

A 21st Century Reformation: Back to First Principles

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The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation left a profound mark not only on the church of Jesus Christ but also on the history of the Western world and, as a sequel, on the history of the whole world. Today, the state of the Christian church in the West and beyond is such that a similar reformation is urgently needed.

A key problem of evangelical churches all over the world today is the unilateral emphasis on numerical growth. For the sake of it the Gospel is watered down, church services are turned into entertainment shows, and Jesus' commandment to make disciples is replaced by a strategy to enroll as many "converts" as possible. In my frequent travels I find an increasing number of megachurches with a very high rate of numerical growth but with very a low concern for faithfulness to the whole Gospel and the ethical dimensions of whole-life discipleship. One wonders what has happened with the vision of whole-life discipleship projected by the First International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne I, held in Switzerland in 1974) in its celebrated Lausanne Covenant.

Lausanne I has been regarded by many as the most significant world evangelical gathering held in the 20th century. There is no exaggeration in saying that the significance of this global conference was mainly in the rediscovery of the absolute importance of the socio-political dimensions of the Gospel for the life and mission of the church. According to paragraph five of the Lausanne Covenant, because 'God is both the Creator and Judge of all people,' Christians 'should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for the liberation of men and women from every kind of oppression.' From this perspective, the mission of the Church must not be reduced to the oral proclamation of the Gospel -- 'evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.' The traditional dichotomy between evangelism and social responsibility is thus practically discarded.

Several consultations organized during the late 1970s and early 1980s by the theological commission of the Lausanne Movement ? a commission chaired by John Stott ? explored in depth the implications of these and similar statements made in the Covenant. The various statements that emerged from these consultations provide both a solid basis and a very rich agenda for Christian action in the world.

Unfortunately, Lausanne II, held in Manila in 1980, failed to follow up Lausanne I with regard to a holistic understanding of the Christian mission. To a large extent, it resulted in a reaffirmation of the traditional separation between evangelism and social action that has so deeply affected Western Christendom, especially in its evangelical expression, for the last couple of centuries.

One big question with regards to The Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town this year is whether it will simply be a rubber stamp of Lausanne II, or whether it will allow the Spirit to use God's Word and thus become a stepping stone for the urgently needed reformation of the church in the spirit of Lausanne I.

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