

## Reforming the Local Church

### Three Examples and Three Principles

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**M**any say that it cannot be done in an SBC church, but they are wrong. I have been involved in reforming three Southern Baptist Churches. They were each different situations, requiring different approaches to the needs of the congregation. By God's grace, there were many things I did right; others I did wrong. Any honest pastor must say the same. However, in the process, God blessed reformation in all three churches.

#### Three Examples of Reformation

1. The first was a typical Southern Baptist Church, North Pompano Baptist Church, in Pompano Beach, Florida. There I began as Associate Pastor to Pastor Ernest C. Reisinger and later served as Pastor. When Ernie arrived in early 1977, he found a congregation in turmoil due to a youth worker's molestation of young boys, a huge financial debt from a previous pastor's financial mismanagement and theft of building funds, and a deacon board of some good men who were strongly influenced by dispensationalism. Ernie began teaching the deacons the *Abstract of Principles* and developing a pastoral relationship with them. When I arrived later in 1977, the church was recovering financially, Ernie's preaching was starting to take affect and the deacons were growing spiritually.

However, soon after my arrival, things began to heat up. Some were dissatisfied with Ernie's preaching on holy living, especially those from a dispensational, "carnal Christian" background. They thought him a legalist. As I began to lead the choir and worship with good hymns of substance, explaining what the words actually meant, a negative reaction set in. When I evaluated the Sunday School literature and found the gospel absent from the preschool and elementary years, I stirred up a rebellion from preschool teachers. Some people began to leave the church, some because of Ernie's preaching, others because of mine. But others came in, especially young families, when they heard of our teaching of the Bible.

The first year and a half were marked with some being saved, some true Christians accepting sound teaching, and others just leaving in confusion. The Word of God divides. However, over all, God spared us from a church split. Many faithful young couples entered the church. When Ernie retired at the end of 1978, I became pastor and he became Missionary-at-Large. In this position he started the Boyce Project, printing James P. Boyce's *Abstract of*

*Systematic Theology* and distributing it to all graduating students in SBC seminaries. The response from many students and pastors was enthusiastic. They wanted to know why they were not taught the SBC founders' theology in seminary. This was the beginning of what later morphed into Founders Ministries.

In the first two months of my pastorate, forty people who had opposed our ministry left the church. Then the chairman of deacons resigned, having accepted atheism. After this we discovered the financial secretary had embezzled funds. Later, the new chairman of deacons was disciplined for adultery. Yet, at the same time, many were growing in grace, accepting the reformed faith of our Baptist forefathers, and leading faithful lives. In August 1980 I left to work on a PhD. Ernie resumed pastoring the church and continued the pursuit of reformation.

In the years that followed, however, the church faced a difficult situation that eventually led to its decline. A co-pastor, who was added to serve with Ernie, decided he could no longer stay in the SBC. He resigned and took many of the active young couples with him and formed Emmanuel Baptist Church, a Reformed Baptist congregation. North Pompano never recovered from the split and finally was handed over to the local Baptist association for oversight.

2. The second was Heritage Baptist Church, a brand new church start in Fort Worth, Texas. I served there as founding pastor along with Bob Martin and Ben Mitchell in the early days. It was a joy to start a church from scratch with beliefs and practice as I saw them in the Scripture and the *1689 London Baptist Confession*.

I worked as a bivocational pastor for the first few years in forming the church. It was the hardest time of my life yet, in many ways, the most satisfying. We need more young men who are willing to sacrifice and work bivocationally to start churches in cities that have small groups of believers who want a reformed and Baptist work. Too many are looking for an established reformed work in which to labor. Too many are fleeing into the PCA for an easier road. Where are the sacrificial "Bunyans" willing to suffer to build sound churches?

I experienced many joys at HBC along with many sorrows. Many seminary students from Southwestern came through the church. Some were very grateful for the work and were trained in ministry. Others always had a better idea of how things should be done and left the church. Some members were affected by theonomy, New Covenant Theology or a critical prideful spirit. Problems of church discipline for adultery plagued us through the years. Problems within the eldership almost led to a church split. But by the time I left

in 1992, by God's powerful and transforming grace, HBC was a stable and growing church plant.

Sadly, further problems within the eldership led to difficulty in calling a pastor and for a season the church declined. However, with the coming of Larry Vincent and the stable leadership of Steve Garrick, the remaining elder, HBC is today a growing, happy and stable reformed SBC church with a bright future.

3. The third church is First Baptist Church, Clinton, Louisiana, where I have served as Pastor since 1993. This church went through reformation under the previous pastor, Bill Ascol. It was a difficult reformation that involved the beginnings of church discipline for adultery. A large number of members, who did not want to hear preaching on holiness or confront difficult situations requiring church discipline, left. Those who remained consolidated under Pastor Ascol. Soon after, a number of younger families joined, coming from a sovereign grace church in the area that had split over the pastor's adultery. When I arrived at First Baptist, the church was sound on the doctrines of grace and its members demonstrated a desire to lead a godly lives. There was much for which to thank God.

However, after arriving, I soon discovered that there were tensions in the church between some of the original members and some of the newer sovereign grace members. Issues arose on the necessity of church membership, the biblical validity of Sunday School for children, admission to the Lord's Supper, the need of other elders. Christian liberty concerning women's dress, crying babies in worship services, how to educate children, the biblical basis for insurance, women working outside the home and other matters consumed my time. Theonomy and political activity for Christians became a divisive issue.

All in all, the first few years were given to addressing these issues with individuals and the congregation to clarify the Bible's teaching on such subjects. In the midst of this, church discipline became necessary for adultery, unwed pregnancy, inactive members, DWI's and illegal drug use. So, even for a church that had gone through an effective theological and practical living reformation, other issues from serious minded Christians necessitated further reformation. I am happy to report that after 13 ½ years, God has brought about stability and unity in the church membership. We have lost many young people to the world, but God has also brought many into His kingdom. It is a privilege and joy to serve such a sincere people of God. We are not perfect, but we are growing in the faith.

## **Summary**

All three churches were three different situations, with different issues, different backgrounds, different kinds of people and different pastoral needs. There is no manual of "How to Reform a Church" which guides step-by-step what to do and when. Rather, each church requires the pastor to be sensitive to "where they are...where they need to be...and what to do in-between." Those who follow a book or theory of reformation step-by-step are opening themselves up to pushing the people too fast or lagging behind too slow. God has His own timetable for reformation through the use of biblical means. A "canned" approach can lead to disaster, as many a pastor can now testify on the other side of a church split or his own firing. There is no panacea or formula for church reformation. We can long for reformation, pursue it and pray for it, but we cannot produce it. When reformation comes, we must acknowledge that it is the work of God's mercy in His timing as He chooses to bless. We must trust Him and look to His Word alone to guide us. As I have watched God bring reformation to these three churches, I have gleaned some biblical priorities or principles which I believe must be followed in every church situation seeking reformation according to God's Word.

### **Three Principles of Reformation**

1. The first principle that leads to reformation is a sound preaching and teaching ministry. This is obvious to those of us who believe that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The Holy Spirit uses the means of the Word of God to do His work in the human heart: "Where there is no vision [i.e., revelation, not "strategy"], the people perish." However, I am convinced that most of us have not been sufficiently prepared to preach expository messages that focus on the biblical text yet apply the Word to the lives of the hearers in a Christ-centered way.

Many styles of preaching are out there today—expository, exegetical, historical—redemptive, current events, topical, pseudo-psychological and what I would simply call "story-telling superficially tied to a text." But rarely do I hear Christ preached like the Apostles preached Him, both evangelistically and didactively to the church. I rarely hear a well-rounded, Christ-centered, textually accurate, practically applied sermon like those of Charles Spurgeon or Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. We are not turning out men who preach Christ and Him crucified like these two great men.

There is a lot more to preaching Christ expositionally than being exegetically accurate to the text or giving a running commentary. Paul and Peter preached the whole message of Christ to the whole of man: mind, emotions and will. They interwove the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascended rule, and glorious return of Jesus Christ into their preaching of every conceivable issue. Lloyd-Jones calls that "theology on fire." They brought Jesus' resurrection into every

evangelistic message to call the hearer to face a risen Christ. They could not teach marriage without referring to Jesus' sacrificial death as the model for husbands and wives. They could not teach humility in the church or while suffering unjustly without mentioning the humility of Jesus Christ in His humbling incarnation or humiliating crucifixion. Our church people are starving to death without hearing much of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life and the Water of Life. This problem is not restricted to non-reformed ministers. Even good, reformed preachers are not immune.

I encourage those who want to see reformation and biblical Christianity in their churches to begin by preaching through one of the Gospels, showing the character, teachings, love, and self-denial of the Son of God. In each text we should preach a whole Christ to the whole man, applying Him and Him crucified to marriage, child-raising, Christian unity, evangelistic effort, God-centered worship, spiritual warfare, trials and the future hope. All of Scripture since Genesis 3:15 is about Him and His truth and His Kingdom. Every exhortation to obedience is about His atonement for disobedience and His grace for obedience. Every obscure passage is about being condemned under law and/or saved under His gospel of grace.

I believe in preaching the doctrines of grace. But in reformation with a people who have been untaught, centering on the life and work of our dear Lord will bring those great truths to light at the foot of His cross. Start with one of the Gospels and set Christ before them. Faithful exposition of a Christ-centered Scripture will call the hearer to deal with Christ and His apostles on the doctrines of grace, instead of inviting attack on the imperfect preacher. We need to reform our preaching before we can even think of reforming our churches. I encourage the reader to read *Preaching and Preachers* by Lloyd-Jones slowly, thoughtfully and annually to reform the way you think about true Christ-centered preaching. This is the greatest need to accomplish any genuine reformation.

2. The second principle that leads to reformation is gracious pastoral care. By this, I do not mean moving to a plural eldership before qualified men are in place. Church order is a biblical truth. But it does no good without biblical men who are mature, doctrinally-sound, family leaders and gracious in their dealings with others. Authoritarian elders are a plague to reformation.

A plural eldership can be a great blessing to biblical reformation—or a great hindrance. To rush toward a plural eldership does not a reformation make. I consider it one of the last things you do in reforming the local church. Few men in our churches understand sound doctrine. Few understand the gospel in its breadth and application to daily life. Few are so mature in their faith and character that they have a gracious and patient spirit with obstinate people.

Why rush to an eldership until faithful men are prepared to take the office with wisdom, maturity, and love for sinners? God gives elders in His time. Paul exhorted Timothy:

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:22-26).

The first matter of pastoral care is to deal with oneself as a mature, faithful man. Only out of a personal maturity in following Christ does a godly man develop the refusal of quarrelsomeness and the grace of gentleness in teaching and correcting those in opposition. Reformation rarely proceeds at the rate we choose or wish. God has to "grant them repentance" as a result of our labors. We cannot control that or rush that. If we have nothing that we did not receive from God, we of all men must be gracious, forgiving, loving and self-sacrificing in our pastoral work of reformation. To do less is a denial of the doctrines of grace we profess.

We must start with the church leaders and become their pastor and dear friend. We must love the obstinate and teach the ignorant and always serve them. Only then will we raise up leaders to stand beside us in the more difficult days ahead of changing worship, administering church discipline, and holy living. We must be by their sickbeds, hold their hands as they deal with wayward children and help them form loving marriages. We cannot let their reluctance for reformation allow them to become our unpastored adversaries. It is the sovereign grace we show them that will lead to reformation under such grace.

3. The third principle that leads to reformation is prayer. This is no trite thing to say. I do not know why God brings revival under one faithful pastor and not under another. Nor in one of His churches and not others. It is His choice, His sovereign will, to do so as He pleases. We are called to preach the Word and pastor the flock with all the grace and truth we can muster at Christ's feet. But we must always remember that He was despised and rejected of men. He was a Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief because He was faithful, truthful and loving in His earthly ministry. Only after His suffering and death did the Father answer His prayer to build His church. It may be so with you as well.

Prayer, faithful prayer, crying out to the Father that He might give saving grace to the unconverted and enlightened minds to the sheep is an absolute necessity for biblical, Christ-centered reformation. Not the kind of prayers that all would accept the preacher and His ministry without causing so much trouble. But the kind of prayers that set eternal souls individually before the Father and the Son, begging for mercy on their poor souls for life and godliness. Especially, prayer for one's enemies.

God has promised to honor prayer as a means for reformation as much as preaching the Word faithfully. At our Lord's darkest times, He prayed for strength and wisdom. He prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail. He prayed for the Father to keep His own in the world and for workers to bring in the harvest. And He thanked the Father for hiding the truth from the proud and revealing His grace to spiritual babes. Reforming pastors must follow their Lord.

The Second Great Awakening had multiple simultaneous beginnings. But one significant event occurred on the campus of Hampton—Sydney College when several new converts prayed for revival and reformation. These prayers were answered with a revival on campus that spread into the churches from graduates. It changed the face of America and its churches. Brethren, we must pray.

## **Conclusion**

We need revival and reformation again. But you will notice that all three principles above have to do with the pastor's life and behavior. If true reformation comes, it must come with preaching the Word in a Christ-centered, expositional, applicatory way. It must come by gracious and patient pastoral care to earn the people's trust and following. And it must come by faithful prayer by pastors for themselves and for their people—without ceasing. This takes time, patience, forgiveness and love by the pastor. There is no other biblical secret or strategy ordained by God in the Scriptures.

Our Lord promised to build His church, universal and local, and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But He does it in His sovereign time, in His sovereign way and with His sovereign means. What is needed is reforming pastors who trust Him themselves and who labor faithfully, graciously and lovingly until He chooses to bless the means He has given. Be thankful for every glimmer of grace you see in your people. It is a miracle! And do not enter into controversy with our Lord because He is not moving fast enough for your comfort and joy. Look unto Jesus always, the greatest Reformer of all, and He will give you the strength to preach the gospel, which blesses and

divides at the same time. And then you will hear these words one day: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

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