

2. The glory of Christ

This is a set of papers about reform. In them I try to describe what I think I can see from my own vantage point. I then make some proposals for future direction for others to consider. This is a task which, Biblically, we should all be continually involved in.

As a package, the reforms I am suggesting are far-reaching. Put together, they are more like gutting and renovating the house, than simply re-arranging the furniture and changing the decor. The whole package is a reformation. I am proposing major shifts in thinking in particular about how we plan to build a viable, self-propagating network of Reformed town churches across Kenya.

Any true reformation is a work of Christ, and must begin, continue and end with him. There is no real gospel advance – only re-arranging deck-chairs – if Jesus does not have the proper place, first, last, beginning, end, everything. At the heart of all spiritual problems – as Paul's approach to addressing problems in the apostolic churches shows – is some failure to appreciate and respond to the true glory of the Son of God. The basic and necessary step, and the one that brings all the others with it, is to think and act rightly again about the Lord Jesus. This paper is about Christ-centeredness. It is a call to fix our eyes on Jesus, to be humbled in his presence, to see his glory, and to put him back where he belongs in our individual and church lives.

Defining ourselves

Who are we? How should we see and define ourselves, as Reformed believers? There is only one possible basic answer, and it must be in terms of Jesus. The early believers at Antioch were called Christians. They were given this name by outsiders (Acts 11:26). When outsiders give you a name, they are often brutally honest, especially about what makes you different from others. We can probably remember some of our teachers at school and the names we gave them! The early believers were called Christians, because Jesus Christ was clearly at the heart of who they were and what they did. The Son of God came from heaven to redeem us, and he rose from the dead to give us his Spirit so that we might turn from sin to him. Our whole vision now is to live for him, to please him, to enjoy him and at last to be with him. That is who we are, if we are anything like what the Bible says the people of God should be.

Once I had a few weeks with a church-planting project in the Midlands of the UK. They had a sandwich-board outside the hall where they met on Sundays, which explained who they were. It had four parts - "God-honouring, Christ-centred, Bible-based and Gospel-preaching." I appreciated that simple summary – a manifesto of who we are and what we do, in just nine words!

Those four points all hang together. We cannot honour God without giving the central place to the Beloved One whom he sent and whom he has lifted up to the highest place (John 5:23). We cannot be Bible-based without continually preaching the good news about this glorious Saviour. True Biblical Christianity is obsessed with the splendour of the Redeemer.

The danger of decline

It is a strange paradox and a tragic reality that true Christians who retain a solid profession of being Bible-based, and with their aim to glorify God, preaching the gospel from their pulpits each week, can and do somehow lose a true, Biblical Christ-centredness. This danger only exists for those who insist – as everyone should – on a high standard of correct teaching. But somehow, over time, this insistence, instead of supporting the lifting up of Jesus Christ, instead begins to obscure him. Sound doctrine becomes our pride and joy and our glory – that in which we boast, and distinguish ourselves from others.

Charles Spurgeon made a wonderful statement about the place of doctrines. I cannot find the reference now, so will have to paraphrase it from memory. He said that doctrines are very useful

and necessary to us, just as the shovels, pans and flesh-hooks were needed for the ministry of the priests in the Tabernacle. But the place of those shovels, pans and flesh-hooks was that they might serve the sacrifices made on the altar. Jesus Christ is the great altar and the great sacrifice smoking upon it, and all our doctrines find their place in serving him.

Spurgeon's witness was true. What, after all, is doctrine? It is the truth, and Jesus Christ is not only the Truth, but the Way and the Life too (John 14:6). He himself is personally the Word of God (John 1:1). All roads do not actually lead to Rome, but all of God's revelation does lead us to Christ, and through him to the Father. The Bible teaches us about our Maker, and the work of Jesus to bring us back to him and enable us to go on living for him. It teaches us what he has done for us, and what he now demands of us – and how he equips us to do it, and rewards us in the end with himself. There is no doctrine which is not ultimately Christ-centred. Doctrine is an essential means, but the end is Jesus.

Pharisaical religion

This is why the religion of the Pharisees was not simply a set of errors of some misguided Bible students. That could be much more easily forgiven, and there would be no need for Jesus to condemn it so strongly. The heart of the problem, as explained in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-12), was that Jesus himself was the Son, and that the whole duty of those sitting in the places of responsibility in Israel was to give way to him (John 3:29-30). By rejecting and crucifying Jesus, they rejected and threw away everything. They were not just left with a passing grade on the law of Moses and a poor performance on the prophets. They had missed the meaning and purpose of the whole Scriptures. Jesus said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40).

It is possible to have a false, destructive Christ-centredness. The Pharisees were a Christ-centred people, in a certain way. They looked, prayed and worked for the coming of the Messiah. But he was not the Biblical Messiah, but one of their own earthly, carnal imaginations. When the real one came, they despised, rejected and killed him. They believed themselves to be zealous for God's anointed one; but were no such thing. This is a deadly snare which it is so easy for doctrinally-serious, truth-minded people to fall into. We can have a much-reduced, subtly altered Christ in our imaginations, and miss the reality. We can do this even whilst telling ourselves, as the Pharisees did, that we are the faithful remnant.

Falling short

Ultimately we fall into this trap when Christ is, to us, more a matter of theory than he is a matter of *personal knowledge* and *real experience*. There is no substitute for reality. About a year ago, a course tutor in networking I knew at a computer college had a need to build a network. He came to me to ask how it was done, because he now realised he did not know! I had built several computer networks, so he came to me for the practical knowledge. He had the certificates, but he had not really internalised the matters he had been speaking about in class day by day.

Christ is not a set of teachings. He is a living, personal Saviour. He is an awesome, holy King who reigns over the universe and fills all things in every way. He is a living Redeemer, who personally interacts with sinful humans. He is a person who comes and has fellowship with those he loves and who trust in him, from day to day and moment to moment. That is the reality. The doctrine can describe to us how it happens. But unless it actually happens, we are in a very bad position. It is for such people that Jesus said, “then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:23).

Sadly, we can have true experience of Christ, and yet it can decline. We can feed on him, a good, satisfying meal – a feast! – and yet then live off the memory of that feast, instead of coming to dine

again. Through the difficulty of the spiritual warfare, through the deceitfulness of sin, and through the dullness of our own hearts, we can confuse our own outward activity, and perhaps success, in ministry, with inward Christian experience and progress. Terrifyingly, God can actually “bless” us with outward success to test if that was actually the thing our hearts desired. Or was it rather the case that we have the Spirit that amidst the ruins of outward disaster is content to sit, wait, rejoice in him and say, “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places” (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

The first of all steps, then, in trying to improve our church life is to return to Jesus Christ, in repentance and faith. All the doctrinal faithfulness in the world cannot compensate for a lack of this. If we do those things, and if we then seek afresh to give Jesus the fundamental and proper place in all of our church life, what kind of people will we be?

A people of love

“God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). People who are full of wonder at Jesus are people who will love each other. Jesus laid down his life for his brethren – how can we then fail to love those people? Jesus is not here for us to show our appreciation to him, but his family (the church) is. And true love is relentlessly practical: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18). In Kenya we have so many opportunities to come alongside and care for the “little people” who are forgotten by the world but loved by Jesus.

The whole law of God is a law of love. The glory of the New Covenant is that this heart is not only clearly revealed to a greater extent than before, but that the Spirit who is the Spirit of love comes to dwell in us and to write that law on our hearts (Romans 8:1-4). He teaches us to love God supremely, and to love our neighbour even as ourselves.

If words like “cold”, “rigid”, or “hard-going” are associated with our churches or their leaders, then something is very wrong. It indicates that we have the kind of Christ-centredness which is not the real thing. If we are known as correct, respected and hard-working ministers and nothing more, that is a tragedy. The apostle Paul was an awesome theologian, and worked harder than any of the other apostles in his church-planting ministry (1 Corinthians 15:10). Yet what we find supremely is that the people he served deeply loved him, and he deeply loved them. He himself wrote that glorious chapter about love, 1 Corinthians 13. His desire moved him to labour from house to house, in public and in private, and to plead with his people with tears in his eyes that they would keep following Jesus (Acts 20:19). The elders from Ephesus wept when they heard him say they would not see him again (Acts 20:37-38). When Peter made mention of him he called him: “our beloved brother, Paul” (2 Peter 3:15). I wonder whether we actually have that vision of Paul in our minds. We know his deep, glorious systematic theology. Do we know his heart? Do we *have* his heart? This heart was in him because to him, Jesus was all. “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). “I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8). “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). If we see Jesus as Paul saw Jesus, we will also love as Paul loved. This is a barometer for us. How do we measure up?

Gospel-based ministry, not law-based ministry

The law of God is holy, righteous and good (Romans 7:12). It remains forever, and forever remains

the revelation of what godly living looks like, for God's people in all ages (Matthew 5:17-20).

Nevertheless, the revealing of God's law is not at the heart of the New Covenant ministry. From that point of view – the heart of the covenant – God's law is abolished. It is not the basis by which God's people relate to him, or receive blessings from him. It is not the motivation which drives us. It does not, and never did, equip us with power to please God (Romans 6:4, 7:7-25).

All of those things come from Christ. Christ has established and sealed the covenant with his own blood. We come to the Father through the Son. All blessings are mediated to us as free grace. They come on the basis of what Jesus has done, himself, all, completely, once and for all. We are pleasing to God, only through him – not because our service goes some way and Christ goes the rest, but only because his entire righteousness is imputed to us (Romans 8:1-4, Philippians 3:2-11, Hebrews 8:6-12). Our motivation in serving is to show his glory to others (Ephesians 3:8). It is to express our gratitude to him, though our expressions can never approach the slightest fraction of what he deserves. It is because he is Lord, and we have come to recognise the truth about the universe and found our rightful place in it (Matthew 28:18-20). Our power to serve comes from his Spirit whom he has sent to us. We can grieve that Spirit and lose his precious influences (Ephesians 4:30), or we can walk and progress in him.

As such, our whole message to everyone should be essentially: Jesus Christ and him crucified, risen and ascended. This is true with unbelievers, beginners in the faith and mature Christians. When a believer goes astray, supremely they have dishonoured Christ, put aside his Lordship and soiled his name before the world. Whatever sin it is, they have failed to recognise some fundamental truth about Jesus. When the Corinthians fell into fornication, they had apparently forgotten that their bodies were members of Christ, who could never be joined with a prostitute (1 Corinthians 6:15). When they kept a fornicator in their company, they had forgotten that Christ as their Passover Lamb had been slain to make them a pure people, without the leaven of sin (5:7-8). When they broke up into factions, they had forgotten that Christ was not divided (1:13). When their spiritual gifts gave rise to jealousy and contempt, they forgot that they were the body of Christ (12:12-13). When they questioned the possibility of resurrection, they forgot that Jesus himself is already risen (15:3ff) – and so on, and on.

Do we approach pastoral questions like Paul did? Is Christ our presupposition, our foundation, our method and our aim? Having good confessions of faith about Christ is not enough. We must actually have him at the centre in all our practice. The Old Covenant failed for the nation of Israel, because law is not enough – we should not repeat the Pharisees' mistake by having a legally-based approach which exalts God's law out of its proper place!

Christ the centre of all our worship

Nobody comes to the Father except through Christ (John 14:6), the mediator of the New Covenant in his own blood, and therefore all authentic Christian worship has Jesus obviously right at its centre.

A Muslim can preach a good message, even about themes we approve of, such as the virtues of love and honesty, the evils of sin, speaking about “God” and his greatness and the lessons from various familiar Old Testament figures. That is, if we think that it is possible to have a “good message” without the centrality of Christ. We would, of course, never invite a Muslim to lead one of our worship services. Yet sometimes we should ask, what difference did *not* inviting a Muslim make today? Have the coming, death and resurrection of Jesus been so central to our worship that if we removed them it would have been like joining another religion, or would it be not have been that different after all? When we gather on Sunday, is our thought about singing some good hymns, hearing from the Word of God, and bringing prayers for our needs to God – and do we remember that a Hindu might be happy with all those things? Is our worship *personal and Christ-centred*? Is it a matter of the Spirit of Christ inside us, calling out to and communing with Christ himself? Or is it

closer to being a routine, of correctly observed rituals? We might follow different principles of worship very accurately, and fall down on the main point.

In another paper I point out that Jesus has given his church a particular outward sign as a means of keeping him and his gospel central – the Lord's Supper – and I suggest some reforms in our observing of it so that we can benefit from that gift more.

Preaching Christ, not preaching about Christ

There is a mighty difference between preaching *about* Christ, and preaching Christ. Even the devil can on occasion preach about Christ, when he is constrained to admit truth. His demons could cry out, “I know who you are – the holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24).

We have to be careful about counterfeits. We do rejoice if Christ is preached, even faultily (Philippians 1:18). Yet it is not enough to give out information about Jesus – even true, rich and deep information. True preaching presents Jesus himself to the sinner. Evangelistic preaching shows and offers the perfect sufficiency of Christ as a personal Saviour; pastoral preaching does exactly the same. It does draw our attention to certain truths, but, as we remarked above, that is for the purpose of leading us to the Truth himself. Sometimes preaching is more “doctrinal”, in that it deals with matters in a more technical way. But if this is at the *expense* of preaching Christ, we have failed. We have dishonoured the doctrine that says that all doctrine must draw us personally to Christ! We must never be like spectators when we come to God's word, to look at it and remark on it; we must come as needy sinners who are called to yield to it and receive into our own hearts.

The heart, not just the head

God made us as complex beings. We have both heads and hearts (and wills too) – that is, we have both a centre of understanding and a centre of emotion. We are not robots, but flesh and blood; but not mindless flesh and blood, but to be guided by truth. We rightly dislike and warn against the excesses of the charismatic movement, which lead people to be led by emotion and fancy instead of God's revelation. But, whilst warning about that ditch at the side of the road, are we equally aware of the ditch on the opposite side of the road, that of a dry intellectualism?

Unless we minister to people's hearts, we are not ministering to the whole person which God made in his own image. We are not actually ministering to people as people. And unless we allow Christ to minister to our *own* hearts, we are failing to equip ourselves to minister to others properly at all.

We all vary in how emotional we are. Some people are fairly hard to shake emotionally, and others can be greatly disturbed comparatively easily. Nevertheless, we are all emotional beings. We all need to feel the comfort, challenge, rebuke and correction of God's words and of Jesus himself. Our people need to know those things in their lives. They need not simply to assent to the truth that we preach, but to feel it, rejoice in it and live by its power. True preaching aims to come through the mind, and then through the mind to have the Holy Spirit stir up the affections in order to assault the will. There is a lot of anti-intellectual preaching about; it bypasses the mind and tries to stir up the affections directly. This is wrong. But it is also wrong to go to the mind and not further. We need to preach a felt and known Christ so that others might also feel and know Christ. Anything short of this is actually unfaithfulness. When a person comes and reads you the rule book, they may have given some help – but it will not wipe away your tears or give you courage to go and resist or to conquer. But if someone comes and speaks to your heart, and Jesus himself comes and dwells in you through those words, you can do anything (Philippians 4:13).

A people of prayer

A people who are full of Christ can only be a people full of prayer. This gives us another measuring stick. Are you a person full of prayer?

This must be so, because Christ is alive today – reigning in glory, at God's right hand, with all authority in heaven and earth. This puts a new perspective on our problems and needs. We do not have any ultimate problems, and only one real need! Because Jesus has defeated Satan, sin, hell and our final enemy, death, therefore all *ultimate* problems have been dissolved away. There only remain temporal problems which will eventually pass away. Jesus will not allow anything to go wrong from his plan, and no believer can fail to arrive with him in glory (Romans 8:28-39). All “risk” during time has been eliminated, and we can run any “risk” where it is wise for the kingdom, because the eternal “risk” has been removed.

Our one need, then, is to make connection with this living Jesus. Our one need is to draw upon his resources, call upon his power and receive his aid according to his promise (Matthew 28:20, Luke 10:42). We just need to ask the Father, in the name of Jesus! He has all we need; he is willing to give it to us; and he has ordinarily bound himself by a simple law – we will get it through asking. If we seek we will find, and if we knock then the door shall be opened to us (Matthew 7:7-11, John 14:13-14, 15:16).

A people of sacrifice

For the same reasons, people who are really seeing the glory of Christ will be a self-sacrificing people. If there are no ultimate risks in life, then nothing is lost by giving all to Christ. If Christ is the greatest glory in the universe, there is nothing better to give our lives to. If we belong to Jesus, purchased by his blood, then all already belongs to him.

A mere sense of “duty” cannot approach these motivations. All the good teaching in the world, unless it truly brings Christ to our hearts and our hearts to Christ with reasons like this in the power of God's Spirit, will be too weak to accomplish the task of nation-wide mission. But if these ideas really do get to us, then nothing will hold us back.

Reformed believers and churches, then, if they have the truth in its purest form, in its power and not just its outward form, should be the most bold pioneers into the unreached and challenging parts of their and other countries. Seeing the glory of Jesus, we have nothing to lose and everything to gain for him.

Conclusion

We have seen that the centrality of Jesus is the foundation of every church's life. When the foundation is right and solid, everything else falls into place. Our doctrine and preaching; our praying; our serving one another in love; our worship, and our giving of ourselves to advancing the kingdom. Jesus taught us that kingdom life is like organic life. If the roots are bad, then the fruit will be bad too; if the roots are good, the fruit will also be good (Luke 6:43-44).

It is essential that our Christ-centredness is real, and not a look-alike. There are lookalikes that can pass for the real thing. We can persuade ourselves that we are doing well, but God looks at the heart and not the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7). “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Proverbs 4:23). If the real cry of our hearts is not “to win Christ, and to be found in him” (Philippians 3:8-9), then pretending will just make us hypocrites. There is no substitute for true Christ-centredness in the church. It is essential.

This challenge must come to us personally first, before it can come to our churches. Unless the work is first done in us, it cannot be done through us. E M Bounds once wrote that whilst men are looking for great plans, God is looking for great men. This is true. Many Kenyan churches are looking for great leaders, organisations and strategies. God is looking for great lovers of Christ. Kingdom greatness means Christ-likeness, and nothing else. True reform and progress in our lives and churches means making sure that we are building on the only foundation that we can build on, and no other (1 Corinthians 3:11). Christ must be all, not just in our confessions, but in truth.