

Article reprinted from Cross†Way Issue Winter 2005 No. 95

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A REFORMED CHURCH

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Faced with the crisis currently enveloping the Church of England and the Anglican Communion it is easy to get absorbed by problems. But it is important to keep in our minds not only the problems but what the Church should be. The primary purpose of Church Society is to uphold the character of the Church of England as a reformed and national church. This raises the question of what it means to be a reformed church. Below are eight distinguishing marks of a reformed Church. These are what the Church of England should be.

The authority of the Bible.

It is a cornerstone of all reformed Churches that the Bible is God's Word given through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible therefore has all the authority of God its author and is without error as originally given.

The Church did not invent the Bible, but came to acknowledge its authority. Whilst the Church is given the task of safeguarding the message it can itself err and has erred because it is made up of fallen men and women not all of who are governed by the Spirit and Word of God (Article 21). Therefore, the Church is always under the Word.

History demonstrates amply that people have again and again claimed the Bible to be in conflict with archaeology, history, science, sociology etc. Time and again these claims have evaporated. Human beings are finite and fallible; our ideas are changing all the time. The Bible is God's Word, therefore though we must use our understanding we submit our own reason to the Word of God.

The Bible describes the real world, it therefore speaks to people in specific cultural settings, it could not do otherwise. Nevertheless, the primary issue in Biblical interpretation is not culture, but covenant. The Bible itself provides the tools for interpretation. The key issue in interpretation is how the words relate to Christ, do they speak to those who awaited His first coming or those who live in the light of that and now await His return?

Clear doctrinal standards

Whilst the Bible has supreme and exclusive authority reformed Churches have always seen fit to draw up confessional standards. These had two initial purposes, first to give clear and concise statements of Biblical truth in an age when ignorance and error was prevalent. Secondly, doctrinal standards provide a bulwark against error. Such concerns are also evident in the development of the historic Creeds.

The Church of England has a clear doctrinal standard in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Whilst it is influenced by its age it nevertheless represents a clear and concise statement of key truths and is faithful to Scripture. A reformed church needs such a standard, but more importantly it must actually be adhered to.

Ideally the Articles would be revised both in their language and in order to supplement. However, with the Church at such low ebb spiritually and so far from its reformed heritage any such change at this time would be a disaster.

Worship that is honouring to God.

The Church of England has always been a liturgical Church. At the Reformation and in the century that followed it opted to reform rather than replace the worship it had inherited. It can be argued that it did not reform enough, but we remember that even the worship of the Temple, given by the command of God, could be futile when the hearts of worshippers were far from Him.

The magisterial reformers saw no clear pattern in Scripture for Christian worship and therefore were content to reform past practice in accordance with Biblical principles. So, for example, Cranmer's Communion Service took existing practice, translated it into English, removed the errors and gave it a new shape and order with some additions. The service is shaped and driven by a reformed understanding of the atonement and its application today. It is sad that many evangelical churches today use liturgies that are unreformed in shape and weak or harmful in doctrine.

There is nothing sacrosanct about the language or patterns of the 1662 BCP but it is a fine, perhaps unsurpassed, example of reformed liturgy. It is a sad fact that today so many churches who claim to uphold Biblical teaching use liturgies which are unreformed in shape and doctrine.

Leaders who are faithful to God.

Under the New Covenant as the Old, leadership is a clear part of God's purposes for His people. Jesus appointed Apostles and in the New Testament we see the emergence of other forms of leadership. God has often raised up leaders through whom He has guided His people. However, in Scripture and history we also see the harm done by ungodly leadership. It is therefore vital that those called into leadership match the exacting standards of God's Word.

The Pastoral Epistles in particular lay down criteria for those to be leaders in the Church of God. These expectations are not of quaint historical interest but are instructions for the New Testament church until Christ returns and such leadership becomes unnecessary. The standards expected of leaders have to do with their own standards of life but also their conformity to Christian doctrine. Such expectations are part and parcel of authentic Anglicanism and the refusal to uphold them, particularly in terms of doctrine is the root of much of the present crisis.

A gospel to be made known to all

God is sovereign and reformed Christians have always accepted that as our beginning rests in the eternal purposes of God so does our future. In preaching we make known the call of God to repentance and faith whilst fully believing that the result of this call depends wholly on the sovereign grace of God.

The reality and extent of sin and its grip on our lives is a key feature of reformed theology. The consequence of sin, by the just judgement of God, is death and eternal separation from God. There is nothing that human beings can do to undo the problem of sin because it runs too deep. Hence the clear focus that salvation is to be found only through Jesus Christ because He alone is the mediator between God and man. Not only does this shape the message we preach it should also lead to

genuine humility as we give all the glory to God. In turn this produces strong assurance since our salvation does not depend on our strength but on God's.

Unless the Church proclaims this message then it will be blighted. Famously Martin Luther said it is the article by which the Church stands or falls. When the message is compromised many who appear to be Christians will not be because they do not put their faith in Christ alone. When sin is downplayed true believers will have little understanding of the cost of Christ's sacrifice, they will show low standards of holiness and will stagnate in faith. When human decision is magnified believers have a poor understanding of grace, too much dependence on their own strength and no assurance.

Transforming lives and society.

The Holy Spirit is at work in those who belong to Christ and, amongst other things, helps us to live by God's standards. Being transformed is a long and slow process. Furthermore, as we grow in understanding ourselves as well as God's standards it will often appear that we are failing. Yet this is part of the process by which God is preparing us for heaven.

Since God is the creator of all, the standards laid down in Scripture are therefore good for all and show us how society may be shaped and moulded for the benefit of all. Transformed lives will have an impact on the world and reformed Christians have always taken a positive stance towards engagement in the world. Old Testament figures such as Joseph and Daniel have been seen as key models - faithful in the service of men but uncompromising in the service of God.

True Christian fellowship available for all.

It is God's purpose to create for himself a people. In the Old Testament the assembly (Church) became focussed in the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the coming of Christ this is taken back to the children of Abraham no longer defined by lineage but now by faith. Now the people of God are the body of Christ and all who are in Christ are part of this body.

Christian fellowship is a right and necessary expression of belonging to Christ. It is essential for spiritual wellbeing. Our desire should be that all Christians have access to Christian fellowship with true believers where the Word of God is faithfully taught. Historically churches have been primarily location focused, hence the parish system. There have always been exceptions (boatpeople and travellers) and in the world there are likely to be more. However, most people live in one place and since fellowship is fundamental they should set aside a day a week for this. Sadly it is now very difficult for many people, particularly in rural areas, to find true fellowship and faithful teaching. In such situations as in the early church and in missionary endeavour they may well need to focus on small groups meeting in homes.

Reformed church structures.

The Church is a supernatural body but it is also a human society and therefore it is prone to corruption and decay. Just as we know ourselves always to be prone to temptation and sin so we can never expect the Church to be perfect or to be free from the dangers of error and stagnation until Christ returns. Reform will always be necessary and it should be a constant task. This should not be confused with change. There are those who believe that the Church must be continually

changing to reflect the changing culture in which we live. Reform has to do with transforming the church under the word of God.

For the English reformers reform did not mean abandoning the insights of heritage unless they were contrary to Scripture. Cultural change is necessary in order not to put up artificial barriers but sometimes reform will mean taking a stand against culture for the sake of Christ.

There is no single or simple structure for the church laid down in Scripture. The reformed churches arose as a reaction to pernicious power of the papal church and have sought to protect themselves from such corruption. Many followed the presbyterian model but in Anglicanism, whilst retaining the order of Bishops, the Church relied on the laity to provide the safeguard against clerical power. In particular this was represented by parliament as the representative of the people but also by such things as lay patronage.

Today, although parliament still nominally acts on behalf of the laity it has ceded much of its role to General Synod and there are many concerns about growing centralisation of power.

Reform of the structures is required to return the focus to the local Church, to reduce the role and workload of Bishops so that they can be more effective as pastor/teachers and less involved in meddling. Synodical government must ensure that the laity of the Church is not steamrollered.

Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda. (The Church reformed and always being reformed.)