

A “REFORMED” HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Evidencing the Blessing of the Biblical Principle Reformation

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01/24/03, rev. 10/29/09
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Most historians consider Church History as merely one subject within a whole host of historical studies. Technically, this is accurate. But viewed through the lens of God’s redemptive plan, the History of the Church is history! That is, as God’s sole purpose in history is to redeem for Himself a people who will eternally be His family, the history of the Church is preeminent among of all historical subjects.

One dominant factor throughout church history is the notion of reform. Right from the beginning when the Serpent introduced Sin in the Garden, the need for the reform of the Church, God’s family, has been a critical element in the Church’s history.

This article presents a brief, *very brief*, overview of the Church’s history from the perspective of reform. It is my hope, dear reader, that the predominance of this issue in the life of God’s family down through the ages will impress upon you the need for reform in your life, your private family, and your church family.

The Church in the OT

In the garden we see the first need for reform following the Fall (Gn 3). This act marks the Great Deformity of God’s family, and is the source of all further deformity throughout the Church’s history. It is because of this principle of deformity that the principle of reform was needed. The pattern of reform always has three elements:

- Remembering – re-learning or even re-discovering the Bible as God’s authoritative statement of what the His family is to believe and what they are to do;
- Repenting – acknowledging in what ways their beliefs and practices have deformed from this standard of truth and turning away from this deformity;
- Re-doing – returning to submission to the Bible’s authority by returning to the purity of beliefs and practices taught by the Bible.

We see this pattern repeated time and time again. Even at the very beginning note that God counters the Great Deformity in the Garden with the promise of the Great Reformer (Gn 3:15). The action of crushing the Serpent’s head is the promise that this one would comprehensively reform (rectify and reverse) the works of Satan.

Immediately following this we see God teaching His family the basics of worship in a fallen world. This is seen in the clothing of Adam and Eve with animal skins. In this act, God taught them that in the same way their nakedness could only be covered by another, the shedding of another’s blood could only cover their sin.

This is the worship system they taught to their sons. It is the de-forming of this worship that directly led to the first murder. Cain, knowing better, decided that he would worship God in a manner of his own choosing. His breaking of the first great commandment (to love God with our all, Mt 22:37-38) led directly to his breaking the second great commandment (to love others as ourselves, Mt 22:39).

Unfortunately this deforming of worship and life continued in the history of the OT Church. By the time of Noah, things were so bad (Gn 6:5) that God’s reform solution was of the most radical nature – the Flood. Then, following this first act of reform, God called on Noah and his sons to a second step of reform – re-doing the first things. In this case, God re-introduces the creation mandate, literally to spread His Kingdom over the whole earth (Gn 9:1).

And of course, the pattern repeats itself again and again. In the Tower of Babel we see yet again God’s reform actions. Likewise in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah these reform oriented acts are seen. As well, continual deforming of God’s worship and God’s acts to reform His people marks the history of the family of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob.

Then we come to the first great reform of God's Family – the Exodus. God brings His people out of the realm of slavery in Egypt, and establishes them as His people, giving them His law for being His family. And the heart of this Law is focused on His worship. But that generation falls away from the purity of this worship, and dies in the wilderness. In Deuteronomy we see the record of God's acts to re-form His people in His actions through Joshua.

While Joshua and his generation were alive – the results of this reform stuck. But when they had died off, according to the book of Judges, the deforming pattern set in again. Yet ever faithful to His promises, God continually visited His family with reforms. From oppression by an outside enemy, God led His people to remembrance of his promises, repentance of their sins, and deliverance via a redeemer, a judge.

In spite of the numerous repetitions of this cycle, God's Church continued to fall into perversion. This continues right up through their first king, Saul.

Then we come to the second great reform of God's family – the rise of the shepherd King David. During His reign and the early part of his son Solomon's reign, progressively God's family was reformed in all their worship (private, families, and corporate). This period of reform culminated in the glorious dedication of God's house, the 1st Temple.

But guess what happened next? That's right; the Church repeated the deforming pattern. This began again almost as soon as the mortar was dry in the blocks of the Temple. And on the rise to power of Solomon's son Rehoboam a period of great deformity set into the Church. In the northern kingdom of the 10 tribes this pattern showed no relenting – each king continued to deform the worship of God and the people of God.

In the southern kingdom of Judah we see the same pattern of deformity, and also a number of kings lead in efforts at reform, Hezekiah's and Josiah's among the most extensive. Josiah's efforts demonstrate another significant factor in these patterns of deformity and reform: deformity advances to the degree that the Church stops submitting to the Bible's authority; reform begins with a return to the Bible's authority over all of life. In Josiah's case, reform began when they literally re-discovered the Bible, lost for some 50 years. The word was read, and the people responded – remembrance, repentance and a re-doing of the former things. Following on the heels of this covenant obedience came the return of God's covenant blessings.

Yet again, almost as soon as Josiah was dead, his sons lead the next generation of God's people into deformity again. So God once again intervenes with a great reform action – the Babylonian Captivity. This reform action is as severe as what God did to both the Flood and the Wilderness generations – only a remnant of His family is saved.

Under such reformers as Ezra and Nehemiah God led this remnant to a pattern of purity that held the promise of sticking. Yet, the Great Reformer has not come yet, and so over the next 400 years God's people slid into further deformity, finding more and more new ways of perverting the worship of God.

The question facing us at the close of the OT history of the Church is a stark one: will reform ever succeed; will deformity always plague the Church?

The Church in The NT

This is the scene at the birth of the Great Reformer – Jesus Christ. Living quietly for some thirty years, in a brief public ministry of three years, Jesus succeeds in confronting all the facets of deformity in God's family. And then, on the moment of His greatest public acclaim, those who cheered Him in His triumphal entry into Jerusalem would at the end of that week call for His crucifixion. It seems as if God's efforts to reform His Church failed. And then, the Serpent's head got stomped! Jesus rose from the dead, bringing with Him the power of God's promises fulfilled. From now on the Church, called to the same mandate to spread His kingdom over the whole world, has the promise of His abiding, supremely powerful presence (Mt 28:18-20).

Immediately on the heels of the resurrection and ascension the small, timid church experienced the first outpouring of this reform power – in the Spirit's coming upon them (Act 2). Among the works of establishing the NT Church, the book of Acts also marks the Spirit's continued acts to re-form the Church, the family of God. Such acts are marked by

the conversion of sinners, removing false brethren (Acts 5 – Ananias & Sapphirah, 8 – Simon), and even thwarting of efforts to deform the Church’s worship (Acts 15 – Jerusalem Council decisions).

Finally, the NT ends with the Great Reformer’s messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor. Each of these messages (Rev 2-3) is marked by issues of reform. Further, the rest of the book of Revelation records the on-going efforts to deform God’s Church and the promise that the Great Reformer will return yet again, to comprehensively conclude the reformation of God’s Family. The promise specifically ends where Genesis began – with the fulfillment of the worldwide kingdom of God so that the entire world is His home and all those alive are in His family (Rev 21-22).

The Ancient Church

This was the promise, which propelled the small, persecuted Church into the early centuries following Christ to carry this kingdom throughout the world. Yet Satan was still actively seeking to deform this Church. As early as the 100’s, early church fathers were dealing with heresies that needed removal. The Apostles’ Creed was penned in this period, as a reform effort designed to provide a summary of biblically consistent Christianity.

By the 200’s many groups had deformed to the point that they were no longer a part of the Church, but became the first Christian Cults. On-going prophecy, ecstatic utterances, and a denial of the relevance of the OT, all the kinds of errors we see today were to be found in and around the Early Church. “Ism’s” abounded – Ebionism, Marcionism, Gnosticism, Montanism, Monarchianism, Manichaeism, Sabellianism, Arianism, and Nestorianism; each new generation saw the introduction of yet a further perversion of the Most profound were the deformities in the basic doctrines of the Church. The nature of God and redemption itself were facing critical attacks. It was in this setting that God providentially led His Church to hold the Great Councils. These councils, beginning at Nicea in 325, to Chalcedon in 451, reformed the Church’s understanding of the Trinity, the Son’s work in accomplishing redemption, and the Spirit’s work in applying it. This great period of reformation still marks the Church today, as we still use their creeds, the Nicene and the Chalcedonian as helpful summaries of biblically consistent Christianity.

Yet (you know what I’m going to say), the efforts to deform the Church didn’t stop. A monk named Pelagius arose in the 5th Century, teaching that all men were inherently good and needed Jesus only to help persuade them to obey. And again, God was not pleased to leave this deformity to grow unchecked. So He called a most unlikely reform, a decadent idolater who earlier was a devotee of Manichaeism, a man named Augustine. It is to him that Church owes thanks for developing the biblical understanding of original sin, total depravity, the sovereignty of God, and predestination.

The Medieval Church

Augustine’s reforms were substantial. Yet it didn’t stop the forces of deformity. Slowly, both the Church in the East and the West sunk into greater and greater deformities both in its doctrines and in its worship.

In the East, God treated the Church as He did the 10 northern tribes in the OT. Starting with Mohammed in the 600’s, the Church in the Middle East, Egypt Africa was all but obliterated.

By the time of the destruction of Constantinople in 1453 by the Turks, the Church in the East has become so deformed that is only with the utmost of graciousness that this church is still identified as Christian.

In the West, the invading Germanic hordes almost wiped the Church out as well. Yet God saw fit to bless the work of a reformer named Patrick. In the 400’s God used him to plant a church in Ireland that in the 500-600’s would be instrumental in the conversion of the Germanic tribes that had taken over the West.

And yet, the slow slide of deformity in the West continued. In the 800’s a reform-minded Christian named Gottschalk spoke out in favor of biblical predestination and against the growing perversion of the Lord’s Supper. For his efforts he was imprisoned for 20 years and upon his death refused Christian burial.

In the 1200's the Waldensians sought to restore biblical consistency in numerous areas of the Christian life. Their reward? – to be hounded from one village to the next, ever suffering for their desire to return to the purity of God's worship.

Others likewise sought the reform of the Church: the Brethren of the Common Life, Thomas Bradwardine, Gregory of Rimini, and others; all sought to re-learn, repent, and do the first things. Yet, it looked like their efforts were falling on the very deaf ears of the Church.

Indeed, John Wycliffe in the 1300's sought to reform the Church in England, going so far as to translate the Bible into the common language of the people. He and the men who followed him, the Lollards, sought to restore the Bible to God's family. Their reward – Wycliffe's bones were dug up some 40 years after his death and burned as a heretic; many of his followers were martyred.

One reformer who learned from Wycliffe carried the seeds of reform back to his home country of Bohemia (in modern day Czech Republic). John Hus emphasized the authority of the Bible and introduced many other reform notions. In thanks for his efforts, the Council of Constance burned him at the stake.

The Reformation

Praise God that He did not leave His Church in this state. At his execution in 1415, John Hus' lasts words were, "*Today you are burning a goose, (for Hus in Czech means goose); however, a hundred years from now you will hear a swan sing - you will not burn it, you will have to listen to him.*" Hus spoke in faith, remembering that one day the Great Reformer would return, and until then He would not suffer His Church to abide in deformity, but would always send his servants – even a swan – to bring about her continuing reformation.

That swan was none other than Martin Luther. In 1517 (a hundred years later) he nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, marking the beginning of one of the greatest periods of reform in the history of the Church. Luther is probably best remembered for his re-discovery of the great biblical truth of justification by faith alone. Yet Luther led in many other reforms of the Church, and they were all monumental.

Yet what marks this period, as one of great periods of reform is not simply the giant Luther. Rather, this period is rightly called the Reformation because God showered on His Church a multitude of reformers. Ulrich, Zwingli, Johann Oeclampadius, William Tyndale, Thomas Cromwell, Andreas Von Carlstadt, Hugh Latimer, Martin Bucer, Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, Anne Du Borg, Philipp Melancthon, William Farel, Miles Coverdale, Gaspard De Coligny, Matthew Parker, Heinrich Bullinger, Matthias Falcus Illyrius, Zacharius Ursinus, Martin Chemnitz, Caspar Olevianus, Theodore Beza, and John Knox, just to name a few, God raised a veritable army to reform His Church.

A key reformer for us is John Calvin. In 1536 he published the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion, a work that along with a handful of others is considered still today to be one of the best summaries of biblically consistent Christianity. Calvin is best known for his dual emphasis on the sovereignty of God over every aspect of life, and the authority of the Bible over every aspect of life.

Along with him the Reformation was marked by five distinctive summaries of biblically consistent doctrine:

- *Sola Dei Gloria: to the glory of God alone*, all things exist solely for the glory of God.
- *Sola Scriptura: in the Scriptures alone*; the Bible is the only authoritative rule for what man is to believe and do.
- *Sola Christus: finished by Christ alone*; the accomplishment of redemption is solely the work of Christ; man adds nothing to it this already completed work.
- *Sola Gratia: the gift of God alone*; salvation is the free gift of God, not merited by man in any manner.
- *Sola Fide: received by faith alone*; God's salvation is only received by man via faith, which faith is a gift of God itself.

These five distinctive marked the Church of the Reformers, and continue to mark those churches, which follow, in their faithful example. [Our placing them on our bulletin is a faith statement of our desire that God would so mark this church.]

Great writing of creeds re-explaining biblically consistent Christianity also marked this period. These creeds were not like the short, pithy earlier ones, for the deformities faced by the Reformers were spread over a much wider doctrinal territory. The creeds of the Reformers took two forms: confessions – extended creedal statements covering numerous doctrinal subjects, and catechisms – brief questions and answers designed to teach the basics of the Faith to young Christians.

Luther wrote both a confession and catechism, as did Calvin and others. Others from this period include: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the French Confession, the 1st and 2nd Helvetic Confession, the Thirty-nine Articles, the Irish Articles, the Canons of Dort, and the Scots Confession.

Most important in our church's history are the Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Written by the Westminster Divines gathered in London, they were published around 1650 as a combined statement of faith for the Church in England, Scotland, and Ireland. The writing of these standards marks yet another of God's wonderful acts of providence to reform His Church. First, these documents were written at the end of the previous generation of reformers. All the men gathered in London had grown up learning from Luther, Calvin, Knox, etc. Second, the over 100 men gathered for this one task are still considered to be some of the brightest men ever born in the Church. That they were born all in this period, and in this nation demonstrates the significance of God's providential act; an act of which we are still receiving the blessings.

Yet this period was not without its marks of opposition to reform and renewed efforts at deformity. Many, many brothers and sisters were added to the Church's list of martyrs during this period. The continuing medieval Church horribly sullied her history by her use of torture and execution against the reformers during this period.

At the Council of Trent (1550's-60's) the modern Roman Catholic Church was born. During this ignominious meeting of this part of the Church, the Roman Catholic wing formally adopted the deformities that the Reformers sought to undo. The Council of Trent specifically declared the key biblical positions taken by the reformers as anathema – beliefs which if held by anyone were sufficient to unalterably condemn that person to eternity in Hell. This pronouncement included the five solas noted above. Unfortunately the declarations of Trent, in spite of many good-hearted Roman Catholics (and many who indeed are saved), are still the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church today.

It was under the authority of this Church that the reformers were so sorely persecuted. In England under "Bloody" Queen Mary (1516-58) hundreds of reformers were tortured and executed. One, Thomas Cranmer, was forced to sign a recantation of his reform views. The next day, when called upon to make public to the court his written recantation, Cranmer demonstrated the spirit of reform that God gives His people. Refusing to acknowledge his written statement, Cranmer stuck his hand into a fire, saying as it burned horribly, that he would rather lose this hand, which had betrayed Christ in signing the document, than lose his faith in Christ. They finished the job by burning him at the stake.

In France, on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1572, the Catholic monarch invited some 2,000 reformed French Christians (Huguenots) to a "peace" conference. They were massacred. In the following years the Huguenots were virtually hunted to extinction. Pastors trained at the seminary started by the Frenchman John Calvin in Geneva, Switzerland, would go into France during this period to take over the reformed churches hiding in the wilderness. They faithfully performed their duties, although their average length of ministry was all of six weeks – it took the authorities that long to hunt them down and kill them.

Even following the great reforms during the Westminster Divines period in the 1640-50's in England and Scotland, the forces of deformity once again swept to power. James II, restored to the monarchy in Great Britain following the Civil Revolution under Cromwell, promised to respect the reformed Church in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Yet in 1662 he proved his falsehood in what is known as the Great Ejection, when he forcible removed over 2,000 Puritan

and Presbyterian ministers from their pulpits. The churches they served were given pastors tainted by deformity. Many of the ejected pastors made their way to the colonies in America. Many others were persecuted and executed.

In Scotland, a faithful group of reform minded believers, known as the Covenanters, continued to try to gather as God's family – meeting in the fields and woods. The authorities gradually increased their persecution of these people. The decade of 1680-90 is still known as the killing times for the many hundreds of faithful Scottish Christians who were martyred for their faith.

Many of these covenanters made their way to America, and in large part settled in and around the hills of Fort Pittsburgh in the western end of Penn's colony of Pennsylvania. These faithful men and women are our direct spiritual ancestors.

The Reformation had a phenomenal impact on the Church. Yet, as with previous periods, these reforms were to be opposed by the forces of deformity. On the continent in Europe this deformity spread more quickly than in Great Britain. And it followed the same pattern as before. The first thing to go was belief in the Bible as the authoritative word of God. By the 1800's there was very little of the reformed purity left in the churches of Europe.

Yet in Great Britain and America, God was not yet done with the reform of His people.

The Modern Church

The forces of deformity continued to attack the Church in Great Britain and America. Yet God was pleased to continue to send seasons of reform to His people in these lands. We identify these seasons of reform by the term "revivals."

In England and Scotland the late 1600's to early 1700's were marked by a period of the virtual abandonment of all the reformed emphases. Very few were the preachers who taught the purity of belief and practice. To be "religious" was scorned by most people as being uncivilized and superstitious. Accordingly, there was very little evidence of salvation in the hearts of most.

The scene was similar in America. Settled throughout the 1600's by faithful Christians, by the early 1700's true belief was hard to find anywhere. In New England, the home of the Puritans, true religion was all but gone. The Puritans sacrificed all to come to America and establish a "city on a hill" whose light would shine the true religion for the entire world to see. Their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, materially prosperous because of their ancestors' work, by and large abandoned their Faith. Universalism (all religions lead to the same God) and Unitarianism (one person in God, not three) were rising in popularity. In the middle colonies, where Presbyterianism found its first home in Philadelphia and the surrounding region, the true religion was giving way to deism, the belief that God is merely the Creator who started the world, but is not paying any attention now. In the south, where Presbyterianism and reformed Baptists shared the landscape, the same pattern of deformity was advancing. And on the frontiers, such as our own backyard, the sacrifices of the Covenanter fathers and mothers of the Church were quickly being abandoned in the pursuit of well being here on earth.

God responded to these circumstances by once again sending reformation to His Church. In England and Scotland He rose up George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers. Even though the latter would adopt the less consistent weak Arminian theology, with Whitfield they believed in the sovereign God's power to convert sinners. And so the truths of Scripture were once again preached and thousands were saved throughout Great Britain. In one generation, the island kingdom went from being predominantly pagan to predominantly regenerated.

God visited the same revival in America. It began in numerous locations in the colonies in the 1740's. In New England, God used the ministry of Jonathan Edwards to awaken the spiritually dead descendents of the Puritans. In the middle colonies God used the preaching of the Presbyterian ministers the Tennents, as well as Whitfield. In the southern colonies God gave Whitfield many an open door to proclaim the pure truth of the Great Reformer. And again, a whole generation was converted. In our history, this period is called the Great Awakening because so many were awakened from the sleep of death in sin to the newness of life in Christ.

This reform movement was used mightily by God to impact all areas of the colonial life. One big example is seen in that reformed values were instrumental in the birth of this nation. In some respects, it was the application of the reformed convictions of the Great Awakening to every area of life that informed the political thinking of the social reformers two generations later, men we call the Founding Fathers. King George in England called the Revolutionary War the "Parsons War" because so many Presbyterian ministers served as chaplains in the Continental Army. At the final battle of Yorktown, all but one of Washington's commanders was a Presbyterian committed to the reformed understanding of Scripture.

John Witherspoon, Presbyterian minister and President of the solidly reformed Princeton Seminary, was the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. His students went on to serve in all areas of public life, helping to shape the young republic of the United States. One of his students, James Madison (4th President of the U.S.), was the chief author of the U.S. Constitution. It is no accident that the Constitution parallels the Book of Church Order we use for our church government. The idea of checks and balances foundational to our Constitution is foundational to Presbyterianism.

Yet, these reforms were not to last, as once again deformity sought to nest in the bosom of the Church.

In Great Britain the abandonment of biblically consistent Christianity grew out of the twin, yet opposing deformities of Higher Criticism and Dispensationalism. The former, coming over from the seminaries in continental Europe, denied that the Bible was the Word of God, but merely the word of man about God. Thus the Bible could not serve as a source of authority. In effect, those churches led by pastors committed to Higher Criticism had no source of authority for their convictions. All that was left was the tyranny of opinions. It is not surprise that such churches die.

Dispensationalism developed in Great Britain and Scotland through the teaching of two men, Irving and Darby. Both men taught a form of prophetic interpretation that fractured the unity of the Bible. In saying that the OT had nothing to do with the NT, that the Old People of God were separated from the New People of God, this new form of interpretation eliminated the basis upon which the NT's teachings are to be understood. While these men disagreed with the arguments of Higher Criticism, they nevertheless effectively supported the same deformity efforts. This is so because: 1) without the NT to interpret its meaning, the OT is irrelevant, and 2) without the OT to explain the fullness of its meaning, the NT is practically un-applicable to the Christian Life. What good is it to believe that the Bible is the only source of authority for life if half of it is irrelevant and the other half can't be applied?

These deformity forces came to America. But preparing the ground for them was the wholesale abandonment of God's sovereignty by a majority of the Church. This found prominence under the ministry of Charles Finney in the early 1800's. An ordained Presbyterian minister who lied when taking his vows this man taught that the application of redemption was solely the result of the rational decision of man. That is, a man through the exercise of his own intellect could choose to believe or not believe in Christ. There was no need for the sovereign work of God.

It is from Finney that we have inherited most of our perverted forms of worship. According to his belief, if salvation was a matter of rational choices, then worship should be oriented toward "persuading" people to choose Christ. The legion of errors this introduced to the Church is too numerous to list here. Suffice to say, in all but the most consciously reformed churches, Finney's theology of worship and life rules to a large extent.

If these deformities weren't bad enough, Higher Criticism and Dispensationalism also served to pervert the Church in America. Higher Criticism found its home in the mainline denominations. By the early part of the 20th Century, this perverted theology controlled most of these churches. Only small remnants sought to remain faithful to their biblically consistent heritage.

In the American Church it appeared at first that Dispensationalism would remain only the deformed theology of an obscure branch of the Church, the Plymouth Brethren (founded by Darby). But, around the turn of the 19th-20th century yet again some men who should have known better adopted it as their own and taught it to others. These men, Lewis Sperry Chafer and C.I. Scofield, both Presbyterian ministers, made Dispensationalism the doctrine of the evangelical Church in America. Chafer was the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary (the source of many evangelical ministers), and Scofield wrote the popular Scofield Study Bible. This one Bible edition is possibly deserves more credit for the worldwide spread of Dispensationalism than any other element.

The deformities introduced by these twin forces did not abate during the 20th Century. At this date, most of the mainline denominations are officially heretical in their doctrine. This is true even though, for example in the mainline PCUSA, the vast majority of their members claim the true Faith. Yet as these dear brothers and sisters die off, their descendants are left in a church that has no source of authority, and so they leave the Faith for good. These mainline churches are in the process of disappearing.

The majority of the apparently faithful evangelical churches too are experiencing the continued deformity of their worship and beliefs. In ever new attempts to re-capture relevancy (remember, Dispensationalism eliminates relevancy), these churches hunt for newer and better ideas for attracting and keeping members. In spite of a claim to accept the Bible's authority, because they do not have a consistent means of interpreting the Bible, their efforts reap confused applications that become just more "opinions" in a church without a real source of authority to live by.

Thus, we've seen growing deformities similar to the Early Church. Cults claiming Christ abound, with new ones springing up every year (most of these find their start in the evangelical wing of the church). Charismatic excesses proclaim the real presence of the Spirit, only to fail to help God's people truly reform their lives. Evangelical moralistic preaching offers help that is no better than what can be had from the pop-psychologist self-help guru in the infomercial.

Even in churches where the traditions of reform are still acknowledged, more and more of God's people abandon the cardinal truth that the Bible is the *only source of authority for belief and practice*. Instead of submitting their opinions to the teachings of Scripture, otherwise well-meaning brothers and sisters fall back on political maneuverings and debating skills to make their points and have their way.

Yet in all of this, we've forgotten that there is really only one question to which God's family needs to give attention: what does God want for us?

The Future Church

So what hope is there? It sure seems like no matter how hard God's people try to reform and stay there, deformity always creeps back in the door. What are we to do?

First, remember that the Great Reformer is coming again. And He is bringing both His reward and His judgment with Him. For those called by the Spirit to faith, this promise is the bedrock upon which we stand.

Second, we must not view the reform history of the Church from man's viewpoint. Rather we must look at it from the viewpoint of the Sovereign God Who is indeed in control. God is not surprised by the deformity of His people, and the continual need to reform them. In fact, these patterns occur according to His plan. And note the glorious wisdom of this plan. Through the deform-reform cycles God is fulfilling His redemptive plan – He is populating eternity with a redeemed people who willingly worship Him as the Sovereign God. In eternity, we will have the joy of talking with brothers and sisters from all these reform periods. Each will tell us that their experiences served to demonstrate that God is sovereign over the affairs of men. Each will tell us that God's acts of reform planted in them a faith yielding fruit for eternity.

Third, and finally, we must place our faith in this same reforming sovereign God. Don't leave this commitment at the abstract or impersonal level. Don't merely give your heart to seeing reform in your country, your church, and your family. Place your primary focus where God places it – on the reformation of your own soul. Ask the Spirit to make your experience in life one of continual reformation:

- Remembering – continually learning and discovering what God wants us to believe and how He wants us to live;
- Repenting – continually acknowledging and turning away from the manners in which our beliefs and practices are deformed; and,
- Re-doing – continually expressing our faith through growing biblical consistency in our beliefs and practices.

The forces of deformity will not win. Even now if you are united to Christ they have no control over you (Rom 6). So don't let your own struggles with deformity knock you out of the battle. Remember that God sovereignly uses the deform-reform cycle to produce in His people all the glories that are already ours in Christ.

Give your faith to this and join in God's reformation of His Church.