

At a Crossroads

June 2025

The contrasts could not be greater; which way is the Church in America headed today? In the White House currently, avowed “Health and Wealth” pastors (Paula White and Lorenzo Sewel) and other promoters of what has become known as the “Prosperity Gospel,” are teaching many of our political leaders that lots of wealth, even opulence, is a good thing, a sign of God’s favor and protection. On the other hand, the advent of Pope Leo XIV on the world scene reminds us about the simple, humble, and service orientation of the Christian life. He is exemplifying a dedication to the poor and the willingness to suffer the abuses and misunderstandings of the world in his life and ministry. Throughout America today you can easily find many thriving megachurches filled with entertainment options and yet few personal demands on the congregants. But the question looms; will the worship services of the megachurch with all their bells and whistles and livestream capabilities continue to entertain congregations and viewers, or will church goers begin to long for and desire a simpler lifestyle and return to a more local, neighborhood friendly church where you know the person sitting next to you? We Christians in America are at a clear crossroads and have important decisions to make; on our knees we need to ask God, where do we go from here?

The Reformation in Europe during the beginning of the 16th Century sounded a loud cry to rid the Church of indulgences – dealmaking between clergy and parishioners. Clergy asked parishioners to pay them money for their prayers with guarantees for good health, prosperity, and eternal security. Many Europeans longed for a return to a simpler, less top-heavy, corrupt-free and more Biblically guided Christian lifestyle following in the footsteps of Jesus. These protests and cries eventually led to massive changes within the European Church and society. They laid the foundations for a more democratic life within and outside the Church. In many regards, the Reformation was a grand success and saved the Church from even greater peril.

The Reformers had dug deep into their Bibles and rediscovered the teachings of Jesus. They read again with fresh eyes and eager hearts the words of Jesus, “it is better to give than receive,” “I have come to serve, not be served,” “The humble will be exalted, and the proud will be humbled.” Jesus also said, “What good is it to gain the whole world, but lose your soul?”

and, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter eternal life.” Many of our current “Health and Wealth” pastors stumble theologically when reading these sayings of Jesus. The world’s lust for money overwhelms their critical thinking capabilities.

The aspect of Pope Leo XIV’s life which has become inspiring to so many of us is the 20 plus years he spent in Peru serving the poor, helping them rebuild their lives through the strength and grace of our Lord. He went to Peru to serve, not be served. There was nothing transactional about his mission. He wanted nothing in return for his services. He even became Peruvian, one of them, enjoying the Latin American culture he admired and loved so much. He had given up his more secure life in the United States to help those in need, fight for greater justice, and suffer any consequences along the way. Daily and certainly in the end, he was richly rewarded by the deep faith of his Peruvian friends and the presence of God active in their lives.



Church door that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses

Earlier this month, Chicagoans filled every seat in Rate Field, the home of the Chicago White Sox baseball team. Being a White Sox fan himself, Pope Leo XIV preached on a large screen from his residence in Rome, celebrating a mass with his fellow South Siders. It was a poignant moment; for just one afternoon, a professional baseball schedule was suspended so a pastor could talk to his flock from his hometown about hope, faith, and unity. Most worldly matters in a stadium in Chicago came to a complete standstill for a couple of hours. It was hope inspiring to consider that Americans had arrived at a point of growing hunger for spiritual nourishment, purpose, and unity amongst themselves. Many of us are tired, beleaguered, but earnestly looking for a new way to follow our Living Lord or even allow ourselves to believe in God again.



I feel a certain closeness to Pope Leo XIV not just because he is an American, a fellow Chicagoan, but he and I are the same age, 69. During the 1980s, he and I attended our respective seminaries in Chicago during the same general time period, preparing for lives of service in ministry; and we both eventually fell in love with Latin America and the Global Church. Though I’ve never met him, I trust, admire, and have discovered a great fondness for him. I marvel at how God has guided his life. I think he is a person of high character, fully capable of delivering a crucial word for our times today.

In 1983, I made the decision to leave my job trading agricultural commodities for Cargill Inc. in Minneapolis to live and work in San Jose, Costa Rica, helping missionaries start a church. For nearly two years, I lived with a most wonderful, humble Costa Rican family and studied Spanish. I fell in love with the Costa Rican people and culture. At the time, I was testing my wings in ministry. I had dedicated all my life savings to this enterprise of living and serving in Costa Rica, responding to God’s call on my life. Those formative years in Costa Rica changed

my life, opened my eyes to the beauty of the Global Church, and gave me confidence to enter seminary and begin my new life in ministry back home in Chicago. I owe much of my life to the love and nurturing I received from the Costa Rican people.

Today in America, too few people are reading their Bibles or seeking a healthy understanding of Christian theology; appreciating, for instance, the reasons God gave us a New Covenant to replace the Old Covenant. Too often American Christians today are acting like they are still under the guidance of the Old Covenant only. They are finding comfort in highly authoritative leaders, seeking wealth as a sign of blessing and learning to fear, abhor, and oppose their enemies instead of loving them. They are not taking the time to dig deeper into the teachings of Jesus Christ to know more about the New Covenant he came to earth to give us. In announcing the New Covenant, Jesus asked us to give our lives to his care and become fully dependent on his grace and the Holy Spirit to pursue even greater mercy, forgiveness, and love than our lives have ever known. He asked his followers to surrender their pride, need for control, possessions, and worldly comforts to his superior wisdom, guidance, and love. We need to become Biblically literate and theologically astute again before it is too late.

During Jesus' ministry, he warned us about two very important things. Often, he would say, do not mix politics and religion in unhealthy ways. Do not let your faith be used by politicians in ways that are contradictory to the Good News. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the world need to interact but in very careful ways. Secondly, he warned us endlessly about the ways a love of money can short circuit or even destroy our faith. Over time, he said, a love of money will corrode our souls and dim our abilities to make wise decisions pleasing to God. History shows us, especially now, that we need to be wary of any teacher or preacher who is promoting theological formulas or allegiances they say guarantee good health or greater wealth through obedience to their teachings. That was never taught by our Lord, Jesus Christ. On the contrary, Jesus warned us that at times we would experience hardships and suffering as we share the Good News with others, helping to heal a hurting world.

I have confidence in the American Church – that it will begin to find its way again, but not without a lot of hard work and soul searching. We need to begin such a turnaround by being dead honest with ourselves. We need to ask ourselves, have we become too cozy with the ways of the world? The first thing we need to do is crack open our Bibles again and seek a greater understanding of both the Old and New Testaments. Five hundred years ago, the Reformers threw themselves into such an important, life-changing exercise, and with an equal amount of effort and prayers, I believe we can do it again.



Let us be guided and renewed again by these wise words of Solomon: "...give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs. For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name." (Proverbs 30:8b, 9)