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Reformation
& Revival



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The second book of Chronicles brings to our attention three notable periods of reformation in the life of God's ancient people. The first occurred in the reign of Jehoshaphat, and is recorded in chapters 17, 19, and 20. The second, and perhaps the most remarkable, occurred in the reign of Hezekiah and is described in chapters 29-31; and the third in the reign of Josiah, as given to us in chapters 34 and 35. When these chapters are compared, it becomes evident that all three "movements" had certain things in common.

The Backdrop of Reformation in the Church

I am not going to attempt any kind of exposition of these chapters, but will rather list features observable in all three reformation movements. These form a kind of backdrop for my treatment of the theme. I believe, in fact, that we will see the relevance of these ancient records to our present situation. What then did these three ancient reformation movements have in common?

1. Godly leadership. Of Jehoshaphat we read, "(He) sought the God of his father, and followed His commandments, and did not act as Israel did. And he took great pride in the ways of the Lord" (2 Chron.17:4,6). Of Hezekiah we read, "He did right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his father David had done" (29:2), and, "He did what was good, right and true before the Lord his God" (31:20). Similarly of Josiah it is recorded, "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the ways of his father David; and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. For in the eighth year of his reign while he was still a youth, he began to seek the God of his father David" (34:2-3a).

Each of these men was personally godly, and gave vigorous leadership in the work of reformation.

2. Respect for the Word of God. In 2 Chronicles 34 we read of Hilkiyah the priest finding the book of the law of the Lord in the temple, and the words of the law being read

before king Josiah. The record reads,

And it came about when the king heard the words of the law that he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded Hilkiyah, Ahikam the son of Shaphan, Abdon the son of Micah, Shaphan the scribe, and Asaiah the king's servant, saying, "Go inquire of the Lord for me and for those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book which has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord which is poured out on us because our fathers have not observed the word of the Lord, to do according to all that is written in this book (19-21).

Hezekiah "spoke encouragingly to all the Levites who showed good insight in the things of the Lord" (30:22a) and commanded the people to support the priests and the Levites "that they might devote themselves to the law of the Lord" (31:4). In the time of Jehoshaphat we read, "In the third year of his reign he sent his officials. . . . And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the Lord with them; they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught among the people" (17:7-9). The Word of God was vital in these reformations.

3. Rejection of that which was contrary to the Word and will of God. Of Jehoshaphat we read, "He removed the high places and the Asherim from Judah" (17:6). In Hezekiah's day, the historian tells us "They arose and removed the altars which were in Jerusalem; and they also removed all the incense altars and cast them into the brook Kidron" (30:14). And again, "Now when all this was finished, all Israel who were present went out to the cities of Judah, broke the pillars in pieces, cut down the Asherim, and pulled down the high places and the altars throughout all Judah and Benjamin, as well as in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had destroyed them all" (31:1). This same type of purging went on under Josiah:

For in the eighth year of his reign while he was still a youth, he began to seek the God of his father David; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, the carved images, and the molten images. And they tore down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and the incense altars that were high above them he chopped down; also the Asherim, the carved images and the molten images he broke in pieces and ground to powder and scattered it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. Then he burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and purged Judah and Jerusalem (34:3-5).

4. Restoration of true worship. Those who led the reformations were not satisfied with merely rejecting the false; they desired to restore the true, and this was especially important with reference to worship. In 2 Chronicles 29:3 we are told, "In the first year of his (Hezekiah's) reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the Lord and repaired them." Then for the next three chapters we have a detailed description of the restoration of biblical (O.T., of course) worship. The temple is restored, the Levites and priests are reorganized, the singers are put in place and provided with the words of David and Asaph, various required offerings are made, and the feast of the Passover is observed. Little wonder that we read,

And all the assembly of Judah rejoiced, with the priests and the Levites, and all the assembly that came from Israel, both the sojourners who came from Israel and those living in Judah. So there was great joy in Jerusalem, because there was nothing like this in Jerusalem since the days of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel (30:25-26).

The same kind of thing happened in Josiah's day as recorded in 34:29-35:19; though no detailed account is given in the record of Jehoshaphat's reign, it is not hard to deduce that the same zeal prevailed.

5. Enjoyment of God's blessing. In all these periods, as

God's people sought to honor Him, so He honored them, and the blessing of God was evident upon them.

6. Great victory. This was not true of Josiah, but it is interesting that both Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah experienced a remarkable intervention of God in battle. In Jehoshaphat's case, God gave victory against an overwhelming number of Ammonites and Moabites (chap. 20), and in the case of Hezekiah a miraculous victory was obtained over the forces of Assyria (chap. 32).

It has often been said that these reformations were shallow and did not last; subsequent generations lapsed into apostasy. But what does that prove except that reformation is an ongoing need? We know that the blessing of one generation cannot be guaranteed to the next. There is always a need for biblical reformation in the kingdom of God.

This leads me then to suggest that such reformation is needed in the churches of our day. I would like to bring to your attention several areas where this is plainly needed.

Theology

We must begin with theology. I contend that in our present-day churches, there is such a lack of sound doctrine, and such a predominance of superficiality, as to be dangerous to the spiritual health and well-being of the churches. The prevalent view of God and His salvation is one that few of our forefathers would be happy to endorse, and one that only barely reflects the Word of God. The modern evangelical church has largely lost the sense of the glory and the majesty of God. The "tremendousness of God" (a phrase employed by Dr. Donald Garlington at a Carey Conference several years ago) is an unknown quality in many churches. That awesomeness which produced the amazement of Moses and Isaiah, the doxologies of Paul and the prostration of John is unknown to many professing

Christians today. Admittedly this is only one aspect of God, and those elements of His Being which cause the heart to sing and the spirit to be glad, need to be declared also; but the point is this, that if the awesomeness of God is forgotten, then the ballast in our theological ship is lost, and the result inevitably is not true joy but frivolity; not gladness but silliness. God isn't praised but patronized; the Lord of glory becomes "the big guy upstairs," and worship is replaced by sentimentality and "feel-good emotionalism."

When God is thus reduced to a trendy buddy, it is not surprising that man is made His equal, and sometimes more than His equal, so that "Calvinism" with its God-exalting/man-humbling doctrine is strongly repudiated, and Arminianism takes the throne. When it comes to salvation, not God but man must be sovereign, and in so many churches the worst of all heresies today is to deny "the free will of man." What the Puritans used to call "the great idol of free will," once tossed out of the temple of the church, at least in good measure, has in this century been reinstated very firmly. The sovereignty of God in election and in the application of redemption is a strange doctrine in most churches. The God of modern evangelism is the God who must wait for man to "give Him the chance"; He stands by helplessly waiting for man to give Him permission to work! He has done all that He can, now it is up to the sinner; He will be glad to save "if only you will let Him." As one respected evangelist crassly put it, "God votes for you, the devil votes against you; you must cast the deciding vote." Whatever happened to the grand Pauline doctrine of effectual calling, one might ask?

Surely there is a need for doctrinal reformation. Men need to understand what repentance and faith are; the character of God must be set forth again; sin must be explained in biblical manner; the doctrines of grace must be declared, and the true nature of conversion must be taught.

Preaching

This brings me to the need for reformation in preaching. In our day preaching seems to have fallen on hard times. The quality of preaching is often poor, and preaching has lost the esteem it once enjoyed. Musical programs, dramas, dialogues, movies and a host of other things, are often viewed much more positively than preaching. And yet it may surely be claimed that the Christian church was born of preaching. The Master Himself early identified preaching as one of the main concerns of His coming: "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for" (Mark 1:38). His choice of text in the synagogue in Nazareth reveals how close to His heart and how central to His mission was the proclamation of the Word:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

After His resurrection, His word was that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be *proclaimed* in His name to all nations (Luke 24:47); and we know that in the apostolic church the preaching of the Word, not merely for the evangelizing of the outsiders, but also for the edification of the believers, was at the very heart of the church's life. Eric Alexander has pointed out that all the officers referred to by Paul in Ephesians 4:11—Christ's gifts to the churches for the equipping of the saints and the edifying of the body—were teaching/preaching officers, and in the light of that, this eminent servant of Christ warned against the neglect and despising of the teaching/preaching ministry. I believe it is safe to say that the entire history of the church testifies to the crucial place of preaching in the life of the church, and

that when the Spirit of God has been most gloriously present in the church, the preaching of the Word was central and powerful. We need hardly wonder at this, seeing that on the day of Pentecost, the immediate result of the outpouring of the Spirit was the preaching of the Word.

I suggest that in our day we need biblical reformation in returning the preaching of the Word to a place of esteem and centrality. And we need reformation which will result in a preaching of all the counsel of God. When I say *all* the counsel of God, I mean *all* the counsel of God, and therefore we are to preach more than the five points of Calvinism. As Spurgeon said in his inimitable way, "David's harp had more than five strings." Yet those who recognize the truth of those five points should also recognize them as vital truth, fundamental truth. How could they be otherwise when they deal with the very work of God in salvation? And these truths do need to be preached. It seems to me that in Canada we are still in the situation which existed twenty years ago, where men who claim that they believe these truths are still unwilling to preach them. To speak of these doctrines as "family secrets," as has been the case, to be whispered among a select few, but not made known to all, is pathetic. To speak of them as true but unimportant and therefore expendable, is arrogant, to say nothing of ignorant. To speak of them as dangerous and divisive and therefore to be shelved, surely borders on the blasphemous. What God has made known we are to declare; it is not ours to pick and choose between God's truth, as to what shall be preached and what concealed. In a powerful sermon titled "Spiritual Revival the Want of the Church," Spurgeon gave his opinion as to how the doctrines of grace were lost to the church. Our present generation of preachers needs to hear this word again:

It began this way. First of all, the truths were fully believed,

but the angles were a little taken off. The minister believed election but he did not use the word, for fear it should in some degree disturb the equanimity of the deacon in the green pew in the corner. He believed that all men were depraved, but he did not say it positively, because if he did, there was a lady who had subscribed so much to the chapel—she would not come again; so that while he did believe it, and did say it in some sense, he rounded it a little. Afterward it came to this; ministers said, “We believe these doctrines but we do not think it profitable to preach to the people. They are quite true; free grace is true; the great doctrines of grace that were preached by Christ, by Paul, by Augustine, by Calvin and down to this age by their successors are true; but they had better be kept back, they must be very cautiously dealt with; they are very high and dreadful doctrines, and they must not be preached; we believe them but we dare not speak them out.” After that it came to something worse. They said within themselves, “Well, if these doctrines will not do for us to preach, perhaps they are not true at all,” and going one step further, they said they dare not preach them. They did not actually say it perhaps, but they began just to hint that they were not true; then they went one step further, giving us something they said was the truth. And then they would cast us out of the synagogue as if they were the rightful owners of it and we were the intruders. So they have passed on from bad to worse; and if you read the standard divinity of this age, and the standard divinity of Whitefield’s day, you will find that the two cannot by any possibility stand together. We have got a “new theology.” New theology? Why, it is anything but a theology; it is an ology which has cast out God utterly and entirely, and enthroned man, as it is the doctrine of man and not the doctrine of the everlasting God. We want a revival of sound doctrine once more in the midst of the land.

In saying this I want to recognize that these truths have sometimes been badly handled. Sometimes the spirit of the preacher has been wrong; he has been out to win an argument rather than bless the people. Some have shown a grievous lack of wisdom, pushing great hunks of steak (so to

speak) down the throats of those who were used to milk! No wonder that they choked! Some have foolishly demanded that their people grasp and accept doctrines in one month which they themselves took years to receive. All that is true. There must be wisdom, patience and grace. But brethren, let it also be said that it is very easy to hide piously behind these things and never preach all the counsel of God, when the real reason is not so much prudence but cowardice, and ultimately it might have to be said, a lack of faithfulness to the Word of God. It is a pitiful thing when a man spends half a lifetime in the ministry, and is still waiting for the right time to introduce the doctrines of grace. The tragedy is that in most of these situations the “right time” never does come. May God give us courageous and faithful men who will declare all the counsel of God.

Speaking of the need of courage and reformation in preaching, we should also point out that our preaching needs to address the issues of the day, even if they are controversial. As the great John Owen said, “Truth can be lost by weakness as well as wickedness.” Do our people know what the Scriptures say about male/female roles, and especially as this relates to eldership and the preaching ministry of the church? Do our people know the biblical position with respect to homosexual relationships? And what of the charismatic world with its claims to tongues, prophecies, revelations and even apostles? Are we addressing these and other pressing current issues in our preaching?

Reformation in preaching must also address the content of our preaching in this sense, that we must truly be preachers of the Word. Our preaching should be expository, not necessarily in the sense that we systematically work our way through books of lengthy sections of Scripture (though I personally recommend that), but in the sense that we should always be “opening up” the Word itself.

Whether we deal with one verse or numerous verses forming a paragraph, our aim should be to explain the meaning of the text and bring out its application to the hearers. So often evangelicalism has been plagued with preaching which consists in a rehearsal of the preacher's life experiences; where he has been, what he has done, the books he has written. Or if not about himself, the sermon has consisted of jokes, anecdotes and various illustrations. This is not to deny the place of illustrations in a sermon, nor even the occasional rehearsal of personal experiences; not at all. It is simply to say that these things must always be subservient to the main task of expounding and applying the word. A return to biblical preaching is desperately needed in our day.

However, we need to understand that such preaching demands a price from the preacher. We preachers must take sermon preparation seriously. We must be prepared to "work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17); time must be devoted to study; we must give ourselves to reading and thinking and praying. We must be prepared for hard work so that we can come before our people with a substantial meal to feed their needy souls.

Worship

We move now to a third area in need of reformation: worship. Some time ago in a church in the United States, the offering had just been received at the usual point in the service and the pastor was about to lead the congregation on into the worship. Suddenly several armed, masked men burst into the church, and taking up positions in different spots in the auditorium, threatened the terrified congregation. As children cried and the elderly quaked, the men gathered up the offering and rushed out of the church. Pandemonium ensued in the congregation, but the pastor quietened the people and told them that it had been a

staged event. He had wanted to get over to them in dramatic fashion the fact that they were robbing God by their poor giving! This "thrice-anointed ninny hammer," to use a Spurgeonian phrase, had not considered the trauma such an event might inflict on children, or the real possibility of a heart attack among the elderly. The incident was described in a letter to Ann Landers in the *Hamilton Spectator*. Incidentally, the letter writer left the church. One can only hope that she was one of many!

This reminds me of another incident in an Evangelical Baptist church in Ontario many years ago. A Sunday school attendance contest was underway, and the pastor and superintendent had been earnestly exhorting the people to bring others to Sunday school so they could win the contest. The morning service began with the pastor and superintendent coming onto the platform in cowboy outfits, gunbelt and all. Two people walked down the aisle as though to make to their seats. The pastor demanded to know how many people they had brought to Sunday school that day. When the couple answered "none" the pastor and superintendent drew their guns and "shot" the pair, two loud caps exploding with a bang as they did so. Thus began the worship of God in that particular (note there is no capital "P" there) Baptist church.

It seems to me that with respect to worship we must avoid the problem of reaction, and as usual strive for a healthy balance. In so many evangelical churches the worship is trivial, superficial and sometimes even juvenile. What transpires is often an insult to non-Christians of average intelligence. When you add to the mix the contribution of many charismatic assemblies, we have to summon other words for our description: frenetic, chaotic, wild! But in reacting to that kind of scenario we must avoid overreaction and not conduct our services in a funeral atmosphere. Must we be restricted in worship to be either burnt to death or frozen to death? Some

good Reformed churches wonder why people are not enthusiastic about attending their services; they generally convince each other that it is simply the price they pay for faithfulness. Sometimes that is the case; but in other instances the answer lies in another direction: the services are just plain dull, dreary and boring! In speaking of this area to seminary students I have used the expression "reverence suffused with joy, and joy tempered with reverence," when describing the atmosphere we should strive for. Perhaps rather than speaking of striving for an atmosphere, I could use the expression "setting the tone." I suggest to you that those leading the service do (or should) set the tone. We can, by our attitude or manner, either throw a wet blanket over the congregation, conveying the impression that worship, after all, is not by any means to be an enjoyable experience, or we can demonstrate that worship, though a serious business, is also a joyous privilege which deserves our enthusiasm.

And what about the content of our services? Do we have any direction as to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable? Is there any principal objection to a juggling act as part of the service? Or someone riding a unicycle on the platform (this could illustrate the need for balance in doctrine)? What about mime or a one-act play instead of the sermon? Is it simply left to objective opinion, or is there any direction for us here?

Our fathers debated the regulative principle and the Reformed branch of the church accepted it as directional for the churches. The regulative principle basically stated that the only elements legitimate in a service of worship were those which the New Testament spoke of as being part of worship. These basically were singing the praise of God, prayer, the reading of the Scriptures, giving offerings and the preaching of the Word, with preeminence being given to the preaching. As with every principle there will inevitably

be differences of opinion as to understanding and implementation, but given the excesses of the "anything goes that will attract a crowd" mentality in so many churches today, I wonder whether our forefathers were not wise in their approach.

Certainly our worship should adequately reflect our view of God, the importance of His Word, the significance of eternal things, the spirituality of the new covenant and the simplicity which is in Christ Jesus.

Church Structure

Fourth, we should consider reformation in the area of church structure, and I am thinking here especially of church officers and particularly the question of eldership. I said once in a paper on this subject, given at a pastors conference, that this is not a panacea for church problems. No matter how closely adhering to the New Testament model our churches might be, there will always be problems to be confronted, for the very simple reason that churches are made up of imperfect human beings, and, we might add, led and superintended by imperfect human beings. Let me also say that I am not adopting a theoretical, idealistic approach here. It is preferable in my mind to have a church where the structure and government might be not quite what it ought to be, and yet love, peace and unity be there, rather than a church wondrously orthodox in structure, yet torn by dissension and strife. Nevertheless, acknowledging those things, surely we ought to be as biblical as we can in this area.

A study of Baptist history will reveal that for most of that history, Baptist churches held to a plurality of elders or pastors, to whom was committed the spiritual oversight and leadership of the church. Frequently only one of these would be fully supported, so that he could devote himself to "working hard at preaching and teaching," and to him the

task of regular preaching of the Word was committed, but he was supported in his work by his fellow elders. This one, the “minster,” operated as a “first among equals.” The elders in turn were assisted by deacons who were responsible for the financial and practical affairs of the church, thus freeing up the elders for their spiritual duties. How and why Baptists drifted away from the scriptural model I am not sure, but I think it would be true to say that most Baptist churches today operate on a one pastor/several deacons model.

That churches in the New Testament always had a plural eldership, seems evident from an unbiased reading. In Acts 20:17 Paul summoned the elders (plural) of the church of Ephesus. It is to these elders that he says “(shepherd) the church of God . . . among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (v.28). Elder, overseer and pastor clearly refer to the same office. The same is true of 1 Peter 5:1-2, where Peter addresses “the elders” and bids them to “shepherd (pastor) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight.” In Titus 1 Paul refers to his orders to Titus, that he (Titus) should “appoint elders in every city” (v.5); he then goes on to discuss the qualifications of those appointed, speaking of them as “overseers,” and he is obviously speaking of the same office. In Philippians 1:1, the structure of the New Testament church is neatly set before us; “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.” In Acts 14:23 we read of Paul and Barnabas who “appointed elders for them in every church” as they visited young churches; and so we could go on. Elders/pastors/overseers in the plural seem to have been the general rule of New Testament churches. That it should be so is not surprising, for authority is given to the elders; they are leaders who are to rule and to whom obedience and submission are due (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7,17). But for rule and authority to be placed in the hands of one man only

can be a dangerous thing, and many a Baptist church could testify to that. Many a Baptist pastor, while fulminating against the pope in Rome, has been a veritable pope in his own church! Ruling with an autocratic high hand and often being unreasonable, cruel, dictatorial and unwise, such a man operates to the detriment of the church. I recognize of course that even a plural eldership may operate in a harsh and dictatorial manner also; Baptist churches would be wise to make safeguards against that possibility, but that is another subject.

Again, John Owen has pointed out that no one man has all the necessary gifts in himself for adequate shepherding of the whole flock. It is a wonderful thing for “the pastor” to have others sharing with him and contributing their gifts to the spiritual well-being of the church.

We should not view plural eldership as a shibboleth to judge a man’s orthodoxy, but we should see it as a desirable aspect of a New Testament church. I also suggest that if these two offices of elders and deacons are functioning properly in a church, that will streamline the functioning of the church in a positive way. Baptist pastors have often inherited a clutch of committees and boards within the church that often function as little independent kingdoms, jealous over their own powers. Many of these could be eliminated if the two New Testament offices were filled with the right men (i.e., biblically qualified men) and functioning properly. This is not to suggest that no committee is legitimate or useful in a church! It is simply to suggest that biblical reformation in the area of structure and government would be beneficial to churches.

I want to touch very briefly on two other areas before concluding, the first being *hymnology*. It has been said that the theology of a church is shaped by the hymns it sings. If this is the case (and I believe much can be said in support of it) then the leaders of the church ought to give serious thought to the hymn book used by the church and the

hymns and choruses that it sings. You notice that I say hymns *and* choruses for I have no objection to choruses so long as (a) they don't supplant hymns, and (b) they reflect biblical truth. Many of the Scripture choruses which have been popularized in recent years are well deserving of their popularity, and can be a great blessing in the lives of God's people. One of their weaknesses however is that they lack the element of "exposition." It is good to read the words of Scripture, but we also need those words expounded for us, hence the work of the preacher. It is also good to sing the words of Scripture, but the beauty of a good hymn by comparison is that it has the element of exposition; it explains, enlarges and applies. Let us not set up a contest where none need exist. The main point is that our singing should be true to the Word of God, and the problem that some pastors face is that the teaching which is being given from the pulpit is being systematically undermined by means of the hymnbook or chorus book. Biblical reformation in a church will often mean a change of hymnbook.

The second area for brief comment must be the *Sunday school*. Once again the danger exists that the teaching given from the pulpit may be denied in the Sunday school classes. This may require not only replacing the Sunday school material being used by the teachers, but it may also require teaching the teachers. The teachers should understand that they are to supplement the pulpit ministry, not undermine it. Care should also be given to methodology, especially relating to children. Children want to please those they like and are easily manipulated; teachers should therefore beware of "decisionising" children, and cranking meaningless decisions out of them which could inoculate them against the gospel in years to come. If we want a truly biblical church, all areas of the work must be measured against the standard of the Word of God.

We return to Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah. They

were leaders and they did not hesitate to lead God's people in the work of reformation. Surely we need leaders in our churches today who will implement biblical reform. And who is to do it if not the pastors of the churches? Are we stirred by the desire to see God honored and glorified? Are we stirred by the sad state of so many of the churches of our land? Do we know anything of the "zeal of God's house" which consumed the Lord Jesus and moved Him to action? We need leaders who will lead in their churches. I have been involved in the Reformed Baptist movement (or the Sovereign Grace Baptist movement) in particular, since the late 1960s; I believe that God has done many wonderful things among us and raised up a testimony to His grace and truth. In those early days there was a zeal for a return to biblical doctrine *and* for biblical reformation in the churches, for surely the two things must go hand in hand. But I raise it for consideration: is the same zeal now evident? Yes, numerous younger pastors are confessing the doctrines of grace, and for that we are truly grateful to God; but is there the same zeal for biblical reformation in the churches? I fear that some simply do not see the connection between the two things; others see the connection and the need, but are prepared to accept the status quo because they are not ready for the hard work and the pains that the work will bring. May God stir us up and make the churches of our land "fair as the moon, clear as the sun and terrible as an army with banners."

Author

William E. Payne is pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, Burlington, Ontario, Canada, and is editor of *Reformation Canada*, a Baptist magazine designed to assist the recovery of the cause of Reformed doctrine and practice in Canadian evangelical Baptist churches.