

# Five filters to use when reading about church renewal

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As a pastor, I constantly am exposed to people who write proposals for church renewal. There are, it seems, more books, articles, blog posts and social media posts about church renewal coming out daily. They are written by authors from different perspectives and with differing levels of influence.

It is good for pastors to read these authors and to learn from their different perspectives. The challenge, however, is what should pastors take seriously and seek to apply to the churches? I have five filters I use whenever I read on church renewal to help me discern what to take seriously and potentially implement.

## Filter One: Scripture

When I read church renewal authors, the first question I try to answer is, “Is their locus of authority Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17) or something else (experience, tradition, etc.)?”

If the author’s proposed reforms require the need to shift the locus of authority to something other than Scripture, then it is a nonstarter. It does not mean I do not read the author or learn from the author. It does mean I will not implement their recommendations. This is the most important filter I use when I read.

## **Filter Two: History and theology**

In thinking about church renewal, it is important to learn from those who have gone before us. They may not have the final say in how we lead renewal today, but their example and their thinking should inform us.

For example, during the Reformation, the leading pastors and theologians spoke and wrote about the importance of recovering biblical preaching and the right practice of the ordinances/sacraments—such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper—in having a proper ecclesiology—theology of the church. These were core concerns for the 16th century reformers and have received sustained attention in the centuries since.

Another example is to read about the role of prayer in renewal movements throughout history. Any reading of church history reveals renewal movements—sometimes called revivals—were preceded and sustained by intentional and intense personal and corporate prayer.

These two examples reveal how history and theology can be helpful by providing such questions as these:

- Does the author give attention to strengthening biblical preaching?
- Does the author give attention to the proper practice of the ordinances?
- Does the author speak about the importance of prayer?

If the central historical and theological concerns given attention over the centuries are ignored, de-emphasized or denigrated, then the pastor should be cautious about the proposed reforms.

## **Filter Three: Consequences**

When reading about church reform, it is a good practice to see what the consequences have been as churches and denominations have implemented

the proposed reforms.

For example, when I read about proposed reforms, I like to ask, “Have the churches and denominations that have implemented these reforms become healthier and subsequently grown?”

I realize growth or lack of growth does not say everything about whether or not a proposed reform is right. Nevertheless, it can provide some helpful guidance concerning what may happen if a reform is implemented.

## **Filter Four: Experience of the author**

While it is good to look at the results broadly across churches and denominations, I also like to learn specifically about the authors.

Sometimes I learn that the author has not actually ever led a church or sought to lead these reforms. If someone has never actually led these reforms, it makes me cautious about taking them seriously.

On the other hand, if someone has led these reforms and can write from their experience about the process and the subsequent results, I am much more likely to take them seriously and consider their proposals.

## **Filter Five: Evangelism and missions**

When I read about proposals for church renewal, I seek to answer questions focused on evangelism and missions, such as the following:

- Will this reform lead more people to share their faith with people who do not know Jesus?
- Will this reform lead more people to become involved in missions?
- Will this reform lead more people to become missionaries?
- Will this reform lead more people to start churches?

It seems counterintuitive that churches and denominations would make reforms that make them less evangelistic and involved in missions, but the results are clear: many churches and denominations have done just this.

## **Conclusion**

I am sure there are other helpful filters. The five I have proposed are my starting place.

If an author proposes reforms to the church that (1) shift the locus of authority away from Scripture, (2) have little to no historical precedent, (3) have been detrimental to churches and denominations that have implemented them, (4) are being proposed by someone who has never actually led a church to do the reforms, and (5) causes people to be less evangelistic and involved in missions, then the reforms—no matter how popular they may sound—should be rejected.

Of course, the opposite is true. If the proposed reforms align with these filters, there is a greater chance God is involved and will bless these efforts.

In a time when so many voices are calling for a myriad of reforms, it is important to implement the reforms God actually will bless and sustain.

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