their own. Far from exhibiting sectarianism, the "form of sound words" serves the unity and mission of the church in the world.

For a Modern Reformation

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