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The Reformation as the Process of Establishing and Renewing the Relationship with God

We can only understand 16th century Reformation within the context of Biblical processes of renewing faith and relationship with God, both individually and as the people of God. In the Old Testament, the Bible reports on numerous processes of renewing the relationship between God's people and God, which in turn inspired reforms in worship. On the other hand, the New Testament emphasizes the establishing of a personal relationship (ie., new birth) with God in Jesus Christ, and a continuing renewal of this relationship throughout one's life. The Church is renewed through the renewal of the believers. Therefore, we will continue to take note of foundational processes, reasons, characteristics, and fruits of the renewing of faith and the relationship with God both in the Old and New Testaments. These processes have been recurring during history and have also been evident during the Reformation.

Renewals of faith and relationship with God in the Old Testament

The model of cyclical renewal of the relationship between God's people and God can be repeatedly seen in the Old Testament, and it's the most obvious in Judges. That's why we'll take Judges 2:1-19 as a passage for consideration, where the cyclical pattern of the dynamics between God's people and God is evident. The Pentateuch talks about God creating everything that exists, including man. There's a special emphasis on creating the people of God – ie., Israel – as well as on the covenant between God and His people. The book of Joshua gives an account of God's people and how they came into possession of the Promised Land. During the conquering of the Promised Land, God had been leading His people, protecting them, and providing for all their needs. God expected the people to be obedient to His voice (ie., God's Word), because God's purposes, which have been promised in His covenant, could have only been fulfilled through obedience. At one point, God spoke to the people through an angel (Judges 2:1-5, i.e. NASB):

And he said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land which I have sworn to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you, and as for you, you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this

land; you shall tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me; what is this you have done? Therefore I also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; but they will become as thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you.'" When the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. So they named that place Bochim; and there they sacrificed to the Lord.

God had repeated the conditions of the covenant between Himself and the people of Israel. He promised He would never break His covenant with them. However, God has given people free will and the ability to choose whether they want to keep or break their covenant with God. The condition for the stability of the covenant with God and for enjoying all the blessings of the covenant was obeying God's command: "you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall tear down their altars." Then, God confronted them with their disobedient condition, ie., with the consequences of failing to keep the Covenant, and He confirmed all the consequences that their disobedience would incur.

The Bible goes on to say, "The people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done for Israel" (Judges 2:7). Joshua's generation, which has seen and participated in the great works that Lord had done for Israel, faithfully obeyed the voice of God and they served God. With the emergence of the new generation in Judges we see the following pattern:

- falling away from God/apostasy
- hardships of the people
- repentance and prayer
- deliverance – raising new leadership, and restoration.

Let's briefly consider every element of this model.

1. Falling away from God

The problems in the relationship with God occurred during the second generation, "who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). Joshua's generation obeyed the voice of God and served Him, but failed in connecting the new generation with God. The consequence was that the new generation didn't know the Lord. Instead of obeying God's voice and serving God, the new generation of God's people "did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. So they forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth." (Judges 2:11-13).

The new generation of God's people was in the process of acculturation, where they were adopting the spiritualities, cultures, and traditions of the surround-

ding peoples. Since they didn't know God, they were only able to rely on the spirituality, achievements, and values of the surrounding nations. In the process of acculturation, they have completely forsaken their Lord. Abandoning and forsaking God and the blessings of the Covenant has been taking place for years, along with the process of acculturation. Although the Bible sometimes gives more detailed accounts of acculturation, it mostly describes it like this: "The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and forgot the Lord their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth." (Judges 3:7; cf. Judges 2:11; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 8:33; 10:6; 13:1).

The falling away of individuals and the people from God can occur in a very short time. The examples of quickly falling away from God can be found both in the Bible and in Church history. While God was delivering the Israelites from the Egyptian slavery, they had experienced numerous God's supernatural interventions on their behalf and for their blessing. Three months after leaving Egypt, when the Israelites set up camp in the desert in front of the mountain, God declared to them through Moses (Ex 19:2-4):

"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

When Moses was finished with proclaiming these words to the people and its elders, the people unanimously promised: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Ex 19:8). Then, the Lord gave them the 10 Commandments (Ex 20:1-17). They heard his voice and were afraid of his presence (Ex 20:18-19). God commanded them through Moses: "You shall not make other gods besides Me; gods of silver or gods of gold, you shall not make for yourselves" (Ex 20:23). God then gave Moses a list of rules and regulations that the Israelites were supposed to adhere to, and Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord (Ex 24:4&7). And again the people promised: "All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Ex 24:3&7). The people then saw the glory of the Lord (cf. Ex 24:9-17).

Even all these experiences with God, the people turned away from the Lord during the forty days and forty nights their leader Moses had been spending in fellowship with God. The people requested that Moses' assistant, Aaron, who remained in the camp with them, make for them idols (gods) which will go before them the way the Lord had been going before them and protecting them. When Aaron made the gold calf for them, the people said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!" (Ex 32:4). They replaced the Lord with an idol to which they've ascribed all the things that the Lord had done for them during the deliverance. Aaron had built an altar before the idol – the gold

calf – and proclaimed a festival in the Lord’s honor. It took a very short time for the Lord’s people to become depraved. That is what God stated about them, saying, “They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’” (Ex 32:8).

The problem of falling away from the fellowship with the Lord is the problem for every believer and the people of God, ie., the Church. It’s very easy to adopt or create one’s own “gods” (idols), which will serve as a substitute for the Lord. And then, just like Israel, we go on to offer sacrifices to idols and feast in the Lord’s honor. However, the Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation.” (Ex 32:9-10). This event aroused the wrath of God. The Lord’s response to idolatry of His people was focused on the destruction of the entire nation and raising a new one through Moses. After being persuaded by Moses, the Lord decided not to destroy the people (Ex 32:14). He let Moses go, who returned from the mountain carrying two stone tablets of the Testimony. The tablets had writing on both sides. They were “God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing engraved on the tablets” (Ex 32:16). The tablets contained the Law and the commandments that the Lord had written down for the instruction of His people. (Ex 24:12). Since that time, the written Word of God has been the source of life for the individual and the Church. The Lord Himself wrote down the commandments on the stone tablets.

2. Hardships of the people – God’s punishment

When Moses was coming down from the mountain on which he spend forty days and nights in fellowship with the Lord and he approached the camp, where there was song and merriment, and when he saw the calf and the dancing, he burned with wrath and he threw and broke the stone tablets on which the Lord had inscribed the Testimonies. By breaking the Tablets of the Testimony (Ex 32:19), Moses reacted angrily to the people, similarly to how the Lord wanted to destroy the entire nation (Ex 32:10). Moses than pointed to the leadership as the core of the problem in terms of the nation’s apostasy. He asked Aaron, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?” (Ex 32:21). Let’s remember that before Moses and Joshua ascended the Mount of God, Moses commanded the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a legal matter, let him approach them.” (Ex 24:14). Moses transferred part of his authority for settling disputes to Aaron and Hur. The problem arose when Aaron agreed to use his authority in an area in which he had not been authorized neither by God nor by Moses. The people

gathered around Aaron and they commanded him what to do. Aaron listened to them and lead them into a great sin. Aaron found himself in a very awkward life situation, as he had to choose whom would he listen to: God or the people. He chose to listen to the people, and lead them into a great sin and apostasy. God's punishment followed. Around three thousand people died because of that sin.

God's response to sin and disobedience of His people to His Word varied during human history. In the book of Judges we read,

“Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the Lord to anger. So they forsook the Lord and served Baal and the Ashtaroth. The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around them, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies. Wherever they went, the hand of the Lord was against them for evil, as the Lord had spoken and as the Lord had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.” (Judges 2:11-15).

As we can read, in this case the Lord became angry with His people and He handed them over to robbers and their enemies. On top of that, the hand of the Lord that enforced His will became their enemy as well. In Deuteronomy we read about the blessings of obedience to the Lord, as well as the curses of disobedience, “Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the Lord your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God: “Blessed shall you be ...” (Deut 28:1-3). Then follow the promises of blessings which are applicable in all areas of life. At the end of the list, the Lord commanded, “and do not turn aside from any of the words which I command you today, to the right or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.” (Deut 28:14).

In case of disobedience to God's voice and His Word, Deuteronomy says, “But it shall come about, if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you” (Deut. 28:15-16). The list of curses and hardships is a long one (from v. 16 to v. 68), and it encompasses numerous situations in the life of the people of God.

3. Seeking God, repentance, and the prayer for restoration

Since the beginning of the world to this day, the central part of human activity in faith revivals and restorations of the relationships with God was an intensive seeking of God. We see an excellent example of this in 2 Chronicles, where

the phrase “to seek” is used twenty-nine times, and nine times in chapters 14-16 (14:3,7; 15:2,4,12,13,15; 16:12). According to it, seeking God involved six important elements: 1) prayer (14:11); 2) hearing and obeying the Word (15:1-7); 3) repentance (15:8,16); 4) removing idols and those who promote them (14:3; 15:16); 5) restoration of worship (15:8-11), and 6) committing to God (15:12,17).

Each search for God, whether by an individual or the nation, was preceded by God’s exhortation and the “discovering”, i.e., finding of the Word of God, followed by doing what the Word says. Seeking God and discovering God’s Word always took place in an atmosphere of prayer. The Bible informs us that, even in times of the worst apostasy of His people, God had always kept a small number of believers spiritually alive and active, who were standing up for the interests of the apostate nation before God’s throne. Those who prayed would often, not even aware of each other, cry before God, both for the improvement of their own relationship with God, as well as for the forgiveness of sins and the restoration of the relationship with God by the people around them and the society in general. In response to the frequent, persistent and long-lasting prayer (which sometimes took decades or even centuries), God would raise up the preachers of His Word and empower them with His authority. During this process, the forgotten, ignored, and neglected Word of God would come into the center.

So for example, when king Josiah was in his teens, he began seeking God (2 Ch 34:1-3). In this process, he was doing what he knew should be done: he started cleansing Judah and Jerusalem from the high places, Ashtoreth’s, and images carved and cast. When they began cleaning the House of God, his people found the Book of the Law. As they began to read the Word of God before king Josiah, the king tore his robes as a sign of repentance (34:19). Then, the king gathered all the elders, priests, Levites, and all the people, and he read to them all the words from the discovered Book of the Covenant. “Then the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord, and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes with all his heart and with all his soul, to perform the words of the covenant written in this book” (34:31).

Restorations of the relationship with God in the Old Testament varied in intensity, from individuals voluntarily seeking God to the forceful expulsion from the community of all those who refused to seek God (see 2 Ch 15:13). Seeking God involved, as it still does, voluntary seeking from the bottom of one’s heart, repentance for all the things that made the person go away from God, a deep decision, and a commitment to serve God, the decision to abandon sin and evil, the decision to do God’s will, and committing to God in prayer.

4. Deliverance and the reform of worship

Since the falling away from God by the individual and the nation is always the result of the process of neglecting God and rejecting the Word of God, so is

the restoration of the relationship with God always the result of coming closer and submitting to God, as well as accepting and doing God's Word. James' epistle (4:7-8) is making this very clear, "Submit therefore to God. ... Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

The Word of God was, is, and will remain the Word that creates. John the Apostle had summarized it excellently, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men." (John 1:1-4). The relationship with God cannot be restored unless His Word is accepted and applied. In this process, God empowers the old leadership and raises up the new, which will continue to lead God's people into a spiritual and material restoration. What follows is a series of reforms in the lives of individuals, families, believing communities, and the society. Accepting and applying God's Word leads into the reforms of praise and worship.

The dynamics of renewing the relationship with God and the renewal of worship always depended, as it still does, on the understanding, interpreting, and application of the Word of God. The level of understanding and interpreting the Word of God always impacts the level to which it is applied in life, which is in turn demonstrated in the forms, depth, and intensity of the praise and worship reforms. Simply put, we always understand, interpret, and apply the Word of God in a certain social and cultural context. That's why our relationship with God and our worship reforms will also vary depending on the consistency of our interpretation and application of God's Word, as well as on our rejection of religious, social, and cultural norms and customs which are opposed to God's will as revealed in God's Word. Since, according to the testimony of the Bible and the history of the Church, it is the religious, social, and cultural norms and customs that usually drive people of God into idolatry and they separate and distance people from God, the success or failure of the reforms usually depended on the interpretation and application of the Word of God on one hand, and on and abandoning religious, social, and cultural norms and customs of the people who didn't know God (ie., the heathens) on the other.

The Bible brings us the following account of king Jehoshaphat,

"The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the example of his father David's earlier days and did not seek the Baals, but sought the God of his father, followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did. So the Lord established the kingdom in his control, and all Judah brought tribute to Jehoshaphat, and he had great riches and honor. He took great pride in the ways of the Lord and again removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah." (2 Ch 17:3-6).

This account tells us some strategic information regarding the reforms from the time of king Jehoshaphat. First, the Lord God was with Jehoshaphat. Second, Jehoshaphat sought the God of his fathers and he walked in His commandments. Third, he didn't seek Baals nor did he go after the works of Israel. Fourth, God established the kingdom in his hand. Fifth, Jehoshaphat followed the ways of the Lord with his whole heart, and he removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah.

After some time, Jehoshaphat's relationship with God began to waver, and Jehoshaphat's heart turned away from God. He was developing his friendship with Ahab, the evil king of Israel (2 Ch 18:1). The result of this friendship was a political and economic partnership between the godly king of Judah, who was leading his kingdom in walking with the Lord, and the godless king of Israel, who was leading his kingdom in hatred towards the Lord. We can read about the evil outcome of this partnership in 2 Chronicles (18:1 – 19:3). Upon the end of the partnership between the godly man and the ungodly man, God gave Jehoshaphat a word of prophecy, "Jehu the son of Hanani the seer went out to meet him and said to king Jehoshaphat, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord and so bring wrath on yourself from the Lord? But there is some good in you, for you have removed the Asheroth from the land and you have set your heart to seek God.'" (2 Ch 19:2-3). Because Jehoshaphat helped a godless man and loved those who hated God, God's wrath fell on him. However, God gave Jehoshaphat another chance, and Jehoshaphat used the opportunity to bring people back to God. Since that time, Jehoshaphat started returning the people to God (19:4) and establishes a reform in the judicial system (19:5-11). He had made another mistake by consorting with the king of Israel, Ahaziah, whose actions were wicked (2 Ch 20:35-37). Under immense stress, Jehoshaphat started seeking God (20:3), praying to Him (20:6-12), obeying the Holy Spirit's prophecy (20:14-17), leading the people to God and in worship (20:18-19), and doing God's will (20:21-30).

Establishing and renewing the relationship with God in the New Testament

The renewals of the relationship with God in the Church during history was and is largely different from the renewals of the relationship with God in the Old Testament. Just like the relationship with God, its renewal is also expressly individual. There is not collective renewal of the Church based on God's Word; instead, the renewal is always founded on the individual's established and carefully maintained relationship with God. The quality of Church is a manifestation and a result of the quality of individuals who walk the paths of the Lord in obedi-

ence, and who participate in the life and activities of the Church. There is no good reform of teaching and worship in the Church without a good renewal of people's individual relationships with God. The renewed individuals comprise a renewed community, which accomplishes its relationship with God through them. And the renewed community accepts and obeys the Word of God in its particular historical moment, bringing it all together in worship that is pleasing to God.

Of course, there have been a number of reforms and attempts of reforms in Church history, which were based on human thinking about God, as well as social, political, and artistic endeavors, and usually without God. Since such reforms were based on the authority of man (individuals) and the authority of the fellowship (councils, gatherings), the results of such reforms were usually within the grasp of human power and social and political influences.

The New Testament model for establishing and continuing the renewal of the relationship with God is based on God's plan of grace and the work of Jesus Christ, and is implemented through the application of the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. God's plan of grace is aimed at the salvation of man, and His ultimate intention is to make people like Christ. His purpose is a complete renewal of the image of God in His children. The Scriptures expressly state that salvation is God's free gift of grace, and man can only accept it, but cannot deserve it in any way nor can he earn it through good behavior.

Man was created in God's image, endowed with the power to create (Gen 1:28); he was given authority over the material creation of God (Gen 1:26); and, just like God, he also creates (Gen 2:15). The Bible tells us that man's sin in all three areas caused something which disturbed God's gracious intentions for man. When man sinned, he hid from God in the garden (Gen 3:8-10), his relationship with his wife and vice-versa was twisted into ugly and vitriolic mutual accusations (Gen 3:13-17); the earth was cursed, and man's everyday work becomes a burden instead of being a blessing (Gen 3:17-19). Sin divides man from God, and it waters down and relativizes man's relationship with God.

Sin is willful disobedience to divine will. It is an act or an attitude of intentional rebellion against God. Sin is a personal reaction against a personal God. The term "sin" points to a rebellion, to godlessness, and to enmity (Ex 1:2; Lk 19:14; Rom 1:18) and it gives away pride and focus on self. Sin is an infraction against God's law, where man is not so much against the law as he is against God, against His holiness, love, and truth. When in sin, man turns away from God. Ultimately, sin is man's will refusing to submit to divine demands. Aside from the word "sin", the Bible uses several terms and phrases to describe sin: evil (Mk 7:21), corruption (Mt 13:49), transgression (Gal 3:19), injustice (1 Jn 5:17), godlessness (Rom 1:18), wickedness (Mt 7:23), disobedience (Rom 5:19), and trespasses (Eph 2:1).

Jesus said that people have a serious problem with sin, which they're unable to deal with on their own. Ever since the fall into sin, human beings have become evil (Jn 3:19), capable of any sort of godlessness and wickedness. Jesus said, "That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." (Mk 7:20-23).

Jesus often spoke about sin in parables which explained just how devastating sin can be in a person's life. He compared sin to blindness (Mt 23:16-26), sickness (Mt 9:12-13), slavery (Jn 8,34) and darkness (Jn 8:12; 12:35-46). According to Jesus' teaching, sin is a general condition and all are at fault before God (Lk 7:37-48). God knows about each human sin, whether as just a thought or as an action (Jn 4:17-19).

The proclivity for doing evil is part of general human experience where people, even though they know that they should be doing good and they want to do it, and yet they often end up doing evil. The Scriptures provide an explanation of the general experience of man's hereditary proclivity toward sin, and states that the consequences of sin have been transferred to all people. The Apostle Paul described it very well,

"For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me." (Rom 7:14-19).

The Apostle Paul is aware of the presence of sin in himself and the power it has in his life. For him, sin is a tyrant whose commands he hates and abhors, but his struggle against its power is futile. All people are in the same situation. No matter how much they'd want to do good, the power of sin drives them to doing evil, because from the moment of conception man possesses a constant proclivity to sin and to rebel against God's will (see Gen 8:21; Ps 51:5). Being under the principle of evil, which is constantly at work, is the state of corruption which is transferred by birth (Jn 3:6; Rom 5:12).

Sin is disobedience to God, but it's even more than that. It is lifting oneself up and putting God down. Every person is a sinner in two ways. One, they're born

in sin, and two, they decide to commit sinful acts. Adam's sin is counted to all people, because he was the supreme representative of mankind (Rom 5:12), and when he fell, so did the entire species. All people inherited this sinful nature, and through it, rebellion against God and His Word. Since people possess sinful nature which is a result of sin, people are completely evil. Sin has had a devastating effect on their mental capacities, their emotions, and their will. Because of that, they're unable to save themselves from this condition nor can they dwell in God's presence and enjoy fellowship with Him. Human minds have been so darkened that they cannot fathom spiritual things. The Apostle Paul put it nicely, "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." (1 Cor 2:14). Since man lacks a spiritual perspective, he is unable to understand the truth of God's things, which can only be understood through the actions of the Holy Spirit.

We can reach several helpful conclusions by considering Biblical teaching about sin and salvation. First, the fallen people are unable to think, wish, or do what is truly good. Second, they are able to do good deeds on certain occasions due to general grace. Third, the ability to make decisions and act has been limited by their slavery to sin. Fourth, the only way to be delivered from slavery to sin is provided by God's redeeming grace.

God approaches man, who is in sin, and begins to remove all the wrong things from his life in order to restore the image of God. On top of that the Gospel declares that, in Christ, people are already what they'll become once they become transformed into the perfect image of Christ at the last turn of events (1 Jn 3:1-3).

A believer is a new person in Christ. The Apostle Paul says, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (2 Cor 5:17). Christ has gifted believers with everything that is needed for life and godliness. By doing this, He endowed people with his great and precious promises, so that through them they would become partakers of divine nature by escaping the corruption which exists in the world because of wicked lust (cf 2 Pt 1:3-4). A believer receives new life in Christ (Jn 5:24; Rom 6:11; Eph 2:1-6), and is renewed from day to day (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 4:16). In Christ, the believer has victory over the old nature (Rom 6:8,12,14). And finally, the believer is not just delivered from the power of sin in Christ, but is also given the authority to serve in the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Mk 16:19-20; Mt 16:19; 18:18; Lk 9:1-2). In Christ, all the blessings of Christian life are theirs.

God provided all that we need for salvation

The Apostle Paul lays out God's plan of grace in his letters to Romans and Ephesians.

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” (Rom 8,28-30).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.” (Eph 1:3-14)

God's plan of salvation is focused on the mediator, Jesus Christ. That's why the Scriptures emphasize, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,” (1 Tim 2:5). Herein lies the reason for the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Triune God: in order to be a mediator, He needs to be God; and in order to represent humanity, He needs to be a man. The punishment for the sins of mankind, which must be paid for humans to be able to have fellowship with God, is death. Since God cannot die, because the spirit doesn't die, Jesus needed to come in flesh. John points that out, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us,” (1:14), and the letter to Hebrews expands on it in more detail,

“Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless

him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” (2:14-17).

God’s work of salvation has been enabled through the death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification of Jesus Christ. Jesus said that He has come to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). He saw His own death as an atonement for the sins of mankind; His blood is “poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.” (Mt 26:26-28). Others also understood His mission as an atoning sacrifice. When John first saw Jesus coming towards him, he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn 1:29). The Samaritans also recognized Jesus as the Savior of the world (Jn 4:42).

The death of Jesus Christ is at the center of the Gospel, the good news of salvation. Apostle Paul emphasizes, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3). Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who was the Son of Man incarnate and equal to other people in all things, except sin. He lived a sinless life in perfect obedience to His Father. His death was the sacrifice for the sins of mankind. By His death He completely bridged the gap between man and God, making it possible for humans to enjoy fellowship with God. Through His death on the cross, Jesus Christ achieved the work of substitution, redemption, and reconciliation.

The phrase “substitution” contains the truth that Christ not only died for us, but instead of us as well. Jesus pointed out that he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45). The Apostle Paul emphasizes strongly, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” (2 Cor 5:21). The Scriptures clearly teach that Jesus Christ was our substitution as He carried our sins to the cross (see 1 Cor 15:3; Rom 5:8; Jn 10:11; Gal 2:20). He didn’t suffer for His own sins, because He never committed a sin (Jn 8:46; 1 Pt 2:22). When He died, He died for the sins of others.

Redemption is connected to deliverance and being set free. Redemption answers a need that was created by man’s slavery to sin; it marks the releasing an evil by paying a price of redemption. The death of Jesus Christ was a ransom paid so that humans could be delivered from sin and its punishment. Paul the Apostle emphasizes, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5-6). Jesus Christ as Redeemer breaks the power of sin and he creates a new and obedient heart: He delivers us from sin, guilt, death, the devil, the curse of the Law, and

God's wrath (Titus 2:14; Gal 1:4; 3:13; 4:5; 5:1). Without this deliverance from the curse, humans wouldn't be able to receive salvation. But, apart from man being delivered from the curse of the Law, he was also delivered from the slavery to the Law and keeping the Law as a condition to be accepted by God.

Reconciliation implies being set free from the human condition of being alienated and being placed in a position of peace and harmony with God. Reconciliation demonstrates God's righteousness and love. As Reconciler, Jesus Christ bridges the gap which is the result of sin, and he renews the blessed fellowship between God and man. On the cross of Calvary love and faithfulness met, and justice and peace embraced each other (Ps 85:11). Jesus Christ took human sin and guilt upon Himself in order to satisfy God's justice and to forgive the sins of humans. Because of Christ's sacrifice, God decided to treat sinners as His own sons, instead of as transgressors. The Apostle Paul says about Jesus, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col 1:13-14). Through Jesus Christ, by establishing peace through the blood of His cross, God reconciled all things to Himself, whether on earth or in the heavens (cf Col 1:20). Reconciliation emphasizes God's initiative in salvation, which is continued through all OT covenants which were made at God's initiative.

When we think about reconciliation, it's important to emphasize that Christ died for the sins of all mankind. John the Apostle writes, "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous One; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." (1 Jn 2:1-2). Of course, this doesn't imply a universal salvation, because Christ's work for the world must become an object of faith, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His [e]only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (Jn 3:16). Christ's reconciliatory death applies for all, while salvation only applies to those who believe in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

In reconciliation, the gap that existed between God and man has been bridged through Jesus Christ. This is a finished work. The last words of Jesus on the cross, "It is finished" (Jn 19:20), are words of victory. They point to the finished work and a victory that's been won.

And finally, the reconciliation which has been attained by God needs to be accepted. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." (Rom 5:10-11). Paul clearly emphasizes that Christians have received reconciliation. God had reconciled people to Himself, and people need to accept it, ot-

herwise they will not be reconciled to God. That's why Paul preaches, "Therefore... as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Cor 5:20). By faith man receives what God had done for him in Christ and he enters the fullness of reconciliation through Christ and God's grace.

The application of salvation in human experience

The event of salvation involves several aspects which act almost simultaneously, and we'll look at them separately and individually: God's calling, faith, repentance, conversion, justification, new birth/renewal, adoption, and sanctification.

God's call

God the Father calls all people to salvation. A person becomes a Christian because God called them into fellowship with Himself and with other Christians. The Apostle Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pt 2:9).

The Bible bears witness of the general and effective calling. The general call involves God's call for people to recognize Him. The general call to all people reveals God's existence, His glory, and the work of His hands, and it transcends the barriers of language and culture. Aside from God's general revelation, God's general call is also manifested through the preaching of the Gospel. During history, Jesus' disciples have always, and now more than ever, obeyed His command, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." (Mk 16,15-16). Jesus was aware that the call of the Gospel will not be accepted by everyone, which is why He emphasized that only those who believe and are baptized will be saved.

The general call is accompanied by the special effective call of the elect (Mt 22:14). In the New Testament, Christians are most often described as "the elect" (Rom 1:6-7; 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:6; Eph 4:1,4; Phil 3:14-15). It's obvious that they've responded to God's call, which means that the call had been effective. The call has to do with being one of the elect (Rom 8:28; 9:11; 2 Pt 1:10). It is a call through which the Holy Spirit brought to Jesus all those that the Father had given Him (Jn 6:37; 17:6,9,20,24).

Faith

Faith is the response to God's call; a means by which we receive salvation. Saving faith is a result of the unity between the Word and the Holy Spirit. Paul the Apostle emphasizes this, "and my message and my preaching were not in

persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” (1 Cor 2:4-5). Thus is faith the result of words and message, carried by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is founded in God’s work, and not in human decision to believe. God approached man and offered him salvation in Jesus Christ. Man can only accept God’s work for him by faith. Paul wrote to Christians in Ephesus: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph 2:8-9). He wrote something similar to the Philippians, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,” (1:29). Salvation stems from grace, and is accepted by faith.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Heb 11:1). Faith is not so much a human attempt at belief, as much an internal security and conviction as a result of God’s presence and activity. Faith is made possible by God, but man needs to live it. The Scriptures say, “if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” (Rom 10:9-10). Faith is both a conviction and trust. It is a voluntary act and an attitude by a person who puts all of their confidence in God, allowing Him to direct their actions.

By faith a person comes to God and receives His blessings, because “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” (Heb 11:6). The believer receives the following from God by faith: salvation (Eph 2:8, Mk 16:16; Acts 16:31; Jn 1:12; Rom 4:5; 5:1; Heb 10:39; Jn 5:24), the fullness of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14; Jn 7:39), sanctification (Acts 15:9; 26:18), security (1 Pt 1:5; Rom 11:12; 2 Cor 1:24), perfect peace (Is 26:3; Heb 4:3), healing (Jas 5:14; Acts 14:9), victory over the world (1 Jn 5:4).

Repentance

Faith and repentance are two “twin” human responses to God’s grace. If a person truly believes in Christ, they need to repent as well; and if they repent for their sins, they need to do it in faith. Repentance is an act by which a person discerns what sin is and they turn away from it, confessing it to God. It is also an act of rejecting sin, changing their way of thinking about sin and about God. True repentance (*metanoia*) is a return to God; it signifies a change in thinking and a change in one’s life’s purpose.

Biblical repentance involves three aspects: intellectual, emotional, and voluntary. The intellectual element includes a change in one’s outlook. It is a change in the way we look at sin, at God, and at ourselves. Sin is recognized, not as a weakness, a mistake, or something that happened by chance, but as a matter of per-

sonal guilt (cf. Ps 51:5-6). Sin is recognized as a transgression against God, and as making oneself tarnished and unclean. The emotional area involves a person's emotional reaction upon being convicted of sin. By expressing repentance through one's feelings, a person expresses true regret over the offenses they have inflicted on God (cf. 2 Cor 7:9-10). Repentance involves every part of human life. It involves a recognition of one's own sinfulness, the understanding of being separated from God, regret over the past, and intentions for the future. Repentance involves rejecting sin and accepting God's plan for one's life. This implies a change in opinion regarding sin and to the relationship with God; abandoning one's own path on behalf of God's way, on which they will travel obediently and in fellowship with Him. Repentance creates joy in the believer's heart, and God's angels also rejoice (Lk 15:10). Repentance opens the door to greater faith and to the forgiveness of sins.

Conversion

Conversion is an act by which a person turns away from sin and comes to God, asking Him for the forgiveness of sins. It is subjective response to God's decisive intervention in a person's life. Conversion involves all aspects of a human being: their desires, their way of life, their understanding of life, their will, and their attitudes. Conversion is an act which connects repentance and faith: it is an act of turning away from sin (repentance) towards God (faith) (Acts 3:19; 26:20; 11:21; 14:15; 26:28; 1 Thess 1:9; 1 Pt 2:25). It is a complete spiritual change from the old way of living to Christ's way of living; it is turning away from a life of sin towards a life of righteousness. Conversion is the first step on the path to eternal life. The act of conversion is coming from death into life, as Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life." (Jn 5:24). The purpose of conversion is twofold: it is a turning away from evil ways and eternal death (Ez 33:11; Mt 7:13) and starting on the narrow path which leads to eternal life (Mt 7:14). Conversion makes it possible for a person to live according to new life principles which are based in God's Word.

The fruits of conversion are manifold. First, God gives the convert eternal life, and this life is in His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 5:11-12). It is also salvation from spiritual death (Jas 5:20). Secondly, in the moment of conversion, a person becomes part of God's family (1 Jn 3:2). Thirdly, all sins are completely wiped away, and God no longer remembers them (Isa 43:25). Fourth, as part of God's family the convert builds new relationship of fellowship in the Body of Christ (1 Cor 1:9; 1 Jn 1:7).

Justification

Justification is an act of grace by which a guilt-burdened sinner is proclaimed to be free. It involves ascribing or assigning God's righteousness. It is an objective

act of God, which takes place outside of man. Sin has separated man from God, therefore man doesn't have a proper relationship with God, but justification makes it possible for man to have a right relationship with God.

The act of justification does not cause a subjective change in the individual. It is the judicial part, whereby the sinner is proclaimed free from the implemented legal sanctions and is authorized to receive the reward fitting of righteousness. It happens before God's throne, where God proclaims man to be righteous. Justification is God's decision regarding man's position, and it's made based on Christ's work on the cross. So, thanks to Christ's work, God justifies sinners righteously (1 Jn 1:9), thus changing man's relationship with God. Once a person confesses their sins, they experience God's faithfulness and righteousness, His forgiveness and cleansing from unrighteousness (1 Jn 2:2). In this way, justification through new birth is realized.

The Scriptures clearly teach that neither the Law nor good works can justify man, but that justification is God's free gift offered to man (Rom 3:24). The Bible also teaches that Christ's work of reconciliation is the foundation of the believer's justification. The Apostle Paul emphasizes it clearly, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." (Rom 3:23-24). Therefore, the only sources and foundation of justification are God's grace and Christ's work of reconciliation.

Since God's righteousness is a free gift, humans cannot earn it neither by good works, nor by fulfilling the Law, nor in any other way; the gift of righteousness can only be accepted by faith (cf. Rom 3:22,28; Heb 11:7; Phil 3:8-9). Man accepts justification by faith, which is why the Apostle Paul can exclaim, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," (Rom 5:1). The faith in man is conceived and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, and it happens during the preaching of the Word. The Scriptures emphasize:

"How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!" However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." (Rom 10:14-17).

Ljudevit Rupčić translates the last sentence even more strongly and more clearly: "faith comes through preaching, and preaching happens by the Word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). Faith hangs on to God's promise and it accepts salvation, filling man with gratefulness towards God the Father and toward Jesus Christ, and man begins to abound in good works as signs of a holy life.

New birth

New birth, or renewal, is having a new heart, ie., a new core created in man; it is a transition from death to life (Jn 5:24), transition from the life of darkness into a life of light (Jn 8,12), from the Kingdom of Satan into the Kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1:13). It is a supernatural act of God by which He imparts eternal life to the repentant sinner when they receive Lord Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5). Not only does the repentant person receive eternal life, but also receives a new nature (2 Pt 1:4). The Apostle Paul emphasizes the experience of new birth as an experience of new creation, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (2 Cor 5:17). During the act and the process of renewal, the Holy Spirit brings life to those who are spiritually dead (Jn 6:63; Rom 8:1-10; Eph 2:1). The experience of a new birth by which God starts a spiritual life in a person happens suddenly and is mysterious. Jesus didn't even try to explain how new birth works, but He did explain the reason, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (Jn 3:6). Human nature can only produce human nature, and only the Holy Spirit can produce a spiritual nature, which makes it possible for people to go to Heaven. Through a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit a new creation is born, because the Holy Spirit instills God's life into man's heart. This experience of new birth, ie., spiritual birth, accomplishes the possibility of development, which has the purpose of making the person more like Christ (1 Jn 3:2).

A key role in the new birth is played by the Word of God (Jas 1:18; 1 Pt 1:23) and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5,6,8; Titus 3:5). New birth comes about when a person believes the Word of God and obeys it (Eph 1:13; Rom 10:17). During the new birth, the Holy Spirit acts in three ways: He convicts the person of sin (Jn 16:7-11), causes the new birth (Jn 3:5-6), and bears witness that the person has been saved (Rom 8:15,16).

Adoption

Adoption is God's act of love by which a person who has received Christ becomes a son of God (Gal 4:4-7). Through the act of adoption, a person becomes a child of God and part of God's family. The reality of adoption refers to their position in God's family and it has to with their rights as a child of God. The person is no longer a child of the Devil (1 Jn 3:10) nor a child of disobedience (Eph 5:6), or a child of wrath (Eph 2:3). On the contrary, the person has received privileges and benefits of the Father's home: access into the Father's presence and creative fellowship with Him. This kind of relationship of the believer as a child before God is accomplished through God's grace via new birth (Jn 1:12-13). Adoption is God's act by which He places a person in a relationship with Himself, where a person takes the position of an adult son (Gal 4:1-7).

There are several levels to adoption. First, God had prepared adoption before

the beginning of the world (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:4-6). Second, adoption has become a possible reality with the coming of Jesus Christ (Gal 4:4-5). Third, a person becomes an adopted child of God when they achieve unity with Christ through faith (Gal 3:26-29). Fourth, adoption is not completely achieved in the present, but upon the second coming of Christ, when it will be perfected and completed by the “redemption of the body” (Rom 8:23).

New birth gives the person a new life and a new nature; justification grants them a new status; and adoption brings them a new position. The Apostle John emphasizes this status, “Beloved, now we are children of God,” (1 Jn 3,2). It’s worth noting that born-again Christians can be certain that they already are the children of God based on the authority of the Holy Scriptures and the witness of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:16).

Adoption brings the born-again believers freedom from slavery; it gives them power to address God as Father and makes them God’s heirs. Adoption involves unlimited inheritance. Jesus Christ is the only heir (Mk 12:7; Heb 1:2), and God’s children are co-heirs of Christ (Rom 8:17; Heb 11:9). God’s children can already enjoy the blessings of the heritage even now, although they will only experience the fullness of blessing in the future, when resurrection opens the door to accepting a full inheritance. Adoption has not been completed in the present. It will only be fully accomplished when Jesus Christ returns again. That is when the children of God will fully understand the benefits of adoption.

Sanctification

Sanctification is a process in which the believer becomes more and more like Christ. It involves taking off the old man and putting on the new man (Eph 4:22-24). The old man is the old corrupt nature which is given to every person on birth, while the new man is the new nature which is born in the person during the new birth. The New Testament meaning of the word “sanctification” is being set apart for God, who gives us holiness, or completeness. First, Holiness primarily has to do with being set apart for God (1 Pt 2:9). Second, holiness has to do with the cleanliness of living (2 Cor 7:1). Third, holiness has to do with the perfection of living (1 Jn 4:12).

The Bible emphasizes two aspects of sanctification: positional sanctification and progressive sanctification. Positional sanctification means a change of position in which the sinner is being transformed into a holy worshipper of God. This aspect of sanctification has already been finished in Christ’s work through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:11). Christ has become the believer’s sanctification (1 Cor 1:30). That is why the New Testament often refers to Christians as the saints. The phrases “sanctification”, “holy”, and “holiness” describe a person who has been set apart for God, who has entered into a covenant relationship with God, which makes it possible for them to experience a new quality of life.

Progressive sanctification is directly tied to a person's spiritual development (Rom 12:1-2; Heb 12:1). Sanctification is a continuing process, because although they've been sanctified, believers aren't without sin (1 Jn 1:8-9). Sanctification is both the goal and the task in a Christian's life (1 Thess 5:23), and the believer achieves it with God's help in their everyday life, and it will be fully accomplished upon the second coming of Christ.

Living the Gospel in the Church

Fruits of good relationships between people and God are produced and experienced in Church. The life of the Church depends on each believer's relationship with God, as part of God's people. That is why the Church needs to repeatedly emphasize and revive each of its members' relationship with God. Based on the Bible, each believer should be filled with the Holy Spirit and a certified winner in the everyday spiritual struggle. Each believer should live the fullness of the Gospel at all times, in every place, and under any circumstances.

Living the Gospel in the Church is manifested in several key areas of life, such as mission, prayer, fellowship, theological integration, and worship. The believers have been called to and into mission, ie., to follow and proclaim Christ in the world. The most effective way to do that is by living a non-compromising life, by proclaiming the Gospel, and through social involvement which results from this. The key to living the Gospel is personal and corporate prayer, which is a means of communicating with God, fruit of a good relationship and fellowship with God, and an active expression of our dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. Living the Gospel is manifested in the fellowship of the Body of Christ – the Church – which gathers all those who love God, which incessantly calls for renewing the relationship with God by those who have neglected it, and it proclaims the Gospel to all those who have not established a personal relationship with God. Theological integration implies reaching and changing the contemporary culture with the Gospel, so that the Gospel, and not culture, would be at the center of the Gospel's content. Christians who have a good relationship with God also have the mind of Christ, both towards the revealed truth and towards their own culture.

Renewing the faith and the relationship with God during Church history

From the day the Holy Spirit came down (Pentecost) in the 1st century until this day processes have been going on of establishing, losing, and renewing the faith and the relationship with God, both as individuals and as communities. The re-

sults of these processes have been manifested in the Church during history, and they're still manifested today. Although the individual processes of establishing, losing, and renewing the faith and the relationship with God have seldom been recorded during history, many of them have encouraged others to establish or renew their faith and relationship with God. Today we call them revivals, or awakenings of faith. God participated in these processes in unnatural ways, and the preached Word of God, the Bible, was always at the center.

For example, we can mention a series of individuals through whom God had been working during history. Some of them include: Gregory the Illuminator, Frumentus of Axum, Patrick, Cyril and Methodius, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, Matija Vlačić Ilirik, Mihael Starin, Stjepan Kiš Segedinac, John Wesley, Charles Finney, Jonathan Edwards, Billy Graham, John Stott, and many others.

The 16th century Reformation is just one of numerous movements for renewing faith and relationship with God. Soon after there was apostasy among the churches which came out of the Reformation, which is why there were many movements for renewing the faith and the relationship with God between the 17th and 20th centuries. The most significant among them include the Pietist movement, the Evangelical movement, and the Pentecostal movement.

Do we need a reformation today?

Since the creation of the world until today, the Word of God has always been the fundamental connection in the relationship between God and man. Whenever people neglected, forgot, or ignored the Word of God, their relationship with God would grow colder, and they would drift further away from Him. Neglecting the Word of God by God's people and the Church always opened wide a door for many godless thoughts and practices, which have divided both individuals and the Church from God.

On the other hand proclamation of God's Word and its teaching in consistent application has always resulted in the salvation of individuals, who in turn took part in reforming worship and the activities of the Church through their relationship with God, their belief, and their living.

How do we assess the condition of the Church today? Does today's Church need to be reformed? What reforms are needed and what are they like? My answer is, no. The Church, whichever it is and whatever it's called, does not need to be reformed. The Church needs to continually establish and renew its relationship with God, primarily on the part of its leaders, members (believers), and then all the people. The Church needs to accept God's Word, preach it without compromise, teach it, and apply it in all aspects of life. The Church needs to proc-

claim the new birth in Christ, through which the person comes into a relationship with God as Father and becomes a partaker and an heir of the Kingdom of God. A person who has a dynamic relationship with God forms their life from that relationship, and on the basis of God's Word. A person who hasn't entered into a relationship with God is on the path of eternal separation from Him, whether they are in the world or in the Church. No church reform would change such a person. Belonging to a church doesn't determine any person's destiny; instead, it's up to the quality of their relationship with God.

A survey conducted by the Henda agency for market research in the second half of 2004 in Croatia, 80% out of 1000 examinees said that they believed in God. One third of examinees answered that they believe in a personal God, while 35.5% said that they feel that there is "some sort of a spirit or a life-force".¹ Since the majority of Croatian citizens claim to be Christian and they profess their loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church, and since Croatia is the most Catholic country in Europe, the survey says that over 45% of Catholics don't believe in a personal God. The survey showed that there were more examinees who believed in some sort of spirit or life-force, which is the essence of New Age spirituality, than they were those who believed in a triune personal God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – which is the essence of Christian teaching.

I'm only using this survey as an illustration of the state of Christianity in Croatia. The survey points to a series of other questions, some of which are: can a Christian believe both in resurrection and in reincarnation; can a Christian accept that, aside from Jesus Christ, who said that He was the only way to God the Father, there are also other equally valid ways to God? Of course, we can also ask some other questions: who is really a Christian, and are Roman Catholics who don't believe in a personal God actually Christians? Can you consider liberal Catholics² who accept God and go to Church, but also like to flirt with astrology, believe in reincarnation, practice spiritism, and go to fortune-tellers, to be Christians?

Who is a Christian? There are various answers to this question. The very word "Christian" has lost its Biblical meaning during two thousand years of history, so now we have to add an adjective to it in order to point out the specific group that this Christian belongs to. So we have Catholic, Greek-Catholic, Old Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Evangelical, and other Christians.

1 Darko Pavičić writes about the survey results in his article, "More than 50% of Croats believe in Heaven and Hell" published in *Jutarnji list* on Saturday November 6th 2004.

2 They are dubbed "liberal Catholics" by Vladimir Lončarević in his article, "*Aquarianism and occultism as signs of the times*" (*Obnovljeni život*, issue 5/89, p. 421.).

For the most part, Christian churches are divided into Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. This division does not reflect the spiritual condition of believers in these churches, but rather liturgic, doctrinal, and theological differences between the churches. When a person belongs to a fellowship of believers, a church or a denomination, it cannot and does not determine their relationship with God. This was best illustrated by the survey we mentioned. Even though 80% of examinees professed to be Christians, around 33% of them stated that they believe in a personal God, and only God knows how many of them have a personal relationship with Him. And Christianity is a personal relationship with a triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are only two kinds of Christianity and only two groups of Christians: traditional or confessional Christianity, and Biblical Christianity and professing born-again Christians.

Traditional Christianity and confessional Christians have a historical view on Jesus; they value Christ's work and the message He preached. They agree with the statements of faith as put together by their predecessors. They possess sufficient knowledge regarding church liturgy, sacramental theology, popular godliness, and they possess some information about God, but they lack a personal relationship with God. The source of revelation is in the Bible and in Church tradition. The Holy Scriptures are one of the authorities for theology and faith, as well as for life and practical activities. You become a Christian in the Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant church by being born in a family of believers, and by being baptized as an infant based on the faith of godparents and the Church. The believers are required to participate in the sacraments which provide them with God's grace. Traditional Catholic and Orthodox believers can be aided in their relationship with God by mediators such as Mary and the saints. In Reformation-heritage churches (Evangelical, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Churches of Christ) even second-generation believers become traditional believers, i.e., the children born to believing parents, who grew up in a Christian home, but lack a personal repentance and conversion to God. They go to church because of tradition and as a habit, and they are partially involved in serving in the church, but their adopted attitudes and life beliefs are more representative of worldly influences than the Word of God.

A born-again Christian is a person who has been born-again by God. What does it mean to be born-again, i.e., born from above? We can find the answer to this question in the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus Christ. One night, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Great Jewish Council, came to Jesus and said to Him:

““Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said

to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." (Jn 3,2-8).

The Christianity of born-again persons, ie., persons born of the Holy Spirit, is not based on being baptized as children or infants as part of a believing family. Their Christianity is not manifested in participating in liturgies and ceremonies. On the contrary, it relies on the experience of a changed heart during the new birth and a continuing relationship with the living God. Jesus revealed this to His disciples, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (Jn 17:3). It's not enough to know about Lord Jesus Christ; in order to have salvation, to live a Christian life and to have eternal life one must know Him.

The only source of revelation for Biblical Christianity is the Bible itself. The Holy Scriptures are the only authority for theology as well as for living and working. A person becomes a Christian by turning to God, by repenting of their sins, by accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord, and by being born-again by the Holy Spirit.

A Christian is a disciple of Christ (Acts 11:26). They are persons who have experienced salvation and a personal, close relationship with God. It's a person who is in a permanent process of learning from knowing Jesus Christ; a person who accepts the Bible as the written Word of God and the only foundation for belief and for life. A Christian lives practically, according to the principles which they've learned from Jesus Christ, and they rely on the Gospel as they do the will of God.

Although the differences are numerous, the most important difference between a traditional and a Biblical Christian is in the dynamics of their personal relationship with God, and in the values they've adopted. Traditional Christians usually don't even have a relationship with God, so when they need Him, they're aware they aren't close with God, so they turn to Mary, the saints, or some other mediators for help. They are loyal to the tradition of their church, but they are basing their attitudes on worldly principles. They agree with church teachers about the sacraments being very important in life, but they consider the sacraments to be nothing more than pretty church traditions and fossilized remnants of medieval theology, which have nothing to do with spiritual reality.

Church traditions and teachings which have not been founded in God's Word and which do not lead a person into a relationship with God are the Devil's trap for every person. Jesus said to His disciples, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (Jn 8:31-32). The Gospel is the truth and the power of God for salvation to all those who believe (Rom 1:16). Church tradition is, at best, harmful for believers, because it shifts their focus to what used to be, instead of pointing them towards a living, dynamic, and close relationship with God in the present. Traditional Christians are usually open for various types of spirituality, including idolatry and the New Age spirituality, which is evident from the survey we've mentioned. Traditional conformity to the teachings of their church agrees with them intellectually and culturally, but doesn't satisfy them spiritually so they try to satisfy their hunger for spiritual things elsewhere.

A Biblical Christian appreciates tradition only inasmuch as it points them and encourages them towards fellowship with God. First and foremost, they appreciate and study the Bible, expecting God Himself to speak to them through His Word and guide them in their life and serving. They are happy to obey and apply the exhortation given by Apostle Paul,

"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom 12:1-2).

The Church today doesn't need reforms nor reformation, but a fresh working of the Holy Spirit in outreaching, primarily to church members, and then to all the other people who don't know God and don't have a personal relationship with Him. Then, the Church today (including the Roman Catholic Church as the most numerous denomination, as well as all other Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Evangelical denominations) needs to be obedient to the Holy Spirit in preaching, teaching, studying, and applying the Word of God. The Word will cause the transformation of individuals by renewing their mind, as opposed to them conforming to this world, and it will bring fruit by recognizing and doing the will of God, ie., all the things which are good, pleasant, and perfect before God. Then, worshipping and praising God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, will come from the believers' purified personal relationship, thus forming praise and worship in the fellowship of believers and in the Church.

Translated from Croatian by Davor Edelinski