

## Rethinking Church: Where Do We Begin?

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American evangelical churches are modifying our practical ecclesiology at a pace that necessitates serious reflection. Certainly we have a window of opportunity as the bankruptcy of Western culture becomes undeniable. Disturbing tragedies crowd the news reports. People who have been satisfied with the status quo are forced to ask troubling questions that get closer to the heart of matters. It is exactly at this point that American evangelicals can meet their culture with the immutable realities of Christ, divine realities that never can be modified, adapted, or revised.

Many people recognize that churches ought to rethink some of their time-worn approaches (usually built upon cultural appetites that went out of fashion decades ago). Rethinking church life in a biblical way, however, is a rare occurrence. I am not claiming that we lack zeal. American evangelicals are well known for our willingness to get up and do something. Words like *extreme* and *passion* have become central to the recent refashioning of the western church. We have passion about cultural relevance. We implement extreme changes in our ecclesiology. However, it may be argued that extreme is not enough.

Extreme is a word that often refers to the degree of change and the rapid pace at which change is implemented. Some people are calling for drastic changes in our methods. Others accuse these new approaches of being too extreme. Yet, the degree of change is not the central issue upon which we should be focusing. No matter how extreme the change, if it only deals with externals and symptoms, it will prove inadequate.

That brings us to another word that has been popularized—*radical*. Strictly speaking, radical is different than extreme, as it has to do with roots. A radical change is a change that begins with the roots, the causes. When we look at God's pattern, we see that He deals with roots. He deals with causes. Everywhere we see Christ interacting with the human condition. He avoids the merely surface issues and drives the conversation to the root matters. If we wish to respond to the present need of our culture, and if we believe this will require change in the churches, it is wise to act in a way that is in harmony with God. Radical changes may often produce extreme changes, but these changes will not be changes on the surface only, but the deeper changes that please God.

A right diagnosis is essential to healing. Imagine a doctor that hurries through the diagnosis process and prescribes medications that treat only the symptoms. He does not test to find the root cause of the symptoms. The doctor is sincere. He cares about the patient, but his diagnosis is deadly. The patient purchases the medications and follows the doctor's instructions precisely. Weeks and months pass and things are not improving. Eventually he returns and a second, more thorough, examination reveals a very dangerous internal disease. Precious time was lost. The doctor had good intentions. The patient obeyed the doctor's orders. The medication did what it was designed to do. So what was the problem? The problem was that all of these things are useless if the diagnosis is incorrect.

Churches have often misdiagnosed the fatal spiritual disease in America. We may be

sincere in our efforts. We may prescribe good medications (the Scriptural principles). Those people to whom we minister may faithfully follow our counsel, but if the diagnosis is wrong then all of the above is useless. After years pass and things continue to decline, the churches will be forced to admit that they wasted precious time due to a surface diagnosis. An honest look at the evangelical scene in America may lead us to be more alarmed by the refashioned churches than the drifting culture. The problems of the lost world have always existed, but if the churches are offering the wrong solutions, the situation is dire.

The good news is that the problems we face in our churches are not unique, and guidance is provided for us in the Scripture. Looking at an extended account from the Old Testament, we will consider the lives of four kings. All were chosen by God, but all failed as leaders at a critical point in Israel's history.

### A Shocking Conclusion

The Bible describes the final days in the decline of the northern tribes of Israel:

The Lord rejected all the descendants of Israel and afflicted them and gave them into the hand of plunderers, until He had cast them out of His sight. When He had torn Israel from the house of David, they made Jeroboam the son of Nebat king. Then Jeroboam drove Israel away from following the Lord and made them commit a great sin. The sons of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them until the Lord removed Israel from His sight, as He spoke through all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria until this day. (2 Kings 17:20-23)

Here we see the ultimate end of a systemic decline in God's people. Still, this is not where we begin if we want to avoid a similar outcome in our churches. We must consider the beginning and early progress of the spiritual decay. How did it come about that God's people so offended Him that the most loving and just response was to hand Israel over to their enemies? Were there no men appointed by God to turn His people from their insanity? Let's consider the lives of four kings.

### Solomon: The Decline Begins

David is dead. Long live King Solomon! In 1 Kings 11 we read the account of the latter years of Solomon. We need to remember God chose Solomon and distinguished him with extraordinary wisdom. In spite of this, Solomon became entangled in a number of political marriages and gathered to himself a sizeable harem of wives and concubines. Soon Solomon was persuaded to use the national treasury in order to build shrines for the worship of his wives' favorite idols. It is shocking to read that Solomon himself cooled toward the Living God, and his heart joined his wives in devotion to idols (1 Kings 11:4). God responded. He warned that He would tear ten of the twelve tribes from Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and give them to another.

Can we stop and imagine the spiritual scene for a moment? The nation was standing at the path of what we might describe as the idolatry of "Yahweh-plus" religion. The next generation would inherit a land progressively filled with false gods and shrines, as well as the temple built to God by David's son. Yet, it would not know the sweet and deeply satisfying reality of God's nearness. By adding to their religion they would lose the one thing they could

not afford to lose—God Himself. Solomon forgot the simple truth expressed by Amy Carmichael, nineteenth-century missionary to southern India, who wrote, “All we need, all want, is to have His ungrieved presence with us always.”<sup>1</sup>

Let’s be honest. American evangelicals have inherited a similar situation. Jesus-plus religion is so commonly accepted that its validity is hardly questioned. We have crafted our services in such a way that there is something for everyone, even those persons who are not interested in following Jesus of Nazareth. Though few are raising questions regarding the fundamental validity of this method, we might ask God, “Have You grown accustomed to our spiritual embellishments as each Sunday rolls around? Have you acquiesced to the many additives that we feel are necessary if we are to do ministry in an effective manner?” He may not be as dazzled by our numerical growth as we are.

What should a generation of church members do when faced with a God-plus religion in which God Himself no longer attends our churches in a noticeable way? Three options can be seen throughout history:

1. A people may become disillusioned with their empty religion and abandon it altogether.
2. A people may decide to add other attractions to maintain interest in religion though God’s active presence seems missing.
3. A people may honestly assess their religion and, coming to the conclusion that God has withdrawn His covenanted presence, decide that a thorough season of repentance is the only wise course.

Consider the three kings who followed Solomon.

#### Jeroboam: The Pragmatist

In 1 Kings 11:29-40, Ahijah the prophet was sent to a capable young Jewish man named Jeroboam. His message was simple. God has chosen you to lead his people when the ten tribes are taken from Solomon’s son. Astonishingly God promised to be with Jeroboam in the same way he was with David! Stop and consider what this man was being handed—the living God drawing near, mercies like those received by David, and the significant opportunity to turn the people of God back from the edge of idolatry at a time when they are reeling from divine judgment. Sadly, Jeroboam could not have failed in a more spectacularly devastating way. His spiritual influence was so poisonous to the nation that from this point forward idolatrous kings in Israel were said to walk in the “sins of Jeroboam.”

Every spiritual leader would do well to ask, “What was the sin of Jeroboam, and am I guilty of it?” Jeroboam’s sin is described in 1 Kings 12:25-33.

1. He adjusted God to fit the cultural appetites (v. 28).
2. He offered the people a religion of convenience (v.29-30).
3. He embraced an all-inclusive leadership policy (v. 31).
4. He did all of the above while maintaining the externals of biblical religion (v. 32-33).

Where did he get this approach? He was an innovative man. He was a strategist in his denomination. However, he drew these new methods from his own heart (1 Kings 12:33).

Do you see that Jeroboam chose the second option for responding to a religion which was devoid of God? He did not become irreligious, but he did not lead the people to return to the living God. He simply added to God. We live in the days of Jeroboam, adding to God in order to make church worth frequenting. As a whole, the American evangelical scene has suffered

spiritual losses in the previous decades. The primary response to this loss has been to follow Jeroboam's pattern in hopes that the people will fill our pews again. Perhaps that seems a harsh evaluation? Let's look at the sins of Jeroboam again and see if we recognize them in our churches today?

1. Too often, we have adjusted God to fit the cultural appetites.

If a person from another country were to listen carefully to the things we are saying (and leaving unsaid) about the character of God in the songs we sing, in the prayers that are repeated weekly, in the Sunday School classes and youth groups, would they find this God to be more like an American than the God they read about in Scripture? What we really believe about God will not be found by reading our church doctrinal statements or listening to our Biblical expositions. It will be found in our choices. It will be found in our casual approach to His worship. It will be found in what we leave unsaid about Him.

Jeroboam offered two golden calves. We would find a less obvious and more refined way of giving Americans the God they want, but if we honestly seek out the truth, we may discover we are following in the sins of Jeroboam. In quiet ways we have offered the world a god that resembles and accommodates them.

One simple test might help us to see things clearly. True religion includes interacting with a living God. He is not one of us. He is not like us. Therefore, true religion will always require adjustment. Who is being adjusted in your church, you or God? When was the last time that your church members were confronted with the tremendous difference between God and them? When was the last time you found God to be inconvenient, unmanageable? If we worship a God that is like us, perhaps we have a golden calf too.

2. Too often, we have offered people a religion of convenience.

Jeroboam erected two new worship sites, conveniently located at the northern and southern borders of Israel. No longer would devout Jews need to travel so far to worship. Making religion convenient for people is so fundamental to our way of doing things that it would not be surprising for us to think that we invented the idea. We do not imagine that there is anything wrong with offering people as many options as possible so that worshipping God may be done in the most convenient manner. Are we constantly asking ourselves how we can make religion easier for people who have no discernable interest in living for God?

3. Too often, we have embraced an all-inclusive leadership policy.

Jeroboam no longer found it necessary to abide by God's specific restrictions for temple-service. As many as wished to join the priesthood at the new worship centers were welcome. Long ago, American evangelicals learned that we could quickly add people to our church roles if only we were willing to give them a sense of significance through leadership positions. Perhaps we are shocked at the behavior of those denominations that are ordaining female pastors, but conservative churches must own up to their own guilt. We have grown accustomed to ordaining wealthy and influential men to positions of leadership who do not bear the marks of Biblically qualified leaders.

How often have young people with a certain talent who want to use God's worship as a platform upon which to display their abilities, found the pastor ready to accommodate them? I have seen a worship service in which a young woman performed a rope dance suspended twenty feet above the ground while the musician played a contemporary Christian song. Who told the

young lady that God now delights in sensual rope dances? No one did. So, why was she indulged? Because we have followed Jeroboam, and Jeroboam allowed anyone who wanted to take a leadership role in church to do so. What God wanted was not an issue to Jeroboam.

In light of these three, why would any serious-minded Christian doubt that too often we have been guilty of the same sins that destroyed the northern tribes of Israel? One reason surely must be that we continue to preach from the right book, quote the right authors, and sing the right phrases. We still meet on Sundays. Surely, we think, we are not perfect, but we are not modern-day Jeroboams! That leads us to the final aspect of Jeroboam's sin.

4. Too often, we have done the above while maintaining the externals of biblical religion.

Jeroboam, for all his innovative religion, was wise enough to mirror the biblical pattern of worship. Undiscerning Jews would be deceived into thinking that because they still kept the trappings of a worship service, they must be involved in a biblically-sanctioned event. Yet that was not the case.

There is a way to carry our Bibles to church, quote them, even preach expository sermons from them, and yet not be biblical in the best sense of the word. If we take the Scriptures, remove from them their appropriate center, and wrap them around us then we will be like Jeroboam. We are never the center of the Bible's teachings. Humanity is not the center of church, ministry, or of God. God Himself is the unmodifiable heart of Christianity.

Jeroboam did all of this because he was a pragmatist. He felt he needed to do these things in order to maintain his throne in that particular religious/political environment. After all, if the people made the annual journeys down to Jerusalem to worship God at the temple they might begin to regret leaving the Davidic line. They might decide to reunite the tribes. They might execute Jeroboam as a traitor.

Can we honestly say that we have not quietly adjusted God (by what we do and do not say about Him), offered a more convenient version of Christianity than Christ did, and brought into leadership all who seem willing? What for? To keep our throne? In a sense—yes, maybe we have.

Jeroboam was not the only one who failed. There was another king to the south—Rehoboam.

### Rehoboam: The Disappointment

Rehoboam, the son of Solomon, kept the throne of Jerusalem and the remaining southern tribes. Imagine the despair that must have come rolling over the people of Judah. The nation was divided and the throne of David deserted by the majority of God's people. Had God's promises failed? On top of that, the northern cousins had actually given themselves to the worship of two golden calves! It was a time of tremendous spiritual significance. It was one of those great turning points in the history of God's people. Decisions made at that moment would carry lasting consequences.

Rehoboam was given an opportunity to expose the evils of the idolatry that Solomon had introduced. He could call the people to turn from all that offended their God and to set their hearts afresh to seek only Him. In fact, that is what many expected him to do. 2 Chronicles 11:13-17 is a heart-breaking passage. The priests and Levites, who lived in the northern territories and were unwilling to join Jeroboam's golden-calf worship, immigrated south to join the ranks of their faithful brethren in Judah. Not only that, but other spiritually hungry people

packed up and moved with them. What an opportunity. Here surely was a core group for reformation! Sadly, within a few short years, they realized that Rehoboam, while not desiring open idolatry, was uninterested in seeking the Most High God. On the surface he was better than Jeroboam, but underneath he was the same. The nation drifted with their king. In 2 Chronicles 12:1-9 we read that God disciplined them by raising up a new enemy, Shishak, king of Egypt. God sent a prophet to call the people to repentance. There was a temporary reformation, but it was insufficient. Later God expressed his assessment of Rehoboam in verse 14: “He did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the LORD.”

Settle this matter: it is a great evil to be given a position of influence over God’s people at time of significant opportunity and to squander it by simply being half-hearted in your own pursuit of God. Here then we have seen three leaders, all chosen by God, all failed in ways that brought terrible consequences upon the people God. Is there no encouraging portrait? Yes, there is a young king, grandson of Rehoboam, who set his heart to seek the Lord.

### Asa: The Man Who Refused To Stop Short

Rehoboam died. His son, Abijah, was not a significant king in the history of Judah. He went to war against Jeroboam I to the north, publicly declaring to be against the new idolatrous practices. However, in truth Abijah himself was like his father in his half-hearted religion. We read in 1 Kings 15:3, “He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, like the heart of his father David.”

Asa, however, is different. 2 Chronicles 14 opens with the young king’s program to remove idolatry from the nation. Bland half-heartedness toward God in the monarchy led the population to drift whole-heartedly into idolatry. Of the many encouraging aspects we see in Asa perhaps the most noticeable is his unwillingness to stop short.

After a season of peace and prosperity given to the nation because it had sought the Lord under Asa, an Ethiopian army arose and threatened Judah’s safety. Asa led the people again to seek God and God delivered them. In 2 Chronicles 15:1-7 we view the king and his victorious armies returning from the battle. Asa was met by a prophet and warned not to stop short in his efforts to lead the nation back to God. “Remember the bad-ole days!” the prophet pled. “Remember when God was distant and don’t stop now.” Asa took the message to heart and pressed on. There is a gem in this account that should not be overlooked. Asa did not merely uproot idolatry in Judah, he also carried his reforms into areas where his armies spread his influence, outside of his own borders. Then we read: “He gathered all Judah and Benjamin and those from Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon who resided with them, for many defected to him from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him” (2 Chronicles 15:9).

Do you see it? There is another spiritual migration. Like in the days of Rehoboam, the believers in Israel hoped their friends in Judah were going to seek the Lord. They heard of Asa’s reforms and they moved south to join the effort. This time the outcome was very different:

They entered into the covenant to seek the LORD God of their fathers with all their heart and soul; and whoever would not seek the LORD God of Israel should be put to death, whether small or great, man or woman. Moreover, they made an oath to the LORD with a loud voice, with shouting, with trumpets and with horns. All Judah rejoiced concerning the oath, for they had sworn with their whole heart and had sought Him earnestly, and He let them find Him. (2 Chronicles 15:12-15)

What a privilege—the LORD let them find Him!

How do these Old Testament accounts help us in our efforts at ecclesiological rethinking? As noted above, we are living in a day that feels the sad loss of God’s manifest presence. It would be difficult to take an honest look at the early twenty-first century in American evangelicalism and come to any other assessment. Still, it does little good to complain about the moral decline in our generation. Is there a way forward? Yes, but we may not find it on the path we are presently walking. The extreme degree to which we are refashioning church to fit our culture is alarming not because it is extreme, but because it is generally deficient, failing to deal with the root issues.

We might ask ourselves, “What did the three kings who failed to honor God have in common?” One was led into idolatry through his wives, one started a rival worship system complete with golden calves, and one was half-hearted while attending the right temple. It is hard to see what they had in common. Look deeper. Each of these men failed to grasp, or rather to be grasped by, the immensity of God. Their inadequate views of God paved the way for their choices.

Think! Only a man with a small view of God feels free to put his wives’ preferences above those of the Most High. Only a man with an inadequate understanding of God feels free to adjust all of religion so he can keep his job. Only a man who fails to get himself into the grip of God’s incomparable splendor thinks God is pleased when he goes about the right kind of religion with half a heart. The choices of Solomon, Jeroboam, and Rehoboam are linked at the source. They all cultivated an inadequate view of the Living God.

Now, we may comfort ourselves with the thought, I am no Jeroboam! Perhaps, but are you a Rehoboam? Do people leave their denominations because of the alarming drift and come to our churches, having heard that we are serious about God? Yet, are they soon disillusioned? Is our God-centeredness anything more than a slogan on our church websites? After their spiritual migration to our churches, do they find that we indeed have held to the orthodox truths, but with only half-hearts? Rehoboam is a terrifying figure for the conservative evangelical minister. He haunts our boasts.

In our day, pursuing the highest and clearest views of the incomprehensible God is the place to begin the reformation of ecclesiology. Of course, a number of external matters need to be rethought biblically, but we cannot be trusted with that kind of task until we ourselves have been reintroduced to the God of Scripture. We must, by an enduring labor of study and prayer, begin to acquire His appropriate weight in our eyes. His spiritual mass, if we might say it in such a way, must expand in our understanding until He begins to pull everything into His orbit: family, friendships, time, money, thoughts—even church. Mentioning God’s name repeatedly in our services is not the same as being a people held captive by the sight of His majesty.

We can refashion the church to fit the culture in hopes of reaching the lost, but we can never really help people if we start with people. We start with God. It sounds simplistic, perhaps impractically mystical, but it is still true. Any leader who wishes to do good in the kingdom of Christ must be a person who is in the grip of that Tremendous Mystery, the King Himself. That kind of preoccupation with God springs from a lifelong determination to know God as He has described Himself and to refuse to accept the inadequate views that our present religious culture hands us. It may require a self-humbling approach to the Bible in which we open it daily and read it as if for the first time. It will require that we, Luther-like, crash against the Scripture phrase by phrase to hear from Him—not about evangelistic methodologies but rather, about God

Himself. It is easy to forage throughout the sacred unveilings of God in the Bible in order to put together another sermon. But how differently the descriptions of God will affect us when it is God Himself we want above all else, even above professional effectiveness. The oft-quoted London pastor of the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon, gives us a peek into his soul when he writes:

My soul, never be satisfied with a shadowy Christ. I cannot know Christ through another person's brain. I cannot love Christ through another man's heart, and I cannot see Him with another man's eyes.... I am so afraid of a second-hand religion. No, I must know Him myself. O God, let me not be deceived in this.

A leader that is willing to admit that there are deep-seated problems in the church is not a rarity. A leader that is willing to speak out regarding the darkness of the culture is common. But the leader that sets his own soul to know God, refusing a "second-hand religion," is an exceptional gift to the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Carmichael, *God's Missionary*. CLC Publications, Fort Washington, PA. 2010. p. 27