

## **A Reformed Ministry — And Some Practical Problems**

The purpose of this article is not to provide answers, but to raise certain questions, in the hope that readers will themselves give sustained thought to these things.

Having been in the ministry only a few years it is possible to recall vividly one impression that was mine as I entered my first pastorate. Deep in my heart was the unwritten belief that all the strings about every pastoral subject had been neatly tied up somewhere, and if I was only to read enough books, the answers would shortly be found. This was my view when, by the grace of God, I commenced what I believe to be a Reformed and Biblical ministry. As problems have arisen it has often been a joy to read some timely word in a Christian book, and particularly from Reformed authors. But on certain practical problems of everyday pastoral experience, it has become clear that there are no 'pat' answers and on some I still have very little light at all.

So, I am raising a few of my problems here. The questions I have in mind would not have arisen if the ministry had not been Reformed.

1: For instance, why does a Reformed ministry attract types? This for me has always been a matter of some concern. My experience is that once it is known that the pulpit upholds the Reformed truths, it is not long before a certain species of student appears regularly in the pew. He is well acquainted with the most prominent works of the Puritans and proudly possesses an orthodoxy which is beyond all reasonable doubt. Such is his regard for the cardinal doctrines which we believe that he seems to carry in his mind an invisible but five-paged notebook, and he hesitates to relax in the service until he has put a mental tick on each page.

But too often, as I see it, he has something lacking. His heart does not leap at the name of Jesus, and the preaching of grace only causes a nodding assent, instead of the joyful gratefulness which one expects from the redeemed. He can talk of election without worshipping. He is able to discourse on the Judgement, yet never tremble; and no tears are found in his eyes when he speaks of hell.

Shortly, others follow in his wake, and prominent among these will be a sort of spiritual 'rolling-stone'. His orthodoxy is as impeccable as the student's, and not infrequently after, and sometimes during the service, they will exchange nods (if not shakes) of the head.

This man shares the Reformed Faith, but does not apparently share the New Testament's view of the local church, for he is constantly wandering from one fellowship to another. The only meeting, he attends with unflinching regularity is the local mid-week Reformed rally. He enters into no spiritual responsibilities and engages in no evangelism. One such man, recently challenged, admitted that he had lived in the same street for over twenty years and yet had never on a single occasion mentioned Christ to even one of his neighbours. No-one can persuade me that he is enjoying true spiritual health.

The company is swollen by the heresy-hunter, who usually stands out as an eminent example of those who assert the Doctrines of Grace without any grace at all. Sometimes he comes to the vestry with an apparent problem, but then reveals his real motive, which is to sound the minister on some controversial issue. He brings with him his close friend, who draws in his breath loudly at such 'taboo' phrases as 'to accept Christ as Saviour', and who treats all those converted at mass evangelistic rallies with the gravest suspicion.

But what is a minister to do? What is the answer?

2: Then, what is one to do in the situation where Calvinism prevails in the church, but Arminianism predominates in the Sunday School? Happily, this is something that I am no longer facing, but it has been a very real problem in the past. For it is true that in the lives of many of our Reformed churches, Sunday is a strange sort of sandwich. While the church services are characterized by abiding

faithfulness to those doctrines stressed at the Reformation, too often in the afternoon it is the shaky theology of the Remonstrates that is heard. Expelled from the church, they are still managing to run the Sunday School and Bible classes.

Many will argue, of course, that this is a matter of little importance, as the Sunday School is not primarily concerned with the teaching of doctrine. May God have pity on such a Sunday School! How can any full-orbed Bible teaching, including the telling of Bible stories, be devoid of doctrinal content? And so, quite properly, there are plenty of schools that do give attention to doctrinal matters. But we must be honest enough to admit that unadulterated Arminianism predominates in too many of them.

Others of us have to confess that we often question whether it really matters anyway! We recall that we were brought up in Arminian Sunday Schools, converted under Arminian preaching, and continued in the same for many years. Only in recent years have we been embraced by the doctrines of grace, and been given eyes to see the hand of the Lord in every past step of the pathway. Arminianism or not, the Sunday School and Bible class was used of the Holy Spirit to bring us to Christ. Does it really matter, then, that the present Sunday School is no different from the one that we were in?

Such arguing is presumption on God's sovereignty, and is not of faith. Besides, the question still confronts us as to whether we can ever be happy knowing that the emphasis in our Sunday School is not a true one. How can we allow to be taught there things we would never dream of preaching from our pulpits? Our Lord has never said a good word to hypocrites, and we cannot conscientiously permit such a situation to continue. But what must be done to alter it?

It is at this juncture that so many people come forward, confident that they have the right answer. The most common and sane suggestion is — 'Continue with your faithful instruction of the congregation. In due time the Sunday School teachers will see things somewhat clearer, and the Sunday School will gradually change, until the teaching given to adults and children exactly tallies on these doctrinal points.

With this advice I entirely agree, but even so it is not so easy to carry out as it is made to sound. Recently I heard a very gifted Sunday School teacher address an evangelistic meeting for children. Pelagius himself would have been thrilled with the message. And yet the speaker was not only godly and Calvinistic, but the much-respected officer of a Reformed church. But he was at a loss as to how to speak to these children, except in a way which in his heart of hearts he did not approve. Illustrations could be multiplied. Such folk do not merit our censure, for we have practically all done the same thing at some time or another.

The problem is real and not to be passed over lightly. The fact is that the teaching of these great doctrines to children is a task of the utmost difficulty, calling for a most unusual degree of wisdom and discernment. Those who give slick answers only prove that they have not truly seen the problem for themselves.

What is to be done? Is anything to be done? Is there any answer at all?

3: I can best raise my final question, perhaps, by referring to Brian, who is, in fact, a collation of several distinct people of my acquaintance. But if there was ever an example of the workings of grace, it was seen in him. Although nobody in his family had ever attended a place of worship, or heard the Gospel, he eventually heard it, fought against it all he could, and finally yielded to a King and Saviour. He wandered, sinned, lapsed, and rebelled; but repeatedly the Lord restored him, and he began to become a part of our fellowship, which was some little way from his home. Although he had no Bible background whatever, and little serviceable education, he slowly made measurable progress in the things of God. The time now came for him to settle in a church nearer his home, and he began to attend the nearest church of Reformed convictions. But he was painfully slow in settling there.

Brian's friends and relatives noted that he always went in his 'best' to church. He wore no tie, but a new jacket and a clean pair of jeans. On this no-one had ever passed comment, for we had taught him that the essentials of worship were to worship God in Spirit and truth, and all other considerations were secondary. But on entering his new church, not only was he the only one without a tie, but he was the only one without a suit. This would not have surprised him elsewhere, but the congregation was made up of local people like himself. At once he knew a blushing self-consciousness.

Then the meetings themselves unsettled him. We had shown him from the Bible that no special grammar was needed to address God, and there was no special merit in a lengthy prayer. He was accordingly overcome with the verbosity in prayer in his new church, and felt ashamed of his one-sentence heart-cries to his Heavenly Father, especially when he was told (in no uncertain manner) that it was not proper to address God as 'You'. And the Bible studies entirely perplexed him. Although virtually unable to read, Brian had a good understanding of basic Bible truths, which he had learned from profuse charts, objects, and verbal illustrations. These he did not expect in his new church, but he did look forward to the preacher using parables and everyday illustrations, just as Jesus had done. But not a bit of it. All the instruction was now given in an abstract and propositional form, and Brian was genuinely unable to grasp why his new minister's teaching method was so unlike that of the Lord he proclaimed. In addition, we had taught Brian that as the early Christians had no Bibles of their own, they met together as often as they could, and using any available copies of the Scriptures, or working from memory, they 'discovered the Bible together'. We had insisted that fellowship with others round the Word was to be the big priority of his life. But at the new church they told him that personal daily Bible study was to be the priority, and if he did not engage in it, he was a 'backslider'. He felt it most unjust to be so labelled when even the Bible in basic English was beyond his present capabilities.

Brian wanted to become a man of God. We gave him the advice of Proverbs 13:20, and counselled him to meet as often as he could with living men of God, studying God's Word and praying with them, asking questions, and treasuring up their insights.

But at the new church they seemed to believe differently. The limit of their positive help was to recommend book titles, and to assure him that anything by certain publishers was worthy of a place on his shelf. At the time, Brian had no shelf! No-one in his home possessed even one book. I am glad to record that although bravely attempting books and seeking to improve his reading, he was never deceived by the notion that books alone were God's appointed means for him to grow in grace.

So much more could be said about him; but I tell the story of Brian for this simple reason — much of what he questioned was defended on the ground that the new church occupied the Reformed position. Can it be true that simply because we are 'Reformed' we are actually defending practices that are far from Biblical? Is it credible that the situation involving Brian would have arisen in the apostolic church? Why then should it happen now?

Is it possible that we are treating some things as being of the essence of the faith, when in fact they are only inherited from a past century, or are part and parcel of the twentieth-century middle-class culture? Are we in fact defending and propagating practices that can be dispensed with, without any compromise of Bible truth?