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Strengthen the Things that Remain
Reforming the Local Church



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Strengthen the Things that Remain Reforming the Local Church

Thomas K. Ascol

One of the great lessons that emerged out of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was that the church of Jesus Christ on earth was not properly conceived as *semper idem*—always the same—but rather as *semper reformanda*—always reforming. The recognition that neither the church universal nor any local church will ever be once and for all reformed in this life led to the conclusion that the church must always be working for reformation according to the teachings of God’s Word.

This has been the overarching burden of Founders Ministries from our conception. We have tried to encourage the recovery of the gospel of God’s grace and the biblical re-formation of local churches. That burden has consistently led us to think about and try to serve pastors. If a pastor is helped, then a church will be helped. God uses men to lead His churches into those healthy pathways that are prescribed by the Bible.

When a church has wandered away from such paths and perhaps has even traveled far down wrong roads, the way back can be long and arduous. It can be and often is painful. Thus it has ever been and thus it shall ever be with the work of reformation.

Sometimes the difficulty of the challenge causes pastors to shrink back. At times the road to reformation in a local church can appear to lead right over the edge of a steep cliff. Thoughts of taking it seem suicidal.

At other times thoughts of leading a local church into (or back into) more biblically sound patterns of life and faith fill a pastor (especially a young pastor!) with romanticized notions of how wonderful it will be when people are taught what the Word of God actually says. It is easy to imagine that such teachers who would expose error and rightly divide the Word would be cheered as heroes in churches where the Bible is revered as God’s holy Word.

Neither despair nor naiveté is a helpful characteristic when the prospect of local church ministry looms on the horizon. This is true for both pastors and church members. Realistic expectations of the challenges and

blessings involved in a reforming ministry are essential if one is to stay the course. The Bible regularly and repeatedly calls us to such realism.

In His letter to the church at Sardis, Jesus gives them what must have been a very painful reality check when He said, “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead” (Revelation 3:1). Imagine being in the congregation when those words were read! The church’s reputation in the community was great. It had a name. It was known for its liveliness. A member of that church would probably have been full of hope and anticipation when the announcement was made that “today we have a letter from the hand of the Apostle John that was dictated by Jesus Christ and addressed specifically to our church.”

Yet, our Lord’s first words are a call to biblical reality. Your reputation on earth is not necessarily the same as your reputation in heaven. What other people are saying about your church is not always what Jesus Christ says about your church. He said that the Sardis church, despite its exalted status in the community, was in reality “dead.”

But what our Lord says next is equally surprising and must not be forgotten. “Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain, . . .” (v. 2). He does not write them off as hopeless. He calls them to reformation. He calls them back to that which they had originally received and heard and He calls them to repent (v. 3). This is precisely the message that many churches in our day need to hear. It is the message that pastors must be willing to proclaim and apply as they commit themselves to the work of biblical reformation.

The articles that follow are about the work of reformation in local churches. They present that work through the eyes of pastors who have led the way as well as from the perspective of church members who were part of the process. These collective testimonies should encourage us to recognize that God does indeed have power to restore local churches that have gone astray either through neglect or false teaching. He very often is pleased to fan dying embers back into flame, to empower His people to “strengthen the things that remain.”

The way back to healthier, purer streams of church life is often very difficult, but the blessings are worth the battles. And the battles never really end. Because the church must ever be reformed and reforming according to the Word of God. ☞

Reforming the Local Church

Three Examples and Three Principles

Fred A. Malone

Many say that it cannot be done in an SBC church, but they are wrong. I have been involved in reforming three Southern Baptist Churches. They were each different situations, requiring different approaches to the needs of the congregation. By God's grace, there were many things I did right; others I did wrong. Any honest pastor must say the same. However, in the process, God blessed reformation in all three churches.

Three Examples of Reformation

1. **The first was a typical Southern Baptist Church, North Pompano Baptist Church, in Pompano Beach, Florida.** There I began as Associate Pastor to Pastor Ernest C. Reisinger and later served as Pastor. When Ernie arrived in early 1977, he found a congregation in turmoil due to a youth worker's molestation of young boys, a huge financial debt from a previous pastor's financial mismanagement and theft of building funds, and a deacon board of some good men who were strongly influenced by dispensationalism. Ernie began teaching the deacons the *Abstract of Principles* and developing a pastoral relationship with them. When I arrived later in 1977, the church was recovering financially, Ernie's preaching was starting to take affect and the deacons were growing spiritually.

However, soon after my arrival, things began to heat up. Some were dissatisfied with Ernie's preaching on holy living, especially those from a dispensational, "carnal Christian" background. They thought him a legalist. As I began to lead the choir and worship with good hymns of substance, explaining what the words actually meant, a negative reaction set in. When I evaluated the Sunday School literature and found the gospel absent from the preschool and elementary years, I stirred up a rebellion from preschool teachers. Some people began to leave the church, some because of Ernie's preaching, others because of mine. But others came in, especially young families, when they heard of our teaching of the Bible.

The first year and a half were marked with some being saved, some true Christians accepting sound teaching, and others just leaving in confusion. The Word of God divides. However, over all, God spared us from a church split. Many faithful young couples entered the church. When Ernie retired at the end of 1978, I became pastor and he became Missionary-at-Large. In this position he started the Boyce Project, printing James P. Boyce's *Abstract of Systematic Theology* and distributing it to all graduating students in SBC seminaries. The response from many students and pastors was enthusiastic. They wanted to know why they were not taught the SBC founders' theology in seminary. This was the beginning of what later morphed into Founders Ministries.

In the first two months of my pastorate, forty people who had opposed our ministry left the church. Then the chairman of deacons resigned, having accepted atheism. After this we discovered the financial secretary had embezzled funds. Later, the new chairman of deacons was disciplined for adultery. Yet, at the same time, many were growing in grace, accepting the reformed faith of our Baptist forefathers, and leading faithful lives. In August 1980 I left to work on a PhD. Ernie resumed pastoring the church and continued the pursuit of reformation.

In the years that followed, however, the church faced a difficult situation that eventually led to its decline. A co-pastor, who was added to serve with Ernie, decided he could no longer stay in the SBC. He resigned and took many of the active young couples with him and formed Emmanuel Baptist Church, a Reformed Baptist congregation. North Pompano never recovered from the split and finally was handed over to the local Baptist association for oversight.

2. The second was Heritage Baptist Church, a brand new church start in Fort Worth, Texas. I served there as founding pastor along with Bob Martin and Ben Mitchell in the early days. It was a joy to start a church from scratch with beliefs and practice as I saw them in the Scripture and the *1689 London Baptist Confession*.

I worked as a bivocational pastor for the first few years in forming the church. It was the hardest time of my life yet, in many ways, the most satisfying. We need more young men who are willing to sacrifice and work bivocationally to start churches in cities that have small groups of believers who want a reformed and Baptist work. Too many are looking for an established reformed work in which to labor. Too many are fleeing into the PCA for an easier road. Where are the sacrificial "Bunyans" willing to suffer to build sound churches?

I experienced many joys at HBC along with many sorrows. Many seminary students from Southwestern came through the church. Some were very grateful for the work and were trained in ministry. Others always had a better idea of how things should be done and left the church. Some members were affected by theonomy, New Covenant Theology or a critical prideful spirit. Problems of church discipline for adultery plagued us through the years. Problems within the eldership almost led to a church split. But by the time I left in 1992, by God's powerful and transforming grace, HBC was a stable and growing church plant.

Sadly, further problems within the eldership led to difficulty in calling a pastor and for a season the church declined. However, with the coming of Larry Vincent and the stable leadership of Steve Garrick, the remaining elder, HBC is today a growing, happy and stable reformed SBC church with a bright future.

3. The third church is First Baptist Church, Clinton, Louisiana, where I have served as Pastor since 1993. This church went through reformation under the previous pastor, Bill Ascol. It was a difficult reformation that involved the beginnings of church discipline for adultery. A large number of members, who did not want to hear preaching on holiness or confront difficult situations requiring church discipline, left. Those who remained consolidated under Pastor Ascol. Soon after, a number of younger families joined, coming from a sovereign grace church in the area that had split over the pastor's adultery. When I arrived at First Baptist, the church was sound on the doctrines of grace and its members demonstrated a desire to lead a godly lives. There was much for which to thank God.

However, after arriving, I soon discovered that there were tensions in the church between some of the original members and some of the newer sovereign grace members. Issues arose on the necessity of church membership, the biblical validity of Sunday School for children, admission to the Lord's Supper, the need of other elders. Christian liberty concerning women's dress, crying babies in worship services, how to educate children, the biblical basis for insurance, women working outside the home and other matters consumed my time. Theonomy and political activity for Christians became a divisive issue.

All in all, the first few years were given to addressing these issues with individuals and the congregation to clarify the Bible's teaching on such subjects. In the midst of this, church discipline became necessary for adultery, unwed pregnancy, inactive members, DWI's and illegal drug use. So, even for a church that had gone through an effective theological and prac-

tical living reformation, other issues from serious minded Christians necessitated further reformation. I am happy to report that after 13 ½ years, God has brought about stability and unity in the church membership. We have lost many young people to the world, but God has also brought many into His kingdom. It is a privilege and joy to serve such a sincere people of God. We are not perfect, but we are growing in the faith.

Summary

All three churches were three different situations, with different issues, different backgrounds, different kinds of people and different pastoral needs. There is no manual of “How to Reform a Church” which guides step-by-step what to do and when. Rather, each church requires the pastor to be sensitive to “where they are...where they need to be...and what to do in-between.” Those who follow a book or theory of reformation step-by-step are opening themselves up to pushing the people too fast or lagging behind too slow. God has His own timetable for reformation through the use of biblical means. A “canned” approach can lead to disaster, as many a pastor can now testify on the other side of a church split or his own firing.

There is no panacea or formula for church reformation. We can long for reformation, pursue it and pray for it, but we cannot produce it. When reformation comes, we must acknowledge that it is the work of God’s mercy in His timing as He chooses to bless. We must trust Him and look to His Word alone to guide us. As I have watched God bring reformation to these three churches, I have gleaned some biblical priorities or principles which I believe must be followed in every church situation seeking reformation according to God’s Word.

Three Principles of Reformation

1. The first principle that leads to reformation is a sound preaching and teaching ministry. This is obvious to those of us who believe that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” The Holy Spirit uses the means of the Word of God to do His work in the human heart: “Where there is no vision [i.e., revelation, not “strategy”], the people perish.” However, I am convinced that most of us have not been sufficiently prepared to preach expository messages that focus on the biblical text yet apply the Word to the lives of the hearers in a Christ-centered way.

Many styles of preaching are out there today—expository, exegetical, historical-redemptive, current events, topical, pseudo-psychological and what I would simply call “story-telling superficially tied to a text.” But rarely do I hear Christ preached like the Apostles preached Him, both evangelistically and didactively to the church. I rarely hear a well-rounded, Christ-centered, textually accurate, practically applied sermon like those of Charles Spurgeon or Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. We are not turning out men who preach Christ and Him crucified like these two great men.

There is a lot more to preaching Christ expositionally than being exegetically accurate to the text or giving a running commentary. Paul and Peter preached the whole message of Christ to the whole of man: mind, emotions and will. They interwove the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascended rule, and glorious return of Jesus Christ into their preaching of every conceivable issue. Lloyd-Jones calls that “theology on fire.” They brought Jesus’ resurrection into every evangelistic message to call the hearer to face a risen Christ. They could not teach marriage without referring to Jesus’ sacrificial death as the model for husbands and wives. They could not teach humility in the church or while suffering unjustly without mentioning the humility of Jesus Christ in His humbling incarnation or humiliating crucifixion. Our church people are starving to death without hearing much of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life and the Water of Life. This problem is not restricted to non-reformed ministers. Even good, reformed preachers are not immune.

I encourage those who want to see reformation and biblical Christianity in their churches to begin by preaching through one of the Gospels, showing the character, teachings, love, and self-denial of the Son of God. In each text we should preach a whole Christ to the whole man, applying Him and Him crucified to marriage, child-raising, Christian unity, evangelistic effort, God-centered worship, spiritual warfare, trials and the future hope. All of Scripture since Genesis 3:15 is about Him and His truth and His Kingdom. Every exhortation to obedience is about His atonement for disobedience and His grace for obedience. Every obscure passage is about being condemned under law and/or saved under His gospel of grace.

I believe in preaching the doctrines of grace. But in reformation with a people who have been untaught, centering on the life and work of our dear Lord will bring those great truths to light at the foot of His cross. Start with one of the Gospels and set Christ before them. Faithful exposition of a Christ-centered Scripture will call the hearer to deal with Christ and His apostles on the doctrines of grace, instead of inviting attack on the

imperfect preacher. We need to reform our preaching before we can even think of reforming our churches. I encourage the reader to read *Preaching and Preachers* by Lloyd-Jones slowly, thoughtfully and annually to reform the way you think about true Christ-centered preaching. This is the greatest need to accomplish any genuine reformation.

2. The second principle that leads to reformation is gracious pastoral care. By this, I do not mean moving to a plural eldership before qualified men are in place. Church order is a biblical truth. But it does no good without biblical men who are mature, doctrinally-sound, family leaders and gracious in their dealings with others. Authoritarian elders are a plague to reformation.

A plural eldership can be a great blessing to biblical reformation—or a great hindrance. To rush toward a plural eldership does not a reformation make. I consider it one of the last things you do in reforming the local church. Few men in our churches understand sound doctrine. Few understand the gospel in its breadth and application to daily life. Few are so mature in their faith and character that they have a gracious and patient spirit with obstinate people. Why rush to an eldership until faithful men are prepared to take the office with wisdom, maturity, and love for sinners? God gives elders in His time.

Paul exhorted Timothy:

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will (2 Timothy 2:22–26).

The first matter of pastoral care is to deal with oneself as a mature, faithful man. Only out of a personal maturity in following Christ does a godly man develop the refusal of quarrelsomeness and the grace of gentleness in teaching and correcting those in opposition. Reformation rarely proceeds at the rate we choose or wish. God has to “grant them repentance” as a result of our labors. We cannot control that or rush that. If we have

nothing that we did not receive from God, we of all men must be gracious, forgiving, loving and self-sacrificing in our pastoral work of reformation. To do less is a denial of the doctrines of grace we profess.

We must start with the church leaders and become their pastor and dear friend. We must love the obstinate and teach the ignorant and always serve them. Only then will we raise up leaders to stand beside us in the more difficult days ahead of changing worship, administering church discipline, and holy living. We must be by their sickbeds, hold their hands as they deal with wayward children and help them form loving marriages. We cannot let their reluctance for reformation allow them to become our unpastored adversaries. It is the sovereign grace we show them that will lead to reformation under such grace.

3. The third principle that leads to reformation is prayer. This is no trite thing to say. I do not know why God brings revival under one faithful pastor and not under another. Nor in one of His churches and not others. It is His choice, His sovereign will, to do so as He pleases. We are called to preach the Word and pastor the flock with all the grace and truth we can muster at Christ's feet. But we must always remember that He was despised and rejected of men. He was a Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief *because* He was faithful, truthful and loving in His earthly ministry. Only after His suffering and death did the Father answer His prayer to build His church. It may be so with you as well.

Prayer, faithful prayer, crying out to the Father that He might give saving grace to the unconverted and enlightened minds to the sheep is an absolute necessity for biblical, Christ-centered reformation. Not the kind of prayers that all would accept the preacher and His ministry without causing so much trouble. But the kind of prayers that set eternal souls individually before the Father and the Son, begging for mercy on their poor souls for life and godliness. Especially, prayer for one's enemies.

God has promised to honor prayer as a means for reformation as much as preaching the Word faithfully. At our Lord's darkest times, He prayed for strength and wisdom. He prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail. He prayed for the Father to keep His own in the world and for workers to bring in the harvest. And He thanked the Father for hiding the truth from the proud and revealing His grace to spiritual babes. Reforming pastors must follow their Lord.

The Second Great Awakening had multiple simultaneous beginnings. But one significant event occurred on the campus of Hampton-Sydney College when several new converts prayed for revival and reformation.

These prayers were answered with a revival on campus that spread into the churches from graduates. It changed the face of America and its churches. Brethren, we must pray.

Conclusion

We need revival and reformation again. But you will notice that all three principles above have to do with the pastor's life and behavior. If true reformation comes, it must come with preaching the Word in a Christ-centered, expositional, applicatory way. It must come by gracious and patient pastoral care to earn the people's trust and following. And it must come by faithful prayer by pastors for themselves and for their people—without ceasing. This takes time, patience, forgiveness and love by the pastor. There is no other biblical secret or strategy ordained by God in the Scriptures.

Our Lord promised to build His church, universal and local, and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But He does it in His sovereign time, in His sovereign way and with His sovereign means. What is needed is reforming pastors who trust Him themselves and who labor faithfully, graciously and lovingly until He chooses to bless the means He has given.

Be thankful for every glimmer of grace you see in your people. It is a miracle! And do not enter into controversy with our Lord because He is not moving fast enough for your comfort and joy. Look unto Jesus always, the greatest Reformer of all, and He will give you the strength to preach the gospel, which blesses and divides at the same time. And then you will hear these words one day: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." 🙏

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My Discovery of The Doctrines of Grace

Terrell Suggs

The following article is an excerpt from an upcoming book to be published by Founders Press entitled *My Journey in Grace* by Terrell Suggs. The excerpt is taken from Part 1—A Personal Journey.

When the Lord called me to preach as a teenager I wanted to be the best I could be. My sense of calling and need to preach has remained at a high level. I love preaching and preachers. Through the years there have been scores of preachers for whom I have had unusual admiration. They have been models and mentors for me. While I have always tried to maintain my own uniqueness, other men's beliefs and practices have greatly intrigued and inspired me.

I have, at times, very naively and almost unquestionably followed them. I would go to their churches, devour their books and study their theology and methods.

At times, I must confess I did not glean truths for myself from the Scriptures. To my deep regret, what I believed, preached and practiced was not always thoroughly grounded in the Bible itself but on what some successful preacher was espousing. It was especially this way in the area of theology.

My theological background in college and seminary left something to be desired. However, in those early years I did adopt the expository method as my primary way of preaching. In this way I had to study every verse. Often texts that dealt with such subjects as the sovereignty of God or foreknowledge puzzled me. This especially was so in the light of all the man-centered "free-willism" I had been taught. I found that commentators would often evade these subjects. Of all the sermons I had read or heard, very few dealt with them. It became obvious that terms such as "predestination" or "election" are very scary subjects to most people.

Responses of impatience and even anger would sometimes result when I preached on or discussed these subjects. I have been accused of being foolish and even a cultist for believing them. In my study, however, I saw that the biblical writers never hesitated to talk very freely, openly and often about them, even to new believers (1 Thessalonians 1; Ephesians 1, 1 Peter 1, etc.). If they are so much a part of the Bible, I reasoned, why don't we freely talk about them?

In my study, I had mixed emotions. Sometimes I found myself struggling, even to the point of tears. I remember waves of terror sweeping over me as I pondered the reality of hell and eternal judgment. In wrestling with the subject of the fairness of God I would agonize over such questions as: "Why evil?" "Why the devil?" "Why suffering?" "Why sin?" "Why the fall of man in the Garden?" "Why did God elect some and not all?" At other times, I would become overwhelmed with joy.

More and more I was amazed at the wonder of God's free grace to undeserving sinners. I wanted to delve into the deep things of God and find answers. I knew I could never completely understand but I wanted to try. My sincere prayer was for God to unveil His Word to me. The more I searched and prayed, the more I discovered books and commentaries that powerfully spoke to me. Some had been on my bookshelves for years that I had never read.

The Lord began to use the writings of such men as C. H. Spurgeon and A. W. Pink to fill me with truth. The Scriptures began to open as never before. I was thrilled beyond words. God became more real to me than ever and the gospel of His sovereign grace virtually jumped off the pages with clarity and power. I began to see the person of Jesus Christ unveiled in all His mighty splendor. I saw in Scripture that Christ is not the weak "Savior" that we often hear about; the One standing on the wayside of life trying to save the world but "sovereign sinners" won't "let" Him.

Rather, I saw the Christ of the Bible as the Savior of His people, the Church (Matthew 1:21; Ephesians 5:25). In the Covenant of Grace He came to save those whom the Father had given Him. He will most certainly accomplish this (John 6:37; 17:1-20). He will not be defeated. His kingdom is forever. Not only will He reign someday but He reigns now (Acts 2:32-35). He is the Christ who has been exalted to the highest place and given a name that is above every name (Philippians 2:9).

I began to understand the reality that God is sovereign. I was especially challenged by A. W. Pink's book on *The Sovereignty of God*. Never had I read such a work. What was so powerful and compelling was his overwhelming scriptural proof of every claim he made. I had never seen

these things before. I could not deny them. How had I missed seeing all this in my study of Scripture? Where had all these great books and writers been all my life?

At first I wondered about the direction in which I was headed. I felt alone in my beliefs. Were there other Southern Baptists that shared my views? The more I searched, the more I began discovering other people of like faith. They were not in abundance but they were there. I thank my God always for each one.

A pastor friend introduced me to the outstanding writings of J. P. Boyce and J. L. Dagg. Boyce was the founder of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and Dagg was the first writing Southern Baptist theologian. Both of these men were among the great early leaders of our convention. The more I studied Baptist history and the theology of our founders, the more I saw that I believed what they believed. I am forever indebted to these men who have given us some of the finest theological works in all of Christian history.

In 1983, I received information about the Southern Baptist Founders Conference. I was elated. I will never forget my first time to go. It was held at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. I was thrilled to attend. Here was a conference filled with Southern Baptists that believed just as I did and shared my concerns. They were committed to doctrinal reformation in our Southern Baptist life. Sermons were preached, papers read, testimonies given, and books made available on the biblically sound faith of our founding fathers. I couldn't believe my ears. I am edified each time I attend this wonderful conference that continues to meet annually.

Indeed I came to see that the doctrines of grace were not incidental in the lives of Baptists from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. The rafters of Southern Baptist churches once rang with these great truths. Seminary and college professors were meticulous in teaching young preachers to articulate the gospel of sovereign grace. This was the gospel that Baptists carried to the ends of the earth. These doctrines were the very foundation of everything in Baptist life. Oh, that it would be so again!

How thrilling it was to make these exciting discoveries. The more I studied, reflected, prayed and talked with others, the more I became convinced that God was showing me truths that had long been neglected. The vast majority of Southern Baptists and much of the Christian world know little, if anything, about the doctrines of grace. The Lord began to make it quite obvious to me that He did not want me to hide these truths "under a bushel" but to hold them high for all to see. ☺

Journeying in Reformation

Phil A. Newton

In the early part of my ministry I had no picture of what a reforming work might look like. Though familiar with some 16th century Reformation personalities and events, the ongoing necessity for biblical reformation had not captured my imagination. But that soon changed.

I was in the midst of studying “Church Growth” under Peter Wagner at Fuller Theological Seminary when my own theological understanding began slowly to change. Along with regular interaction with other ministers and students that crossed many denominational lines, I began to read more widely than at any point in my ministry. Much of the reading lacked theological roots, even though focusing on church ministry. Though seldom wrestling theologically, I found it puzzling that sociology instead of theology drove the Church Growth movement. Along the way I recall talking with another student that happened to be Southern Baptist about the T.U.L.I.P. acronym for Calvinism. He asked how many *points* of Calvinism I agreed with. I said that I wasn’t sure and asked him to tell me what each point stood for. As he walked through total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints, I said that I agreed with four and wasn’t sure about limited atonement. The subject moved on to other things, but T.U.L.I.P. loomed in my mind.

Shortly after this I planted the church that I now serve, borrowing from Church Growth principles while trying to maintain biblical exposition as priority. A number of people enthusiastically joined the new church, which had no doctrinal statement or polity. Just a few years into the new church plant, I roomed with another pastor during a mission trip. He affirmed that he was a 5-point Calvinist. I continued to ponder how all of this worked out in my own theology.

“So, you’re a Calvinist!”

My practice of preaching through books of the Bible regularly challenged me. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians appeared to be the book that I personally needed to investigate in order to settle some of the burning

issues in my own thinking. By this point, I had begun to wrestle theologically with various texts, recognizing that glossing over them did not square with faithfulness to God's Word. I realized that settling theological issues would affect my methodology in ministry. Having clearly understood that Church Growth literature, for the most part, was driven by sociology, pragmatism and culture, not theology, I realized that becoming theologically-minded would radically change my approach to ministry. Because of high respect for God's Word, I knew that I must have a biblical foundation for my beliefs and practice. So in 1990, just three years after starting the church, I began to study and preach through Ephesians. Simultaneously, I was shaken and elated! Profound joy and wonder flooded my mind as I exegeted the text, meditated upon it, and read Lloyd-Jones, Stott, Boice, MacArthur, Morris, Packer, Sproul and others. My theological world turned upside down; or better, right side up!

I had not traveled far in my study through Ephesians when I sat alone in my study and said aloud, "So, you are a five-point Calvinist!" At this point, I personally knew only three Baptists that were reformed. Two of them, local seminary students, had moved on to other ministries. The other happened to be Tom Nettles, who concluded his teaching at Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis shortly after I moved to the city. By this time, Dr. Nettles had moved to Chicago, the other two friends were long moved, and I was alone—or so I thought. The more I studied, the deeper grew my convictions, and the more the Lord brought one person after another across my path to encourage my theological reformation. More than anyone, the late Martyn Lloyd-Jones, through his eight volumes on Ephesians, mentored me in the doctrines of grace. His cogent arguments thawed the lingering coldness in my biblical theology.

This began the reformation process at our church. I studied and preached through Ephesians, knowing that the opening verses would send shockwaves through the congregation. A few in the church were a step ahead of me in their own theological reformations; so they offered much encouragement. One dear lady passed along excellent books that supplemented my study. Our discussions sharpened my ability to explain the difficult points of doctrine. My wife and I spent many hours talking over what I studied and preached, with her questions spurring my understanding.

Others immediately embraced the biblical teaching, finding it to be liberating; though not all agreed with what I was preaching. Often, on either Sunday or Wednesday nights, I would open the floor for discussion of the exposition from Ephesians. I acknowledged that some of the doctrines

appeared foreign to our understanding. So, demonstrating the consistency of divine decrees, election, predestination and particular redemption, by showing their connection to the whole of Scripture, proved invaluable. Phone calls and discussions after church gave more opportunity to talk about doctrine, offering clarifications for misunderstandings and sharpening my own thinking on the subject. Quoting Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, Packer, MacArthur and other well-known evangelicals allowed the church to see that their pastor had not gone off on a wild tangent!

It struck me that I had to be patient in teaching the doctrines of grace. I was plowing through new territory for me personally, so dialoguing with my congregation without taking a defensive posture proved important. Nor could I hammer these doctrines into their heads without resultant backlash; so I did not get into a hurry in working through them. Knowing that I would be asked serious questions drove me to intensify my personal study, and consequently, changed my entire approach to sermon preparation. I was changing, and so was my congregation, though not everyone.

Another Alamo

During the initial phase of reformation we were meeting in an old church building owned by a tent company, while purchasing property and waiting for our permanent building's construction. The old building's stone façade resembled the Alamo, and in many ways, it began to feel like it! Mostly without my knowledge, a battle had begun in the church that would not explode openly for two years. Skirmishes, to be sure, took place involving personalities and pitting those embracing the doctrines of grace with those who rather silently rejected them. Still, I thought the differences were in personalities and preferences in ministry. Little did I realize that doctrinal battle lines had been drawn, and the machines of war crept into action.

We spent two years at "The Alamo," ample time to work through Ephesians and to complete a new polity document. For many years I had concerns about the way church government functioned in Baptist churches that I'd served. A core group of leaders worked their way with me through the Scripture as we concluded the biblical need for elder plurality. Afterward, I methodically set this forth to the church and they voted approvingly to adopt elder plurality within our congregational framework. Three families left over this aspect of reformation. The rest of the church seemed favorable as we moved into our new building with a new church polity and prospect for new growth.

Grow we did! At least numerically we added to our rolls while a portion of the church continued to grow in biblical understanding. What we lacked upon entering the new building was a clear process for membership. Eighty percent of the visitors to our church came because they had watched the new building under construction and decided that they wanted to check out this young congregation. Many joined.

At this point I still had the formal invitation at the end of the service, though careful not to use it manipulatively. Most visitors came from Baptist backgrounds, so the “invitation” gave them a quick way to join the church. That later came back to bite me! Too many that joined did not do so out of biblical conviction; some, obviously, were unregenerate; and thankfully, some stood with the truth they heard from the pulpit and wanted to be part of this reforming church.

Reality Settles In

Within two years, in the summer of 1994, the euphoria of a new building had worn off. I continued preaching expositionally, applying the varied doctrines in each text, and enjoying the process of learning truth myself. My days of being a-theological were over. Though it seemed that we rarely had substantive theological discussions when I was in seminary, now I found myself in regular theological discussions with church members and friends. Not surprisingly, tensions grew in the church. When energies were no longer focused on the new building and new people, some began to listen to the preaching. By this time I was well into a series on John’s Gospel. Messages, such as “When Belief Stops Short” (2:23–25), “The New Birth” (3:1–15), “What’s the Gospel All About” (3:31–36), and “True and False Worship” (4:20–24) deeply probed the conscience and exposed superficial faith. Some did not want to admit that they had misunderstood the doctrines of God and man. For others, the issue was not divine decrees or total depravity, but rather, their objections came concerning the gospel. What is the gospel all about? What part does man play in salvation? What does it mean to be regenerated? What happens when God saves a sinner?

In the midst of this, several families brought their young children to me requesting that I baptize them. As I talked with the children I was convinced they were fairly clueless concerning the gospel in spite of making professions at their grandmother’s VBS or at their Christian school. Anger brewed because I dared to question the validity of their child’s profession and declined to baptize them, even though in every situation I offered directions to the parents in teaching the gospel to their children. I

continued expounding John's Gospel, reaching chapter six, with the result that the dike could no longer hold back the waters of dissension. I sought to probe the nature of saving grace, correcting the long-held, mistaken notions common among Baptists regarding eternal security, i.e., that a person who had made a decision was safe regardless of how he or she lived beyond that decision. Quoting Spurgeon, I declared, "True conversion gives a man pardon but does not make him presumptuous. True conversion gives a man perfect rest but it does not stop his progress. True conversion gives a man security but it does not allow him leaving off being watchful." That night I received a phone call from a man that had been with our church from the start. He said that he and his wife "felt led" to visit other churches. I asked why. He replied, "We just don't think we're getting fed." That contradicted what others attested, so I told him, "Maybe something is wrong with your appetite."

Other families followed this family's lead. No mass exodus occurred, just a slow seep that continued for three years with one family here, two there, until sixty-five percent of our attendance vanished. Unknown to me, two Sunday School teachers of our largest classes sought to secure enough votes to remove me. I considered both of these men as good friends. Their efforts to remove me failed, God intervened through the body, but the poisoning of the well emptied their classes. However, the church began to change. A new hunger for Christ and delight in the Word spread through the church; worship intensified; seriousness about the gospel grew; profound joy at the grace of God overwhelmed us!

Not everyone left with rancor. That distinction belonged to only a few. Most simply followed the "wagon train" toward the imagined gold rush; not realizing that some of the richest veins of golden grace come only after suffering and patience. On the way out, quite a few told me that they had grown more and learned more of God's Word at South Woods than any church they'd been part of. That puzzled me more as to their departure. A few even called later to apologize for their part in the conflict. For those that endured, the unity and maturity that developed surpassed our expectations. God has been pleased to add to our number, giving us some precious people from the community, allowing us to witness the power of the gospel, and expanding the witness and ministry of our church far beyond Memphis. The emergence of a team of spiritual leaders, tested and refined by the conflict, continues to prove the dividends of biblical reformation.

Lessons learned

Reformation is a slow process. It took several years for me to grapple with the doctrines of grace, so I could not expect my congregation to embrace them in a few weeks. They did not need my pounding but patience and openness in teaching, candidness in discussions, and avoidance of a defensive posture while working through the process. I can own an unrealistic expectation of my congregation, thinking that something as weighty as the mystery of God's decrees can be grasped by a single sermon. Our best teaching takes place by careful, deliberate layering of one truth upon another upon another. Lloyd-Jones exemplified summary and repetition with his London church, knowing that the careful layering and rehearsing of truths the pastor may take for granted become the cornerstone for establishing a church in God's Word.

Some things are best learned under fire. I had never realized the vital importance of every aspect of a local church moving in the same direction. During the days of conflict, teachers from our three largest Sunday School classes aimed their classes toward a doctrine-lite Christianity. It was not what they taught that presented the problem; it was what they *did not teach* that loomed large. While being massaged with a soft, fluffy Bible lesson in Sunday School, the class members' minds turned away from attentiveness to the solid truths of doctrinal preaching. Like children who raided the cookie jar before dinner, their spiritual appetites sated, they found no satisfaction in biblical preaching. They preferred the warm fuzzies and clichés of a vacuous Christianity to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Yet out of this, as reformation took place in our student ministry, worship services, music ministry, children's ministry, evangelism and overall church life, the church developed unity that cannot be manufactured. God's grace melded us together in love for one another and in support of one another's ministries—all to the glory of God and the furtherance of the gospel.

I remember talking with Ernie Reisinger after a few years into our reformation. He counseled, "Get your people reading." I had already developed the practice of printing my sermon manuscripts and making them available before the worship service to help those unaccustomed to exposition to better follow. I began to add booklets on varied subjects, small books, reprints of Spurgeon or Puritan or Piper sermons, and other resources for my congregation. This led to an ongoing hunger for good books by the church. I challenged the church to read through the Bible during the year. Many accepted the challenge and continue to do so.

The body of Christ became more precious to me in the reformation journey. God raised up brothers and sisters in our church to stand with me. A word of encouragement, a note thanking me for preaching the Word, an arm around my shoulder, an agreeing nod during a sermon, faithful prayer, and a meal together proved to be the tonic for curing discouragement when things grew tense. Through being their shepherded, my view of the church sharpened by seeing how much I needed the body of Christ.

A few years into reformation, I found out about Founders Ministries from a providential conversation with Jim Carnes, who is now our music minister and an elder in our church. He also told me about the annual youth conference (now called Saved By Faith Youth Challenge). My associate at the time, Todd Wilson, and I took the youth to our first conference. They loved it, and so did we! I found a group of men and women from other churches that had walked through the same process of reformation. Conversations late into the night healed many wounds and spurred me to further reformation. Later in the summer I attended my first Founders Conference. My heart immediately felt the kindred spirit of like-minded brethren. I needed that fellowship and encouragement so that I would not grow slack in the journey of reformation. I'm still on the journey, and thankful to have supportive elders, deacons, staff, church and family journeying with me. ☺

Testimony of Reformation

Tommy & Betty Campbell

(Members of South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN)

The church is constantly in need of reform, or so it is said. We know this to be true, but this truth applies to other churches, not our own, right?

We joined the congregation of South Woods Baptist Church on a lovely autumn day in 1988, shortly after relocating our family and our lives to Memphis, Tennessee. We were joining together with a group of wonderful Christians, many of them old friends, to worship our God and Savior Jesus Christ. The truth of the Word was being proclaimed and our new pastor was clearly committed to shepherding this small congregation according to that truth. Warm thoughts of rekindling old friendships, nurturing new relationships, settling into the social fabric of our new church, and getting

about the business of raising our small family abounded. Whatever we thought, reformation was the last thing on our minds. Never could we have anticipated that reformation fires had already been kindled and, in God's providence, would soon burst into flame, engulfing us in a firestorm—a refiner's fire—destined to refine and purify us all.

A change of location was just one of the many steps that would lead South Woods down paths of righteousness, for which, to be honest, we as a family were not prepared. When the old church building was sold by our mother church, our congregation relocated and the leadership proceeded with plans to acquire land and erect a new building.

A change of focus—building a worship center, building children's programs, building a recreation ministry—was the next important step. Looking back, we see that the congregation allowed these to become the primary focus of the church. Focusing on each other, focusing on a common goal—these commanded our attention for a time. The church succeeded in meeting these goals and moved into the new building, bursting at the seams with children, ball teams and excitement.

A change of heart soon became apparent, however. We began to realize that we no longer loved the truth more than we loved ourselves and our comfort. Our pastor, however, never strayed from the basic principles and we came face to face with doctrinal truths that we had never considered. Though lifelong members of various Baptist congregations, our family had never confronted the doctrines of regeneration, predestination, limited atonement or effectual calling. As parents, we were uncomfortable with the thought that all of our children might not be counted among the elect. Our self-centered type of Christianity was being challenged, and rightly so. It was a crossroads for our family, as well as many other families in our church.

A change of direction—this was how our pastor's presentation of truth, doctrine and the Word was perceived. The lay leadership asserted itself, expressing disagreement with the doctrinal truth being proclaimed from the pulpit. Failing to express biblical reasons for their disagreement, some among the lay leadership said they no longer agreed "with the direction of the church." We came to despise this phrase when Tommy attended an early morning breakfast with one elder and one Sunday school teacher. That morning the pastor's "shortcomings" and his "misguided" notions about the proper "direction of the church" were the main topics of discussion and it became apparent to us that we were in the midst of a true battle. The grumblings of a few became the mantra of many. Quiet dissatisfaction with the "direction of the church" and formerly subtle undermining of the

pastor ended as some members made known their intent not only to leave the church but also to “save” as many members as possible from this “misguided pastor” and his “misguided focus” on doctrinal truth.

Everything changed when we realized that we were expected align ourselves with one side or the other. Those in opposition to the pastoral teaching at South Woods took an attitude that we were either for them or against them. We, however, came to the painful realization that the real choice was whether we would choose to align ourselves with the proclamation of biblical truth we didn’t completely understand or to put friendship above truth. Emotionally, it was a devastating time for us as many relationships we had nurtured for more than a decade were destroyed. Our oldest son was separated from his lifelong friend. Our closest friends were now distant.

Tumultuous times always pass. Despite the loss we suffered, we gained much more. We gained the knowledge that we must stand for the truth of Scripture regardless of the results. We gained the perspective that South Woods Baptist Church needed reformation. Most importantly, we gained an understanding that true reformation of a church starts with the reformation of the individual members. ☞

News

Join us on June 13, 2006 at the SBC in Greensboro, NC for the **Founders Fellowship Breakfast**. The breakfast will begin at 6:30 a.m. in Imperial Ballrooms A/B/C on Level One in the Sheraton Four Seasons. Mark Dever, Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington D.C., will speak on “Election, the Gospel and Evangelism.” Deadline for registrations is June 5, 2006.

Registration is only available online:

wwwFOUNDERS.org/conferences/ffb/

The national **Southern Baptist Founders Conference** is scheduled for July 11–14, 2006 and will be hosted by Bethel Baptist Church in Owasso, OK. The theme will be “The Gospel of the Grace of God.” Speakers will include Sam Waldron and Ray Ortlund, Jr.

Online:

wwwFOUNDERS.org/conferences/

Born to Reform

Jeff Noblit

While driving my car back to college, at the age of 19, I was converted listening to a preacher on the radio. I began to attend church regularly, something I never did before. The thing that seemed to strike me the most in the churches I attended was the obvious lack of passion, sincerity and obedience to Scripture. On Sunday mornings in my small town, I could look around the packed auditorium and count many who were living in open sin. There was never any effort of accountability or discipline within the church at any level. Adding to this, I was regularly questioned by well-meaning church members as to whether I had “prayed a certain prayer” to be saved. In my remembrance, no one opened the Scriptures and taught me the biblical evidences of the new birth. I began to pray the “sinner’s prayer” many times each day hoping one of them would be the real thing and I would be eternally fixed for heaven and not hell. I began to go “soul winning” and urging, if not forcing, others to pray the “sinner’s prayer.” Something seemed artificial about this, but I continued on because that’s what I was taught. From the beginning, I was troubled in my heart and was uncomfortable with the state of the church and the common understanding of conversion.

I was quickly becoming disillusioned by the shallowness and hypocrisy of the churches I attended. I observed coldness and indifference to spiritual things, and it made me wonder if these church members had experienced what I had experienced. My heart was burning with love for Christ and with a passion for biblical obedience in His church; however, I was unbalanced in my spiritual immaturity. A lot of heat and too little light burned within. Looking back now I see that I was too prideful concerning my walk and service to Christ. God is still growing me in these areas.

It was probably by the end of the first year of my Christian pilgrimage that I became so disappointed in the local church that I decided I would commit my life to “para-church” ministry, but that decision didn’t last long. Slowly, from the Scriptures, I was beginning to see that the local church was the center of God’s purposes on earth.

Then one day God spoke to my heart. I do not remember exactly when or where, but I distinctly remember a strong impression within my soul. It was as if God etched in my heart with a hot iron stylist these words, “I will do My work through My church. You can get on the inside and be used as part of the solution or arrogantly stay on the outside and continue your useless criticizing.” Again, I do not remember the specifics, but God impressed this upon my heart as surely as I’m breathing today! I had known within months of my conversion that I was to be in full-time ministry. Now I knew I was to be a pastor in one of God’s local churches. From that time onward I was totally committed to the pastorate and to leading a church to be truly biblical and to be a model of a true church. God had humbled me and spoken to me. Now there was no turning back; there could be no Plan B. It was as Amos said in Amos 3:8, “A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?” Deep within my heart the lion had roared; my destiny was set. I was terribly ignorant of all this would mean. I just knew I was called to preach and pastor, and that I must fully trust in the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture. One thing I *did* know was that my pastoral leadership would most likely be in contradiction to much, if not most, of the typical functions of the average church. I felt that if I took a pastorate and followed in the flow of the typical Southern Baptist Church, I would be as disobedient as Jonah sailing for Joppa. Today I understand as never before that God does not need me, but I am equally convinced that by His grace and certainly for His glory, I was born to reform.

Glory of God Focused

I have been on the pastoral staff of First Baptist Church of Muscle Shoals for more than 25 years. Seventeen years ago I was called to be the Senior Pastor. That’s when I began prayerfully to put together a scriptural purpose statement for the church. I was convinced that we needed a clear purpose statement to help guide our journey together as pastor and people.

I was strongly convinced of two things. First, the primary truth of the purpose statement must be the glory of God. The church is Christ’s bride, born and sustained by His power, and all is for His glory (Ephesians 3:21). Second, the purpose statement must be thoroughly biblical. It must be totally and fully God’s will for His church as revealed in Scripture. The purpose statement we composed is:

The purpose of First Baptist Church Muscle Shoals is to glorify God by obediently making and equipping disciples of Christ in the Shoals and throughout the world by the power of the Spirit.

The focus on God's glory and on being Bible saturated has sustained me "through many dangers, toils, and snares." I'm convinced that with any lesser purpose, I would have left the ministry or run away in fear. The warfare of reforming a church is severe and seemingly, at times, unrelenting. A deepening and unswerving commitment to the glory of God and knowledge of His sovereignty was, for my life, the anchor that held the ship of reformation steady through the storms of opposition. A strong passion for His glory in the church is the only sufficient anchor to weather the storms of reformation.

Informed and Reformed

Several years ago I received a call from a dear brother I had never met. Most *Founders Journal* readers will probably know his name — Mark Dever, Pastor of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Mark said he had heard about the ministry of FBC Muscle Shoals and would like to meet and discuss our mutual convictions. Shortly thereafter, during that sit-down conversation, some lights turned on in my mind!

The first occurred when Mark asked me if it was studying church history that led or inspired me to begin the reforms within my church. I actually had no idea that the reforms I had initiated made my church much like most Baptist churches of the 18th and early 19th centuries. But it was something I needed to hear. My response to Mark's question as to what led me to reform First Baptist Church was a simple and honest reply, "It's scriptural." Today, partly due to Mark's encouragement, I am a student of church history. This practice has edified my life and pastorate immeasurably.

The second light that flickered but did not come on until some time after my conversation with Mark was the concept of being "reformed." I had only a shallow understanding of what the word meant as far as specific church movement historically or theologically. Over the next couple of years, as I deepened in my study of church history, I realized that for the most part (depending on who is defining the term) I am "reformed." But more than reformed, I'd rather be viewed as biblical. Actually, they should be the same thing, but woe to the brother who strives after reformation as a system as his first passion and not for God and His glory. The order of

these things is essential. Calvinism can be as deadly an idol as Arminianism. We must love God and use systems of theology and not love systems and use God!

I was well into the pilgrimage of reformation at First Baptist Church Muscle Shoals when I was informed that I was “historically and theologically speaking,” reformed. Actually, I think it was a gift from God that I was mostly ignorant of “labels” and “systems” until the majority of reforms were well underway in my church. I did not begin by looking to a system of theology as helpful as that may have been. I started with a desire to serve and glorify God by leading my church to be fully scriptural. If this is what is meant by reformed then I gladly wear the label. Yet in my case I had to be informed that I was reformed.

Theology and Methodology

As I mentioned previously, my passion for the local church began soon after my conversion. Early on I began to learn of those who were esteemed as role models within the Southern Baptist Convention. Yet as I examined their churches I found glaring unbiblical practices and seemingly no efforts to reform these areas. This is one of the reasons Dr. John MacArthur’s ministry was so appealing. His church genuinely seemed to strive after obedience in the totality of local church life. In many ways, Dr. MacArthur’s ministry was my role model. Yet, in the Southern Baptist Convention, the “great churches” that were held up as examples seemed (to me) to have an obvious disconnect between the theology their churches embraced and the methodology that was followed! Man-centered pragmatism seemed to rule the day!

Unfortunately and to my shame, there were far too many areas where, either in my pride or in ignorance, I, too, was functioning with a man-centered and pragmatic spirit instead of humbly yielding to sound scriptural truth. Yet, God was growing me and still is to this day.

Discipline

Upon becoming the senior pastor, I immediately began reforming many policies and procedures, but God had an accelerated course in mind. On the fifth day in my role as senior pastor, a prominent church leader, who had strongly and openly opposed my becoming pastor, was found to be in open and scandalous sin. There was much pressure to “sweep the issue under the carpet.” I knew because of the person’s prominence and the

scandalous nature of the sin that public correction was necessary. We lost close to one-third of our active membership. Some who left went about spreading lies throughout the community concerning the dismissal of the member found in scandalous sin. One very positive thing did happen. The commitment to deal with sin in the body in a biblical manner was well established. Over the next couple of years we developed policies and procedures for compassionate discipline. Since then, hundreds have been removed for the sin of neglecting church attendance. Many others have been removed for adultery, drunkenness, unbiblical divorce, abandoning their spouse and children, among other things. God has chosen to glorify Himself by letting us see several who were dismissed come back into church membership with humble, repentant hearts! I remember the first time a publicly disciplined member stood before the congregation in tears thanking the church for dismissing him from membership. He stated that God used the dismissal to bring him to repentance and give him victory over the sin in his life. Another member dismissed for unrepentant sin was at rock bottom, living in a roach-infested hotel room at the opposite end of the state. He was separated from his wife, his child, everyone. When he received word that he had been removed for his lack of repentance, he later told me his first thought was, "There's something worth returning to. These people love me." Within weeks he was restored, and God restored his marriage. Today he is faithful to the church and has even become an elected community leader! The effects of biblical discipline are powerful for the church family. An increased spirit of love and humility within the body always marks the weeks following a dismissal for sin. And usually an increased number of new believers are added to the church.

Elders

After the initial case of discipline, the church went through about sixteen months of decline and struggle. Eventually things really began to take off. The respect and admiration for me from the church body began to grow greatly, and I knew this was not healthy. I simply had almost no accountability. The deacons were only servants to the body and had no authority to oversee. The pastor was viewed as a benevolent dictator. I knew I needed help to lead and oversee the church. I was convinced that a plurality of elders was the most biblically healthy model of church leadership. I preached a series of messages on biblical elders and then asked the congregation to nominate men they discerned to be called and qualified for the office. I examined the top nominees, along with their wives, as to their

sense of calling to the office and their biblical qualifications. Twelve men were presented to the congregation for a two-week examination period. If anyone had any concerns, they were given two weeks to bring them to my attention. After this time, the men, with their wives at their side, were unanimously affirmed as elders in the church. Originally, we called them “the Pastor’s Council” for fear the title “elder” might unsettle some. Since then we have matured greatly in our understanding of elder ministry and in our policy for selecting and installing them. Today those under consideration are required to complete a 50-page questionnaire on theology and church polity. For more than sixteen years now the love, encouragement, and accountability among our elders has been priceless to me. They have been the key, humanly speaking, to holding the church together in some very difficult times. Their leadership in doctrine and discipline issues greatly enhances my role as the preaching pastor.

Membership Process

During the first ten years of my pastorate, we experienced incredible numerical growth. In those early years, to join our church, you just walked to the front at the end of the service, received a three-to-seven minute counseling session and were presented as a new member. As it turns out, more of our growth was a curse than a blessing! Though our overall “numbers” kept increasing, so did our discipline problems. It took some time, but I finally figured out part of the problem. Many who joined by letter were either unregenerate or terribly shallow in their understanding of the biblical duties of church membership. Once the newness of church membership wore off, they were leaving off their duties and returning to their sinful habits. We had already opened up the back door by exercising biblical discipline, but now we realized we must guard the front door! This realization led to a radically new procedure for receiving members.

Today most people attend for months before requesting membership. This gives many opportunities for them to fellowship with members and church leaders, learning both the blessings and duties of church membership. They attend a three-hour class that covers doctrine and church polity. The class places a strong emphasis on the biblical evidences of true conversion. If they desire to continue toward membership, they must meet with a church elder, who examines their conversion experience and their understanding of the duties of membership. After this meeting, if all is acceptable, they are asked to sign a covenant statement that places particular emphasis on our policy on discipline. Lastly, they are presented to

the congregation and publicly make five affirmations of faithfulness and service. The congregation responds with an affirmation of love and support to them. This practice, which is continually being revised, has proven to be a great blessing to the spiritual health of the church.

“Salvation by Works” in Baptist Life?

First Baptist Church Muscle Shoals has always had an aggressive and passionate commitment to evangelism. We have averaged over 25% of our Sunday School attendance at weekly outreach Visitation for more than sixteen years. During the early years of my pastorate, we averaged about 180 baptisms per year! I remember so many, including prominent leaders in the Convention, praising these results! Yet no one that I can remember ever questioned the genuineness of these “conversions.” If most of these baptized converts were genuine and bore lasting fruit, we should be having close to 3,000 in attendance on a good Sunday instead of close to the 1,000 we have today!

Initially, we tried to combat this problem by developing a thorough follow-up and discipling program through our Small Groups. Still the percentage of those who fell away didn’t improve. And far too many had to be disciplined.

Then a light went on that was startling and shocking. We had actually been functioning with a shallow, if not outright unbiblical, understanding of conversion. The reason so many of those we baptized fell away was because they were not truly saved! Urging people to simply pray a prayer or walk down an aisle at the end of a service was vastly different from becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus. Without saying it outwardly, our evangelism emphasized the simple WORK of walking forward or saying a prayer. Actually, I was living as a dualist. I strongly denounced “easy-believism,” yet the methods I followed were clearly fostering this error.

I spent two years intensely studying the doctrine of conversion. I studied all the Baptist Statements of Faith I could find. I read many Puritan fathers along with Spurgeon, Dagg, Boice, Gill, Pendleton and others. I read the biographies of Edwards, Spurgeon, Whitefield, Wesley and many more! I could not find one example in Baptist church history or in any Baptist Statement of Faith that taught that one is *assured* of salvation by praying a “sinner’s prayer.”

We began to go through a serious reformation concerning our understanding of gospel preaching and personal soul winning, especially what constitutes true conversion. Today we never tell a person, “If you prayed

that prayer, you are saved.” We certainly do not discourage lost sinners from calling on the Lord in repentance and faith to save them; however, assurance of salvation must be based only on solid biblical criterion. From the Scriptures we teach “seekers” of repentance and faith and the witness of the Spirit within the heart. *Simple* faith in Christ saves, but it is also a *substantial* faith that transforms the whole person (2 Corinthians 5:17). I’m convinced millions have prayed a prayer in the power of the flesh and have not been born again by the Spirit of God, yet these have been assured by well-meaning Christians and pastors alike that “the prayer” saved them. God help us!

Today we have many seekers who regularly attend church with us. I appeal to them, urge them, even command them, sometimes with tears, to repent of loving self, sin and this world and turn to Christ as Prophet, Priest and King, and God has been gracious to let us see a steady stream of new believers who give good biblical evidence of repentance and faith.

It’s powerful and gives glory to God when new believers testify before they are baptized of how God brought them to repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Just a couple of weeks ago, a lady shared before her baptism, “I see my sin. My sins are so wretched and bad, and I fall short of His glory. But I have come to Him in repentance. At times I cry and mourn over my sin. I am trusting Him. My hope is in what He did on the cross. He took the wrath of God on Himself and let me go free. I treasure Him more and more each day I live. I just want my love for Him to be greater and greater.” I simply do not remember hearing such a substantial testimony as this in the earlier years of my ministry. Today they are common—methodology flowing out of our theology. It doesn’t get any more basic than that. Yet, most of our churches need thorough reform to get there. *We* did. And we are still reforming. 🙏

Testimony of Reformation

David Young

(Member of First Baptist Church Muscle Shoals, AL)

I came to First Baptist Church Muscle Shoals, with my wife and two young children, in December of 1989 at the age of 34 in search of something different. I had been brought up in small Baptist churches all my life. I don’t believe I ever remember being in a church that preached verse

by verse through the Scriptures. For the first time in my life, God's Word began to have an impact.

Earlier in my life, at age 13, I had become concerned about all my friend's making professions of faith and felt pressured into making a decision—to become a Christian, and unfortunately that is all it was at that time—a mental decision. However, 21 years later, in just five short months at First Baptist, God, through the person of the Holy Spirit, began to break my heart over my sin and I came to understand that I was lost and that Christ was calling me to Himself. On May 16, 1990, I surrendered my life to Him. After 34 years, the conflict was finally over.

Shortly after that, Brother Jeff began to teach our body about the biblical teaching of a plurality of elders. This was new to me, given my background in small churches, which were, for the most part, ruled by deacons. I applauded his desire for accountability. See this desire in our pastor, plus the clear teaching of Scripture, made it an easier decision for our people to follow.

As I look back over the years, this is one thing that God has used to give our church the much-needed stability to remain effective in times of trouble and uncertainty. Our congregation grew steadily over the coming years to become the largest church in our area, but the growth was not all good.

Our elders became convicted that even though our church was growing, we also had within the body some members who were living in open sin and were not willing to be reconciled. Brother Jeff began the long process of teaching our church about biblical discipline from Matthew 18:15–20, among other texts. Our people began to realize the importance of church membership and we saw many come to repentance through obedience to His Word.

After much study of the Scriptures and reading book after book of church history written by some of our great fathers of the faith, our elders came to realize that much of the problem with sin and shallow worship in the church began when we swung open our doors to anyone who would simply walk an aisle to request membership or pray a prayer. I began to see, though it was a struggle at first that this was not true evangelism and we were filling the church with the unregenerate.

Our elders began to establish a much more cautious system of church membership. No longer were they forcing people, who had no true understanding of the gospel, to respond to a three to five minute invitation at the end of the service. Now they began encouraging them to come for counseling with a pastor or elder. They also instituted a membership class that

all perspective members must attend, and required each person to sign a church covenant with a pastor or elder. I saw these changes as a fulfillment of 2 Corinthians 13:5 which says: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” So much of what our leadership has led us to do over the years, even though thoroughly biblical, is very much outside the norm for most Southern Baptist Churches and will be very difficult for a pastor to establish without much prayer and guidance.

But I must say as a member and as a Christian, I thank God for our having been led to understand what it means to be more biblical in our structure of leadership and have membership in our church that really means something.

It takes a gracious God to be so patient with us as we grow towards Him both corporately and personally. None of us are perfect but we are all being conformed to the image of His Son, and always reforming. ☺

Announcing the Founders Study Center 2006 Fall Courses!

The Founders Study Center will be offering four courses this fall:

Theology of the Puritans with Dr. J. I. Packer

Maintaining Your Spiritual Health with Dr. Don Whitney

AND TWO NEW COURSES:

Systematic Theology 2 with Dr. Roger Nicole

A Biblical Call with Pastor Albert N. Martin

Registration for the fall will begin on June 26, 2006. Fall orientation for students will open August 21, 2006; courses begin on September 4, 2006.

For more information, please visit our website at
study.founders.org

Letters

Dear Tom:

I wanted to write and express my appreciation for you and your ministry. I am not a Calvinist and I seldom journey to your web site. However, I looked at it to check on something, and now have spent odd and end time reading through your blog over the last 2 or 3 weeks. I especially want to thank your for the February 23, 2006 post on your entitled “Whither the Southern Baptists? While any such schema necessarily draws lines somewhat arbitrarily, I found your description apropos. I also appreciate your candor and balance—calling to account the Rigorously Reformed Vision as well as the Superficial Evangelistic Vision. My aspiration is certainly to be part of “Tom’s Vision.”

I first heard of the Founders approximately a decade ago through two casual acquaintances. I was thoroughly turned off by the two young men who bluntly told me that “when we get control” the SBC would adopt the 1689 confession and people such as I would have to go. I wrongly associated the Founders with that attitude. The truth is that these were two young men who were relatively new Christians, perhaps even a little arrogant, and mainly suffering for the disease usually cured by time, being barely 20 and knowing everything. In any event, every group seems to have it fair share of people with more zeal than grace. Having now read most of this year’s postings (Calvinists do seem to post more than most) I have come to appreciate the spirit of the Founders and almost all are very strong in beliefs, but gracious in attitude.

I also appreciate your focus on church discipline and the lack of integrity in reporting and accounting. It seems to me that on balance, the Founders is the only group that has elevated truth above denominational promotion. I do not mean every individual, but most other groups seem to remain silent. I am not yet where you are soteriologically, but I certainly want to be a partner with you on integrity. God’s blessings and mercies on all of us, Calvinists and non-Calvinists, we all must have that.

S. P. (North Carolina)

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I just received the Winter 2006 journal. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I recently preached on the importance of right behavior in the church (<http://scripturealone.blogspot.com/2006/04/1-timothy-314-16-how-one-ought-to.html>). I’m glad to see the issue being highlighted. I hope people will listen and respond!

E. S. (via email)

Contents

Strengthen the Things that Remain	1
<i>Thomas K. Ascol</i>	
Reforming the Local Church	3
<i>Fred A. Malone</i>	
My Discovery of the Doctrines of Grace	11
<i>Terrell Suggs</i>	
Journeying in Reformation	14
<i>Phil A. Newton</i>	
Testimony in Reformation	20
<i>Tommy & Betty Campbell</i>	
Born to Reform	23
<i>Jeff Noblit</i>	
Testimony in Reformation	30
<i>David Young</i>	
News	22
Letters	33