

The New Reformation
General Assembly
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My name is Scott McKee and I am the pastor of Ward Church in Northville, a western suburb of Detroit not far from here. It's a post I have held now for five months. I am an expert on nothing.

You may know something about our church. The dynamic Bartlett Hess started Ward Church in 1956 as a suburban satellite of Ward Memorial Church in Detroit. We were doing multi-site before anyone knew what that was. In 1968 the suburban church became a full church in its own right and entered a season of explosive growth. The 1970s and 80s were an amazing ministry run that included the planting of four daughter churches, an aggressive ministry to singles and divorced people, and an attendance peak of 5,000 people at a time when churches just didn't get that big.

But something happened over the last 20 years and that is: the world changed. The methods that fueled our growth in the 1970s didn't seem to be as effective anymore. The needs and interests of people seemed to shift. Our congregation grew older, and we entered a season of decline that continues to this day.

Some of you are in situations similar to mine. You pastor a church with a glorious history. And you wonder if you will be remembered as simply, "one of guys that came after the glory years." Quite a legacy. I am one untimely born.

I have a great deal of respect for Bart Hess, the founding pastor of our church and one of the founding pastors of this denomination called the EPC. For years I admired him from a distance. But it is not easy following a strong charisma-laden founding pastor. Some of you know that.

Dr. Hess, I am told, was a great preacher, teacher, care-giver, church planter, visionary, and manager. He was a tireless servant of Christ, a published author, and a godly man. His shadow still looms large in the hallways of Ward. In fact, you sort of get the idea that if there was an opening in the Trinity for a fourth member, Bart Hess would be a strong candidate. He truly was an amazing person. Many of you knew him.

I tell you the brief history of our church to explain that I am one of the many folks in the room who think a lot about the future. I marvel and appreciate how God has worked in the past, but I wonder and imagine how God might move in the future. What new thing will God do? I hear echoes of the prophet Isaiah, though whom God said, "Once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder" (Isaiah 29:14). How will God astound his people next time?

Matthew 9:14-17

¹⁴Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?"

¹⁵Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

¹⁶"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

The new wine is a familiar illustration. If you take fresh wine, and pour it into old, worn, brittle wineskins, where there is no longer any flexibility, any softness, you're in for a leaky experience. Thanks to the fermentation process it won't be long before the wine will cause that bag to bulge and stress, and finally break.

Jesus says that the Pharisees were just like old wineskins.

Matthew 15:6 "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."

They hung on to their traditions so tightly that they weren't able to recognize that God was doing a new thing. They had become inflexible, and as a result they were not able to receive the new wine that Jesus was offering.

As I scan the cultural horizon, I think Jesus may be offering new wine once more. For those who are flexible enough to receive it, it will lead to a new reformation. The marks of the new reformation will sound strangely similar to the 16th century reformation in which God did a new thing. Maybe it's not a new reformation at

all, but a completion of the work begun in the fifteen-hundreds. We live in a time when the unfinished work of the reformation is being completed.

Tonight, I'd like to talk about three works of the new reformation:

1. The Priesthood of all believers

Sound familiar? The language, of course, is from the Bible:

1 Peter 2:9

9But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Nearly five hundred years ago, reformers unleashed a revolution that promised a rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers.

Luther made statements like:

Everyone who has been baptized may claim that he already has been consecrated a priest, bishop or pope.

He said:

Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be Christian be assured of this, and apply it to himself – that we are all priests, and there is no difference between us.

But the reformation was never quite completed in this regard. Most Americans do see a difference between clergy and non-clergy. People say things all the time that suggests that we ordained people have a special status.

Just a few weeks ago, some folks were planning on outdoor wedding, and they said to me, “Make sure you put in a good word for no rain.” Does this every happen to any of you pastors here? Someone asks you to pray for the weather or “put a good word in with the man upstairs,” as if we have a special link to God’s weather department.

My response is always the same: “I am in sales, not management.”

The reformers desire to return to the priesthood of all believers happened in phases:

1. All believers have direct access to God through Jesus Christ. The reformation released us from the practice of going through a human mediator. The one high priest, Jesus Christ, has opened up the way to God. A special class of representing us to God and God to us is no longer necessary.
2. The Bible should be in the language of the people and should be read by all people, not just priests.
3. Not only are we priests before God, we are also priests to each other and to the world. This is the unfinished part of the reformation. We have not fully realized the ministry side of the “priesthood of all believers.”

Some believe the reformation is being completed now. Churches are waking up and recognizing that every follower of Jesus is a minister and must be released to do the work of ministry.

There are huge changes even in the Roman Catholic Church. 41% of catholic churches world-wide have no resident priest. The numbers of priests are shrinking. In catholic theology the priest must consecrate the host. You cannot celebrate mass without a priest. A priest may only come around once a month or every other month because of the shortage. As a result, in the absence of a priest, they are having lay persons lead the service without the celebration of the mass and simply teaching the Bible. Catholicism -- over a billion strong worldwide-- is in a historic shift because of this. From the centrality of the sacrament to the centrality of the scripture. From clergy-driven ministry to lay-driven. I picture Martin Luther rolling over in his grave.

The re-discovery of the priesthood of all believers, the releasing of rank and file followers of Jesus Christ for significant ministry will be so powerful, some have said that it will be a second reformation. The first reformation returned the Bible to the people. The second reformation will return the ministry to the people.

The main hindrance in the priesthood of all believers is the clergy people themselves.

“Clergy discount”

The idea that there is a separate class of people called clergy is virtually non-existent in the New Testament. To be sure the bible talks about the important role of overseers and teachers, but the idea that some Christians are called into ministry and some are not, does not come from the Bible. Everyone is called

“Apostle Paul, what do you think of women’s ordination?”

Ordination as we know it did not exist in New Testament times. We bring questions to the Bible about modern practices that the writers of scripture would not have understood.

In the reformed tradition, we ordain not only pastors, but ruling elders. We believe that we are breaking the clergy mindset by inviting two ruling elders for every teaching elder at assemblies like this one. It is a good start, but it isn’t nearly enough. We need not just pastors and elders, but every member of every church released for ministry.

Question for ruling elders: “If everyone in the church is a minister, do you even need a paid pastor.” Absolutely.

In the new reformation, pastors will go back to the role of equipping people for ministry like Ephesians 4 says. Church members will be ministers, trained by Ephesians 4 pastors.

2. The Bible in the language of the People

This, of course, was on the major rallying cries of the 16th century reformation. And now we have the bible in English, and in many other languages. That's good.

But we still don't fully speak the language of the cultures in which we minister.

Western missionaries missed this for a while. They would go to tribe somewhere and teach the people English, give them western clothing, ship over a pipe organ, assemble a boys choir that would sing in Latin. Tribal people were converted to Christ and to western culture.

It can be very difficult to distinguish Christianity from the culture that envelopes it. These get confused. I think we are doing better in this. Mission work has changed dramatically.

Today, if you visit a church in parts of Africa, you will find that people are wearing African clothes, worshiping God with African instruments, praising God in African dialects. They don't have to become culturally western first, before coming to Christ. The cultural barrier has been removed and they come directly to Jesus. Jesus incarnate to their culture. A fully indigenous church.

All around the world today, we have culturally indigenous churches, worshipping God in the language and music of their culture. We have indigenous churches everywhere around the globe....except in the United States. Many of our churches use 16th century European music. We use vocabulary that no one else uses. We are way behind in our use of media and technology which many cultural analysts say is the language of our day. We have a Christian subculture that is a barrier to people coming to Jesus.

The New Reformation will remove cultural barriers and make worship accessible to 21st century Americans. New Reformation leaders see themselves as missionaries to their communities and desire a ministry deeply marked by a theology of the incarnation.

In our church, there is a lot of discussion about music. Anyone else in a church that has spirited discussion about music? Churches sometimes argue about what music is appropriate for church.

Look at this worship experience from Psalm 150.

Psalm 150:3-5

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,

praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,

praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.

How many of you would like those things in your church? Harp and lyre, tambourine and dancing, clashing symbols? How many of you would attend the 11 o'clock tambourine service? How many of you who aren't from Nate Atwood's church would want to attend? I am not sure we'd like that.

No mention of the organ is Psalm 150. No mention of electric guitars, either.

History of Organ

I am not saying that churches should get rid of the organ. I am saying that we need to be careful before claiming that we worship in the biblical way. We do not worship the way they did in the Bible, we wouldn't want to. All worship of God reflects a particular culture.

In the new reformation, pastors and church leaders will think more like missionaries. They will be driven by a desire to put the gospel in the language of the day, in the music of the day, to reach the people of the day; to make the worship of God accessible to real people.

It's going to require putting away those wineskins that are brittle and unpliable and trade them in for new wineskins that are able to move and flex for when God does a new thing.

3. A return to the catholic church.

Not the Roman Catholic Church, but the church "catholic," the church universal, the one church of Jesus Christ with multiple expressions. I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.

Remember, the reformers did not intend to start new denominations. Their intent was to reform, to fix, to improve the existing church. In fairness, the catholic church eventually did reform...

Some of you will say, the catholic church hasn't reformed enough. I have news for you: neither have we.

The new reformation features an appreciation for the one global church of Jesus Christ and desires a greater connectionism across denominational lines. New reformation leaders recognize that church splits and denominational arguments have weakened the witness of the one church.

I was at a conference and somebody asked me what type of Presbyterian I was. He was obviously familiar with Presbyterian history. He said, "Are you PCA, EPC, OPC, or PCUSA?" I told him I'd get back to him ASAP.

Last night, Donald Fortson gave us a wonderful call to unity within the EPC. That unity must extend to the global church, the One church of Jesus Christ with multiple expressions. I believe in the Holy Catholic Church.

E Pluribus Unum - From the many, one

Most Americans see churches with plenty of *pluribus* and not much *unum* to 'em.

[John 17:20-23 \(New International Version\)](#)

²⁰"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: ²³I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to

let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

There's a sense in which John 17:23 is the great, still-unanswered prayer of Jesus -- "Father, make them one." There's a sense in which you and I hold in our hands this unanswered prayer of Jesus.

Greatest barrier toward a broader unity: competition and jealousy

1. We see a growing church in our town and we say, "We'd be growing too if we stooped to those levels."
2. Survey of pastors

Can't we just rejoice when we see a growing church? Can't we be happy when we hear stories of people coming to faith in Christ no matter which church gets the credit?

We are not competitors, but co-laborers. Our job isn't to reach our city all by ourselves. Our job is to reach our city in cooperation with all the other churches. Isn't great to know your church doesn't have to do it all? It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people.

There is no need for competition. Our job is to introduce people to Jesus Christ and there is plenty of people and plenty of Jesus to go around.

The reformation is being completed in our day. Three works of the new reformation:

1. Priesthood of all believers.
2. The gospel in the language and culture of the people
3. A return to the church catholic. We are all on the same life-saving team.

Conclusion

Apollo 13: Three astronauts are in space and are attempting to return home. An unexpected malfunction has jeopardized the mission and the outcome is far from certain. Three lives hang in the balance.

And there is a group of folks at NASA who are in charge of the mission. They are responsible for bringing home those people who are very far from home. One of them is really afraid because the future is uncertain. And he says, "I am afraid this is going to be the greatest catastrophe in the history of NASA." And another character played by Ed Harris, who is just a rock through all this, great faith, says, "To the contrary, with all due respect, I believe this is going to be our finest hour."

They all work like crazy. And there is four minutes of absolute anxiety. The spaceship trying to do reentry, and so they have lost all contact. Life and death is on the line. It seems like an eternity. And the whole world is holding its breath. The whole world wonders, "Are they going to make it home?" And finally, out of the silence and out of the static, you hear this voice, "This is Apollo 13. We made it. We're home." And that group at NASA just explodes with celebration. And people are jumping up and down. And engineers are dancing and embracing each other. And people in the theater are laughing and crying.

And the Bible says every time somebody comes home, every time the church accomplishes her mission, there is an explosion like that in heaven. And the most non-expressive people you can imagine, engineers and Presbyterians, laugh, and hug, and dance, and sing, and shout, and weep, and pound each other on the back.

And then the camera shows this rock character, Ed Harris and he is just standing there. He feels emotion too deep for words. Cause his whole life, all of his energies, all of his dreams, all of his efforts, have been focused toward this one moment. It is his finest hour.

All around us plays out this eternal drama. The mission of the church is to bring people home, to save lives. But the mission doesn't always appear to be going so well. The future is uncertain. There is this scramble of creativity to figure out how to bring people home, how to continue the mission in light of new circumstances. Many people are afraid and wonder if this will be a catastrophic

season for the church. I tell you what I believe: I believe this can be our finest hour.

Let's stand and pray:

God we pray that we would recognize and cooperate with the moving of your Holy Spirit. Help us to be flexible enough to receive any new wine you give. You have called us to the difficult task of church leadership. Forgive us, Father, the times we have taken our task too lightly. Grant all Presbyters and guests here today wisdom and discernment, that we might lead with diligence.

Help us to recognize the gifts and callings of every member of your church and release your people for that for which they were designed. Help us to communicate your word in the language of our day to the people of our day. Help us to see and love your greater church, and may the unity of the church be a sign to a broken world that you are real.

We confess our inadequacies to lead. We confess our fears about the future. And yet, Father, we place full trust in you. We surrender again our plans to yours. Work in us and through us.

This we pray in the powerful, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.