



Reflecting ON THE REFORMATION

By Carrie McWhorter
for Word&Way

Trends or truth?

Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther nailed his answer to that question on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg and dared the Church to choose an answer — a challenge that still stands.

"Today, many churches struggle with the swirling winds of change," says Scott Pace, associate professor of applied ministry at the Herschel H. Hobbs College of Theology and Ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, Okla. "Contemporary churches may not be guilty of selling indulgences, but we can be equally guilty by manipulating people with glitz and gimmicks. As the familiar ministry maxim reminds us, 'what you win them with is what you win them to.'"

In the ever-changing American religious landscape, where 91 percent of all U.S. adults and 76 percent of practicing Christians say that the best way to "find yourself" is to "look within," truth does not seem to be winning. A 2015 Barna Research study found that as many as eight in 10 adults across multiple demographics — age groups, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status and political ideology — have great concern about the nation's moral condition. But when asked about the source of moral truth, Americans could not seem to decide on one. A majority of those surveyed agreed that "the Bible provides us with absolute moral truths which are the same for all people in all situations, without exception." But a majority of those same respondents said personal experience and culture provide moral truth as well.

Barna president David Kinnaman says this "morality of self-fulfillment" has all but replaced Christianity as culture's moral norm. And Christians are adapting the "truth is relative" as well.

"There is a tremendous amount of individualism in today's society, and that's reflected in the church too," Kinnaman said. "Millions of Christians have grafted New Age dogma onto their spiritual

person. When we peel back the layers, we find that many Christians are using the way of Jesus to pursue the way of self."

"While we wring our hands about secularism spreading through culture, a majority of churchgoing Christians have embraced corrupt, me-centered theology," he added.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BIBLE

There are plenty of pastors and teachers who are happy to promote a vision of the gospel that feeds the culture's trend toward individualism — that what feels good to me is what is good for me. But Pace says that temptation is one of the things the Reformers were calling out in the Catholic Church of 1517.

"The Reformers rejected the notion that tradition or contemporary culture should determine the paradigm or principles for ministry," Pace said. "The anchor tenant of the Reformation was the unrivaled authority of Scripture to govern all matters of faith, life, and practice for the Church. The goal of the Reformers was to reestablish the biblical foundation of the Church. Their commitment to the word of God is not only inspiring, it is instructive."

Not all of the changes attributed to the Reformation came about for righteous reasons, of course. But just a few years after Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the church door, England's King Henry VIII authorized the Great Bible in 1539, an edition of the Bible in English to be read aloud in church services of the Church of England. Though it cost William Tyndale his life, Scripture in the language of the people was a huge step forward.



Michael Fuhrman

"People were so hungry to hear the scripture in their own language and to study it," said Michael Fuhrman, professor of Christian studies at Southwest Baptist University

in Bolivar, Mo. "The Great Bible had a way of disappearing from these churches. People were slipping into the church and taking the Bible home, hiding it so they could read the Scripture themselves."

By 1560, mass production of the Geneva Bible, a complete Bible in English, made it possible for English-speaking people to have their own copy of the scriptures. But Fuhrman fears too many in the pews have lost their love for God's word.

"For all the ways we try to praise the Bible, there is not that much Scripture read in our (Baptist) worship services," Fuhrman said. "The winter Bible study, for example, a special time of the year when we gave emphasis to an in-depth study of God's word, for the most part is gone."

Believers cannot practice what they do not know, and without a strong foundation in the word, the world's definition of moral truth creeps in. Pace says ministry leaders must build on "ministerial truth rather than ministerial trends" to avoid the temptation to compromise the Scriptures.

"The commitment that the Reformers modeled and advocated must be preserved, that the Scripture must continually be used to shape, or re-form, the church," Pace said. "Everything we do as the Church must be informed and infused by God's word. It must be the plumb line by which we evaluate not only the content of our ministries, but their philosophy, purpose and practice. Every aspect of our ministries must be thoroughly and uncompromisingly biblical."

In that respect, the church is always being reformed but never reformed, Fuhrman said.

"Reformation should be an ongoing process," he said. "We're to be about doing better things in better ways, going deeper in our discipleship and becoming more effective in our witness. That's the heart of ongoing reformation of a group of believers, whether in the local church or within the denomination." ◀◀