

**WHAT IS
A REFORMED MINISTRY
TODAY?**

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“When I use a word” said Humpty Dumpty to Alice on here journey through Wonderland, “it means just what I choose it to mean –neither more nor less”.

Many evangelicals in the churches today take this sort of approach to the term “Reformed”. Indeed, there is such confusion over the meaning of this word that many people, even in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, see little difference between holding a general evangelical position and subscribing to the Reformed Faith.

The task assigned to me, then, is one of definition and application of this distinctive position to the work of the ministry in the Church today. Obviously, in a paper of this kind one cannot enter into every aspect of the Reformed position, but a few aspects which relate particularly to the Christian ministry in our times may be singled out for special attention.

I. Commitment to a Distinctive Theology

The first matter with which we must reckon is surely this one: that a Reformed Ministry is committed to a distinctive theological position. It is an obvious point: most of us are aware of what this means in terms of theological commitment, but I want to underscore this sine qua non of being “Re formed” to refresh my own memory as much as yours.

The Reformed Faith has a distinctive theology: pre-eminently it is the biblical theology derived from the Scriptures and, viewed historically, the synthesis of that biblical theology which has been given expression in the great Confessions of the Reformed churches (e.g. the Scots Confession, the Westminster Confession etc.). This

much is apparent from the term “Reformed” itself: it is the faith of the Church “reformed” from its errors in accordance with the Word of God.

The distinctive theological position to which a “Reformed” ministry is committed can be summed up simply in this way:

It is distinctive in its doctrine of God. While all Christians are agreed upon the nature of God as Triune, it is the Reformed faith alone which safeguards the high doctrine of God’s sovereignty as the only explanation of evil as well as good in the world, and the reason why some men are left in their sin and impenitence while others are awakened to spiritual life in Christ. In a true sense, it is the Reformed faith alone, in its doctrine of the God-head, which lets God be God, without any qualification or diminution of this sovereign power and glory.

It is distinctive in its view of man. Again, while all Christians are agreed that man is a sinner, differences become apparent when the extent of that sinfulness is discussed in the light of Scripture. There are those (Roman Catholic and Protestant) who believe that man, in spite of his fallenness, is able to will and do some good. But the Reformed Christian receives the teaching of Scripture that the natural man can do nothing that is spiritual, for he is not merely spiritually sick but “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1-5).

It is distinctive in regard to salvation. While all Christians believe that the purpose of salvation is the enjoyment, ultimately, of the bliss of heaven, there are those who believe that it is possible for a man to be saved and then finally lost again. The Reformed position, however, emphasizes that salvation is secure: God not only hopes to have heaven full, but the Scriptures show clearly that Christ can never lose any single one of the “elect” for whom He has died.

To be “Reformed”, then, is to embrace a distinctive theological position involved particular theological views of God, man, the work of Christ and salvation. My contention is that this position, consistently held, is bound to show itself in the life of the Reformed minister. These are not small matters of difference from other theological positions, they are profound in their implications for every area of Christian life and work. They affect one’s preaching, one’s worship, one’s evangelism and one’s doctrine of the Church, and I will be saying more these subjects later in this paper.

Suffice it to say, then, that Reformed theology is all-embracing and comprehensive in its scope, the only-full orbed, consistent, thoroughly and searchingly biblical theology in the world. It is much more than merely the famous “Five Points” (total depravity, the unconditional character of the election, particular atonement, the irresistibility of the divine grace, the perseverance of the people of god). Calvinism is not satisfied with adherence to Scripture at these points alone, as though this were all it had to say. No sphere is strange to it: it demands that every part of life, every area of theology, every element of human experience, be subjected to the divine authority.

There are three qualifications which I want to introduce at this point to safeguard what I have said from misinterpretation:

(1) We are not saying that doctrine, by itself, saves. It is Christ alone who saves. But we must remember that it is the truth which sets men free. The truth is in Christ: He is the truth. But God has given to us the truths, the doctrines, the great facts about Himself in the Word, and our apprehension of Christ is through that Word, by which we are guided, directed and instructed.

We maintain then, that there is no dichotomy here. Christ alone saves: but the plan of salvation is given to us in His Word. As Reformed Christians, we believe that the “Five Points” are like five great pillars of truth upon which rests the salvation of men. To hold less than these cardinal truths would mean that we are less than Presbyterian and Reformed according to our Church Standards: to tamper with any one of them would be to call in question the full scripturalness of one’s faith.

The effect, then, of the Reformed position in its theological distinctiveness is to underline, guard and define the gracious character of redemption: that it is all of God; that there is no place for a theology of “works”; and that from beginning to end, we have nothing to contribute, nothing to offer, but that the Lord does it all.

(2) On the other hand, we are not saying that confessional formulation in the sixteenth or seventeenth century has a measure of finality for the Church. We are not implying that the Westminster Confession (or any other Confession) has said “the last word”. All confessions suffer from at least three limitations:

(a) They are conditioned historically to some extent by the particular circumstances which led to their formulation. That is, the issues with which they deal in particular may not be the same issues of importance which face the Church at a later time. A truth of Scripture may be inadequately or imperfectly stated, or a matter of doctrine may have been entirely omitted in a particular Confession.

(b) Because a Confession is a human document, it suffers from human fallibility. We may never assign to a Confession the infallibility which belongs to Scripture alone.

(c) There is the aspect of the progressive understanding of the faith delivered to the saints by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. On this principle, no age of the Church has a complete understanding of the mind of God.

But, given these factors, it must be said that the Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries are remarkable for their faithfulness to Scripture on almost every issue with which they deal. The way forward for doctrinal renewal in the Church is not to despise and set aside the accumulated fruits of the Church’s understanding of Scripture formulated in these great confessional documents, but instead to build upon what is already there. (It may be of interest to note that the late Professor John Murray indicates how this may be done in a chapter on “The Theology of the Westminster Confession” in Scripture and Confession (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1973).

(3) It must be asserted that the charge often laid against Calvinists, that they are inhibited from proclaiming the “free offer” of the Gospel, cannot be sustained. The same is true with regard to the alleged denial of human responsibility which, it is said, a Calvinist position must imply. We believe in the “free offer” of the Gospel and we find

no contradiction between a salvation which is “all of grace” and accountability on the part of those to whom salvation is offered. This position is clearly formulated in a number of Reformed Confessions: perhaps one of the clearest statements is found in the celebrated Canons of Dort. (III-IV/8), “As many as are called by the Gospel are unfeignedly called; for God hath most earnestly and truly declared in his Word what will be acceptable to him, namely, that all who are called should comply with the invitation. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to him, and believe on him”.

II The Church: A distinctive congregational life.

Second, a Reformed ministry will express itself in a distinctive congregational life. It will affect the way a local church lives and worships and conducts itself.

(i) This will show itself in the preaching of the Word. We do not need to be reminded that belief in the Scriptures as the inspired and infallible Word of God has declined in the life of the Church generally, and as a result the eloquence and power of the proclamation of the Word have diminished too.

I heard the situation described vividly in this way recently. In the context of a panel discussion between a rabbi, a priest and a Protestant minister, the rabbi stood up - and said, "I speak according to the law of Moses". The priest said, "I speak according to the Church". The clergyman rose to his feet and said, "It seems to me . . ."

For a Reformed ministry, the preaching of the Word is a paramount responsibility. What the Church needs today is a profound understanding of the doctrines contained in Scripture and a fearless proclamation of them. By this, we mean not simply the so-called "basic" (or evangelistic) doctrines, but all doctrines, especially those relating to the sovereignty and grace of God.

In a recent article in Christianity Today magazine (Dec. 20th, 1974), James Montgomery Boice had this to say:

"Paul exhorted the young man Timothy to preach sound doctrine, that is, to preach all the themes that Paul had taught him. . . He wrote, "I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, Who shall judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: preach the Word, be diligent in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and patience" (II Tim. 4:1-2). "The things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2:2).

"Are these weighty exhortations being followed today? Generally not, I fear. Pick up the Saturday paper listing the sermon topics for the next day in some city. The crisis in the Middle East will be discussed. There will probably be sermons on the problems of race, the economy, Sino-American relations and other current matters. Many Ministers will be expounding on some biblical story. Many will be using a text to bring in an essay on ethics. But where in this long list are the titles of those expositional sermons that set forth the themes of God's sovereignty in all human affairs, His grace to the undeserving, His love, His hatred of sin, the

nature and specific object of the Atonement, irresistible grace, the keeping power of God, repentance, forgiveness, God's plan for the ages, the plans and ultimate defeat of Satan, the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so forth?"

Where are those themes being dealt with today? Preaching, in the Reformed tradition, is never a brief essay by a minister on some religious topic. Preaching is the exposition and application of the Word of God. It is the chief means in the congregation for accomplishing the building-up of the saints and the conversion of sinners. For that reason there can be no compromise with modern replacements and alternatives to the Word of God preached. It cannot be supplanted with dialogues, discussions, testimonies, concerts, "hymn" services or anything else.

In preaching, then, the Reformed Minister will be aware of the high conception of his work before the Lord and will not suffer himself to be turned aside from this paramount calling to be a "Minister of the word". Correspondingly there should be evidenced in the congregation a growing awareness of the worth of such a ministry and a response to it. The congregation that dislikes preaching or seeks to inhibit its minister in this part of his work - or shows its preference for a less demanding form of preaching - shows itself to be something less than Reformed.

Reformed preaching, then, is preaching indeed, because it is theological in nature and subject to the biblical revelation. It is powerful because it addresses men and women with the claims of the triune God and with the truths of His own Word, and because it expresses, too, the care and earnestness with which Ministers watch over their flocks.

(ii) Second, a Reformed ministry will express itself by evincing a deep concern for the government and discipline of the local congregation.

I believe that this has been a cardinal failure of evangelicals in our own Church of Scotland for many generations. They have been concerned, and rightly, with preaching and with the recovery of biblical ministry within the Church. But they appear to have neglected the areas of Church government and discipline to which attention should also have been directed. To be consistently Reformed involves our concern in these areas as well.

(a) By government, I mean rule within a local congregation. It raises the subject of the choice, training and ministry of Ruling Elders. Although this subject is being dealt with in another paper today, I wish to raise the matter here and to make brief mention of some of its aspects.

We are living in times when much of the glory of the Ruling Eldership and its continuing usefulness to the Church has been lost sight of and needs urgently to be recovered. We are all aware of the widespread neglect of real pastoral work throughout the Church which should be undertaken, in the main, by the Eldership. How can we redress this situation?

It is my contention that a prime place should be given in a Reformed ministry to the choice, training and ministry of Ruling Elders. We are a Presbyterian Church: we are committed to the principle of rule by Elders ("presbuteroi") and to the principle of parity (equality) of office. The pastoral care and rule of a congregation is not a 'one-man' task: it is a shared task, and if the system were made to work as it should work, we have in the

Presbyterian system the finest provision for effective evangelism and pastoral care that any Christian denomination could wish to possess!

I offer the following guidelines:

We must seek suitably qualified men for the office, believing that the urgency of the times requires the raising up of godly men for such great work of Christian ministry. They should be converted men who meet the qualifications listed in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

These men must be painstakingly trained for their work. They must be instructed in the doctrine of the Church; the biblical grounds for the office and work of the Ruling Elder; the Minister must take pains to see that they are fully acquainted with the Westminster Confession of Faith and that they understand that their Church is a confessional and Reformed Church. The great work of the pastoral care of the flock must be carefully explained and inculcated by visitation, preferably with Bible reading and prayer in each home; the duties of examining each new member for admission to the Church; the exercise of discipline over the erring and the lapsed.

The Minister must encourage the new Elder by a visual example of his own pastoral care of the flock and for this purpose he should endeavour to accompany the Elder on his first visit to a district to guide, support and encourage him.

It will be a long task to restore the Eldership to its rightful place and practice in the contemporary Church, but it must be attempted.

(b) Then, the matter of discipline. A Reformed ministry will be deeply concerned about the state of affairs generally in the Church and it will address itself to the matter in the following ways at least:

(1) The admission of new members. Recognizing that the Lord's vineyard has been laid waste to a great extent through the neglect, over the years, in proper instruction of, and discipline over, those who apply for membership in the Church, a Minister will wish to be very careful indeed over this matter. I illustrate from my own practice in my present congregation. Intending new members are required to meet weekly for almost three months where basic instruction is given in biblical doctrine. The opportunity is given at any time throughout the course for a candidate to withdraw. One or two Christian Elders are present from time to time, and these Elders (appointed by the Kirk Session) then join with the Minister at the end of the course to interview each candidate individually. The interview may last up to an hour in each case: we examine each one on his understanding of basic Christian doctrine, the Christian life, the Church and its constitution, the Sacraments, the devotional life etc. In the event of any doubt being entertained by the Elders or Minister, we do not hesitate to recommend to the applicant that we cannot at this time recommend the Kirk Session to approve membership.

Again, the way ahead for the recovery of proper standards for admission to membership is a long one but a start must be made.

(2) The discipline of the lapsed. No Minister is without this agonizing problem. But no Reformed Minister can contemplate leaving a situation without redress which is dishonoring the great King and Head of the Church. There is no easy and painless

solution in the light of today's landslide into nominal membership. I suggest, however, that the very least measure which would be consistent with a Reformed ministry is to urge the Kirk Session towards a visitation of lapsed members with a view to their restoration, if possible, otherwise the prospect of discipline by removal of membership. To leave the situation as it is at present would be to leave a festering sore in the visible Church which will simply grow and infect a larger and larger area.

(iii) Third, a Reformed ministry will also be concerned about the piety of Church members.

We would expect that commitment to Reformed distinctive should produce a special and distinctive form of Christian living in its recipients. The expectation is surely a reasonable one, yet it must be said that seldom do we find congregations which are clearly identified by Reformed piety flowing from instruction in the Reformed Faith. In a real sense, I believe, the effectiveness of our ministries is being shown continually by the extent to which the influence of the Word preached is being shown in the day-to-day lives of our members in their own homes.

We would surely expect to see at least the following marks.

It is piety that centres upon the home and family. This arises naturally from the place that the Covenant holds in our spiritual heritage. The visible Church embraces believers "together with their children" (Westminster Confession, Chapter 25, Section II). So that family worship (as distinct from the value and importance of private devotion, which is stressed by evangelicals generally) is regarded as vital by Reformed Christians. The recovery of this distinctive form of Reformed piety is never more necessary than in the present time of crisis among youth and alienation within families, together with the widespread ignorance among the young concerning spiritual things.

It is a piety that springs from the root of a clear apprehension of the majesty and glory of God. In contrast to the flippancy and lightness that characterizes much of the evangelical's approach to God, the Reformed Christian will approach Him with reverence and filial fear, never using words or forms of expression which tend to our becoming 'excessively familiar' with God.

It will be a well-informed piety. The Reformed Christian will be one who is encouraged to read widely, according to his ability, in theology and Church history and who will be aware of the great issues of our own times as they confront the Church's witness in the world today. It should be the aim of a Reformed ministry to produce this type of Christian, whose spiritual faculties are alive to the fact that he is a member of a worldwide Church and that his responsibilities in prayer, stewardship and active Christian work reach far beyond the immediate confines of his own situation and congregation.

(iv) Fourth, a Reformed ministry will be concerned with scriptural evangelism.

There has been a great deal of thinking about evangelism in our in our own generation. Much of this concern has been stimulated by the often disappointing results of "mass" evangelism, or by concern about how 'ecumenical' evangelism can be allowed to become before forfeiting the essential Gospel. The question of the place of the 'entertainment' element in evangelism has been a source of conflicting discussion, and perhaps a further factor in the debate has been the rediscovery by many Christians of the

Puritan and Reformed teaching on evangelism. All these factors have re-awakened interest in what constitutes biblical evangelism.

The charge has often been laid against Calvinists that they have not shown sufficient interest in the preaching of the Gospel to the unconverted and in missionary work. There is no doubt that this charge has been true of some Calvinists in some periods of Church history (e.g. the days of the reign of Moderatism in our own Church.) But it is noteworthy that the earliest missionary work following the Reformation was done by Calvinists, and that some of the greatest preachers of the Gospel (such as George Whitefield and C. H. Spurgeon) have been great Calvinists.

A Reformed ministry today will be deeply concerned about evangelism. Scriptural evangelism, its recovery and re-instatement in the Church is a paramount need. The Reformed Minister will find his theology of evangelism rooted in the biblical doctrine of God - the God who is creator and Judge of men, holy and righteous in character and whose character is expressed in His holy law. It will also be rooted in the biblical doctrine of man as a sinner: the Reformed Minister cannot regard man as sick and simply in need of moral palliatives to restore him - he must accept the scriptural teaching that the natural man is "dead in trespasses and sins". In so doing, he declares that the only remedy is preaching that depends entirely upon the aid of the Holy Spirit, and that the 'type' of Gospel preaching which alone can avail is that which sets forth the character of God, the nature of sin and the objective Atonement of Christ on the Cross.

It should perhaps be added that there will be a deep concern also that the local congregation be actively involved in evangelism since it was the practice of the early Church to engage in evangelism as a Church.

These, then, are four areas of distinction for a Reformed ministry: preaching, the government and discipline of the local congregation, the piety of Church members, and scriptural evangelism as a normal function of the Church.

III. Presbyterian Polity

The third and last division of this paper deals with our Presbyterian polity (form of Church government). I introduce it because I believe that much of the situation which we are facing in the Church of Scotland today derives from the apparent failure of many evangelicals in our Church's ministry over the years to take our Presbyterian polity seriously.

Every office-bearer in our church at his ordination is required to assent in the affirmative to this question:

"Do you acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God; and do you promise to be subject in the Lord to this Presbytery and to the superior Courts of the Church, and to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?"

It is clear from this question that every office-bearer should be aware that he is entering a Presbyterian Church and that this requires his active participation in the conciliar government of the Church - the Kirk Session, the Presbytery, the Synod and the General Assembly. It is not an 'optional extra' for those who might feel they have an aptitude for ecclesiastical business: it is mandatory for all. And the evangelical, above all, should recognize and welcome the fact that he has constitutional recourse to this system of Courts within Presbyterianism to seek redress in those matters where he knows the Church has taken a wrong course; and, positively, that it is a means to further reformation in the Church.

But what, in fact, actually tends to happen? It is more than evident from events in our own times and from a study of the history of the evangelicals in the Church of Scotland that evangelicals generally tend to be practical congregationalists. They operate as congregationalists within a Presbyterian setting! This may be for a variety of reasons: for example, the pressures of the parish ministry may seem to preclude a Minister using his time to grapple with issues in the courts of the Church which seem to have little enough relevance anyway to life in the parish; or, it may be the attitude that God's call has been to preach the Gospel, not to 'play' at ecclesiastical politics. (While the motive may be laudable, we must surely ask, "Where does this man stand in relation to his ordination vows?" And, "Is he really acting consistently in a Presbyterian Church?").

Unhappily, it is surely true (as the Rev. Iain Inglis reminded us in his fine address on the contemporary situation in the Southern Presbyterian Church) that "One of the things we must face up to is that by and large we have a tendency to be practical congregationalists. We have put into practice the words of the children's chorus, "You in your small corner and I in mine." We must come to the conclusion that if anything is to be done for our cause it cannot be done in isolation or single-handedly" (Contemporary Trends in Historic Presbyterianism P. 25)

John Macleod, in his *Scottish Theology* repeatedly laments the lack of evangelical unity throughout much of the Church of Scotland's life. For example, speaking of the evangelicals in the days of the First Secession, he says that although they were in a definite majority in the Assembly, "they were more or less of a mob for lack of organized unity. They lacked coherence of policy" (p. 171). And again, "It was the weakness of the devout evangelicals that they lacked concerted counsel and action" (p. 172). He goes on to say that if the evangelicals had taken seriously their work in the Courts of the Church, their influence would probably have prevented the rise of the 'Moderate' party in the Church in the latter half of the 18th century. .

"If the Orthodox were but to adopt the tactics of their opponents and combine in following a considered policy they could still outvote the broad Church Erastians. If only they had men like Maclaurin and Witherspoon (two leading evangelical statesmen) to lead them and organize them, things would have been different. Their forte, however, was not the sphere of the ecclesiastical schemer and manager. Had they given better consideration to what could have been done in

the region of the Church's public business, the vogue of fashionable Moderatism might never have come to have the place which it got in the life of the Church". (p. 192 ibid.)

This verdict, you will agree, has much to say to the situation of evangelicals in the Church of Scotland today.

Let me summarize the points which I wish to make in this way:

It is incumbent upon a Reformed minister to be concerned for the maintenance of Presbyterian principles within the Church of Scotland. He has entered a Presbyterian Church and has undertaken solemn vows to uphold its Constitution. If its doctrines, worship and polity mean so little to him that he feels at liberty to show lack of concern when they are under attack, it is questionable whether the decision to enter the ministry of a Reformed and Presbyterian Church was a carefully considered one in the first place.

It is also incumbent upon him to keep up a continual awareness of the main issues which are being brought before the Church through its Committees and its Courts. It is not sufficient to consider that what we do in our own-parishes is the "all-important" thing, to the neglect of involvement in the wider issues. For it is not in the local congregations, but in the Courts of the Church that the future structure of the Church (in its doctrine, polity and worship) is being steadily determined. We cannot escape the verdict that it is because of lack of evangelical influence upon decisions that have been taken over the years that the Church is facing a steady erosion of its Reformed heritage today.

(3) Since it is impossible to achieve very much in the present situation by oneself, it is surely an obvious duty to seek to act together in the preservation and propagation of the Church's Reformed heritage. This is particularly so in the light of the fact that those who seek to remove the Church from its historic roots are themselves organized and committed to the achievement of a definite policy. Moreover, this conclusion is strengthened by other branches of the historic Presbyterian Church overseas, where the issues they face are remarkably similar to those in Scotland.

There are particular areas of concern which may constitute a priority at the present time.

(a) A Reformed minister will be concerned to communicate to his flock something of the seriousness of the Church's position, to elicit their prayers and mutual concern.

(b) He will wish to inform his Elders in particular of these issues. He will want to encourage those who are commissioners to the higher Courts to be particularly conversant with leading issues and to be equipped to speak on these issues.

(c) He will be concerned that Divinity Students be conversant with the situation within the Church. In particular, he will take special care to instruct any from his own congregation in the nature of the Church as Reformed in doctrine and Presbyterian in polity.

(d) He will be concerned to write to the Press in the interest of upholding his Church's true position when this is under attack.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavored to present some of the chief lineaments of what may be considered to be "A Reformed Ministry Today" in the Church of Scotland. In the nature of the case, it is impossible to say all: I hope that I have said something, at least, of value.

One thing is clear: that to be "Reformed" involves bringing our theology and our practice into conformity with each other. A Reformed ministry is not a preaching ministry *simplieiter*. It is a ministry whose whole practice is being brought consistently to the touch-stone of Scripture, subordinate to and under the authority of the Word of God, the Holy Scriptures.

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