
Reformed and always Reforming

“Reformed and always reforming.” This is a phrase that has been used for the past few decades by people who believe that the Christian church, in particular the Reformed branch of the Christian church has stagnated and needs to become more contemporary. In particular, this phrase has been heralded by those who believe that the church is out of touch with society and needs to reevaluate some of its teachings and practices.

This phrase was not from the Reformation times (the early 1500s) but, rather, was coined in 1674 by a Dutch church leader who believed that the Reformed churches of his time had stagnated and that Christians needed to think more critically about what they believe and how they live in this world. He was concerned that the church was becoming something that was different from what God intended it to be.

In the last few decades or so, the phrase, “reformed and always reforming,” has been adopted by more liberal Christians to call for the church to change so that it becomes more “relevant” to the culture in which it exists. Most recently they have called the church to a new reformation particularly in the area of human sexuality, saying that science has shown that what were once considered deviations by psychologists (e.g. homosexual practice) should now be considered normal and acceptable. “We need to reform,” many are saying, so that we can be relevant to the world in which we live. Essentially, they teach that continued reformation must happen, and if the church does not reform itself, it will lose the opportunity to witness to the many who cannot abide by traditional values.

Because those who are more liberal in their theology used this phrase, there has been a bit of a backlash among those who would identify themselves as more conservative. “We must keep things the same,” has been the response, and some have even begun to push back and say that we must not allow change. We should abide in what we have been given.

As we prepare to remember Reformation Day this coming Friday, it might be helpful to understand what the phrase “reformed and always reforming” means. It is important to know that this phrase is a truncated and twisted version of the original phrase. In the late 17th century, Jacobus van Lodenstein coined this statement: *The church is reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God.* There are several aspects of this statement that deserve our attention.

First, we note that the church is reformed. When van Lodenstein wrote this, he was referring to the confessional statements made by the Reformation churches, confessions which brought the Protestant churches back to the Word of God. These confessions were rooted in the teachings of Scripture and corrected some of the divergent teachings introduced over the centuries. Many of these teachings were the result of human statements being given revelatory status and had become engrained in the traditions and teachings of the church. The Protestant church had reshaped its theology to align it with the teachings of Scripture, and, thus, the Creeds and Confessions, thus, held a high position in the Protestant Church, for they provided a framework which enabled people to understand the central teachings of Scripture in summary form. The reformational churches understood that even the creeds and confessions were not

to be considered untouchable, and throughout the years, with careful study of Scripture, they have been changed to comply with biblical teaching. Even the documents that shape our understanding of what God has revealed to us are subject to reformation, if Scripture demands it. Nevertheless, we would say that the church is reformed, reshaped from the way it was before the Reformation.

Second, we note that the original statement is not that the church should *be reforming* but rather that it is *being reformed*. The first is active while the second is passive. By this we understand that it is the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in the church that moves it forward in its understanding of Scripture. As the culture around it changes, the church must find its way forward, seeking to understand how it can live within an ever-changing culture. The Confessions do not address, for example, the Pentecostal movement which began in the early 1900s or infant dedication which has become a wide-spread practice among many evangelical churches in the last 50 years or so. The Christian church needs to deal with these shifts. Another more insidious movement (as mentioned before) deals with human sexuality. How does the church respond to this major cultural shift that has taken hold in the last decade and a half? Where is the Holy Spirit leading the church as it responds to an ever-changing world? Some have said that the church is being moved to accept and love those who do not wish to maintain a traditional view of human sexuality, and they believe firmly that this is where the Holy Spirit is leading the church today. These subjects are often controversial, and the church must trust that it is being reformed/reshaped by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.

Third, and most important, is the phrase, “according to the Word of God.” While we believe firmly that the church must allow itself to be changed by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit who guides God’s people to live faithfully in an ever-changing cultural context, we also know that not all that seems to be the work of the Holy Spirit really is. While we must be convinced that Holy Spirit is working in the church, we also must be firmly convinced that the Spirit will never move the church in any direction other than that which complies fully with Scripture, God’s revealed word. Thus, we are called to test the movements within the church to discover if they are the work of the Spirit or if they are merely the result of people bowing to cultural values. The debates in many denominations over human sexuality, for example, show this divide quite clearly. Those who argue for a change in practice find it difficult to find support for their views in Scripture, and more often than not, we find them referring to newly accepted cultural norms as their guide for change. On the other hand, those who argue for the traditional view of human sexuality base their views on Scripture. Even then, of course, we must be sure that when we base our arguments on Scripture, we do so in a way which does not result in our twisting Scripture for our own purposes. That is as problematic as relying on culture to guide us as we navigate life in this world. Still and all, we trust that the Holy Spirit will move the church of Jesus Christ to respond appropriately to the world in which we live, bringing about new understanding and change, always according to the teaching of Scripture.

To summarize, the church should never believe that it has arrived. Rather, the church (and we as individuals) should always be ready to be guided by the Spirit, even as we study the Scriptures to ensure that what we feel is the Spirit’s leading actually is. And, if we are faithful followers of Jesus Christ, we should always be ready to be reformed again and again as we follow the leading of the Spirit to conform us to the teachings of Scripture.

Pastor Gary