

Reformation
& Revival

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- 1 Matthew Sylvester, ed., *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, section 2, p. 2.
- 2 J.M. Lloyd-Thomas, ed., *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, pp. 106, 107f., 112, 115, 117, 118f., 125, 130f.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 258-264.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 298.
- 5 *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, Part I, pp. 21, 84f.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 93f.
- 8 *Practical Works*, Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991, III, p.585f.
- 9 Lloyd-Thomas, *Autobiography*, p. 293.
- 10 Hugh Martin, *Puritanism and Richard Baxter*, p. 173.
- 11 F. J. Powicke, ed., *The Reverend Richard Baxter's Last Treatise*, 1926.
- 12 J.T. Wilkinson, ed., *Richard Baxter and Margaret Chilton*, pp. 110, 152. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1928.
- 13 Matthew Sylvester, *Elisha's Cry After Elijah's God*, p. 18. Appended to *Reliquiae Baxterianae*.

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Where are the Reformers?

Geoffrey Thomas

It is difficult not to be concerned about the state of the professing churches today. It is not so much the abundance of error; that is serious enough. What is just as serious is that the spirit of reformation has departed from us. Where are the reformers? In vain we look for them. Their absence is one of the greatest single evidences of the fact that we live in days of spiritual decline.

How will we recognize a true reformer? It will not be by some "plan for reformation" which he publishes. No true church reformer of past generations has ever announced some "program," "strategy," or "decade for reformation." Each one was simply faithful to Scripture and through his faithfulness reformation came. When Luther nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the church he did not realize that he was preparing the way for reformation. He was simply being faithful to Scripture. When William Tyndale determined to translate the Bible into English come what may, he was not aware that he was laying a foundation for the birth of English Puritanism. When Thomas Chalmers did battle with moderatism and patronage for the right of a congregation to call its own minister and to resist those foisted upon it, and when he protested against any attempt by Parliament or the courts to interfere in matters spiritual or ecclesiastical, he did not know that this would result in what we now call the Disruption.

These church reformers were merely imitating the example of the Savior Himself, who did nothing more than preach in a manner that was faithful to Scripture. Jesus addressed the error in the church of His day, and was eventually cast out, and that is how it will always be here on earth. Reformation does not require a residential conference, costly experts, or advertising hype; indeed, if any would-be reformers started to draw up such plans, they would no longer be acting in a reformational spirit and would be judged for it.

When we think about the work of church reformers, we must never look at people alone. The second book which Luke wrote should have been known as “the Acts of the risen Christ” rather than the Acts of the Apostles. Church reformation is always the sovereign work of the Lord Himself. Any reformation that truly deserves the name is entirely the work of God, and is not due to a single deed of any man.¹

We are told that “The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon” (Judges 6:34). That does not mean that Gideon stood up abruptly and took action, that he suddenly shook off his lethargy and defeatism, that a desire for battle welled up in him, causing him to seize his weapons. In that case we would be reading the story of the acts of Gideon, even if it were the Spirit that first set him aflame. What we read is that “The Spirit of the Lord *came upon* Gideon.” Those beautiful words mean literally that the spirit of the Lord “put on” Gideon. This is the word which is used when a man puts on his jacket. We all know that when it is time to go to work we put on our work clothes. The blacksmith puts on his leather apron, the welder puts on his face shield, the pilot puts on his flying jacket. Yet no one is so foolish as to ascribe the work he is about to do to those garments. The act of putting on special clothes does not signify that the garments are going to work, but that at that moment the workman himself, wearing those clothes sets about his calling. Scripture tells us that the Spirit of the Lord *put on* Gideon, and then that man became to the Spirit what a leather apron is to a blacksmith. Gideon is only a set of work clothes—the one who does the work is the Spirit. So who was springing to action to deliver the people and raise a standard? It was the Holy Spirit! The Lord arises to do battle. The book of Judges is not a set of stories of great deeds of certain outstanding people; it is a summery of the mighty works of Jehovah. Look at the subsequent life of Gideon,

and you find a man who later fails. What he achieved was by God alone for one period of revival.

If church reformation is not looked at from that perspective, we will get bogged down in the evaluation of historical facts and personalities. Whenever there is a decline in the church and moderatism dominates, some people become concerned and raise objections to what is happening. They say, “Yes, there is a disease here, but you do not forsake your sick mother!” Such people give an appearance of tenderness and responsibility, but their diagnosis is wrong. Declining churches are not sick mothers; they are evil doctors prescribing poisons to sick mothers and fathers and children who have been placed in their care.

There were also concerned ministers serving as local pastors during the time of the Reformation. This was the case, for example, in Wales, yet it was 200 years before the truths of the Bible were widely embraced throughout the Principality. How is this to be explained? It was because many pastors told their congregations of their concern about the state of the church, and they also told them about the message of the Bible, but they did not take any action. They soothed their parishioners by their expressions of concern, and the local church remained exactly where it was. It was not until the Word was vigorously applied to people in those churches two centuries later that they came into New Testament life and practice. The earlier opportunity was gone, not to return for four or five generations.

This is frequently what is happening even today. Ministers speak up about error in their denominations, and many elders support them, but “mother is sick,” so nothing is done. They express their concern and remain “faithful” and “evangelical”; they guard their own pulpit, but do nothing about what is being said in other pulpits within their own denominational fellowships. They cooperate with all men in nationwide evangelistic campaigns and their strategy suits

the moderates perfectly, so moderatism prevails. Betrayal of the gospel is prevailing and they think that they can work to reform by biding their time. They try to get the poisoning doctors replaced gradually, until the evangelicals themselves will finally form the majority. So they begin by subordinating themselves, and “dialoguing” with the poisoners, and thus they join the evil that is afoot. They want to have the whole strategy of reformation in their own hands. They will determine a plan for themselves. Thus they take their stand at the spot which the Spirit has reserved for Himself alone.

Genuine reformation has nothing to do with human strategy and planning. The “well-intentioned people” who are stumblingly doing a little at the present hour to stem the movement of the historic denominations into some united church of Roman Catholics and modernists are exactly these kinds of reformers. They are doing something out of conviction, but with the feeling that there are many other more able men than themselves, but that those men, alas, are doing nothing.

It is along such a path that the Lord leads His church reformers. They are blind tools, a mere leather apron that the Holy Spirit puts on when He goes to work. They are soldiers who have not been filled in on the battle plan. They are not diplomats or strategists who cleverly take a position, establish a front, and place their people strategically. That sort of approach is radically mistaken when it comes to the church of our Saviour.

There is one thing we know about all such reformers. They are misunderstood and judged wrongly by their contemporaries. You should read what Spurgeon’s opponents said and wrote about his person and character. In his obituary in *The Times*, Joseph Parker was mild when he summed up the life of Spurgeon thus: “Mr. Spurgeon was absolutely destitute of intellectual benevolence. If men saw

as he did they were orthodox; if they saw things in some other way they were heterodox, pestilent, and unfit to lead the minds of students or inquirers. Mr. Spurgeon’s was a superlative egotism; not the shilly-shallying, timid, half-disguised egotism that cuts off its own head, but the full-grown, over-powering, sublime egotism that takes the chief seat as if by right. The only colors which Mr. Spurgeon recognized were black and white.” (*The Times*, February 3, 1892)

The pattern is always the same. The reformer is described as brilliant, but a loner. He is accused of thinking he is misunderstood. He is a complicated, split character. He is suspicious, vehement, sharp, absolutistic; everywhere he sees corruption, decay, a process of undermining; he is aggressive; he always wants his own way; he comes from a minority culture within the country; he never really understands the issues; he was not trained in the right place; he is...old!

In this regard, the disciple is not greater than his Lord. Christ was despised and called a glutton and wine-bibber who went around with prostitutes and tax collectors, who came from the wrong place, who despised the law and turned it inside out. He was branded a revolutionary who preached rebellion against ecclesiastical authorities, one who stepped onto the public stage without authorization or competence. To this day people continue to bring charges against him.

Such has ever been the outlook of people who have no idea that the the Holy Spirit uses human beings, as a workman puts on his work clothes, when he undertakes to reform his church.

It is such workmen, men and women who have been “put on” by the Holy Spirit, that we cannot find anywhere today. That is the saddest evidence of our spiritual decline.

Endnote

- 1 Rudolph Van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*. Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publishers, 1990.

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