

Reforming the Church According to God's Word

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the seventh Sunday of Easter, May 12, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:11b-19.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed he met with his disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem and He prayed for all those who would come to trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He prayed that we might be protected from dangers that threaten to destroy us. The Word of God preached and taught is the primary means by which Jesus Christ protects his people.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are indispensable means by which the Church of God is continually reformed. For all Christians, but for Reformed Christians in particular, the Bible sets the boundaries of interpretation and ^{gives direction to} ~~orders~~ the way the church's theology is shaped. The reading and study of the Bible are necessary for faithful participation in the life of the Christian church. The devotional reading of the Bible is also essential for personal growth to Christian maturity.

And Jesus prayed that God's people might be protected by God's word. Jesus prayed that God's people might be sanctified, or set apart, in the truth. Jesus also made it plain that by "truth" he was referring not to scientific or psychological truth but to God's Word. "Thy Word is truth", he said.

The Word of God is central to the ^{identity} ~~identity~~ and mission of the Christian church. As the Westminster Confessions says, "The Scriptures principally teach us what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of us." The Word of God is meant to protect and guard us from dangers that threaten us as God's people.

1. One danger that threatens us is a kind of relativism that makes it very difficult for many of us to say, with John, in our epistle lesson, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." That kind of thinking doesn't set very well in a world where even Christians have a tendency to believe that Christ is only one of many ways to God.

Bishop Stephen Neil, an Anglican missionary has written that, in his experience as a missionary, when people are converted to Christ from another religion they never speak of their former religion as a an equally valid path to God. Rather, without exception, they say such things as, "Once I was blind, but now I see. I was dead in my sins, but now I am alive." That sense of the utter necessity of Jesus Christ for salvation is amazingly absent from large segments of the Presbyterian church.

Presbyterians in general and our church in particular, I believe, have a very difficult time bearing a verbal witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. As a denomination we've become very fuzzy about such basic things as how a person becomes a Christian and how Christians should live in gratitude for what God has done for us through Christ. Even in our new members classes it seems that an inordinate amount of time is spent on informing people of organizational matters as to how committees work when, in fact, it seems to me, the new members classes should be, above all, an opportunity for people to explore how a person becomes a Christian and what a Christian believes and does. A church that is reformed according to God's word is a church that gives priority to bearing witness to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

2. A related danger is our tendency to redefine evangelism as merely a presence or as social action. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I believe

that the church should be involved in the world, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners working for peace and justice. But when we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the prisoners, healed the sick, housed the homeless, demonstrated for peace and justice we haven't yet done anything specifically Christian. We have done no more than what all the world's great religions enjoin their followers to do. *← last years H.A.*

Christians give bread, medical care, and service to every human need. But these things can never take the place of a witness to Jesus Christ. Bread is crucially important to those who are starving, but when one has given bread to a starving person all the basic problems of human existence still remain. We don't live by bread or by medical care or by political planning alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Sooner or later we die by these things. Therefore, unless Christians have something greater than bread or medical care or political action to give I don't believe there's much hope for the world.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh who has procured salvation for all people. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, animists, secular humanists, as well as Christians, all need to hear the Gospel. Christian witness in the world is incomplete and not even uniquely Christian unless we bear witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. This witness to the world is put at risk by a secular and pluralistic society. Our culture, on the one hand, sees no reason for conversion and, on the other hand, feels that the Christian witness is an intrusion into another ^{person's} ~~person's~~ life or culture.

3. We need to be protected from allowing secondary matters becoming primary concerns. *last years H.A. - Columbus Day celebration - diplomatic relations with Cuba ... seemed to take on primary importance*
 A number of elders have pointed out to me that ever since the trustees and session were combined session meetings have become preoccupied with matters of finance and buildings. Finance and buildings

are important, but their are secondary matters. A church that is reformed according to God's word is a church which gives priority to those activities by which the church lives, namely, preaching the gospel, teaching the gospel, and exercising pastoral care.

How much time we've spent as a church over the last two years preparing to build a physical building. All this work for something that is, strictly speaking, not necessary. A church building certainly is a great help to provide a place for us to worship, study and serve the community. But a church building is not, strictly speaking, necessary in order for a church to be a church. For the first several hundred years after the death and resurrection of Christ Christians met in homes and catacombs.

The one thing that a true church needs is the Word of God; the Gospel of Jesus Christ. ^{& People gathered around the preaching & teaching of the word of God in hunger for righteousness.} We don't really need buildings. We don't need organs or pianos.

We don't even need ministers, elders, Presbyteries or even General Assemblies. All these things can be either helpful or harmful, but not absolutely necessary. The one thing needful is the Word of God in Jesus Christ, and when this Word is proclaimed and heard, the church exists and is built up and reformed.

A church that is reformed according to the Word of God is a church that is clear as to its identity and purpose in this world. It's a church that doesn't confuse itself with a civic club, a social agency, or a political party; nor does the minister confuse himself or herself with a political advocate, a psychotherapist, or an executive. If the Word of God in Jesus Christ is not central to the life of a church, the church isn't much different from a service organization, a political party or a therapeutic group. The foundation for Christian faith is the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments bear witness.