

Reformation
& Revival

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The church is swelling like the belly of a starving man. Any thoughtful anatomical survey of evangelicalism reveals a critical deprivation in the intake of substantial biblical content. Simply put: doctrine is out! The starvation resulting from this fact has produced at least two serious embarrassments: (1) The lack of a substantive moral difference in the lives of our hearers—we are simply not behaving like the Christians we profess to be; and (2) The mammoth disparity between the numbers of people reported as “new believers” and the facts. The church is swollen with numbers, yet sick with emptiness; inflated, yet famished! We have been eating and distributing more packaging than real food, but what colorful and extremely clever packaging we have produced!

Just consider how the church’s numbers of “professed” converts have expanded our girth in recent years. Various campaigns have reported anything from tens of thousands to as many as 3.5 million converts, all in a matter of a few days. (Such figures, if true, would have already been evidence of the greatest revival in history.) Admittedly, there are exceptions, but it must be agreed that, to a great extent, what is believed to be church *extension* is, on the whole, church *distention*.

Who can say that reformation is not needed immediately? Do we not all lament this problem of uncontrollable bloat? It is not as though we have put nothing into our mouths, but whatever we have eaten has obviously failed to produce much in the way of hardened muscle and strong bones.

Recent Western Christianity has on the whole invested its zeal either in efforts at organizational brilliance, playing “catch up” with the business world, or (perhaps as a reaction) in an emphasis on recovering the Holy Spirit’s power. Some have blended the two. Because of the former, our advertising acumen, our technology, our recruitment, and

our creativity have reached their apogee. In many churches and para-church groups a level of professionalism has been attained undreamed of in earlier days. "Excellence" has become the new code word. Yet there is an increasing cry for substance amid all the hype and structure, for form without content does not feed the souls of hungry men.

But has the move toward the Holy Spirit, whether charismatic or otherwise, been any better? There are deficiencies here as well; certainly not in the Holy Spirit, but in how such sincere believers have characteristically handled the Bible. In fact, a separation has resulted between the Holy Spirit and the Word. Sadly, in many such cases, the Holy Spirit has been understood only in terms of personal power or immediate radiance. There is much to commend in this desire for piety and the display of God's power before men. Let us not react in such a way that we lose our yearning for God to be displayed as God before men. However, many caught up in this wave of thought persist in eating intuitive, non-cognitive, high-calorie, fast food and reject, in the main, doctrinal meat. This diet is grossly inadequate. As a result, such movements generally do as much harm as good. It is the absence of doctrine, flame-kissed doctrinal meat to be precise, which is killing us. This more stable diet is what a weak church with "iron poor blood" really needs. Unfortunately, the church at large languishes in this dietary syndrome. A more substantial diet takes too long to produce, cannot be reheated in the "microwave," and is not nearly so immediately attractive to the senses.

While some will dismiss doctrine for a more palatable public presentation, others will throw it out for denominational or charismatic ecumenicity. Still others will reject it, believing falsely that doctrine is tantamount to outmoded human traditions. Some even fear that to be "too doctrinal" is to be "too intellectual," and thus spiritually dead or cold. Many more will have no emphasis on doctrine simply

because they have never personally known a church warmed by the Holy Spirit at the hearth of truth. Their home church was just fine with its programs and very little content. The school they attended was short on, or entirely forgetful of, the pursuit of higher knowledge. As a result you will find only lightweight devotional books under their reading lamps. I find it particularly revealing how many churches can switch doctrinal belief systems every time they call a new pastor and not even be aware of what they have done. Most of these churches have called their pastors without ever asking them specific, clear, *doctrinal* questions. (The fact is, they do not ask many moral or ethical questions either, just questions related to *program*, *past successes*, etc.) The very doctrinal distinctions that cost the lives of their forebears are either unrecognized or willfully forgotten.

What must we do? In the midst of unprecedented activity and apparent outward success, we must pray for revival and call the church to a new reformation according to the Word of the living God. The trumpet must not give "an uncertain sound" in such an age. The coals of warm evangelical doctrine have been shoveled out of our churches along with the ashes of earlier generations, and we are now suffering a long, hard winter in the cold.

Behavior Rising from Belief

Think of reformation in its broadest sense: the process of making better by correcting errors and righting behavior. The latter aspect, righting behavior, rests like a flagpole on the concrete foundation of doctrine. Behavior rises from belief. The pole is more visible, but the foundation upon which it rests is, perhaps, more crucial. Paul understood this. He used this two-phased model in his epistles, beginning, in almost every case, with the doctrinal and ending with the hortatory, or practical. Neither Paul nor the other

writers of the New Testament epistles could conceive of doctrine isolated from behavior, though sometimes their connection was more subtle.

It is precisely this pattern which has been abused in our time. We have altered the biblical system by appealing to the will and emotions alone, rather than going through the mind first, then to the will, and finally to the emotions. The people, though challenged to behave biblically, are not biblically minded. Their thinking is more “this world” than “other world” oriented. This error not only affects Christian living; it affects Christian evangelism in a most profound way. It explains, I am convinced, our inflated emptiness.

What Doctrines and Why?

Just what are the doctrines which have been deleted from our modern diet? There is surely a plethora of such. Because the church of our day is simply not doctrinal at heart, finding a place to begin an answer to my question is somewhat arbitrary. But, for the sake of your prayerful consideration, I would like to consider five of the more obviously misplaced doctrines in our age. These are: 1. the thoroughness of man’s depravity, 2. the judgment of the damned, 3. the judgment of the believer, both now and at the end of this age, 4. the nature of saving faith versus false or wasted faith and, 5. the absolute sovereignty of God over all His creation. Of necessity we will only be able to smell the aroma of these truths on a pass through the kitchen. A true feast awaits all who will sit down and eat.

I choose these particular doctrines for several reasons. **First, they are truths which convict deeply.** It seems to me that cooperation with the Holy Spirit in His convicting work (cf. John 16:11-15) demands that these doctrines be apprehended, applied and transmitted. Convictional preaching is more than merely inspirational preaching, though we should

not fail to motivate our hearers in proper ways. It has the added advantage of tilling the soil deeply enough for the seed of the word to take root, thus yielding more vigorous and productive growth.

Second, these are truths which have been preached in times of historical reformation and genuine revival. They have also been preached when there has been no revival. God sovereignly gives seasons of refreshment. Nevertheless, a simple survey of most historic awakenings reveals the interesting conclusion that such doctrines as these are inevitably at the very heart of the revival. I realize that sincere charismatic brethren may feel that we are presently experiencing a great revival, due in large part to the permeation of their distinctive views among both Protestants and non-Protestants alike. I must lovingly differ with this estimation for several reasons. I believe some of their practices are not only mistaken but out of due proportion to the Word of God. Further, I am convinced that the almost absolute doctrinal void created in such “experience centered” settings is neither healthy nor a New Testament practice. Is the lack of historically sound doctrinal emphasis the work of the Holy Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit promote avoidance of the very truths He has authored in order to promote true conversions and genuine renewal? I think not. This is not meant to imply that no truth is present in these circles; only that what *is* present does not correspond to the emphasis given to it in better days of church history. Additionally, I must say that while I am quite aware that there are exceptions, the charismatic and “Third Wave” movements are often short on biblical holiness. This is largely the result of a failure to comprehend the doctrines that spur us on toward holiness, not the least of which are the judgment of believers, the depravity of man, and the nature of true faith. After all, are not genuine revivals the return to holiness?

Third, these grand truths are honoring to God. They make

less of man and more of God. A genuine reformation honors God doctrinally. Here I must be delicate. It is one thing to view the exaltation of God as an event, or an experience to be had; it is quite another to believe rightly and therefore to express a life of adoration and humility. Much that *passes* for praise to God does not really praise God because He is God! God is not the focus—He is only the occasion, or the means, of our feeling better. The quality of praise is often measured by the intensity of the worshipper's emotions. But the praise of people deeply moved by truth (i.e., sound doctrine) touches the deeper recesses of the human heart and is thus more sustained, authentic and genuinely God-pleasing. This is precisely because it has touched the mind of man first, i.e., "as a man thinks in his heart, so is he." It is the whole man at worship! The man whose emotion is exercised without the engagement of his mind is a partial worshipper, and may be disobedient if done intentionally, for God calls us to love Him with our minds as well as our hearts. Becoming "doctrinaire" is no better. Truth must be expressed with the intent of driving through the intellect to the heart. One interesting by-product of this better view is that on the Lord's Day itself, ejaculatory praise may come more spontaneously in the midst of preaching than in singing. This is especially true if the singing is without content, which is, tragically, quite often the case.

Finally, our survey of doctrines has *evangelistic overtones*. Each of these truths particularly affects our view of the unconverted, while at the same time establishing and shaping the believer. This pattern is not uncharacteristic of the New Testament. It is the gospel-life that we live. Romans, for example, is the gospel doctrine logically presented with attending practical implications. When considering how encompassing this gospel is, we are almost prone to say, "What else is there but the gospel?" Wrong views of the foundational truths of the gospel in true believers color life

and ministry; wrong views of the gospel presented to non-believers augment the current dilemma of empty decisionism.

It is certainly in this larger sense of the gospel that Jude writes his opening lines: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." (vs. 3) Note here that his original intent was to encourage the believers with "the salvation we share," which could justifiably encompass the full-orbed benefit of God to the believer set in contrast to sin and judgment, from eternity past to eternity future. Jude writes a stinging doctrinal and practical polemic stimulating brothers to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." The gospel is what Christians are to talk about and the gospel is very clearly doctrinal!

The following questions should probe your thinking concerning these five missing doctrines which we will consider in the coming issues of **Reformation & Revival Journal**. Think them through prayerfully. Studied carefully, these doctrines will, under God, provide a beginning place for a reformation of vibrancy in your own life and in the lives of the people you influence. Truth rejoices the heart. (cf. Psalm 19:8a) Further amplification as to the meaning, effect, and application will be forthcoming. Above all, in this anemic and starved age, eat!

Preparatory Questions _____

How radically has the fall of man dealt a death blow to the human will?

Is it accurate to say that there are degrees of suffering in hell?

What implications would follow if there were?

Will believers be judged for the negative, as well as the positive, aspects of their lives?

Is it possible to have faith and still be damned?

If God is sovereign, to what extent is He responsible for the volition of men?

To what degree are you willing to pursue "mind to heart" reformation?

Author

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