

# Why We Need Reformation Now

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*The title of this Fellowship refers to Revival and Reformation, and whilst we often look at issues relevant to revival, we less frequently consider the issue of reformation. The following article seeks to look at one aspect of the Evangelical Christian world today and seeks to show how there is a need for reformation truth and principles to be restored.*

“When Paul faced the issue of how the faith was to be continued after his death, he offered two basic proposals in the Pastoral epistles: the church needed a form of sound words and it needed a structure.”<sup>1</sup> It may be observed that these two issues, right doctrine and the nature of the church, were central in the Reformation of the 16th Century. They were also primary emphasis in the ministry in the last century of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. They are issues that are central to the ethos of the Reformation and Revival Fellowship, and why in our conferences we place such emphasis on preaching.

### Sound doctrine

When we talk about Reformation we are looking at the orthodoxy of what we believe, how that affects our individual lives and what the impact should be in our local churches, and then in the wider church.

A concern that there was a serious loss of emphasis on sound doctrine in Evangelical groups and churches in the USA led a number of leaders to issue a call to reformation in 1996 when they produced the Cambridge Declaration. In that declaration they expressed the concern that “churches today are increasingly dominated by the spirit of the age (rather) than by the Spirit of Christ” and so they called the church “to repent of this sin and to recover the historic Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup> The thrust of this call was to urge churches, and preachers in particular, to give primary place to faithfulness to God’s Word.

However, since that time there has been something of a drift in an opposite direction within evangelicalism in the USA. There has been one primary criticism of those men advocating a return to reformation principles and that has been that they lack gospel zeal. For instance Tim Keller has described the emphasis on faithfulness to God’s Word as “an oversimplification that has dangers.” In 2012 in an article entitled “Doing Balanced, Gospel-centred Ministry in Your City” he argued that our gospel calling demands “fruitfulness [as] our criterion for evaluation”<sup>3</sup> It is true that there is always a danger that ministers may be content just to be doctrinally faithful and not be as earnest in their gospel effort as they should be. This criticism is often applied to ‘reformed’ churches in this country as well.

Accepting that there is this danger of an imbalanced emphasis on orthodox theology alone, and that with that there must be strong gospel zeal, it is still important to recognise that within evangelical circles there has been the development of a new focus onto a more pragmatic approach to gospel outreach.

### Scripture’s sufficiency

The Reformation itself, and the Cambridge Declaration following that, particularly emphasised the sufficiency of Scripture for the work of the Gospel. This appears to be being lost.

This diminishing confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture and the adoption of a more pragmatic approach may be seen in a number of features of modern evangelical life in the UK. Perhaps the most disturbing effect is the rise of superficial preaching which fails to challenge the hearer but is content to give information only. It is noticeable that in this regard calling people to repentance is almost a forgotten emphasis in so many churches.

The place of prayer also seems to be much understated. The concept of waiting on God before beginning any activity or form of outreach is even considered has actually been stated to me as being a lack of imagination and zeal. It also seems that in some churches the concept of a public prayer which simply focusses on our Triune God and extols the greatness of grace has been lost. In this regard it is disturbing to see the sad absence of the church prayer meeting in many church programmes. Undoubtedly prayer is made, but as one godly lady said to me of her church where there is only home groups, “we pray for each other with real enthusiasm, but there is no prayer for the big issues of the Gospel.”

In evangelistic outreach pragmatic methodologies and various forms of social action predominate. And while much that is good and useful is promoted, there is a sad lack.

### **The Holy Spirit**

Too little attention is given to the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and also His sovereign work in enabling the preacher and the preaching of the Gospel, and in guiding and enabling the believer who is speaking for the Lord. Indeed it seems appropriate to ask if there is any real doctrine of the Spirit at all. But all that is done is undertaken in the name of missional necessity.

On this theme John MacArthur has written the following, “When we look at contemporary ministry, we see programmes and methods that are the fruit of human invention, the offspring of opinion polls and neighbourhood surveys, and other pragmatic artifices”<sup>4</sup>

So we can sum up the situation in the following way - “The issue at stake is whether or not the faithful preaching of God’s Word and the other ‘ordinary means of grace’ are sufficient to deliver saving power to the lost. Reformers of the past have argued that “the Word of God in the hand of God is sufficient to do the work of God.” The trend in Reformed churches today seems to argue instead that God’s Word and the Holy Spirit are necessary but insufficient for gospel impact.”<sup>5</sup>

Looking outside the church scene we cannot ignore the fact that the sad moral drift taking place is largely unchallenged by the church. There seems to be no prophetic voice in the nation. We must be thankful for all the lobbying that is done by a variety of organisations. But so often even there the arguments tend to be pragmatic and on the grounds set by others. That is appropriate for such organisations given the situation they are responding to. But there is no strong voice that proclaims the Truth of the Word with authority.

### **One generation**

In his book “Puritan Portraits” J I Packer has a chapter on “The Puritan Pastor’s Programme”. He begins that chapter in the following way, “It is a truth periodically voiced by a few, though rarely heeded by many, that the church of God on earth, always and everywhere, is just one generation from extinction. Shocking as this may sound, it is not a dictum that is difficult to defend. Should clergy no longer spend their strength teaching the faith, preaching the Gospel, and seeking the salvation of souls; should believing parents no longer labour to share their faith

with their children, and believers with their neighbours; should the practice of evangelism be abandoned; should the Bible and Christian books be left around the house unread; should church people settle for being the nicest persons in the world according to the world's specifications; how long do you think the church would remain a going concern? More than a generation? I doubt it. And have you noticed that much of Western Christianity is currently treading this path to extinction? It seems clearly so to me. What then can stop the rot and turn the tide? One thing only, in my view: a renewed embrace of the Puritan ideal of ministerial service. Without this, nothing can stop the drift downhill."

What we need is a reformation in our own thinking and in the life of our churches and the evangelical church at large. There needs to be a return to orthodox doctrine which inspires our hearts and motivates us to godly action. We need a renewed confidence in the absolute sufficiency of the Scriptures so that we look there for guidance and direction in our lives and in all our evangelistic endeavours. We need again to see the indispensable place of prayer that is persistent and earnest. Prayer that lays hold of God and like Jacob of old will not let go until there is blessing. And we need the coming of the Holy Spirit to give us a truly empowered zeal in the Gospel. It is as J I Packer once said, that we become God-centred in our thoughts, God-fearing in our hearts, so that we are God-honouring in all that we do.<sup>6</sup>

**Notes:**

1. Carl Trueman, "The Evangelical Dilemma" on the website Place for Truth, March 24<sup>th</sup> 2014
2. Richard Phillips, "Renewing the Call for Reformation", Place for Truth, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2013
3. Ibid.
4. John MacArthur, "Biblically-Anaemic Preaching", Dynamic Resources, Spring/Summer 2014, pub. by Grace to You Europe
5. Richard Phillips, "Renewing the Call for reformation", Place for Truth, October 14<sup>th</sup> 2013.
6. Quoted from memory!