

The Fruit of Church Reformation

By Rev. James Slopsema

We were recently reminded of the calling that every disciple has in the face of apostasy. Should his church deviate from the truth of God's Word, it is his solemn obligation to protest and appeal in the proper ecclesiastical manner. Should this prove to be fruitless so that it becomes apparent that his church has committed itself to the way of apostasy, it is then his calling to separate and institute the church anew with those who are like-minded. Or should there be an already existing church that is still faithful to God's Word, it is his calling to join himself to that church. His love for God, for Christ and for the truth demands this of him. To do anything less is to deny one's discipleship.

We call this church reformation.

Church reformation is not a new idea. It has taken place time and again in history. Due largely to the influence of a carnal element that gains the upper hand, the church as institute has repeatedly strayed from the truth of God. And these departures always evoked the response of faithful in the church. They protested. They appealed. They fought. They struggled. Very seldom, however, did they succeed in bringing the church back to the Scriptures. Once a church departs from God, very seldom does it ever return. And, therefore, to remain faithful to their calling as disciples, the saints of old were forced time and again to separate and institute the church anew. The true church of Christ has been able to maintain its existence down through the ages only through the repeated process of re-forming.

Such is the calling also today of every disciple that finds himself in a church committed to apostasy. To heed this calling is to continue in the Spirit-led tradition of the saints of the past. It places one in good company.

Nevertheless, church reformation is painful. To lodge protests against the actions of various church councils and assemblies is a task from which even a minister shrinks back. And that says nothing yet about the average laymen. Many feel totally inadequate and ill-equipped to follow such a course of action. In addition, every church member knows that any protest he may bring will more than likely brand him as a malcontent and trouble maker in Israel (so also was Elijah.) It is much easier simply to drift with the tide of events in the church rather than to oppose them.

Neither is it easy to leave the mother church, even for conscience sake, and go elsewhere. We always feel a certain sense of loyalty an attachment to our mother church. She once instructed us, fed us, nourished us with the Bread of Life. She means very much to us. And so it ought to be. But then it is not easy to leave her, even though she has become unfaithful and a spiritual adulteress who will not repent. To leave our mother church is in a sense like leaving home. Besides, to leave an apostatizing church for a church that is faithful usually means to leave a large, well-established church for a church that is small and struggling. It means to leave a church that has gained a certain amount of honor and recognition for a church that is despised by both the secular and ecclesiastical world. In addition, to leave one's church for the sake of the truth means that many of our friends and associates will turn their back to us. And what about our children who have already married into the church and are raising families? To leave the church usually means to leave our family behind as well.

The whole process of church reformation, of protest and appeal, of separation from apostasy, of finding a new church home is certainly not an easy course to follow. It certainly does not appeal to the flesh. Perhaps that also explains why there is so little of it today.

It is well, therefore, to be reminded of the spiritual fruits of the church reformation. If some could come to see what these fruits are, perhaps they would be able to overcome the hesitancy of the flesh and be motivated to action.

One of the fruits of engaging in church reformation is that the child of God frees himself from any personal responsibility of the sins of the apostatizing church. The principal here is found in Ezekiel 3:18-21. "When I say

unto the wicked, Thou shalt die; and thou givest him not warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, to save his life; the same wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand. Yet if thou warn the wicked, and he turn not from his wickedness... he shall die; but thou hast delivered thy soul. Again, when a righteous man doth turn from his righteousness... he shall die: because thou hast not given him warning, he shall die in his sin... but his blood will I require at thine hand. Nevertheless if thou warn the righteous man, that the righteous sin not... he shall surely live, because he is warned; also thou hast delivered thy soul.” The implications of this Word of God for the subject at hand are quite apparent. To see the church follow the way of apostasy whether in doctrine or in life and then to do absolutely nothing about it is to bear the personal responsibility for those sins before God. The blood of all those led astray through such apostasy will be required of us. We free ourselves of this guilt only when we sound the alarm, give the warning, call to repentance, and separate ourselves from all apostasy.

Another fruit of church reformation is that it gives the child of God the full benefit of the means of grace. The means of grace are those means that God uses to work his saving grace in us. The means of grace, therefore, are vital for the spiritual well-being of the saints. The chief means of grace is the preaching of the Word. Closely connected to the preaching are the sacraments: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Both of these – the preaching and the sacraments – are inseparably bound to the institute of the church. It is only the church institute that preaches the Word. She does so through her minister under the supervision of the elders. The same is also true of the sacraments. They are administered only by the institute of the church and to her members.

When the church apostatizes, however, these two fundamental means of grace are corrupted. And to the degree that they are corrupted they are also rendered ineffective as means of grace.

This is true, first of all, with the preaching. When the church goes the way of apostasy the preaching gradually deteriorates. It becomes characterized by false doctrine and heresy. More and more does it become the word of man rather than the Word of God, the lie of Satan rather than the truth of God. And to the degree that this is true, the preaching is rendered ineffective as a means to strengthen and nourish God’s people. For God does not use the proclamation of the lie nor the mere words of man to bless His people. God’s grace reaches us only when His word is proclaimed and His truth heard. Apostasy in the church robs the preaching of its power.

The same is true with the sacraments. Apostasy renders them virtually ineffective. Especially is this true from the point of view of the faithful yet in the apostatizing church. How, for example, can parents present their children for baptism and solemnly promise to instruct their children in all the doctrines of the church, when they know that the church has already departed from the truth of God? And how can the individual come to the Lord’s Supper, which expresses the unity of the church in Christ, when he no longer is one with the church? And how can he come to the Lord’s Supper when he knows that the Table of the Lord is being profaned because of the failure of the church to exercise proper Christian discipline? This not only raises the question of moral honesty before God and the church, it also implies that the sacraments become little more than meaningless formalities, without power and essence.

Those saints of God, therefore, who stay with the apostatizing church deny themselves the full power and effectiveness of God’s means of grace. And the result is that they suffer spiritually. They become spiritually sick and anemic for lack of proper spiritual nourishment. And if this continues, they will eventually die in their generations. Their future generations will gradually decline spiritually with the church until finally they become dead wood in the tree of God’s covenant and are cut off.

Should those saints, however, separate themselves from the deadening influence of apostasy and join themselves to a church faithful to God’s Word, they would find things to be quite different. They would find that both the preaching and the sacraments have power. They would find that they are fed from week to week with the wholesome Bread of Life, instead of some watered-down version. And they would develop. They would become spiritually strong and vibrant, they and their children. Such is the fruit of church reformation.

Finally, and this above all, the fruit of church reformation is that God is glorified. There is nothing more dishonoring to God than that the church which bears His name misrepresents Him and spreads evil lies about Him through false doctrine. Neither is God honored when the church refuses to submit to His word and

commandments. The church committed to apostasy is an abomination to God. And for that very reason God is glorified when the faithful in the church rise up to defend His honor; when they resist the tide of apostasy and challenge the defilers of His church. So also is God glorified when His saints separate themselves from all apostasy, not only spiritually but if needs be, also institutionally. The chief and principle fruit of all true church reformation is that God is glorified.

And that, after all, is the primary concern of every true disciple whose heart is filled with the love of God. The love of God seeks above all else the glory of God and the honor of His name. So also, therefore, does every true disciple.

Are you that kind of disciple?