



House Church Basics

15 Theses. Wolfgang Simson

God is changing the Church, and that, in turn, will change the world. Millions of Christians around the world are aware of an imminent reformation of global proportions. They say, in effect: "Church as we know it is preventing Church as God wants it." A growing number of them are surprisingly hearing God say the very same things. There is a collective new awareness of age-old revelations, a corporate spiritual echo. In the following "15 Theses" I will summarize a part of this, and I am convinced that it reflects a part of what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church today. For some, it might be the proverbial fist-sized cloud on Elijah's sky. Others already feel the pouring rain.

1. Church is a Way of Life, not a series of religious meetings

Before they were called Christians, followers of Christ have been called "The Way". One of the reasons was, that they have literally found "the way to live." The nature of Church is not reflected in a constant series of religious meetings led by professional clergy in holy rooms specially reserved to experience Jesus, but in the prophetic way followers of Christ live their everyday life in spiritually extended families as a vivid answer to the questions society faces, at the place where it counts most: in their homes.

2. Time to change the system

In aligning itself to the religious patterns of the day, the historic Orthodox Church after Constantine in the 4th century AD adopted a religious system which was in essence Old Testament, complete with priests, altar, a Christian temple (cathedral), frankincense and a Jewish, synagogue-style worship pattern. The Roman Catholic Church went on to canonize the system. Luther did reform the content of the gospel, but left the outer forms of "church" remarkably untouched; the Free-Churches freed the system from the State, the Baptists then baptized it, the Quakers dry-cleaned it, the Salvation Army put it into a uniform, the Pentecostals anointed it and the Charismatics renewed it, but until today nobody has really changed the superstructure. It is about time to do just that.

3. The Third Reformation.

In rediscovering the gospel of salvation by faith and grace alone, Luther started to reform the Church through a reformation of theology. In the 18th century through movements like the Moravians there was a recovery of a new intimacy with God, which led to a reformation of spirituality, the Second Reformation. Now God is touching the wineskins themselves, initiating a Third Reformation, a reformation of structure.

4. From Church-Houses to house-churches

Since New Testament times, there is no such thing as "a house of God". At the cost of his life, Stephen reminded unequivocally: God does not live in temples made by human hands. The Church is the people of God. The Church, therefore, was and is at home where people are at home: in ordinary houses. There, the people of God: -Share their lives in the power of the Holy Spirit, -Have "meetings," that is, they eat when they meet, -They often do not even hesitate to sell private property and share material and spiritual blessings, -Teach each other in real-life situations how to obey God's word, dialogue - and not professor-style, -Pray and prophesy with each other, baptize, 'lose their face' and their ego by confessing their sins, -Regaining a new corporate identity by experiencing love, acceptance and forgiveness.

5. The church has to become small in order to grow big

Most churches of today are simply too big to provide real fellowship. They have too often become "fellowships without fellowship." The New Testament Church was a mass of small groups, typically between 10 and 15 people. It grew not upward into big congregations between 20 and 300 people filling a cathedral and making real, mutual communication improbable. Instead, it multiplied "sideways", like organic cells, once these groups reached around 15-20 people. Then, if possible, it drew all the Christians together into citywide celebrations, as with Solomon's Temple court in Jerusalem. The traditional congregational church as we know it is, statistically speaking, neither big nor beautiful, but rather a sad compromise, an overgrown house-church and an under-grown celebration, often missing the dynamics of both.

6. No church is led by a Pastor alone

The local church is not led by a Pastor, but fathered by an Elder, a local person of wisdom and reality. The local house-churches are then networked into a movement by the combination of elders and members of the so-called five-fold ministries (Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Evangelists and Teachers) circulating "from house to house," whereby there is a special foundational role to play for the apostolic and prophetic ministries (Eph. 2:20, and 4:11-12). A Pastor (shepherd) is a very necessary part of the whole team, but he cannot fulfill more than a part of the whole task of "equipping the saints for the ministry," and has to be complemented synergistically by the other four ministries in order to function properly.

7. The right pieces - fitted together in the wrong way

In doing a puzzle, we need to have the right original for the pieces, otherwise the final product, the whole picture, turns out wrong, and the individual pieces do not make much sense. This has happened to large parts of the Christian world: we have all the right pieces, but have fitted them together wrong, because of fear, tradition, religious jealousy and a power-and-control mentality. As water is found in three forms, ice, water and steam, the five ministries mentioned in Eph. 4:11-12, the Apostles, Prophets, Pastors, Teachers and Evangelists are also found today, but not always in the right forms and in the right places: they are often frozen to ice in the rigid system of institutionalized Christianity; they sometimes exist as clear water; or they have vanished like steam into the thin air of free-flying ministries and "independent" churches, accountable to no-one. As it is best to water flowers with the fluid version of water, these five equipping ministries will have to be transformed back into new, and at the same time age-old, forms, so that the whole spiritual organism can flourish and the individual "ministers" can find their proper role and place in the whole. That is one more reason why we need to return back to the Maker's original and blueprint for the Church.

8. God does not leave the Church in the hands of bureaucratic clergy

No expression of a New Testament church is ever led by just one professional "holy man" doing the business of communicating with God and then feeding some relatively passive religious consumers Moses-style. Christianity has adopted this method from pagan religions, or at best from the Old Testament. The heavy professionalisation of the church since Constantine has now been a pervasive influence long enough, dividing the people of God artificially into laity and clergy. According to the New Testament (1 Tim. 2:5), "there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." God simply does not bless religious professionals to force themselves in-between people and God forever. The veil is torn, and God is allowing people to access Himself directly through Jesus Christ, the only Way. To enable the priesthood of all believers, the present system will have to change completely. Bureaucracy is the most dubious of all administrative systems, because it basically asks only two questions: yes or no. There is no room for spontaneity and humanity, no room for real life. This may be OK for politics and companies, but not the Church. God seems to be in the business of delivering His Church from a Babylonian captivity of religious bureaucrats and controlling spirits into the public domain, the hands of ordinary people made extraordinary by God, who, like in the old days, may still smell of fish, perfume and revolution.

9. Return from organized to organic forms of Christianity

The "Body of Christ" is a vivid description of an organic, not an organized, being. Church consists on its local level of a multitude of spiritual families, which are organically related to each other as a network, where the way the pieces are functioning together is an integral part of the message of the whole. What has become a maximum of organization with a minimum of organism, has to be changed into a minimum of organization to allow a maximum of organism. Too much organization has, like a straightjacket, often choked the organism for fear that something might go wrong. Fear is the opposite of faith, and not exactly a Christian virtue. Fear wants to control, faith can trust. Control, therefore, may be good, but trust is better. The Body of Christ is entrusted by God into the hands of steward-minded people with a supernatural charismatic gift to believe God that He is still in control, even if they are not. A development of trust-related regional and national networks, not a new arrangement of political ecumenism is necessary for organic forms of Christianity to reemerge.

10. From worshipping our worship to worshipping God

The image of much of contemporary Christianity can be summarized, a bit euphemistically, as holy people coming regularly to a holy place at a holy day at a holy hour to participate in a holy ritual lead by a holy man dressed in holy clothes against a holy fee. Since this regular performance-oriented enterprise called "worship service" requires a lot of organizational talent and administrative bureaucracy to keep going, formalized and institutionalized patterns developed quickly into rigid traditions. Statistically, a traditional 1-2 hour "worship service" is very resource-hungry but actually produces very little fruit in terms of discipling people, that is, in changed lives. Economically speaking, it might be a "high input and low output" structure. Traditionally, the desire to "worship in the right way" has led to much denominationalism, confessionalism and nominalism. This not only ignores that Christians are called to "worship in truth and in spirit," not in cathedrals holding songbooks, but also ignores that most of life is informal, and so is Christianity as "the Way of Life." Do we need to change from being powerful actors to start "acting powerfully?"

11. Stop bringing people to church, and start bringing the church to the people

The church is changing back from being a Come-structure to being again a Go-structure. As one result, the Church needs to stop trying to bring people "into the church," and start bringing the Church to the people. The mission of the Church will never be accomplished just by adding to the existing structure; it will take nothing less than a mushrooming of the church through spontaneous multiplication of itself into areas of the population of the world, where Christ is not yet known.

12. Rediscovering the "Lord's Supper" to be a real supper with real food

Church tradition has managed to "celebrate the Lord's Supper" in a homeopathic and deeply religious form, characteristically with a few drops of wine, a tasteless cookie and a sad face. However, the "Lord's Supper" was actually more a substantial supper with a symbolic meaning, than a symbolic supper with a substantial meaning. God is restoring eating back into our meeting.

13. From Denominations to city-wide celebrations

Jesus called a universal movement, and what came was a series of religious companies with global chains marketing their special brands of Christianity and competing with each other. Through this branding of Christianity most of Protestantism has, therefore, become politically insignificant and often more concerned with traditional specialties and religious infighting than with developing a collective testimony before the world. Jesus simply never asked people to organize themselves into denominations. In the early days of the Church, Christians had a dual identity: they were truly His church and vertically converted to God, and then organized themselves according to geography, that is, converting also horizontally to each other on earth. This means not only Christian neighbors organizing themselves into neighborhood- or house-churches, where they share their lives locally, but Christians coming together as a collective identity as much as they can for citywide or regional celebrations expressing the corporateness of the Church of the city or region. Authenticity in the neighborhoods connected with a regional or citywide corporate identity will make the Church not only politically significant and spiritually convincing, but will allow a return to the biblical model of the City-Church.

14. Developing a persecution-proof spirit

They crucified Jesus, the Boss of all the Christians. Today, his followers are often more into titles, medals and social respectability, or, worst of all, they remain silent and are not worth being noticed at all. "Blessed are you when you are persecuted", says Jesus. Biblical Christianity is a healthy threat to pagan godlessness and sinfulness, a world overcome by greed, materialism, jealousy and any amount of demonic standards of ethics, sex, money and power. Contemporary Christianity in many countries is simply too harmless and polite to be worth persecuting. But as Christians again live out New Testament standards of life and, for example, call sin as sin, conversion or persecution has been, is and will be the natural reaction of the world. Instead of nesting comfortably in temporary zones of religious liberty, Christians will have to prepare to be again discovered as the main culprits against global humanism, the modern slavery of having to have fun and the outright worship of Self, the wrong centre of the universe. That is why Christians will and must feel the "repressive tolerance" of a world which has lost any absolutes and therefore refuses to recognize and obey its creator God with his absolute standards. Coupled with the growing ideologisation, privatization and spiritualisation of politics and economics, Christians will, sooner than most think, have their chance to stand happily accused in the company of Jesus. They need to prepare now for the future by developing a persecution-proof spirit and an even more persecution-proof structure.

15. The Church comes home

Where is the easiest place, say, for a man to be spiritual? Maybe again, is it hiding behind a big pulpit, dressed up in holy robes, preaching holy words to a faceless crowd and then disappearing into an office? And what is the most difficult, and therefore most meaningful, place for a man to be spiritual? At home, in the presence of his wife and children, where everything he does and says is automatically put through a spiritual litmus test against reality, where hypocrisy can be effectively weeded out and authenticity can grow. Much of Christianity has fled the family, often as a place of its own spiritual defeat, and then has organized artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life. As God is in the business of recapturing the homes, the church turns back to its roots, back to where it came from. It literally comes home, completing the circle of Church history at the end of world history.

As Christians of all walks of life, from all denominations and backgrounds, feel a clear echo in their spirit to what God's Spirit is saying to the Church, and start to hear globally in order to act locally, they begin to function again as one body. They organize themselves into neighborhood house-churches and meet in regional or city-celebrations. You are invited to become part of this movement and make your own contribution. Maybe your home, too, will become a house that changes the world.

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