Continued from last month

Stumbling Blocks to Faith

B. The Solution

Introduction

There is much about today's church that is different to the church of the Bible. Yes, over the years, our theological understanding has developed and grown, and new practices have been adopted. (And that can be a positive thing.) But many of the beliefs and practices we have inherited and developed, today, are inconsistent with the Gospel. Furthermore, they have become stumbling blocks to faith, not only for those outside the church but for those within as well.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century tried to the reform of the church, but it was not an all-embracing restoration. As a consequence, there is still much to be done to undo the practices—some of which began before the Reformation—which have added to and subtracted from the Gospel.

Indeed, reform is well overdue. But then it is often trivialised or ignored. Indeed, much of today's debate revolves around churchmanship—with the high church, low church, and Pentecostal movements—and the issue of whether the church should be liturgical or free. In other words, it tends to ignore the errors that are common to all.

So real reform—not superficial reform—is what is required. But how can we do that, with all the baggage that the church has acquired and developed over the centuries? And that baggage includes the church's involvement in extra-curricular activities, like running schools, welfare agencies, nursing homes, cemeteries, and the practice of conducting weddings and funerals.

Having said, many of these organisations and practices were probably started with the best of intentions—with the view of proclaiming Christ to the world. But is that what they do today, with all the expectations, restrictions, and limitations that have been put on them by governments and by society in general?

And the church hasn't helped matters either. Indeed, by engaging with governments and the community in the way that it has, is it any wonder that people do not recognise the church for what it is supposed to be?

So the time has come for action; the time has come for biblical reform. And how we do that, should be on the church's agenda.

Identifying the Differences

Because, of course, the first thing that needs to be done is to evaluate the extent of the problem.

Now the church as recorded in Acts 2:42-47 was vibrant, and alive. The people were engrossed in God's word; they understood the concept of community. And, as a consequence, God was able to bless them, and the church grew. But in contrast, the church of today has lost much of its spark, and seems to portray little

understanding of the biblical concept of covenant community. Indeed, it reflects the increasingly godless and individualistic society in which we live today.

As a consequence, there needs to a process by which the beliefs and practices of the church in the twenty-first century can be compared with that of the first. And that process needs to be conducted at both the local level, and—for those churches who are part of a wider church community—at a denominational level.

And Bible study and prayer should be included at this and every stage of the reform.

Creating a Biblical Template
Then, having identified the differences, secondly, there needs to be a template created by which we can assess everything that we believe and do.

Now obviously the Bible is the perfect template, and should not be ignored. But in 1517 Luther identified problems with the church, and nailed his Ninety-Five Thesis to the Wittenberg Church door. Now the fact that he received much resistance is a fact of history. But he didn't just receive resistance, there were many who came on board. Because even though the response of people throughout Europe varied in their response, reform did come. And eventually even the church in Rome decided on a reform of their own.

So perhaps we need a statement of our own, but something with a more positive twist—something we can (figuratively) nail to our own church doors. And if we did that, using the passage from Acts 2 as an example, we might well come up with a series of principles by which our beliefs and activities could be assessed. For example, we can commit to:

1. Devoting ourselves to teaching;
2. Spending time with one another;
3. Sharing meals with each other;
4. Praying together;
5. Expecting miraculous signs;
6. Sharing everything in common, as there is the need; and
7. Praising God.

To which we might add in, from Matthew 28:19-20:

8. Sharing the faith with those outside of the faith community.

And that, I must emphasise, is just one simple example. Those principles can then be used as a gauge to assess everything that we believe and do.

So, for example, if a church is tempted to meet certain expectations of the outside community, there would be a simple criteria on which the validity of that practice could be assessed.

Commiting to Resolving Issues
Which brings us to a third issue . . . the need for commitment to resolve the issues. Because whatever we have done up to this point is pointless if we are unwilling to change.

Having discovered the differences between the church of the Bible and the church of today, and having used our templates to gauge the correctness or otherwise of our practices, we should then be willing to start, keep, change, or even abandon such practices, depending upon how they fit the criteria.

Existing practices may make us feel good inside, we may even have convinced ourselves that they are part of the mission of the church, but if they take us away from the main mission then there needs to be agreement to change focus, and to revert to a more biblical direction.

Now I don't want anyone to get me wrong here. It's not that we shouldn't care for those outside the church. We just shouldn't do it at the cost of the Gospel. If we get the church right, then everything else should naturally follow. But it doesn't work the other way around. Indeed, the greatest gift we can give anyone is to introduce them to Jesus Christ. And we cannot do that if the focus of the church is elsewhere, and if there is a lack of commitment by the church to biblical values.

Commitment to the task then is imperative. But remember a lot of unbiblical practices have been around for a long time—centuries even—and many people have not known any other way. As far as they are concerned that is the church. As a consequence, not only does their need to be a willingness to change, but it needs to be done in a pastorally caring way. It has taken the church a long time to get into its current mess, and it is not something that will be fixed overnight.

Taking the Appropriate Action
Then, fourthly, we need to take the appropriate action.

Now with a computer, there is always an option to reset the programme, to restore it back to the manufacturer's original design. So when there is a bug, the reset option can be very useful indeed. As a consequence, I have often thought how useful it would be to have a reset button for the church. After all, since the first century AD, when the church was established, the church has changed considerably, and not always for the better.

Indeed, the church these days is involved in welfare programmes (to the public), hospitals, nursing homes, retirement villages, schools, etc. It has adopted practices, like the conduct of weddings, funerals, and the baptising of non-members. It has developed rituals. And it has changed Communion from something celebrated in the context of a meal, into a ritual as part of a worship service. And those are just some of the obvious things, none of which were features of the New Testament church.

As a consequence, the church is in desperate need of a reset button. And that button needs to be pressed. But not just to go back to a certain time—to a favourite time in the past. But all the way back. Furthermore, it's a button that needs to be pressed periodically to keep the church on track. Because, whatever our motivation in starting new things, we need to keep away from the additions and subtractions that so easily lead the people astray.

However, as I've already said, we will not be able to fix everything overnight. As a consequence, a commitment in writing, in the form of a covenant with God, might be approriate. Because then we would have a commitment—a time frame—for everything to be fixed.

Implications
Now, of course, some of the implications of biblical reform are:

1. That the church will need to down-size its public welfare programme;
2. That the church will need to remove the non-Christian influences (whether board members or employees) from its various organisations;
3. That the church will need to restrict itself to using its own resources—people and finances—with the Gospel restored to centre place;
4. That the church will need to remove itself as an administrator of the Marriage Act;
5. That the church will need to reinstate the biblical idea of marriage being the universal gift from God.

6. That the church will need to distance itself from community expectations; and
7. That the church will need to refuse financial assistance from outside sources.

But all these are necessary, if it is to focus on portraying and defending the Gospel; if it is to stand up for the purity of the faith; and if it is to make the distinction between the sacred and the profane. It may also be necessary for the church to sell its church schools, hospitals, nursing homes, welfare agencies, etc., and to cease conducting weddings and funeral services.

But that doesn't mean that the church shouldn't care for others outside the church. It just shouldn't do it at the price of losing its God given goals.

The 21ˢᵗ Century Reformed Church
But once the church has separated itself from the demands and expectations of governments and society, it will then be in a position to be outspoken about the things that it needs to say—which it can't currently do being part of the establishment. For being part of the establishment merely makes the church complicit in the questionable decisions of both the parliament and the community.

And having freed itself from outside influences, it will then be in a position to defend itself from contamination from other beliefs and practices, which come with being intertwined with government and society.

Yes, the church will remain a part of society. But it will be a distinct part, set apart for the purposes of God, and will no longer be a stumbling block to faith for those outside the church and within.

Conclusion
Now this is not the first time that the people of God have got it wrong. Over the years the people have gone off track many times before. The question for us today, then, is can we identify the questionable practices and teachings of our generation? And if we can, have we got the courage, with God's help, to deal with them?

For me, reformation of the church in the twenty-first century is a must. There is simply no other option. Because having become aware of the failings of the church, we have the responsibility, with God's help, to get it back on track.

Now the process of reform can be a very positive and uplifting experience, but it can also be a very painful experience too. Luther and the other reformers in the sixteenth century did not find reforming the church an easy exercise. Indeed, many were rejected by the church. But shooting the messenger instead of dealing with the message has never solved a problem, and it won't solve this one now.

As members of God's church, it is incumbent upon all of us to ensure that God's church remains on track. And when it veers off, we need to be active in getting it back on track. My hope is that we can recognise the problem that the church is in and, with God's help, are willing to commit to the necessary reform.

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