

Reformation
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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
 2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.
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Information

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in this country, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

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Table of Contents

Reformation & Revival Journal

<i>Editor's Introduction</i>	9
John H. Armstrong	
<i>Truth vs. Technique</i>	17
John F. MacArthur, Jr.	
<i>Biblical Reformation in the Churches</i>	43
William E. Payne	
<i>Recovering the Third Mark of the Church</i>	61
Art Azurdia	
<i>The Chief Musician Is a Pastor-Teacher</i>	81
Leonard R. Payton	
<i>The Nomadic Search for a Local Church</i>	85
Walter J. Chantry	
<i>What About Applause in Public Worship?</i>	89
Norman P. Anderson	
<i>Every Inch for Christ: Abraham Kuyper on the Reform of the Church</i>	91
James Edward McGoldrick	
<i>Frank Schaeffer's Protest Against Protestantism: A Protestant Response</i>	101
Chuck Huckaby	
<i>Christian Illuminati</i>	123
Don Cook	
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i>	127
<i>Book Reviews</i>	131
<i>Book Notices</i>	175

There is a growing awareness in the West among the true people of God that the church in our day needs a new and thorough reformation. This hunger crosses man-made denominational lines. Further, evidence exists that a growing number of people, in almost every region of the globe, are praying earnestly for heaven-sent showers of revival. For the appearance in our time of these concerns any servant of God should rejoice.

My friends know me as one who deeply loves the church. I gave my life to Christ, by His grace, as a young boy. Shortly thereafter I gave my life to the visible community of the church. When God called me, internally, to preach the gospel, He later called me, externally, to submit that call to the visible church. There had to be an examination and a confirmation of my call if it was of God.

In my college days in the 1960s I met a group of young believers who were fresh. Excited. Revived! They wanted to throw overboard the local churches of the community ("dead, just dead," they said of them) and start over. "Let's have a simple, pure, faithful, New Testament fellowship!" (By the way, these same "reformers" later ended up moving into one of the most traditional of all traditions, the Greek Orthodox Church.) Radical reformers, they called themselves! My first communion in this "house church" fellowship was so moving, and so simple. Could this be the beginning of a new move of God for our generation? I wondered, and prayed.

As I studied and sought to equip both my mind and heart for the service of Christ and His church I kept bumping up against this one basic truth—Christ loves the church! If I love Christ, then I must also love His church, even if it is a church that needs reformation and revival desperately. Nothing has changed this basic love and the direction of my life since.

But what is the church? And what should be our attitude toward it in these times when she appears so insignificant

to modern life?

The word church came into the English language from Anglo-Saxon and meant, originally, "the Lord's." The building where the Lord's people met thus became "the Lord's house," and its meaning has expanded in our language.

I do not think that we must give up the use of this word to describe buildings, institutions and other gatherings, but we surely must reclaim the proper biblical sense of the word if we would work for reformation in the life of the church. We need, once again, to understand that the church is first and foremost "the Lord's people."

Question 54 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* gives us a fuller statement on the definition of the church when it says:

Question: What do you believe concerning "the Holy Catholic Church"?

Answer: I believe that, from the beginning to the end of the world, and from among the whole human race, the Son of God, by His Spirit and his Word, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself, in the unity of the true faith, a congregation chosen for eternal life. Moreover, I believe that I am and forever will remain a living member of it.

But how do we recognize the church? What constitutes a church as a church? Must we have a pope? Bishops? Particular creeds? A right view of authority in terms of the historical development of the visible institution that we call the church?

Nicholas Ridley, a Protestant reformer who died at the stake on October 16, 1655, offered a remarkable reply to one of the objections made against his theology in his trial. His words bear consideration by those who may again be called upon to lay down their lives for Christ and His kingdom.

The holy, catholic or universal church which is the communion of saints, the house of God, the city of God, the

spouse of Christ, the body of Christ, the pillar and stay of the truth: this church I believe, according to the Creed; this church I do honour and reverence in the Lord. But the rule of this church is the Word of God, according to which rule we go forward unto life. "And as many as walk according to this rule," I say with St. Paul, "peace be upon them and upon Israel, which pertaineth unto God."

The guide of this church is the Holy Ghost. The marks whereby this church is known unto me in this dark world and in the midst of this crooked and froward generation are these: the sincere preaching of God's Word; the due administration of the Sacraments; charity; and faithful observing of ecclesiastical discipline according to the Word of God. And that church or congregation which is garnished with these marks, is in very deed that heavenly Jerusalem which consisteth of those that be born from above. This is the mother of us all; and by God's grace, I will live and die the child of this church.¹

This excellent confession of faith is a good summary of the Reformed doctrine, which I believe to be sound, both historically and biblically. It is significant that the statement was made under great "stress." Ridley knew well what to think about the church and the efforts at reform that were going on in his lifetime. He sums up well the three "marks" that ought to distinguish the church on the earth.

It is important to note that Ridley was not seeking to explicate a specific formulation of doctrine regarding the church *visible* and *invisible*, a truth which the Reformers developed properly in later writings. Rather, here he is answering a simple and all-important question: How will we *recognize the true church* in this present age?

You must recall that Ridley was living in a time when Copernican megashifts were taking place in both church and society. The world had been awakened from deep and prolonged slumber—intellectually, morally and spiritually.

The gospel was being unleashed with power upon a populace that had little or no knowledge of the glory of Christ. Europe was shaken at its foundations by this new approach to learning. What was underway had combined the conditions of a new pursuit of knowledge in the culture with a powerful reviving work of the Holy Spirit, and no man or persecution could stop it.

Bishop Handley C. G. Moule pointed out that a church "must possess all the notes of reality though it may be lacking in the conditions of ideality."² By this I understand, with most reformers over the ages, that the church may lack much, and will often be anything but ideal in her appearance, but if the "marks" ("notes," Moule calls them) are present, or perhaps in a state of *present* recovery, then we do have a church, even if it is a weak and divided church.

Men have disagreed about the sacraments (Baptists even preferring the word "ordinances" in order to protect against sacerdotalism and other abuses of grace), and they have handled discipline quite differently. They have developed differing patterns for church government (congregational, episcopal, and presbyterial), each believing he has the New Testament on his side in the argument. Such issues can not be ignored. Indeed, if the church becomes healthy again, people must be genuinely interested in these issues, even if they disagree. Charity, or love for one another, should never stop the pursuit of truth regarding the church and its local expression. The present latitudinarianism does not help in the reformation of the church. It has successfully stopped real concern for searching the Scriptures in many areas of doctrine, and has raised up a generation of "church growth" leaders who are almost entirely disinterested in intelligently confessing anything about the doctrine of the church, except that local churches should grow (preferably to be huge enterprises of great power and influence!) through the use of marketing plans that gather in

the unchurched.

Does all of this mean that we need a perfect order of things to have a true, visible church? And what if one of the marks is more obviously a concern than another? In a very real sense what the Reformers and others are saying in these discussions is summed up in the words of John Leith who writes:

This does not mean that people have to be perfect to be the church, but that they have to be serious in listening to the Word of God and in seeking to live according to it. Discipline is a way of maintaining the right preaching and hearing of the Word, that of proclaiming the gospel. *So the church exists where the Word of God is heard in faith and obeyed in love* (emphasis his). Nothing else is necessary for the church's existence. Long ago (A.D. 110) Ignatius said that where Christ is, there is the church.³

Much confusion exists in our time regarding the church. This confusion has led to problems that threaten the development of any movement of prayer for revival. While growing numbers of church leaders urge prayer for spiritual awakening, we must be wary of such calls if they will not address the concern for reformation in the local churches where these same leaders are members. Some of these leaders will not even externally submit to a local church, much less invest their lives in a Christian community seriously.

The late D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones understood this problem quite clearly. He addressed this when he said:

We are not concerned with one another's motives. We know that we are all equally honest and equally sincere. It is not a question of persons; it is a question of attitudes and of points of view. But there is no doubt that this is a major cause of division amongst evangelical people in this country today.... Movements come into being, men set themselves up and

form their own organization, men enter pulpits without any church ever considering whether they have been called or not, and so on. The state of our churches is one of confusion, and it is ultimately due to the fact that we have not troubled to consider the New Testament doctrine concerning the nature of the Church. In our zeal and anxiety to do good and to evangelize we have rushed into action without considering how these things should be truly done.⁴

When we consider the reformation of the church we especially need to stay close to the actual life of the local congregation, because here the greatest confusion exists regarding what Christ would have His people be doing in this age. In our time believers are being urged to every kind of renewal and recovery movement imaginable. They need to understand that their *primary life* in the Spirit is that which they share together with the people of God *in community*.

Time and time again I have personally gone back to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's little classic, *Life Together*, to get a clearer sense of community. Bonhoeffer saw plainly the importance of Christian fellowship in the life of the church. This came as a result of his own struggles in an oppressive time of opposition to true disciples of Christ. Bonhoeffer wrote:

Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim. Only God knows the real state of our fellowship, of our sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim. What may appear weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as the Christian should not be constantly feeling his spiritual pulse, so, too, the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be constantly taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more surely and steadily will fellowship increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.⁵

Surely we need this kind of perspective if we would discuss and carefully consider the reformation of church life in a time like our own. We must remain thankful for the community and loyal to the church, even when it is in need of great repair. It is Christ's visible body in the earth, populated by wheat and tares for sure, but still related to Him because of the gospel.

This issue of the journal is aimed at putting concern for the church back on the front burner of both thought and action. If we are to work for reformation in all areas we must never ignore the church. Correcting existing errors in the churches will not bring about a great move of God, in itself, but we must still work at taking out the rubbish which we have brought into the sanctuary over many years of compromise. If we would *pray for revival* how can we ignore the need for *reformation in our churches*? Every narrative in the Old Testament that tells of those momentous times of awakening sent from heaven to Israel came when human leaders took seriously the revelation of God's will regarding public worship, ethical integrity, and the keeping of the law and the covenant. Can we pray for the success of the gospel in our generation while ignoring the church and the desperate need for a new reformation? I do not think so. This is why we have prepared this issue. I pray that it will be one small tool in encouraging reformation which I see increasingly touching the life of a growing number of churches.

Notes:

- 1 Nicholas Ridley, *Works* (Parker Society Edition, 1843), 122-23.
 - 2 Marcus L. Loane, *Christ and His Church*, a publication of *Christianity Today*, n.d., 4.
 - 3 John Leith, *The Church: A Believing Fellowship* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1981), 21.
 - 4 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *What Is the Church?* (London: The British Evangelical Council, 1969), 4-5.
 - 5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, New York: Harper, 1954), 30.
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