



Shall There Be Reformation No More?

By Rev. G. Van Baren

THE WORD OF
Life

“Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither labored in vain.”

Phillipians 2:16



The following is the text of a Reformation Day lecture sponsored by the Men's Society of the South Holland Protestant Reformed Church.

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On October 31, 1517, about 12:00 noon, a relatively unknown monk crossed the street in Wittenberg, Germany in order to nail upon the door of one of the churches the 95 theses. He had given the matter of the theses much thought, though he had not consulted with any of his superiors. Those 95 theses were not revolutionary; they were not world-shattering by any means. They did not mention justification by faith alone -- which later became the theme of the Reformation. They did not condemn the Roman Catholic Church; they did not denounce popery. They did not even condemn indulgences, though they spoke rather extensively about the abuse of indulgences. That young monk, Martin Luther, desired those who read these articles to enter into discussion with him concerning the propositions he had set forth.

Luther himself, in later life, did not regard these theses as so very significant. Luther stated concerning them, "I allow them to stand, that by them it may appear how weak I was, and in what a fluctuating state of mind, when I began this business. I was then a monk and a mad papist, and so submersed in the dogmas of the Pope that I would have readily murdered any person who denied obedience to the Pope." (*History of the Christian Church*, Schaff, page 157). These 95 theses, however, quickly spread throughout Europe and became the beginning of what we now know as the Protestant Reformation.

Today, in a time of great apostacy and departure from the Word of God, there are many who are crying again, "Can there arise another Martin Luther, another John Calvin? Can there come forth another document, perhaps, that will sway the minds and hearts of men and lead the church, which has so greatly apostatized, once more in the way of the truth?"

Only recently I read such a cry in the *Presbyterian Journal*, Oct. 27, 1971. The editor writes, "Today many have been praying that God will do it again. The charlatans of Luther's day who went about collecting money to buy souls out of Purgatory have their counterpart in the social revolutionaries who would enslave what's left of the free world through their perversions of the Gospel. A new reformation is desperately needed."

There are many within the pews of the churches of whom arise this similar cry, "We need reform! Where shall it come from? We need reform! Can it come? Shall there be reformation no more?"

When we speak of the reformation, we automatically think of that great event of 1517 and following years. We think of that event during which the church was given new direction and a new course, an event which led the church once more into the truths of the Word of God. Once again the church was led to proclaim the truths of God's Word faithfully from Sabbath to Sabbath.

Yet when we speak of reformation, we must not suggest that reformation began and ended with Martin Luther or John Calvin. The church, as long as it exists here on this earth, is, and often has been called, *the reforming church*. There must be always a process of reformation. This process continues and must continue to the end of this age.

That such reformation must continue today, is very evident from the fact that all of the members of that church are sinners. We all transgress God's law in thought, in word, and in deed. We know that. And Scripture testifies of that fact.

One doesn't have to study Scripture long nor hard to find out that the church written about in the Word of God was also repeatedly in need of reform. Read

of the church of the Old Testament -- the church of the time of the judges or of the kings. You read there of a people of G^od who fell into gross sins out of which God had to call them powerfully by the word of His prophets. God led them through the way of deep affliction to repentance. Or recall the epistles written to Corinth. That church, established by the great Apostle Paul, taught by that apostle of God, nevertheless already in Paul's day had fallen into grievous errors. First and Second Corinthians speak of it. The church there was rent by division. Some said, "I am of Paul;" others, "I am of Apollos;" or, "I am of Cephas;" or others, seeking to appear more holy than the others, said, "I am of Christ." Within that church there was great fornication of such nature that was not even mentioned among the heathen. And the church did not even condemn it! Within that church there were those who denied the resurrection from the dead. Within that church there were those who abused greatly the gifts of God given to the church. Oh, yes, the church of Jesus Christ, throughout the ages and already in the days of the Apostle Paul, had to be called unto reformation.

Paul also, shortly before his captivity, addressed the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:28-29 as follows, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing, shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." So, you see, there has been constantly the need for reform within the church throughout all of the ages.

That call to reform is also strikingly emphasized in Ezekiel 33:11, written not only to the Jew of the Old Dispensation, but also to the church of today, "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" That is a call to Israel to repent. That is the call to the church of today as well to reform.

And God leads His church by the preaching of the Word and under the direction of His Spirit unto proper reform. Sometimes, though that does not often happen, that reform comes in a very striking way as it did in 1517 and the following years. Sometimes it comes over a period of time gradually. For God, under the preaching of His Word, leads His people and His church to recognize and to condemn what is the lie and to seek and follow after the truth once more.

But what of our day? Is there need for reform today? Is there need for reform, you ask? One does not have to look far. He does not have to study hard to find an answer to that question.

I have a number of quotations with which I mean to impress upon you the fact that reform is urgently needed. I could call your attention first to the World Council of Churches. You have heard of this organization. Many, many denominations belong to that Council, including some of Reformed persuasion. But also there are leaders within Reformed denominations not belonging to that World Council, who are urging their churches that they ought to join too. Therefore with this in mind, one finds interesting the two articles in the *Reader's Digest* about the World Council of Churches in the October and November (1971) issues. You ought to read that. I have a short quotation from the article in the October issue. It states: "Out of its long commitment to the 'social gospel,' the WCC counters: 'It is not enough for Christians to seek to save souls and improve individual characters. Christians must be concerned for the

structures of society.' This, to the WCC means changing the structures by whatever means are most effective. 'As Christians,' says the Council, 'we are committed to working for the transformation of society. In the past, we have usually done this through quiet efforts at social renewal, working through established institutions. Today, a significant number of those who are dedicated to the service of Christ and their neighbor assume a more revolutionary position.'

"Reaching out to establish theological backing for their views, some churchmen reach absurdity. One freely quoted in WCC circles is William Stringfellow, an Episcopal lay theologian, who wrote: 'According to the gospels, Jesus was not a non-conformist, not just a protester. He was a criminal revolutionary.' Another, Harvey Cox, Harvard professor of divinity, recently commented that Jesus 'died the death reserved for those guilty of insurrection'.....

"...Concerned Christians the world over are asking: Does the present ardor of the World Council and some member churches for political, social and economic revolution merely betoken errors in judgment made by well-meaning but naive Christian leaders? Or are these the moves of desperate men who are no longer sure what their mission is, and have lost faith in orderly change and in the potency of Christianity's age-old weapons -- reconciliation and love -- which over the ages have again and again transformed both men and their societies?"

Yet many leaders of the church say, "We ought to belong to such an organization"! Is it any wonder that the cry arises, "Shall there be reformation no more?"

I could call your attention again to the *Presbyterian Journal*. This is a conservative magazine published by some members of the Southern Presbyterian churches. In the October 14, 1971 issue, a study is made of some of the events occurring in the Southern Presbyterian Church over the past ten years. The editors point out various episodes which indicate the decline, a rapid decline, in their denomination. They point out a report in their magazine of May 14, 1969, on the general assembly (their broadest church gathering) of that year. A committee is authorized to draw up a new confession of faith; hunger is given top priority in the mission of the church; evolution is supported as compatible with Genesis; for the first time the assembly conducts ordinary business on Sunday. The *Presbyterian Journal* reports in Nov. 1, 1961, of a presbytery (comparable to our classis) that accepts a minister who denies the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection and the second coming of Christ.

In Feb. 27, 1963, this same magazine reports another minister received by a presbytery after denying belief in the virgin birth. March 18, 1964, yet another presbytery receives a minister who makes fun of the virgin birth, and denies the substitutionary atonement of Christ. May 16, 1966, a presbytery accepts a seminary professor on a second examination after turning him down in the first examination when his universalism came through clearly. Nov. 21, 1962, a North Carolina congregation invites the T.V. audience to join in the Lord's Supper by going to the refrigerator, get a beverage, and a piece of bread and unite with those who partake in the sanctuary.

This is what is happening in the Southern Presbyterian Church. Is it any wonder that the editor of this magazine asks, "Shall there not arise another Martin Luther to lead the church to reformation?"

Or I could remind you of the fact that many denominations, becoming increasingly liberal, allow their members to join freely with the world in its corrupt entertainments. These have loosened restrictions with regard to movie attendance and the dance. I myself have read movie reviews in the *Reformed Journal*, and in Calvin College *Chimes*, reflecting upon movies of the worst sort and encouraging the young people of the church to attend these.

Or I could point you to other quotations that I have. One is from the *Banner* of Sept. 17, 1971. The editor comments on the scientific achievements of the United States to bring men on the moon and he presents there what can be termed nothing other than post-millennialism, suggesting his desire that a Utopia be established here on this earth through the efforts and labors of the church. He writes, "God is obviously using the 'scientific community' to do what the Church has sadly failed to accomplish, namely, to develop a worldwide consciousness of the unity inherent in the human family...."

"Science and all its achievements, whether 'made in the USA' or in the Soviet Union, is by leading of God the Spirit, who holds the keys to truth and gives gifts to men. All who hope that the Church may some day bind the family of man into a unity which transcends geographical and political boundaries, a unity which will make war less likely in a human family become conscious of its ties, can rejoice that God chooses His own means to do what churchmen have so conspicuously failed in doing...."

"From all this the Church has something to learn. The Spirit is trying to teach us. How apt pupils are we likely to be?"

Is there any wonder that the cry arises, "Shall there be reformation no more?"

Or again, I could point you to the fact that the Reformed churches historically oppose Arminianism. Nevertheless, today these virtually unanimously and openly embrace Arminianism. The Reformed churches have as their adopted Standard, the Canons of Dordt. One of these articles, (Article 10 under the 3rd and 4th head of doctrine) states, "But that others who are called by the gospel, obey the call, and are converted, is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will, faith and conversions, as the proud heresy of Pelagius maintains; but it must be wholly ascribed to God, who as he has chosen his own from eternity in Christ, so he confers upon them faith and repentance, rescues them from the power of darkness, and translates them into the kingdom of his own Son, that they may show forth the praises of him, who hath called them out of darkness into his marvelous light; and may glory not in themselves, but in the Lord according to the testimony of the apostles in various places."

That is the Confession of all Reformed churches. Nevertheless, one finds increasingly so in our day an embracing and encouragement of men as Billy Graham and his association; of Campus Crusades for Christ; etc. All of these teach that very false doctrine condemned in the Canons themselves. And the Arminian error becomes more popular within the Reformed camp itself. One wonders, "Shall there be reform no more?"

Some of you may have read in the *Standard Bearer* recently quotations which came from the *Calvinist Contact* in which they report quotations of theological professors and ministers within the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. I have those quotations here. Prof. Koole, in the *Gereformeerde Weekblad* of Sept. 16, 1966, writes, "The Bible is an ancient Oriental description of history which one should not expect to be absolutely exact." Prof. Kuitert, on Oct. 5, 1966, in

a meeting of Christian Pedagogical Studies Center, writes: "There has never been an Adam and no Eve either; there never existed a Paradise that was created without sin and death." And again this same Kuitert on May 13, 1966, as reported in *Trouw*, stated on the annual Theological School Day in Kampen, "You cannot say that something really happened because it says so in the Bible. For instance, in the time of Joshua, Jericho did not exist." Drs. T. J. Baarda, in *The Reliability of the Gospels*, 1969, writes, "There are some accounts in the gospels that have the legendary touch, as for instance, the story of the cursing and withering of the fig tree, or more so even, that of the resurrection of some dead when Jesus died. Is it not possible that certain apocalyptic words of Jesus have been dramatized in the rumor, the story passed on orally by the people?"

Reformation is sorely needed.

I have worded my theme very deliberately in the way that I have: "Shall there be reformation no more?" By this, I mean to express the almost hopeless despair of many who think that reformation is now impossible. We live in a time in which liberal trends develop rapidly, false doctrines increase on every hand. One can read quotations in newspapers and magazines which reveal the latest theological fads - all of them contrary to the Word of God.

Theological leaders of the churches of our day insist: "We don't need preaching any more. We don't need mission work any more. We need an emphasis upon that which is social. We have to provide remedies for social injustices. We must help the revolutionary when he seeks to overthrow an 'unjust order' of society."

Conservatives within these churches throw up their hands in despair. These cry, "How can we accomplish anything by means of protest or appeal? The very people to whom we must appeal are the ones who themselves have adopted these liberal viewpoints." And the fact is that there are not even many who care to appeal or protest. There are not that many, after all, who *are* offended at what is taking place. Many there are who are utterly indifferent. They don't care: don't care what is preached from their pulpits; don't care what is taught in their seminaries; don't care what is taught to their youth. These simply *don't care!* They have their names on the membership rolls of the church. Perhaps, though not always, they frequently attend. But they are indifferent. They are cold toward the Word of the Lord.

Others, many others I fear, are enthused about present-day developments. They are enthused that the church is now meeting the "needs of the day". Instead of preaching the Word, the church can come in dialog or with some interesting film. It must attract the youth: get them off the streets and bring them into the church by any means. Finally, the church can be engaged in remedying the social injustices of the day.

No wonder that the faithful child of God feels lost. He does not know where to turn. And he asks, (if he can find another sympathetic to him) "Do you think there's going to be another reformation? Do you think there'll be another Martin Luther? Somewhere? Someplace? One who will lead once more the church back to the truth of justification by faith alone, and to the truths of the infallible Word of God?"

But when one studies Scripture, especially those many passages that speak of the apostasy of the church, one can legitimately come to the conclusion that there is not going to be a reformation again as was seen in the days of Luther. There is not going to be another Martin Luther nor another John Calvin to

inspire thousands to follow again the principles of the Word.

Why do I say this? Because the Word of God indicates clearly that one of the signs of the end of time is this: apostasy within that which is called the church -- great apostasy. There are several passages of God's Word which indicate that. We live in the last times, you know. "The night is far spend, the day is at hand." It won't be long before our Lord Jesus Christ will come again on the clouds of glory. Perhaps even *we* will see Him come again before we die. All the signs about us point to the nearness of His return: signs of wars and rumors of wars, pestilence, earthquakes, the development of man scientifically, the uniting of nations -- all these remind us that the end is at hand.

You can see that, can't you? One of these signs is apostasy within the church. Jesus says in Matt. 24 (in speaking of the signs of the end of time), "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many". That prophecy is being fulfilled today. II Tim. 3:1-4 states, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God." One would say that the author of that Word of God was living in our day and reporting what he observed, wouldn't you?

These are signs of the last time. Jesus Himself, through John on the island of Patmos, spoke to the church of Laodicea, a church which probably more than any other of the seven in Revelation resembles the church of our day. Jesus says to her, "I know thy works, that thou are neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Or, Jesus says again in Matt. 24:24, "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect."

Other passages of the Word of God show that the church of the last day is not going to be large. It shall be few in number. Jesus addresses them in Luke 12:32, "Fear not, *little flock*, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Jesus says again in Luke 18:8, "Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" Do you see the picture presented in Scripture?

In the last days apostasy shall abound. That which is called the church shall rapidly degenerate into that which can only be termed the false church -- the church of the antichrist. And those who remain faithful, scattered perhaps through many denominations, will be as lonely sheep without a shepherd -- except that Christ Himself has promised to be with them to the end of the world. These are going to face ever greater opposition, hatred, envy, persecution, mockery, imprisonment, and death. Shall there be reformation, then, anymore? Is the world going to change? I'm convinced that the only answer is, "No." The *little flock*, the faithful of Jesus Christ will remain in the midst of this earth, looking more and more for the return of their Lord on the clouds of heaven -- for then He shall deliver them and bring them to the glory that He has promised to them for His Name's sake.

Should we then perhaps despair? Or should we say that It's no use -- no use to oppose the corruptions within the church? Should that be our attitude? By no means.

What is your calling? First of all, it is to know for yourself, and instruct your children, in the truths of God's Word. Know the Word thoroughly; study it carefully and diligently. Use your time wisely to that end. Scripture tells us that lack of knowledge is precisely the downfall of the "church". Hosea 4:6 states, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children." Again, Hosea 6:6 states, "For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."

Lack of knowledge is the result of refusal to use faithfully the means which God provides for spiritual growth -- especially the neglect of the pure preaching of God's Word and the neglect of careful study of Scripture. Some who even deny that the Word of God is infallible -- scorn the very source of spiritual knowledge. The result is a spiritual ignorance which leads to apostasy and to destruction.

But you, who faithfully hear the pure preaching of the Word, who study that Word, who insist that your children learn it diligently from their infancy -- you are able to recognize the lie. You will be able to recognize and hold to the truth. By God's grace, with that knowledge of His Word applied to your hearts, you will hold fast to the truth even to the end.

But what must members in rapidly apostatizing denominations do? What must one do when he sees God's Word and truth forsaken in his own church? Must one throw up his hands in despair, and say, "It's no use?" May one insist that it is futile to protest? I would insist that anyone who is convinced that he must remain in a particular denomination, whatever one it may be, has the duty and calling before God to protest whenever there are deviations from doctrine and walk within that church or denomination. This is one's duty. Nor may one say, "It's no use." As long as one is a member within a certain church or denomination, he has the responsibility to protest all that which is opposed to the Word.

But if it is true that there is no point in protest, if it is true that the foundations of a church are so undermined that there is no hope anymore of directing that church back to the truth, then such people do not belong there anymore. They do not belong there because by their own admission, they are neither being fed the Word of God aright nor is there any prospect of changing that situation. These can not tolerate such a situation either for their own sakes or especially for their children's sakes.

If one can not protest, and thus lead the church back again to the truths of God's Word, then he has the duty and calling to separate himself from that apostate church. And, incidently, you may have read that plans for separation even now are being prepared within the Southern Presbyterian churches. Some there have banded together to separate themselves at the appropriate time from what they themselves admit to be an apostate denomination. I believe that is their calling. Dr. L. DeKoster in the *Banner* of Oct. 8, 1971, deplors their action. He calls it schism. He says, "Mankind cries out today for guidance into unity lest we fall into the division of total destruction. Marxism promises such unity in its 'Workers of the world unity,' but we have seen Marxist unity fractionalize into Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, Castroism. Now must we Christians too display before the world once more our inability as brethren to

live together? Is it in the genius of *Reformed* leadership to pick up our marbles and go home? Not at all! Dr. Bell is right! Fight it out, friends, right where God placed you!" Fight it out? Fight it out in a church where the Word isn't preached anymore? How can one fight? Fight it out while one's children are being fed the lie? How will they grow up spiritually? What will they believe under such circumstances?

Where the church rapidly departs from the Word of God, where there seems no hope anymore of its reform, the calling of the child of God is to come out. That is the instruction of Rev. 3:20 where Christ addresses the church of Laodicea. It was the "lukewarm" church. Therefore Christ says, "I'm going to spew you out of my mouth." Yet there were those in that church who loved God. To them Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and sup with him, and he with me." (And, by the way, that text is not meant to portray Jesus standing at the door of the sinner's heart, pleading for admittance. Rather, in light of the context, it is very plain that Jesus stands at the door of the apostate church.) Jesus does not tell the members there, "Fight, brothers, where you are." He says rather, "Come out; I can not sup with you there. Come out -- and I will sup with you and have fellowship and communion with you."

And when Christians do come out, they should seek to reform completely. Their reform ought not to be half-hearted or partial, as in some instances has been the case in the past. Children of God, called out of the apostate churches, are called to hold fast once more to the principles of the Reformation: justification by faith alone; and, Scripture interprets Scripture -- for Scripture is the infallible Word of God.

Without any desire to boast, I believe I must say that by God's grace the Protestant Reformed Churches have continued to maintain these great Reformed truths. I believe that from our pulpits the Word of God is yet clearly and purely sounded forth from week to week. I believe that under that sort of preaching, we and our children are properly equipped to fight the battle of faith.

Do you, dear reader, seek the pure preaching of the Word of God? Do you *insist* upon hearing that? And where such insistence bears no positive fruit, do you seek such a church where you and your children can again hear the proper preaching of the Word? I would encourage you to walk in such a path. Do not become down-hearted nor discouraged. Keep looking up -- even for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ on the clouds of heaven. And while looking up, join the saints in singing:

Faith of our Fathers, living still
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy
Whene'er we hear that glorious Word.
Faith of our Fathers, holy faith,
We will be true to thee, til death.

Do you sing that too?

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