

## Reformation of the Heart:

### The Cyclical Nature of Reformation in the Christian Church

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“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

- George Santayana - *The Life of Reason: Reason in the Common Sense*.

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The Christian Church as we know it is being pushed towards extinction, but it can learn from its past to prepare for a better future. Congregations vacate the pews in throngs, boarding up the buildings behind them as they go. Church is no longer what people want, nor is it what they need. The traditional expression of Church faithfully meets every Sunday, preaches about God, and sings in worship, but it continues to depreciate. With more Christian communities closing their doors, the cries for reformation grow louder. One suggested solution has been heard in past reformations: we must become like the early Church.

This cry for a course-correction in the Church to go “back to our roots” was a foundational element in the birth of Protestantism. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther and other reformers accused the Church of having become very different from the Church portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of Paul. The sacraments, the indulgences, the theology, the hierarchy of the Church, the ethical standards of the clergy, and even the physical contents of the Church and how the buildings looked were all called into question against the plumb-line of biblical authority.<sup>1</sup> Many reformers, like Luther, set out to change the Church they

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<sup>1</sup> Luther comments concerning the sacraments: “To begin with, I must deny that there are seven sacraments, and for the present maintain that there are but three: baptism, penance, and the bread.” Martin Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” in *Three Treatises* (Fortress: 1970), 132. On indulgences, see Roland H. Bainton, *Christendom: A Short History of Christianity and Its Impact on Western Civilization*, 2 vols. (Harper & Row: 1966), 2:14-15; and Mary C. Moorman, *Indulgences: Luther, Catholicism, and the Imputation of Merit* (Emmaus Academic: 2017). On the disputes of theology, see Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Beacon: 1985), 48. Concerning the hierarchy: Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” *Three Treatises* (Fortress: 1970), 11-15. On the ethical conduct of the clergy, see Bainton, *The Age of the*

valued, not to create a new one entirely. However, once the reformers of the Church came to irreconcilable differences with an obstinate hierarchy over how the Church was to operate, massive division occurred. Like the fish and the loaves, a few Protestant denominations soon became dozens, hundreds, thousands.<sup>2</sup>

And five hundred years later, the Church finds itself amidst another season of transition and reformation—and we again look to the example of the apostles for our answers. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate what it really means for the modern Christian Church to model itself after the early Church, and to determine if that is what we need. Understanding the Jesus Reformation of Judaism and the birth of the early Church will elucidate proper course-corrections in the modern Church while hopefully protecting the Church from making mistakes similar to those made by the early Church.

Certain elements of early Christianity are needed for a healthy future of the Church, but those elements must be incorporated into the existing traditional Church in a process of non-divisive reformation. In doing this, we will equip the Church to prevent ourselves from being committed to a cycle, repeating mistakes the Church has made before.

The contents of this paper are organized into three parts. The first section of this paper clarifies what the term “reformation” means in the context of the Christian Church past and present. The second section of this paper is a historical study dedicated to analyzing the

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*Reformation* (Krieger: 1984), 12-14. Fred Kleiner comments on iconoclasm in the Protestant Reformation: “In an episode known as the Great Iconoclasm, bands of Calvinists visited Catholic Churches in the Netherlands in 1566, shattering stained-glass windows, smashing statues, and destroying paintings and other artworks they perceived as idolatrous.” Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: A Concise History of Western Art* (Cengage Learning: 2010), 254. Despite the resolution of those such as the Calvinists, Martin Luther discouraged such iconoclasm. See Harold Ristau, “Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments: Martin Luther’s Polemical Critique of the ‘Demonic’ in Radical Protestant Soteriology.” (PhD diss., McGill University: 2007).

<sup>2</sup> There is debate over number of denominations, but the higher estimates as of 2019 exceed 9,000 globally. Roughly 210 denominations exist in the United States. Todd M. Johnson, and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database*. (Brill: 2018), [www.worldchristiandatabase.org](http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org).

reformation of the Judaic religion in the time of Jesus and the formation of what we now call the “early Church.”<sup>3</sup> This historical portion progresses through the development of the Jesus Reformation in five phases, which form what will be referred to as the “cycle of reconstruction,” to help us understand the evolutionary arc of that process of reformation. The third portion contains the results of a survey I conducted, supplemented with surveys by Pew Research. This section is to investigate potential reasons for dropping attendance trends in Christian churches and how the current state of the Church may be indicative of a reformation with similar characteristics to the Jesus Reformation.

All models are wrong. Some models are useful.<sup>4</sup> Though it is helpful to view progressions of historical events in “phases” in order to distill models such as the cycle of reconstruction in order to apply cause-and-effect relationships, the phases must also be understood within their contexts. The temptation when dealing with phases is to assign a specific event, date, and place to the end of one phase and to the beginning of the next. However, history does not always transition this way. Specifically, in the Jesus Reformation in the Israelite religious history, we are talking largely of culture changes and shifts, which are gradual processes. These phases all overlap with their successors and predecessors to varying degrees.

By combining a retrospective look at the establishment of the Jesus Reformation with an introspective look at the condition of the Church, we can illuminate practical ways which Christians as individuals and as the community of Christ can progress through this modern

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<sup>3</sup> Or “the apostolic Church” or “the Church in Acts,” all in reference to the community of Jesus followers in the decades following his crucifixion.

<sup>4</sup> George E. P. Box and Norman R. Draper, *Empirical Model-Building and Response Surface* (Wiley: 1987). Though models are a helpful way to look at a complicated topic in a simpler way, the smaller and more detailed that any given point of focus becomes upon the model, the more discrepancies appear between reality and the model intended to convey reality. The accuracy of a model is directly proportional to how detailed and focused the observation must be before the model reaches a failing point and discrepancies begin to appear. I was first made aware of the concept by Dr. Charles Mahler in Chemistry class.

season of reformation in more unifying ways, rather than the divisive ways to which we have resorted in our past. By eliminating division as our response and solution for tensions within the modern Church, we can escape the cycle of reconstruction before the Church divides further, potentially committing to another cycle in the future.

Though I consider this project and how I approach it to be academic, my primary goal is not so much to contribute to an academic conversation as it is to use a scholarly perspective to produce tangible and helpful suggestions regarding how Christian communities as well as we as individuals can constructively participate in the changing Christian landscape. I have the perspective and bias of a stout Christian raised in a few Protestant traditions, but I believe that an objective, critical look at the Christian religion will ultimately prove beneficial in removing some debris from our eyes. I believe that divisions in the Church such as denominationalism are actively working against God's ideal for a unified body of believers.<sup>5</sup> I seek to inform and empower individuals, to stop further divisions, and to cultivate opportunities for a more unified Church.

### **Defining Reformation**

“And the Church must be forever building and always decaying, and always being restored.”  
– T.S. Eliot *The Rock*

The label “reformation” has a lot of intellectual baggage tied to it that needs clarification before talking about it effectively. For most, the label evokes the image of Martin Luther's brazen posting of the ninety-five theses on a Church door, the birth of Protestantism, the

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<sup>5</sup> I have come to greatly appreciate Richard Niebuhr's perspective on denominationalism, which he views as a spiritual compromise for the embodiment of a group of believers. He writes, “The fact that compromise is inevitable [in reference to denominationalism] does not make it less an evil. The fault of every concession, of course, is that it is made too soon, before the ultimate resistance “to the blood” has been offered...but compromises are doubly evil when they are un-acknowledged, when the emasculation of the Christian ideal remains undiscovered and when, in consequence, men take pride, as in an achievement, in a defeat of the essential gospel.” H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (H. Holt: 1929), 5.

overturning of indulgences, and religious heroes rising up against corruption, duplicity, and the misconduct of the Catholic Church. Though that was *a* flashpoint period in a much larger and longer process of reformation for the Church, it is not the only time followers reformed the way we have expressed ourselves.

In Phyllis Tickle’s book *The Great Emergence*, she highlights several periods of massive reformation. Her claim is that roughly every 500 years, the Church holds a “rummage sale,” a period of upheaval, and we are currently due for another.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Tickle is right in that certain flashpoints of great change have occurred throughout the history of the Church, it is important not to ignore the time in between. Reformation is always in progress, but the level of change which happens over a given period ebbs and flows. The Church is continuously re-forming, so fixation upon the flashpoints leads to ignorance of the greater scope of the reformation process. We must step back and look at reformation as a whole, including the events leading up to and away from the flashpoints. What we gain from paying close attention to the time in between flashpoints is the ability to see patterns and reoccurring characteristics that we can apply today to better understand the state and direction of the modern Church in the United States.

The Jesus Reformation, Gregory the Great (540-604 CE), the Great Schism (1054 CE), and Luther’s ninety-five Theses (1517 CE) are all examples of reformation flashpoints in the continuous process of reformation.<sup>7</sup> Under this umbrella term “reformation” is a specific type of

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<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Baker Books: 2012), 27.

<sup>7</sup> According to Phyllis Tickle, the rummage sale reformations of the Church began in the sixth century with Gregory the Great and his influence in the development of a monastic Christianity and Anglo-Saxon evangelism. Roughly five hundred years later, (1054) the next drastic season of change for the Church was what we now call The Great Schism—the division of the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Roman Catholic Churches. Then in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant Reformation resulted in a division in the Churches which opened the doors for exponentially multiplying divisions under the Protestant umbrella. Each of these three periods deserve much deeper analysis to determine their helpfulness in guiding our next steps in the Modern Reformation than I will be able to complete here. For her work on reformations past and present, see her three books *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, and Why It Matters* (Baker: 2012); *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*

reformation I will refer to as “reconstruction.” Reconstruction begins as an attempt to apply reformative course-corrections to the Church but results in division and the creation of a new community apart from the original Church body. For example, the flashpoint of Gregory the Great’s monasticism would be a type of reformation because it provided a new directive and a course-correction within the Church, but it was not a reconstruction of the Church because it did not result in two divided religious entities.

The Jesus Reformation became a reconstruction through the formation of the early Christian Church as a separate entity from Judaism. The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century follows the same pattern of reconstruction as the Jesus Reformation. This pattern appears to be cyclical in nature, a cycle which we observe emerging within the Modern Church Reformation—which we desperately need to escape. The future of the Church must be within reconciling and unifying reformation, not reconstruction and further division. Thankfully, we are early enough in the cycle that we still have the opportunity to utilize this modern upheaval for constructive reformation before it becomes a divisive reconstruction. I hope that we will be able to bring revivals such as those in the past without incurring the reactionary division.

### **The Jesus Reformation**

“Jesus did not intend to found a Church *because there already was one*, namely the people of Israel itself. Jesus’ intention was therefore to *reform* Israel, not to found a different community altogether.” – N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*

Much of the material in this section references the Bible as a source. The reliability of the Bible as an accurate historical document is certainly challenged in modern scholarship, but a different approach to the Bible as a reception history can still bear fruit in the context of this

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(Baker: 2012); Phyllis Tickle and Jon M. Sweeney, *The Age of the Spirit: How the Ghost of an Ancient Controversy Is Shaping the Church* (Baker: 2015).

project. Regardless of whether we agree on the historical accuracy of the Bible, it gives us an image of how the authors of the Bible (specifically focusing on the Gospels and Epistles) and their audiences interpreted the events of that time period and used their interpretation to form religious community. The reformers of the early Church created their doctrine and ecclesiology using the world views, commands, and teachings that are encapsulated within the texts we now call “the Bible.”

*Phase I: Religious system focuses on business and politics. Discontent grows.*

The religion in Israel had become one that operated not only as a spiritual center but also as a political, social, and economic engine. By the time of Jesus’ public ministry, Israel was under the control of the Roman empire and operated as client kingdoms and an imperial province under leaders placed by Rome, such as the sons of Herod the Great and Pontius Pilate.<sup>8</sup>

The Jewish religion was heavily institutionalized by the time Jesus started flipping tables. Institutionalization of religion occurs when a group of people with a common belief system structure themselves in community through the implementation of organizational structures, such as authoritative hierarchy, extra-biblical sources of doctrine, and real estate.<sup>9</sup> An institutionalized religious body creates negative tension between the heart of the faith and the system created.<sup>10</sup> In order to operate in the world, religion compromises part of its essence in order to gain what is

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<sup>8</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Fortress: 1984), 18-22; Everett C. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Eerdmans: 2003), 43-45.

<sup>9</sup> In the early Church, the *Didache* and *The Apostolic Constitutions* would be examples of this type of text written later than a large portion of canonical scripture, providing authority on biblical interpretation to make sure that believers in that particular branch remain like-minded. In the modern US, the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* and the Presbyterian *Book of Order* are two well-known examples of this.

<sup>10</sup> The Biblical theme of contention between God’s rule and humankind’s system of rule can be seen in many places, including during the period of the Judges and the establishment of the kings in Israel, the construction of the Temple that God does not need (1 Kgs 8:22-61), and in the Prophecies of many Old Testament figures which will be referenced in Phase 2.

perceived to be a sense of control. This shifts the priority of the religious group away from spiritual cultivation and toward power-gain, survival, and growth. The institution engenders the types of relationships that are refuted by the values upon which the institution is created.<sup>11</sup> As a result, participants in the religion feel the unnatural tensions between the religion that preaches one thing, but institutes another. Discontent grows.

This unnatural tension is one that was felt within the Judean religion. In ancient Jerusalem, the Holy Temple acted as more than a house for God. The Temple and the facilitating priesthood were the center of religious worship, destination of pilgrimages, feasts, and festivals, the “Bank of Jerusalem,” and the marketplace of the city. For foreign invading kings such as the Seleucids, the power and influence vested in the Temple system by these operations made the positions of influence within the system a political leverage point over the religious leaders and the teachers of the Law.

The teachers of the Law were responsible for operating the synagogues, reading the scripture to the largely illiterate public, and collecting Temple taxes and tithes to send back to Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> The tithing was dedicated to the compensation for the priestly class and the Temple Tax was dedicated to the upkeep of the Temple and synagogues.<sup>13</sup> The Temple also operated as a bank for both the rich and the poor of Jerusalem, as we can see through examples in the Old Testament such as 1 Kings 7:51, when Solomon deposits silver and gold into the “treasuries of the Lord’s Temple.”<sup>14</sup> Those who banked on the Temple were confident that their money would

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<sup>11</sup> Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Philip F. Esler, “Jesus in Social Context,” in *Jesus in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia* (ABC CLIO: 2003), 470-75. Esler titles Jerusalem as an “orthogenic city” based on how the Temple hub propagated the “systematic and reflective dimensions” of the Jewish tradition (471).

<sup>13</sup> Num 18:21-24. See J. Liver, “The Half-Shekel Offering in Biblical and Post-Biblical Literature,” *HTR* 56 1963:173; Shmuel Safrai, “The Temple Treasury,” *EncJud* 19:601-626, esp. 622.

<sup>14</sup> Hamilton explains how in antiquity, temples operated as the earliest banks in most cultures, not just in Jewish tradition. As we near the time of Jesus, Mediterranean trade and prosperity increased through the connections created by Hellenization and then the Roman empire. This increase in money allowed banking, investing, lending,



be protected by the Divine and also by the influential priesthood, Jewish authorities, and certain overlords like Augustus, who considered theft of money at the Temple to be a severely punishable sacrilege.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to operating as the hub for the several festivals and great pilgrimage events as well as the central bank of Jerusalem, the Temple also operated as a market place.<sup>16</sup> According to the Law, regular sacrifices of varying kinds were to be made by the people as a means to facilitate a right relationship with God. These sacrifices were performed by the priests at the Temple, giving the priestly class a significant amount of potential leverage over the public, which they exploited.

The family of the High Priest had a monopoly on the market and money-changing tables operating within the Temple complex to provide acceptable sacrifices. They determined which sacrifices were acceptable and sold them to the public, many of whom were illiterate and could not read the sacrificial laws for themselves but were at the mercy of the learned scribes and teachers of the law—who were employed by the Temple.<sup>17</sup> The social and religious authority of the Temple apparatus as well as the stupendous amounts of money it controlled made gaining positions of influence within the Temple hierarchy a competitive struggle.

The Old Testament includes clear instructions for ordination to priestly positions. Aaron, brother of Moses, became the high priest for the tabernacle. His descendants were those who

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and currency exchange to become more popular practices, largely operated by the temples. According to 2 Macc 3:10-12, widows and orphans also kept their deposits within the temple—presumably far poorer individuals compared to the majority of the deposits in the Temple. Neill Q. Hamilton, “Temple Cleansing and Temple Bank,” *JBL* 83 (1964): 365–72. Other examples include 2 Kgs 18:15, 1 Chr 9:26, 2 Chr 36:18, and 2 Macc 3:10-12.

<sup>15</sup> Safrai, “Temple Treasury,” 623; Hamilton, “Temple Cleansing and Temple Bank,” 366.

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, “Temple Cleansing and Temple Bank,” 365–72. Hamilton quotes and expounds upon the work of Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, (Jewish Publication Society of America: 1959), 155, who describes the “hierocratic” nature of the priests (meaning they hold significant religious and secular power) specifically in relation to banking within the Temple.

<sup>17</sup> Esler, “Jesus in Social Context,” 471; Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 26; and Bainton, *Christendom*, 1:3.

would inherit his responsibilities (Exod 28:1; 29:29-30). The upheaval caused by the division of Israel, with the turbulence of invasion, destruction and reconstruction of the Temple, and exile of much of the population made the priestly positions more vulnerable to usurpation.<sup>18</sup> One clear example of this is the political leveraging of priestly positions by outside rulers in the Maccabean Period (167-63 BCE).<sup>19</sup> For example, a wealthy Jew named Menelaus offered the Seleucid rulers of Judea a massive sum and access to the Temple treasuries in exchange for appointment to the office of high priest.<sup>20</sup> In response, the family of a priest named Mattathias, who was displaced by the Seleucid rule, revolted and attempted to secure the priestly position from Menelaus.<sup>21</sup>

The sects within Judaism were another example of the power struggles within the Temple system, but arguably as politically driven as the previous example. Much like modern Christianity, there were many different sects of the religious authorities, such as the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the scribes.<sup>22</sup> The Sadducees were religious leaders from the wealthier class

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<sup>18</sup> The high priestly families exercised corruption and violence to leverage influence over the Temple, vying for the favor of Hellenistic kings who made it practice to appoint priest in positions of influence who would be favorable to their agenda. Esler, "Jesus in Social Context," 471; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 531.

<sup>19</sup> This period is rife with examples of political leverage being applied to positions of influence within the Temple, specifically concerning the struggle of the Tobiads and the Hasmoneans. Excellent sources on the history of this particular struggle and others like it as well as the political and economic factors involved can be found in Solomon Zeitlin's "'The Tobias Family and the Hasmoneans': A Historical Study in the Political and Economic Life of the Jews of the Hellenistic Period," *PAAJR* 4 (1932): 169-223. See also Moshe Pearlman, *The Maccabees* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson: 1973).

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 382-85.

<sup>21</sup> Lineage claims were a common way to assert authority. Specifically, a claim to the line of Aaron was used to validate a claim for the priesthood (Exod 28:1, 1 Macc 7:12).

<sup>22</sup> The Sadducees were very active in the economic and the political realms of the Jewish state. Though the Sadducees possessed wealth and social status, their political allegiance remained Maccabean, an opposition to Hellenization. No one can tell if the Sadducee's political stance sourced their theology or if their theology sourced their political stance, but regardless the Sadducees valued purity in the Jewish state above all else, creating a very ritualistic, exclusivist expression of the Jewish religion. The more institutionalized the Jewish religion became, the more influence and power the Sadducees had because of their position in the higher socio-religious strata, and the less popular support they enjoyed. Gary G. Porton, "Sadducees," *ABD* 5:892-95; Menahem Mansoor, "Sadducees," *EncJud* 17:654-55; Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 23.

The Pharisees were often people with positions of influence in the community, but not from the significantly higher social stratum as the Sadducees. Though in scripture we often see Jesus combat the Pharisees in their understanding of the Law, Pharisees were largely believed to be a reforming force within the Jewish religion in that time period, seeking to "get Israel back on track" through the strict observation of the Torah and the studying and reciting of the oral traditions. Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism*. (Eerdmans: 1997), 156-57. They desired to renew zeal for the covenant and build a stricter society which could

and were most present in Jerusalem and in the Temple leadership circles, whereas the Pharisees and the scribes were largely self-educated laypeople, mostly operating in the synagogues in the rural areas of Israel.<sup>23</sup>

With the focus of the leadership on paying the bills and strengthening the religious institution, discontent festered over the matters of spirituality and how the religion itself was being handled. The individuals who came to religion yearning for truth, for depth, and for relationship with God, instead received solicitation for their financial and political allegiance. The religious system cultivated political relationships rather than community relationships, providing opportunity for the love of money and influence to subvert the love for one another. Noticing this draw away from what they believed to be the very purpose of the religion, reformers began to speak out one by one in the centuries leading up to the time of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

Judaism had a long history of reformation tensions before the time of Jesus. The Old Testament prophets' call of reformation was for devotion and righteousness, a "circumcision of the heart" (Deut 10:12-16; 30:6) and a moral foundation upon which the institutionalized religion could be righted. These reformers rejected the sacrifices (Isa 1:10-13; Amos 4:4-5; 5:22; Mic 6:6-7), the feasts and festivals (Isa 1:13-15; Amos 5:21), and even the Temple (Ezek 10:18; Zeph 3:4), threatening the authority and validity of the religious institution. They claimed that

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resist the influence of the outside forces which the Hellenizers and Herodians so gladly embraced. Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," *ABD* 5:289-303; Menahem Mansoor, "Pharisees," *EncJud* 16:30-32; Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 23-26.

"Scribes" is a rather vague title and has been used in a variety of ways. It does not refer to individuals of a certain theological or political persuasion in the same way that the titles of Sadducee and Pharisee do, but rather concerns their education level. In a time of limited literacy, those who could read and write were often involved in the religious practices as interpreters of the Law. They were also heavily involved in the institutionalization of the Temple through the banking and the market exchange, acting as bookkeepers. Because of their skillset and their involvement, they were considered to be social and religious leaders. Anthony J. Saldarini, "Scribes," *ABD* 5:1012-16; Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 22-26.

<sup>24</sup> A similar environment existed in the Catholic Church by the time the reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century burgeoned. The towering hierarchy with an infallible Pope at the top led to many decisions such as pushing indulgences and heavy taxation, draining the population, to construct St. Peter's Basilica.

righteousness was something more, something deeper to the relationship with God. The Law, institution, and ritual was empty without the foundation of righteousness the religious leaders lacked.<sup>25</sup> Between the legalistic, institutionalized means of conducting relationship with God and a personal, righteous relationship with God, the tension grew. There was a distinction growing between spiritual and religious.

Moving into the first century CE, a few minor figures are presented in Acts 5:33-41 by the Pharisee Gamaliel. This particular Pharisee tempered the outrage that the Sanhedrin council harbored against Jesus' apostles by reminding the council of two people who opposed the social and religious authorities in the past: Theudas and Judas the Galilean.<sup>26</sup>

After Theudas and Judas come a revival of the Old Testament prophetic model through John the Baptist.<sup>27</sup> John's call for reformation can be interpreted as a rejection of the Temple-cult as well as a reformed doctrine of atonement. By preaching in the wilderness, John recalls the wilderness as a place of transition and redemption for the Israelite people. Rather than preaching in the "holy city" of Jerusalem at the Temple, John preaches at the Jordan river, where God's glory came through intervention in Joshua 3 as the Israelites entered the promised land.<sup>28</sup> John's

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<sup>25</sup> Isa 1:16-31; Amos 5:24; Mic 6:8; Jer 7:1-15; Ezek 11:1-3; Mal 1:6-2:9.

<sup>26</sup> Very little is known for certain about Theudas and Judas the Galilean. Because of this, they do not comfortably fit within the same class of reformer as the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist because we do not know their specific grievances against the Jewish religious structure. However, Gamaliel's inclusion of them are indicative of continued and increasing tensions in Judea leading up to the time of Jesus. For information on the debate concerning the identity of Theudas and a sketch of what is known about this potentially violent reformer, see Ronald Brownrigg, *Who's Who in the New Testament* (Routledge: 2001), 323; Freidrich O. Zuschlag, "Alleged Anachronism in Acts 5:36 in Relation to the Sedition of Theudas," *BSac*, 5 (1848): 409–31. For Josephus' account, see Josephus, *Ant.* 20:97-98. For Josephus' account of Judas the Galilean, see Josephus, *Ant.* 18:1-10, 23-25; 20:102; *J.W.* 2:118, 433; 7.253. For an insightful critique on Josephus, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "Are Judas the Galilean and the 'Fourth Philosophy' Mere Concoctions? The Limits of Josephus' Inventiveness," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 81 (2016): 91–111.

<sup>27</sup> Comparing Mark 1:6 with 2 Kgs 1:8 reveals John the Baptist's identity as Elijah returned for the purpose stated in Mal 4:5-6.

<sup>28</sup> According to Josephus (*Ant.* 20:97-98), Theudas also attempted to hold his sedition at the Jordan but was killed by Fadus. Bainton explains the significance of history and remembrance of God's intervention in the Judean religion, which he claims is a "religion of history," especially as espoused through the prophets. (*Christendom* 1:3)

preaching actively undermined the authority of the Temple hierarchy's monopoly on atonement. He claimed that forgiveness of sins and salvation can happen in places other than the Temple.<sup>29</sup> To John, salvation could come by means of confession<sup>30</sup> and a baptism<sup>31</sup> of repentance (Mark 2:4-5)<sup>32</sup> as opposed to sacrificial offerings. The authority and the financial gains of the hierarchy were severely threatened when "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" followed this reformer into the river.<sup>33</sup> John the Baptist prepared the way for a flashpoint Reformer to come after him.<sup>34</sup>

*Phase 2: One reformer or group sparks the flashpoint. Momentum grows.*

The Gospels are quick to show their audiences that Jesus intends to carry the prophetic reformation movement forward with John's proclamations about his successor (e.g. Matt 3:11-12) and Jesus' acceptance of John's non-conformist baptism.<sup>35</sup> Like John the Baptist and the

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<sup>29</sup> Roy Smith describes John's desire for alternatives to the Temple for religious services as one held with less contention than I portray here in his book *A Voice in the Wilderness* (Abingdon-Cokesbury: 1940).

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *The Immerser*, 111.

<sup>31</sup> Charles H. H. Scobie, in his book *John the Baptist* (Fortress: 1964), 31-40, highlights how sectarian this religious environment has become. He notes that baptism specifically is an identifier of direct "opposition to the Temple and its sacrifices" (38). The Baptist identifier as well as John's asceticism reveals him as a "sectarian and a non-conformist" (39).

<sup>32</sup> Each of the four canonical Gospels are different in their portrayal of John but are similar enough in their portrayal of John as a predecessor to Jesus and a reformer-prophet against usurpation of the Judean religious structure. For an excellent comparison of each Gospel's portrayal of John the Baptist, see Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press: 1968). Wink also includes an analysis of John in Q and Josephus.

<sup>33</sup> As Joan Taylor point out in *The Immerser*, 198-203, John and the political/religious leaders were diametrically opposed specifically in reference to the verses in Matt 3:7 and Luke 7:29-30.

<sup>34</sup> Carl Kraeling provides a challenge to the common and fairly one-dimensional perspective produced by the "Gospel tendency to subordinate John to Jesus and to regard him as Jesus' Forerunner." Carl H. Kraeling, *John the Baptist* (Scribner: 1951), 17.

<sup>35</sup> In Mark 12:1-12, Jesus could be referring to his reforming predecessors and their persecution, much in the same way Luther had reformation predecessors such as Erasmus, Hus, and Wycliff. André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, (Plough: 2004), 19. Though the implication of Jesus' acceptance of a baptism of repentance causes contention in the divine, sinless Jesus, all four canonical Gospels include Jesus' acceptance of John's baptism and handles Jesus' repentance differently. Though I do not explore this long-held debate here, Taylor provides an excellent summary of the course of the debate from the Gospels until now in *The Immerser*, 261-264. See Scobie, *John the Baptist*, 38-39. In addition, Kraeling comments, "The baptism implies, of course, that Jesus accepted John's proclamation.... This meant that he accepted the imminence of the divine judgement and of the need for decision, repentance, and Abrahamic piety" (*John the Baptist*, 135-36).

preceding reformer-prophets, Jesus<sup>36</sup> called for an absolute loyalty to God, pursuing righteousness first and trusting completely in God (Matt 6:33-34).<sup>37</sup> Jesus' reformation efforts caused tension to build rapidly with the Jewish religious leaders, culminating in Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus undermined the authority of the Jewish religious leaders and empowered the lowest of the socio-political structure of the religious system—not simply to tweak the *modus operandi* of a religious system, but to reform the understanding of the Kingdom of God. The drastic tension caused by these actions and the changes occurring in such a short period after the death of Jesus frames this phase as the flashpoint of the Jesus Reformation.

Tensions between Jesus and the religious authorities began escalating from early in his ministry as the people gave credence to Jesus' teaching, viewing them as “a new teaching with power” (Mark 1:27).<sup>38</sup> He publicly insulted the religious leaders on many occasions, threatening their authority and influence in society with regard to the very things which justified their existence as authorities: the Law, morality, and the Temple.

In the largely illiterate society of antiquity, the learned religious leaders were relied upon for the transmission and interpretation of the Law and the Prophets. Several times, Jesus engaged

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<sup>36</sup> The debate of “which Jesus” is certainly a worthy one to have in any academic work (A succinct history and evolution of the discussion concerning the “Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History” can be found in Paul Copan, ed., *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand up? A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (Baker Books: 1998). The problem of discerning what may belong to the historical Jesus and what may belong to the Christ of Faith (with a recent call for openness towards a ‘theological Jesus’ and ‘philosophical Jesus’ in the introduction of Runar Thorsteinsson’s *Jesus as a Philosopher: The Moral Sage in the Synoptic Gospels* [Oxford University Press: 2018], 2). is made difficult by a lack of reliable non-Christian sources about Jesus. (Wink, *John the Baptist*, ix). James Dunn composes an interesting protest to the foundational claim of the quest for the historical Jesus that “faith is something which prevents a clear historical view of Jesus.” James D. G. Dunn, “Remembering Jesus: How the Quest of the Historical Jesus Lost Its Way,” in *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy (InterVarsity Press: 2010), 199-225, 201.

<sup>37</sup> “Jesus was starting where John had left off, only with greater urgency. John had preached repentance to prepare for the coming of the kingdom. Jesus preached its imminent arrival.” Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> The translation of the Greek is rather tricky. I translated it as “What is this? A new teaching with power? He commands even the unclean spirits...” But this could also be translated as “What is this new teaching? With authority he commands even the unclean spirits...” Regardless of the translation, the effect of Jesus' actions on the people is threatening to the other religious leaders who now have formidable competition.

in a terse exchange with a group of religious authorities, publicly embarrassed them, and dismantled their attempts to display their biblical savvy (e.g. Matt 22:15-22).<sup>39</sup> Several times, Jesus questioned their knowledge of the Law, which they presumably knew well (Matt 19:4, Luke 10:26). The more that people began to look to Jesus as the authority over the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the scribes, the more attrition their authority suffered.

Jesus revived the Old Testament prophetic *topos* of righteousness before ritual. He accused the religious authorities of imposing their own expectations upon others masquerading as God's commands (Matt 15:7-9).<sup>40</sup> He also accused them of projecting a pious image while inwardly lacking an ability or desire to apply God's heart undergirding the whole Law (which is the condition Jesus describes as "hypocrisy;" e.g., Mark 7:6).<sup>41</sup> Jesus clarified that righteousness is not fulfilled through following the expectations of the religious institution, but rather through love and mercy (Mark 12:28-34; Matt 9:13).<sup>42</sup> Jesus made it clear that the fault lay not with the Law, which Jesus supported (Matt 5:17-20), but with the usurpation of the law by the religious authorities (Mark 7:12-13).<sup>43</sup> The redefinition of righteousness from adherence to the socially-accepted standard of piety to right relationship with God and others through love and mercy, completely undermined the foundations of the ivory tower the religious leaders of Jesus' time had constructed.

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<sup>39</sup> Additional examples of Jesus besting or simply denying the religious authorities: Mark 2:1-12; Matt 12:28-42; Luke 11:29-32; Matt 16:1-4; Mark 8:11-12; Matt 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26; Matt 22:34-40; John 6:3-11; Mark 12:35-40. Frend suggests that Jesus "did not court conflict with the religious authorities," but he certainly did not flee from conflict initiated by the religious authorities (*Rise of Christianity*, 63).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Mark 7:6-7; Isa 29:13. See another example in Matt 15:1-6; Mark 7:10

<sup>41</sup> Ulrich Wilkens, "υποκρινομαι, κτλ" *TDNT* 8:559-71, esp. 566-67.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Matt 12:7; 22:37-39. For references to the Old Testament Prophetic ideas upon which Jesus drew, Cf. (on rejection of sacrifices): Isa 1:10-13; Amos 4:4-5; 5:22; Mic 6:6-7. On rejection of Feasts and Festivals: Isa 1:13-15, Amos 5:21. On rejection of the Temple: Ezek 10:18, Zeph 3:4. On the lack of moral conduct: Isa 1:16-31; Amos 5:24; Mic 6:8; Jer 7:1-15; Ezek 11:1-3; Mal 1:6-2:9.

<sup>43</sup> Shailer Mathews, *Jesus on Social Institutions* (Fortress: 1928), 121.

Jesus attacked their purses, too. The economic and political engine that was the Temple included a marketplace function within the Gentile courts, which brought in significant income, especially around the feasts and festivals when the number of animal sacrifices increased exponentially.<sup>44</sup> Jesus entered the Temple to find the marketplace and single-handedly brought a stop to both the economic and religious functions of the Temple by jettisoning the vendors and prohibiting the vessels for the religious services from being taken through the Temple (Mark 11:15-16).<sup>45</sup> By recalling Isa 56:7 (Mark 11:17//Matt 21:13//Luke 19:46), Jesus proclaimed religion was only acceptable to God when it followed faith.<sup>46</sup> Seeing that their sizable income was in jeopardy, the chief priests and the scribes decided to become more serious in dealing with the threat Jesus posed (Mark 11:18-19; Luke 19:47-48).

In addition to taking the religious authorities down several pegs, Jesus also used his ministry to empower the poor, discriminated, and marginalized of society. Through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took the Law which his listeners knew well and pushed deeper into the heart behind the Law. He preached that just following the legalistic expectations of the Law to check

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<sup>44</sup> According to Everett Ferguson's estimates, during the period of the first century CE the Temple had accumulated the most wealth it had possessed since in Jewish history. (Ferguson, *Backgrounds* 530). Hamilton references Josephus, *J.W.* 6.424, and Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem zur Zeit Jesu: Kulturgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur neutestamentlichen Zeitgeschichte* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: 1958), 368, both of whom confirm a marketplace presence in the Gentile courts. Jeremias specifically argues for the presence of cattle within the courts, supporting John 2:15. Hamilton, "Temple Cleansing," 368-69.

<sup>45</sup> The historicity of the Temple cleansing is almost undisputed, and well-argued by scholars such as E. P. Sanders in *Jesus and Judaism* (Fortress: 1985), 61-71. See also Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence* (WUNT 247; Mohr Siebeck: 2009), 429-39; and N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK: 1996), 405-6. *Skeuos* ("vessel") can be translated specifically as a vessel used for religious or cultic services. Frederick W. Danker, "Σκευος," *BDAG* 927. Werner H. Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Fortress: 1979), 59-62.

<sup>46</sup> Gerd Theissen distinguishes between prophetic and programmatic oppositions to the Temple, which is a conversation of interest in considering Jesus as a reformer. Jesus' prophecy could certainly be interpreted as a prophetic opposition to the Temple, describing what *will* happen to it in the future (Matt 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6), while his recollection of Isaiah and cleansing of the Temple could be interpreted as a programmatic opposition, showing what *should* happen in the Temple. Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (T&T Clark: 1993), 95-100. Jesus acts as both a programmatic and prophetic reformer of the religion who advocates for changes the Jews can control and forewarns listeners to the change that will come which is outside of their control.



off boxes on the to-do list is not good enough; a transformation of the heart must take place where the Law is used to train us to seek and destroy the roots of behavior that causes hurt in the world. The Law is an indicator of sin, not its defeater.

While lambasting the authority of the religious leaders, Jesus clarified that righteousness is a condition of the heart, expressed through behavior (e.g., Mark 7:17-23). In his affirmation of the widow (Luke 21:1-4), he honored the righteousness of the poor. In his parables, he advocated for the righteousness of the marginalized (Luke 10:25-37). In his healings (Mark 7:24-30) and his miracles<sup>47</sup> (Mark 7:31-8:10), he welcomed the marginalized of Jewish society into a right relationship with God and others.<sup>48</sup> In doing this, he tipped the scales towards equality.<sup>49</sup>

*Phase 3: Reformation becomes division.*

The increasing nuisance that Jesus became did not go unnoticed, and both the Jewish and Roman officials began to feel threatened. Thousands of people would wander into the desert without provisions just to be with him and to listen to him (Mark 6:30-44). That amount of social influence made him a liability for inciting a revolt against Roman oversight, and his constant incursion upon the influence of the religious leaders threatened their livelihoods. The two powers

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<sup>47</sup> Whether or not the healings and miracles of Jesus are viewed by my readers as historical, the subjects of the healings and miracles consistently being poor, discriminated, and marginalized individuals can be considered a reflection of Jesus' values and his portrayal of how a God-serving community should behave.

<sup>48</sup> For a thorough and objective account of recent biblical scholarship concerning the authenticity of the 'dinner with sinners' motif, including compelling arguments for opposing positions, see Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Fortress: 2002); Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 200-211; and Bock and Webb, *Key Events*, 214-27.

<sup>49</sup> Kelber provides a compelling display of the Markan portrayal of Jesus' acceptance and welcome of the Gentiles and the marginalized. He shows how Jesus opens up the Kingdom and "pushes the new communal identity to its limits geographically, ethnically, and sexually" (*Mark's Story of Jesus*, 36-42 esp. 38).

collaborated in the elimination of their common enemy and executed him as they would a bandit or insurrectionist.<sup>50</sup>

The execution of Jesus changed the landscape for his followers. Those who looked at Jesus as their Messiah were not then known as Christians because that term did not exist until decades after Jesus' death.<sup>51</sup> These followers were Jews born, raised, and Law-following—whose very identity was the redeemed Israel, following the promise foretold in the prophecies.<sup>52</sup> Without the authority of the earthly Jesus, his disciples were stuck between faith in Jesus as a fulfiller of the Law and their brothers and sisters who did not believe.<sup>53</sup>

The disciples longed for their messianic hope to be shared with their fellow Jews, but the reformation Jesus intended his movement to be grew to a division.<sup>54</sup> The disciples continued to follow the Law and attend services at the synagogues and Temple, but they likely did so in the hopes of continuing the reform Jesus set in motion.<sup>55</sup> Their central purpose was now the mission to recruit others at the synagogues and the Temple,<sup>56</sup> to call for repentance in the Old Testament prophetic fashion (Acts 3:11-26), and to be the true Israel, redeemed by their Messiah.

A powerful council of religious authorities called the Sanhedrin acted quickly. The disciples preached in the Temple courts and the Sanhedrin ordered their arrest. They were flogged and threatened “not to speak in the name of Jesus” (Acts 5:40). Undeterred, the disciples

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<sup>50</sup> Though the passion narratives show Rome and the Jewish religious authorities in cahoots, blame tends to be focused upon the Jewish authorities much more so than Rome. Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Alban:1978), 71-72.

<sup>51</sup> L. Michael White, *From Jesus to Christianity: How Four Generations of Visionaries & Storytellers Created the New Testament and Christian Faith* (HarperCollins: 2016), 117.

<sup>52</sup> Bainton, *Christendom*, 1:42.

<sup>53</sup> Theissen provides three different models in which to view the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as the Jesus Reformation grew, and how to understand the foundation Christianity had in Judaism. My paper tends to be closer to the realm of his second and third presented models, which are “Christianity as a De-restriction or Opening of Judaism” and “Christianity as a Transformation of Judaism,” respectively. Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (T&T Clark: 1993), 202-6.

<sup>54</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress: 1992), 445.

<sup>55</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 275.

<sup>56</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Reformation* (Continuum: 1994), 130-31.

continued their mission and were clearly successful.<sup>57</sup> In Acts 15, a group of Pharisees are present in the council of Jesus-followers, showing that not all the religious authorities were uniformly against the Jesus Reformation. As the followers of Jesus grew, so did the division.<sup>58</sup>

The growing Jesus Reformation began adopting Gentile members into their community, pushing the division into a different frame.<sup>59</sup> Rather than the point of division occurring between the Jewish followers of Jesus and other Jews, the division shifted into a separation from the culture of Judaism itself. This was a far more painful process than dividing from the portion of their community which murdered their Messiah. This forced Jewish followers of Jesus to call into question their entire worldview.

The founding of Gentile Christian churches caused tensions within the Jesus Reformation in episodes such as that described in Acts 15. In the debate Paul and Barnabas had with the Jerusalem council over circumcision, the identity of the Jesus Reformation in Judea is shown to still have strong roots in Jewish culture. For the Jerusalem Church, following Jesus meant following the Law, but the contentious debate which led to the removal of circumcision and the kosher diet allowed for a much easier expansion into the Gentile populations that did not share the Jewish religious background.<sup>60</sup>

*Phase 4: New Church system grows rapidly and is persecuted.*

In the context of this paper, “persecution” is used in reference to religious persecution, defined broadly as “acts against or ill-treatment of an individual or group based on religious

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<sup>57</sup> Frend, *Rise of Christianity*, 88.

<sup>58</sup> Frend argues that “the Christians... were in no way opposed to the Temple cultus.” But still “felt...distinct from their fellow Jews” (*Rise of Christianity*, 87).

<sup>59</sup> “The rapid growth of the Gentile Church which was independent of Judaism both by heritage and by conviction could only result in a sharp and final separation between the two.” Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, (Eerdmans: 1985), 355.

<sup>60</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 445; Theissen, *Social Reality*, 205; Rom 2:25-29.

differences.” Within the Jesus Reformation, the population grew exponentially in the decades following the death of Jesus, and with that growth came a significant rise in persecution from both the Jewish front and the Roman front. Often, when religious persecution is mentioned, we tend to think of the persecution only within the framework of violence and martyrdom. However, persecution can be manifested in many less extreme ways such as social exclusion and still be used as a solidifier of religious division as well as a tool to marginalize and suppress. As in many other cases, oversimplification comes with a danger of misunderstanding.

As the Jesus Reformation grew and incorporated more Gentiles, the identity of the group as a collective began distinguishing itself from the identity of the Jews. The Jesus Reformation began questioning four key symbols of Jewish religious identity: Torah,<sup>61</sup> the efficacy and necessity for the Temple,<sup>62</sup> purity and food laws,<sup>63</sup> and circumcision.<sup>64</sup> For the Jewish mindset, which held these four symbols as pillars of Jewish religion and a right relationship with God, the Jesus Reformation was shedding the holiness of the Jews attained through these symbols of separateness (Lev 11:44).<sup>65</sup>

Unlike the Jesus Reformation, Jewish coreligionists who did not join the division from the religious authorities in Judea were still entrenched in their seats of influence as discussed in phase one. They were able to leverage their influence (cf. Phase 1) to marginalize Jesus

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<sup>61</sup> The Jesus Reformation valued the Torah but saw Jesus as a necessary fulfillment of the Law. They valued his interpretations of the Torah over the Jewish religious authorities (Matt 5:17-20).

<sup>62</sup> As exemplified through Jesus’ “cleansing” of the Temple (Matt 21:12-17) and prophecy of its destruction (Mark 13:1-2).

<sup>63</sup> Mark 7:17-23. The food and purity laws did not completely get thrown out the window but were loosened considerably from the Torah’s standards as decided in Acts 15:28-29.

<sup>64</sup> In Acts 15:1-21 Peter argues for a “cleansing by Faith” against some of the Pharisees who were members of the Jesus Reformation. Douglas R. A. Hare, *The Theme of Jewish Persecution of Christians in the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Cambridge University Press: 1967), 1. Paul makes his stance clear, interpreting the “circumcision of the heart” as presented in Lev 26:41 and recapitulated in Deut 10:12-17, Jer 4:4; 6:10 (circumcision of the ears); 9:26, and Ezek 44:7-9.

<sup>65</sup> Hare, *Theme of Jewish Persecution*, 5

followers and attempted to mitigate the threat their growth posed (Acts 4:1-31; 5:17-42; 8:1-4). Throughout the first century, the forms of persecution likely varied in severity from ostracism, to floggings paired with reprimands to (in rarity) martyrdom.<sup>66</sup>

With increasing resistance in Jerusalem, the Jesus Reformation's growth shifted the heart of the movement from Jerusalem to the massing populations in larger port cities such as Alexandria and Antioch. A body of Jesus-followers were meeting and were well-established in Rome by around 50 CE.<sup>67</sup>

For the most part, Romans were religiously inclusive. By the first century, the Roman Empire encompassed the religions of many different regions under its control, and it interfered only when a certain religion was perceived as a threat to the Roman peace and way of life.<sup>68</sup> Due to the dispersion, a Jewish community had been in Rome long before the Jesus Reformation, but the Jesus Reformation was viewed as a threatening schismatic group, which led to persecution in Rome. A particular period of discrimination in Rome is of note. Emperor Claudius' ban of Jews (including Jesus followers) due to unrest in the Jewish community; unrest most possibly caused by the introduction of the Jesus Reformation.<sup>69</sup> Claudius' ban ended with his death, and a sizable Christian community was in Rome by the 60s CE.

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<sup>66</sup> Though evidence provides an uncertain case, the social ostracism may have been expressed in the form of informal or formal bans from public places of worship. Hare, *Theme of Jewish Persecution*, 48-56. For floggings, see Acts 4:1-31; 5:17-42; for martyrdom, see Acts 8:1-4.

<sup>67</sup> The spread of Christianity remained mostly within the confines of the Roman empire within the first century. It is likely that a substantial Christian community was established in Rome by 50 CE as indicated by the dating of the authorship of Paul's letter to the Romans, which is around 54-57 CE. It is likely that without the connectivity of the Roman empire (extensive roads/sailing routes and ports) Christianity would never have had the opportunity to grow as it did. Additionally, it is likely that the dispersion of Jews throughout the empire allowed for pockets of Jewish converts to the Jesus-movement who attributed to the movement's exponential growth. Similarly, in the Protestant reformation, the Gutenberg printing press allowed for the transmission of ideas to spread at an exponentially increased rate, engendering the flashpoint of the Protestant Reformation cycle.

<sup>68</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity: How a Forbidden Religion Swept the World* (Simon and Schuster: 2018), 161-80.

<sup>69</sup> An additional example of Rome's perception of the Jesus Reformation as a threat to the Roman sovereignty and way of life can be found in Pliny the Younger's letters to Trajan around 112 A.D. (by which point the movement had increased considerably). Pliny informs Trajan of the threat and justifies severe action against the obstinate

Following Claudius was Nero, whose infamous persecution of the Jesus Reformation in Rome was likely a convenient political move for him, rather than a religious discrimination or a response to a threat. After the great fire of Rome in 64 CE, Nero—who likely set the fire—blamed the Christians and used them as a scapegoat. Even the Roman historian Tacitus, who was no supporter of Jews or the Jesus Reformation, incriminated Nero for his abominations and unjust ruling.<sup>70</sup> Despite Nero’s persecution possibly having been a political move, it affected the Jesus Reformation by marginalizing them through physical threat.

Aside from Nero’s short persecution, Christianity was not made illegal in any part of the Roman empire in the first century, but the Jesus Reformation still faced varying forms of religious persecution. Following the example of Jesus meant living in the growing Kingdom of God where society is turned upside-down, threatening the status quo of every stratum of state and religion with the promise of the humbling of the high and the rising of the low. This mission was attractive to many, and the growth of the Jesus Reformation soon became so expansive that Paul and Jesus’ original disciples found it impossible to support every community by themselves.

*Phase 5: To accommodate growth, Church system establishes doctrine, infrastructure, polity, and hierarchy.*

As the Jesus Reformation continued to grow, the members began to organize themselves to be more effective in propagating a consistent and undiluted message to new converts. Hand-in-hand with this organization into institutionalization comes a standardization of that which holds authority to govern the institution: the Scriptures, acceptable interpretation of Scriptures,

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“superstition” in his 96<sup>th</sup> letter. Pliny the Younger, *Complete Letters* (Oxford University Press: 2009); Ferguson, *Backgrounds* 556-59; Ehrman, *Triumph of Christianity*, 183-88.

<sup>70</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (Penguin UK: 1973), 15.44.2-8.

and processes by which individuals can gain authority over others in the system (clergy). Eventually, standardization and institutionalization cultivate a hierarchical structure. Within the hierarchy, a vulnerability to usurpation creeps into the power dynamics and impersonal relationships of the system to which the Scriptures and the heart of the movement's origins are diametrically opposed.<sup>71</sup>

In the first few chapters of Acts, we see signs of institutionalization manifesting through the organization of its members. In Acts 6, we read:

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.’ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.” – Acts 6:1-6 (NRSV)

The disciples delegated, as all good leaders do, and discerned their own responsibility in the ministry of the “word of God” to be more important than this particular task at hand, so they recruited a widow-feeding committee. The Jesus Reformation greatly increased in number (Acts 6:7) and as more Churches were planted there was a need for people of authority to be leaders and organize these Church bodies. Training for a clergy position included teaching, praying, and fasting with elders of a higher authority, like Paul, Barnabas (Acts 14:21-28), Timothy and Titus.

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<sup>71</sup> “Organize [Christianity’s] ethics—as organize them you must whenever two or three are gathered in the name of Christ—and the free spirit of forgiving love becomes a new law, requiring interpretation, commentary, and all the machinery of justice—just the sort of impersonal relationship with the gospel denies and combats. Place this society in the world, demanding that it be not of the world, and strenuous as may be its efforts to transcend or sublimate the mundane life, it will yet be unable to escape all taint of conspiracy and connivance with the worldly interests it despises.” Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 5.

In the Pastoral Epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus is a list of qualifications needed for positions in the hierarchy (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). The qualifications for these positions are paired in both Timothy and Titus with concerns of teachings opposed to the accepted Gospel being present in the communities (1 Tim 4:1-11; Titus 1:10-16), showing the hierarchy was expressly intended for as defense against heresy. In several places in the letters of the New Testament, the hierarchy is composed of several different leadership positions stratified over the laity. In Romans, there is Phoebe the minister (*diakonos*; Rom 16:1) and in Hebrews are the leaders (*hegeomai*; 13:17). In 1 Timothy there are the offices of overseer (*episkope*; 1 Tim 3:1) and elders (*presbuteros*; 1 Tim 5:17), which are both mentioned again in Titus 1:5-9. None of these were instituted by Jesus, who trained apostles (*apostolos*) and disciples (*mathetes*).

The creation of new Jesus Reformation communities and new clergy led to a need for the standardization of teachings to ensure everyone was on the same page. By around the turn of the first century, a book of discipline called the *Didache* was being spread to as many Jesus communities as possible.<sup>72</sup> This book was used as a source of instruction for the operation of the Jesus communities, a program to follow. By the end of the first century, Jesus' promise to return (John 14:3) began to lose its immediacy, and the Church coalesced into an institutionalized structure.

Building on the organizational model as seen in the pastoral epistles, figures such as St. Clement and Ignatius of Antioch continued to institutionalize through organization of a hierarchy into the second century. For example, Clement asserts the authority of the hierarchy over the

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<sup>72</sup> The process of selecting which documents would be considered canonical scripture was a longer and more arduous process. The letters of Paul and the four gospels we know were circulated and used as authoritative documents concerning the teachings of Jesus and acceptable interpretations, and a generally accepted list was current around the second century, but adjustments and additions were made until well into the fourth century. See Lee M. McDonald and James A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Hendrickson: 2002), for a more detailed account of the many sides to this discussion.



unruly Corinthians in a letter. He commandeers a verse of the Greek translation of the Old Testament, “I will establish your rulers in peace and your overseers in justice” (Isa 60:17) and inserts the hierarchical nomenclature when he writes, “Thus, the Scripture says in one place: ‘I will establish their bishops in justice and their deacons in faith’” (1 Clem 42:5). In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius of Antioch presents the religious leaders of the Jesus Reformation with a similar tone to Clement. Ignatius writes, “Follow the presbytery as you would the apostles. Respect the deacons as the commandment of Jesus Christ” (Ign. *Smyrn.* 8:1).

During the third century, Constantine’s rule redefined Christian identity through the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which established Christianity securely in the Roman Empire. As the religion became even more established in the secular realms and drew from more populations, the need for standardization increased. In 325 CE, the Council of Nicaea produced a creed including what were considered to be foundational beliefs for Christianity. Any teaching that did not align with these standards was considered heretical and marginalized so as not to threaten the status quo.

The larger the Jesus Reformation became, the taller the hierarchy rose in step with the standardization in order to organize the movement into one body. With growth and institutionalization through the centuries also came greater amounts of influence and money flowing within the system. The vulnerability of the structure lies within the opportunity which institutionalization provides for the few members of the upper strata to usurp or misuse their influence, in extreme cases leading to a Church system with a Pope as an infallible monarch wielding the authority of God over all people.<sup>73</sup> Institutionalization of the Jesus Reformation led to its structure mimicking the Judaic Religious system in phase one.

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<sup>73</sup> Luther, “Babylonian Captivity,” 45.

## The Cycle of Reconstruction

“Prosperity itself corrupts...Discipline begets abundance, and abundance, unless we take the utmost care, destroys discipline; and discipline in its fall pull down abundance.”

- Roland H. Bainton in *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*

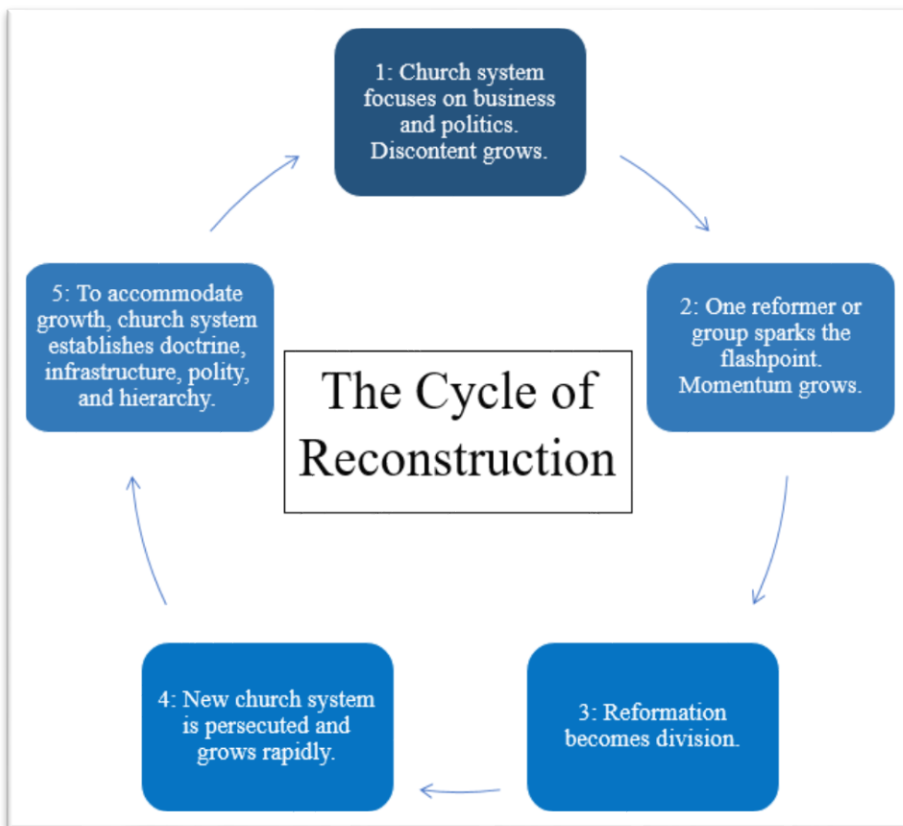
The cycle of reconstruction has five distinct phases. These phases manifest themselves differently according to each time period given the different specific issues and cultural settings involved, but the overarching principles and effects remain the same. We can recognize that the cycle of reconstruction may be materializing when the Church system in question spends a disproportionate amount of time and energy on what we will call “institutional concerns.” These are concerns of the business and political dynamics of an institution: income, expenditures, cost/benefit analyses, marketing, public image, hierarchy placement, and all manner of vying for positions of influence. These attributes within a religious system have led to growing upheaval and disenchantment in the reformation flashpoints of the Jesus Reformation and the Protestant Reformation and are once again a growing concern for Christians in the United States. Both the Jesus Reformation and the Protestant Reformation became reconstructions at phase three, where reformation tendencies escalated to the point of division into two separate religious entities.

In this paper, we explored a brief history of the background and genesis of the Jesus Reformation, separated into the five phases. At the heart of the Jesus Reformation is a highly spiritual and personal relationship with God, designed to define personal life as well as community life. However, every attempt to organize, preserve, and spread the religion has resulted in heavy institutionalization.<sup>74</sup> Distilling patterns in history allows us to formulate an

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<sup>74</sup> Like in the Jesus Reformation, the many movements of the Protestant Reformation (apart from certain movements such as some forms of Anabaptism) quickly institutionalized with the growing popular support towards the ideologies of that branch.

understanding of this cycle of reconstruction. The cycle progresses through the phases and reformation of the Church becomes division into separate Churches at phase three. Ultimately, as



the newly-established Church grows, it organizes through institutionalization, thus engendering the replication of issues similar to those which originally caused the dissension. As we begin noticing the signs of the cycle in the Christian Church in the United

States, it is imperative that we do not allow the cycle to progress as the Church has in the past, or we may be left to repeat the phases of the cycle again.

Through the Cycle of Reformation and the data from modern surveys, we see that this heavy institutionalization may appear effective through membership numbers, social influence, and monetary capital increase, but ultimately produces a religion unsatisfactory for its members.

## **The Modern Reformation**

“Christendom has often achieved apparent success by ignoring the precepts of its founder.”

- Richard Niebuhr in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*

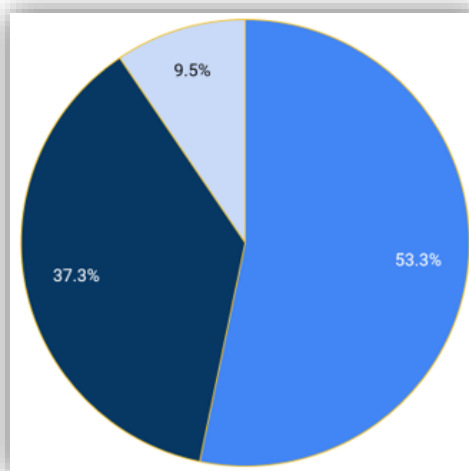
Drastic change has been occurring within the last few decades of the Christian Church in the United States, most noticeably the decline in numbers of attendance at services and organized events. Many books and journal articles have attempted to flesh out why the Church is experiencing this upheaval and what courses of action are the best as we move forward. Through this section, we will first have data and stories from survey respondents to explain the downward trend in attendance, and then we will discuss how to respond to these stories and these trends in light of understanding the cause and effect relationship of the cycle of reconstruction.

As someone who has been involved in the Christian Church (mostly mainline Protestantism) my whole life, I have had the opportunity to observe the changes and decreasing trends as well as listen to the observations of Church members who have been around a lot longer than I. It seemed to me as if conversations about the “decline of religion” had become more frequent. These observations, conversations, and my studies into Church history made me begin to suspect a cyclical nature of reformation tendencies in the Church. This suspicion led me into conducting a Church Experience Survey that asked questions about people’s experiences within the Church. I wanted to know why people were leaving the Church and why people were staying.

The Church Experience Survey was conducted primarily through qualitative, open-ended questions. From October 2018 to February of 2019, 170 participants of widely-varying experience within the Christian Church answered the survey, which was distributed by word of mouth and social media and email platforms.

The first question of the survey asked if the respondent currently attends Church, used to attend but no longer does, or has never regularly attended Church. According to their answer, the respondent of the survey was led to the questionnaire which corresponded with their Church experience. The results of this first question are summarized in the pie chart.

Though the numbers of the data are not entirely surprising, the feature of interest to me was how all three groups represented in the pie chart had remarkable consistency in their view of the Church. For most, Church *could* be an incredible community, but they identify core issues of Christian community that are similar issues as those highlighted in phases one and two of the cycle of reconstruction in the Jesus Reformation. A large number of respondents expressed frustrations with Church politics, hierarchy, and business “money-centered”



37.3% - Used to attend Church but no longer do.  
 9.5% - Have never attended Church regularly.  
 53.3% - Currently attend Church regularly.

mentality, feeling as though genuine and organic discipleship opportunities which delved into the meat of the faith were not available to them. Many respondents also noted what they view to be a problem of hypocrisy in the Church and had experienced harm or exclusion. My respondents have been given pseudonyms for privacy.

Maggie, a 22-year-old respondent to the survey who selected “I used to attend Church but no longer do” noted that she stopped going to Church at the age of twelve, when her parents left.

When asked “Why did you leave Church?” She responded:

My parents thought going was no longer about religion. The in-church politics (who should/shouldn’t have leadership positions and the ostracizing of people who didn’t

agree with leadership) began to overwhelm everything in the Church community. We switched to another Methodist Church, but after a year we found the same thing was happening there. We eventually stopped going and didn't look for another Church. My parents never talked to me or my siblings about religion or God after that.

This woman's experience had no strong sense of faith that could survive or thrive outside of a church community. When they felt no other option but to leave the church, they left the faith along with it.

Charles attended a church faithfully, but recently left. When asked why, he answered that he "was asking questions that were not well received" and he and his family divided from his home church of 50 years. His questions did not align with the standardization of faith, and he felt unwelcomed because of it. When describing what led up to this change, he commented that his church "has become more of a business." Though he left the church, he remained active and dedicated to his own pursuit of faith.

When asked, "What is your opinion of Church and the people who attend?" Daphne commented on both her observation of hypocrisy within the Church as well as the positive potential of the Church:

Most Churches I attended when I was a believer, I noticed many people would go to Church to show they were good people. Many did not go to praise their God, but instead as a way to show their community they were good. They would see themselves high and mighty and judge others. That is something big I did not like. However, other Churches I did see that there was a huge sense of belonging in that community. The Church would help people in need and would donate their funds to families who needed it. That is something I did like.

Daphne is not Christian and has never attended a church regularly, but still recognized that some churches she has experienced do cultivate belonging and community. For someone who was not steeped in Christian tradition, her remarks of the hypocrisy in the Church are remarkably reminiscent of Jesus' description of the Church he tried to reform.

Caroline currently attends a Roman Catholic church and has for her whole life. She explained her experience as similar to mine. When asked, “What changes have you seen in your Church?” she confirmed the decreasing trend in the younger population:

Now that I’m in my twenties, I can see the adults remarking about younger people fading from the Church. The population is certainly older - only just noticeably in the last few years. I went to Church as a child with countless other children, whereas my little cousins currently going to the same Church are often the only children in weekly mass.

Caroline’s observations are echoed by many of the respondents, revealing a consistent trend indicative of growing dissatisfaction in churches.

The respondents to the Church Experience Survey provided much to consider about the weaknesses of the church, but those who still attended church regularly were also asked to comment on what they saw to be their church’s strengths. Kathy has been attending a church for all fifty-three years of her life and has attended her current church for the past ten years. She said the strengths of her current congregation are:

Outreach/service orientation; intentional involvement with immediate neighbors/community; excellent pastor; don't need to leave our brains at the door (we are challenged to think deeply about life and theology); open and welcoming to all (gay music minister, several young women on staff part-time, variety of socioeconomic levels, several with physical disabilities); mixed theological and political preferences among congregants.

Kathy sees a unity of diversity in her congregation and views it as strength. Like all respondents, she was asked, “What should the perfect community look like?” to which she responded saying that the perfect community should be one in which, “all are welcomed, nurtured, and empowered to be the hands and feet of Christ to whomever they come in contact with throughout the day.”

Kathy was unified with all 170 respondents (from all types of church experience) in that her description of the perfect community had no mention of a church structure, building, particular music type, or even perfect unity on theological issues.

Many other respondents who still attend a church comment on the beauty and the benefits they experience within that Christian community, but comment on the consistent weaknesses in the church when it comes to building community and relationship with people outside of the church. Regardless of church experience, through their responses about the strengths and weaknesses of church and their depiction of ideal communities, respondents consistently identified that the value of a Christian community is in its ability to welcome, love, and support. Eric's description of the perfect community sums up the overall perspectives of the respondents of the Church Experience Survey rather well:

[The perfect community] is committed to self-giving love. It is a community that looks out for the needs of all, not just a few at the top of the pile. It is open to listening to all perspectives, and is constantly exploring how the borders of the community can be expanded to welcome more and more into the community, until there are no boundaries at all. A perfect community is one where all are welcome and equal. Perfect community is in harmony with the self, with others, and with creation, and in this way, along with through other forms of religious/spiritual expression, we also come into harmony with the Divine.

My findings in the Church Experience Survey are consistent with the work done by Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, which they have published in their book "*Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith.*" Though my survey was open to people of any Church experience, *Church Refugees* focuses on people like Charles, who have poured a lot of themselves into a church but felt compelled to leave for their own spiritual health. Like the results of my survey, they found a dichotomy where their respondents feel as though the community of a church can be extremely valuable, but ultimately feel that "they were done because of the politics and infighting and constantly being asked to do



things to keep the Church running.”<sup>75</sup> Here, Packard and Hope touch on a specific way in which a focus on the institutionalization side of Christian community can cause harm.

When Christian community is dependent upon providing experiences for their congregations as well as resources to supply full-time salaries and covering the many costs of owning real estate, a pressure to fuel the machine rather than feed the people results. “People are much more likely to see the Church as a kind of niche political institution that’s ultimately not concerned with their day-to-day existence. They view the Church as inwardly focused and consumed by the politics of its own survival.”<sup>76</sup>

Both my survey and the work done by Packard and Hope largely deal with qualitative results—we want to know the ‘why’ behind the tensions in the Church. My survey was not intended for providing raw quantitative data to figure out what the numbers show about attendance trends. The limitations of my survey include the means of propagation. Because the survey was largely made available to respondents through word of mouth and social media, it remained mostly within my own social circle, which is most likely more representative of current churchgoers than a larger, random sample of United States citizens. This characteristic of my survey led me to verify with a quantitative source: The Pew Research Center’s survey.

Pew Research conducted the 2014 Religious Landscape Survey with over 30,000 Americans from all fifty states. Research done through the survey showed that the overall weekly attendance at religious services has gone down from 39% of adults to 36% of adults since 2007. Of the adults who are weekly service attenders, only 17% fall between the ages of 18-29, while 32% are between the ages of 30-49, and 28% are between 50-64. Between 2007 and 2014,

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<sup>75</sup> Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are DONE with Church but Not Their Faith* (Group Publishing: 2015), 40.

<sup>76</sup> Packard and Hope, *Church Refugees*, 18.

they estimate a total drop in attendance of 5 million adults in mainline Protestantism in the United States.<sup>77</sup>

Drawing from the survey I conducted, *Church Refugees*, and the Pew Research Center's survey, there are definite consistencies in the declining population of the Christian Church as well as strong feelings of discontent with the political organization of the Church. Recalling our early Church roots in the early to mid-first century for our solution may have some merit, but it also comes with dangerous temptations. If our response to the data and the stories that were shared is to simply abandon the current structure of the Church and to start fresh on our own, not only would we be jeopardizing much of the good which the institutionalized Church could and does bring, but we may be committing ourselves to another cycle of reconstruction.

“What Jesus talked about looked more like Habitat for Humanity or Alcoholics Anonymous—a grassroots movement with no official hierarchy but lots of leaders; no offerings, but enough money to get the job done. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God.” – Jim Henderson in *Jim and Casper Go To Church*

Going back to our roots of the early Church must be done carefully, following their examples while avoiding their mistakes. The Church is not going to die. When we see the data from surveys, our impulse is to panic and do damage control—to figure out what is wrong and fix it so we can fill the pews on Sunday like it used to be. The Church is adaptive and will change with the times as it has in the past, and it will survive. If our response to the numbers is to ask, “how do we control this?” then we will have made the mistakes of our forefathers.

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<sup>77</sup> Mainline Protestantism is the group which is showing the most drastic decline in adult membership, but the 2018 Gallup Poll confirms that the overall population of Americans who identify as a member of a Church or Synagogue has declined from 70% in 1992 to 50% in 2018. “Religion.” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>. In 2007, there were 227 million adults in the United States, and a little more than 78% of them – or roughly 178 million – identified as Christians. Between 2007 and 2014, the overall size of the U.S. adult population grew by about 18 million people, to nearly 245 million. But the share of adults who identify as Christians fell to just under 71%, or approximately 173 million Americans, a net decline of about 5 million. “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.” <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

Before any conversation is had on what course-corrections should be pursued in the Church, there *must* be an absolutely unwavering commitment from everyone involved in the central belief that God's plan for the Church includes being unified.<sup>78</sup> This ardent adherence to the ministry of reconciliation will cause tension and discomfort in our highly-standardized Christian religion. If the Church is to thrive with diverse unity in this modern upheaval, our commitment to God and community must surpass our commitment to human standardizations of religion. If those who would be called Christians are not able to be a loving community, committed to salvation through our reconciliation with God, how then can we be justified in reciting the Great Commission as we pursue salvation for the rest of humanity? We have concentrated our efforts in plugging the leak as people pour out of our Churches by pushing invitations to Church. Perhaps we need more practice inviting people into the Kingdom of God.

With the benefit of retrospect, we have the perspective of the long-term effects of the early Church's establishment of hierarchy. There is no doubt that the institutionalized Church can be an incredible force for good in the establishment of well-resourced missions and loving communities, but we have also established that as the Church grows, the hierarchical pyramid grows with it. The hierarchical pyramid in and of itself is not evil, but it allows for it. As the population of the Church increases, more power and influence become vested in the top of the pyramid, making the population vulnerable. Wherever a few preside over the many, there will be the opportunity for their mistakes to wreak havoc among the rest.<sup>79</sup> Jesus gave us full justification to create a community of faith rather than a hierarchy of religion (Matt 23:1-15).

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<sup>78</sup> Matt 23:1-15; John 17:22-23; Acts 4:32; Rom 12:16; Eph 1:10, 2:14, 4:3, 4:11-16; Phil 2:1-4; 1 Cor 1:10, 10:17, 12:12-13; 2 Cor 13:11; Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:13-14; 2 Chr 30:12; Ps 133:1.

<sup>79</sup> In phases one and two of the Cycle in the Jesus Reformation, we saw firsthand how the minority at the top diverted the course of religion away from God's intentions of the faith, and those underneath them were misled and taken advantage of as a result.

The challenge then lies in the tension created by the missions of making and keeping the Church unified while avoiding the establishment of a hierarchical structure. To navigate through the tension, we need to understand why there is a tension at all. Certainly, the intention of establishing an institutional system is one of merit: so that resources can be pooled, the message can remain undiluted, and the Church can spread. This is unity through control. But as we have seen in the past, the vulnerability generated by the hierarchical structure can be exploited by those in power to commandeer the resources, weaponize the message, and marginalize and jettison any who do not match the standard (like Charles). The response of the marginalized is to make their own Church and to do it their way. The tension between a unified Church and the need to construct a hierarchy boils down to a need for control. Our compulsive need to standardize and control the Church is a loud and clear proclamation of one truth: we do not trust God to be an active leader in the Church.

We can disconnect from the Church above us in order to connect with the Church around us. Each individual church community investing in relationships and collaborations with the community and the churches around them will allow for Christian community development and resource pooling, while keeping the hierarchical pyramid short. The Law of Synergy is part of God's design for us, meaning that the whole may be more effective than the sum of all our parts. Churches within the same community working together will be more effective in that community than two churches in different states, tethered only by the denominational tagline on the door.

The missional flexibility of the modern Church can be achieved in multiple ways that are already familiar to us, such as missionaries and charities. But in the spirit of mimicking the evangelical style of Christ and the early Church without dissolving the institutional Church

entirely, we must consider changing how we view the Church. We must stop *going* to church and start *bringing* Church.

Whether in the four walls of our traditional expression of church on Sundays, or dinner with neighbors, drinks with friends, vacations with family, or talking with strangers, our ability to *be* and *bring* Church is the key to manifesting the flexibility of the Jesus Reformation.<sup>80</sup> For the unification of churches to occur effectively and on neutral ground, the Church must overcome the four walls which bind it in weekly services. To reach across the ravines of division and to reinforce relationships despite growing tensions, the Church must produce fresh expressions of itself in which the Church is embodied in community and in relationships rather than embodied in hierarchy and in property.<sup>81</sup> As the respondents to the Church Experience Survey agreed: the value of Church is within its mission of building relationships, not in the establishment of a weekly social club.

The cycle of reconstruction shows how asserting a system of control over our religion allows us to achieve apparent success, while ultimately reducing righteousness to a stage persona for our weekly performances. Without a personal and individual commitment to a right relationship with God and each other as our foundation, none of our offerings to God, our conferences, performances, or our church facilities can ever bring us to righteousness. Jesus did not come to reconstruct religion into a new Church, he came to show us a reformation of the heart.

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<sup>80</sup> Tod Bolsinger describes the need for “adaptive capacity” in the leadership of the Church today in *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, (InterVarsity Press: 2015), 89-94.

<sup>81</sup> “Fresh Expressions.” <https://freshexpressionsus.org>.

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