

# An Honest Evaluation of Modern Reformed & Evangelical Churches and Proposals for the Future

I wrote a general critique of the wider evangelical church in 2005 called *The Current Deplorable Situation in the British Church*. This looked at various issues and demonstrated that virtually all sectors of the current UK church are heavily engaged in unbiblical teachings or practices.<sup>1</sup> In another paper written in 2002 [*The Current UK Church Scene: A personal reflection on a nation in spiritual decline*] I included a criticism of the Reformed church in a general way. This comprised of: heterodox teachings in many parts, ever declining numbers, unbiblical authority figures, authoritarian leaders, meetings with no spiritual life and a lack of proper pastoring or catechising. However, at today's date I believe that the situation has significantly worsened.<sup>2</sup>

Having drawn close to many different Reformed works in the last twenty plus years I have been more able to better experience and learn of the dark underbelly that passes for church life. It is futile for the Reformed church to condemn the heresies of the Charismatic Movement, the extremism of TV evangelists or the apostasy of the Anglicans when there are just as many skeletons in Reformed cupboards.

If we truly mean to serve God in our generation there is absolutely no point to pretend that things are fine. Such hypocrisy will never be blessed. Neither dare we excuse or cover up very serious shortcomings in church practice and ethics. It is also absolutely useless to keep writing about, praying for and hoping in a God-sent revival to fix the mess. Most of the problems have been caused by men loving themselves and disobeying God. The fix for this is repentance and godly responsibility, not leaving it all for God to clear up and save us the trouble. When the Lord has perhaps just a small community of saints, but one that is built on Biblical truth and led by men who fear him, then we should start praying for revival in a time of small things, national dissipation and persecution.

When we have done what God gives us responsibility to do, then we can cry to him for mercy and grace to aid the work; we have no right to expect supernatural power to correct our disobedience and hypocrisy.

What then needs to be confronted?

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<sup>1</sup> The main headings dealt with: a focus upon technical improvements which have done no good; the lack of sound theology; the lack of Biblical pastoring and discipling; the damage caused by the Charismatic Mvt; ecumenism; the damage caused by the anti-charismatic mvt; the focus upon man; the neglected Gospel; the lack of care for the poor; the unbiblical pattern of the church and the lack of godly leaders;

<sup>2</sup> However, I must add a caveat (limitation) here that there are still a few churches established on key Biblical principles, with godly leadership committed to pastoral instruction. These seem pitifully few. Also there are a few Reformed groups/magazines desperately seeking to exert a godly influence on the UK scene.

## The scope of the problem

Most churches are suffering a huge loss of members; this would not be happening if churches were working Biblically. It is now commonplace that Reformed churches have only a handful of old ladies in the congregation. I have heard of once significant Reformed Baptist churches that have a congregation of three. Historic denominations have been losing large numbers for many years, but despite apparent success over the last few decades, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches are also suffering a bleeding of members. Some Black Pentecostal churches in London and other large cities have grown, but this is often through immigration not actual evangelistic growth. To get an idea of how bad things are, I will give some examples.

Studies by Elaine Bolitho,<sup>3</sup> regarding the diminishing numbers in New Zealand's Baptist churches, show that between 1989 and 1996, 10,118 members were lost without any record. For every 100 new members 108 left with none being accounted for by dying or moving to another church. In my experience this is fairly typical of most churches in the UK, with some churches experiencing a much worse figure. These figures show substantial increases in the numbers of people leaving today than in previous history. Pentecostal churches in New Zealand, despite an apparent dramatic growth, reveal that a steady 10% leave by the back door each year.<sup>4</sup>

Studies by George Barna and others in the US and Peter Brierley's census statistics of UK churches corroborate this generally declining pattern. In America 3,000 churches vanish every year and 2.7 million church members fall into inactivity (i.e. leave the church). From 1990 to 2000, the combined membership of all Protestant denominations in the USA declined by almost 5 million members (9.5%), while the US population increased by 24 million (11%).<sup>5</sup>

At one point a few years ago the UK churches were losing 2,000 people every week. Peter Brierley's *'Church attendance in England 1980-2005'* shows that most denominations are in considerable decline. Although the Anglican, Methodist, United Reformed and Roman Catholic churches have suffered the worst decline, the other churches are faring little better. Baptists have lost over 32,000 (11%) while Independents have lost nearly 50,000 (20.3%). Catholics lost nearly 1.2 million, even before the paedophile scandals.

However, New Churches (Charismatic Restorationist) and Pentecostal Churches have increased, which is to be expected as people moved from institutional churches to them; this is not real growth but relocation. Also, many of them only appeared around 1980 when these figures begin; they could only increase from that time. Their decline has only begun in the last few years and is yet to be evaluated; my gut feeling is that New Churches are in slight decline since 2005, traditional Pentecostal churches are in considerable decline while Black Pentecostal churches are in slight growth. Regarding the general decline of British church attendance, some statisticians prophesy the eradication of evangelical Christianity within fifty years at this rate because evangelism is failing. Sheep stealing will not enable Charismatic churches to grow forever.

The table below gives the actual figures for 'evangelical' churches:

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<sup>3</sup> Bolitho, E.E. *Hole in the Bucket*. Seminar to Auckland, Waikato and Bay of Plenty Baptist leaders, October 1997 (Auckland).

<sup>4</sup> Taylor L. "Denominational Growth" in Patrick B. (ed), *New Vision New Zealand Vol II*, Auckland, Vision New Zealand, (1997), p69.

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Richard J. Krejcir; *Statistics and Reasons for Church Decline*. Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development.

Church denomination	1980	2005
Baptist	286,900	254,800
Independent	239,200	190,500
New Churches	75,000	183,600
Pentecostal	221,100	287,600

Congregational churches, that once had John Owen and Thomas Goodwin as champions, have been absorbed. Brethren churches have become virtually extinct in the UK already, with Methodist churches fast approaching the same fate. There are hardly any historic Presbyterian churches left in the UK outside Scotland and Northern Ireland (in fact they do not appear in the census statistics at all). Particular Baptists are a tiny and dwindling denomination while Grace Baptists, though larger, are also diminishing. The Baptist Union has long sold its soul to liberalism and modernism, whilst the Reform evangelical party within Anglicanism limps alongside the burgeoning liberal, even anti-Christian, party that dominates it. How Christians can formally support such an apostate denomination is a mystery to me; they should have all left in horror many years ago. Martyn Lloyd-Jones called for them to resign in the mid-60s; things are much worse now. In some towns, such as Bradford, Christians are outnumbered by Muslims two to one and Anglican churches have been scrapped.

Although the mainline evangelical churches are suffering, the big Charismatic churches in the UK actually suggest a historic decline larger than other churches not picked up in statistics. Thousands of people joined them in recent decades and yet their congregations have remained fairly stable. The national increase is in the appearance of new churches; the existing large churches are hardly any bigger at all, or slightly smaller. This means that most of those thousands were lost out of the back door; indeed many church plants collapsed. Though they have large churches, the Charismatic Movement, in the main, bleeds many more people; there is a constant stream of people coming in and going out and this loss rarely gets measured.

For instance in Brighton, the main Charismatic churches around in 1980 have remained stable for the last couple of decades but several new Charismatic churches have opened up in the town, thus giving a statistical impression of increase. The membership of these churches is largely dominated by the huge student population in the town (in excess of 30,000) and thus the membership is volatile. In practice many young people attend several of these churches, flitting like butterflies between them, and numbers could easily be double-counted in a census. The largest Charismatic church has literally had thousands of people pass through its doors and yet is no larger than it was in the early 90s. It may have a current membership of several hundred, but it has certainly lost thousands in two decades. This huge loss is proof of decline more than the several hundred is proof of success.

It is a myth that the people leaving are those on the fringes of church life or young aimless folk. Many people who have left the church were mature people, often families, who had become terribly disenchanted. They had previously been very committed people, but left thoroughly disillusioned. Two of my best friends are a husband and wife who were pillars in the largest UK Charismatic church for over 30 years. They left a few years ago, absolutely disenchanted, and even angry, at abuses. These people were very committed to the church for decades, and very active in serving the church sacrificially. They now condemn the church as apostate.

There has been one useful survey of lost members. A study of church leavers from Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in New Zealand<sup>6</sup> found that they were

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<sup>6</sup> *Ten Myths About Church Leavers*, Alan Jaimieson. [www.ntrf.org](http://www.ntrf.org)

predominantly middle aged (70% were between 35-45 years) who had been active in their respective churches as adults for more than 15 years. 80% of them had children but nevertheless chose to leave the church, with their children. 28% had church backgrounds as children (i.e. attended children's and youth programmes). 40% came from nominal church backgrounds (and attended some church-based children's programmes). 30% of the leavers had no church background at all. 94% had been involved in leadership positions in their churches and 40% had been involved for at least a year in a paid capacity.

These people did not lose their faith but were very committed to the cause of Christ. However, they have lost their faith in men and organisations. Something is very wrong!

### **Growth of other works**

It is not good enough for church leaders to just dismiss this decline as typical of the times we live in, post-permissive society religious apathy and so on. Other works are growing as the church declines.

For many years the fastest growing religious movement has been paganism. What was once considered as obsolete and dead, from the Victorian Age to the 1950s, is now very much alive. Many large towns have shops dedicated to witchcraft, even sleepy, dull, retirement towns like Worthing. There are many active Wicca covens and various other sorts of nature religion. Clairvoyants, astrologers and fortune-tellers are more popular than ever and many people attempt their own divination through a variety of methods, such as the I-Ching, Numerology, Palmistry and Tarot cards.

The sects are also growing. JWs and particularly Mormons and Scientology are growing quite fast due to their aggressive and persistent proselytising methods. But the biggest faith growth in the UK at this point in time is probably Islam. In some parts of the UK more people go to a Mosque on Friday than go to church on Sunday already, and the spurt of growth is predicted to increase. Much of this is due to massive immigration in the last decade. In addition, there are increasing numbers of Sikhs and Hindus. A dedicated Hindu temple (as opposed to a meeting in a rented room) was once a rarity in the UK, probably only appearing in London, but now they are spreading. There is even one in a suburb of Brighton & Hove, which only has a population of 300,000 or so and relatively few immigrants from India.

People are not becoming less religious, indeed the fact of postmodernism suggests otherwise; people are being turned off Christianity. In my view this is not because churches are dogmatic, but because churches have watered down their faith and compromised the truth. People want dogmatic certainty, and so they go to sects and cults that claim it for themselves. The churches made a big mistake in pandering to the wicked and dumbing-down the Gospel message.

In this paper I want to concentrate particularly upon the problems within Reformed and evangelical churches in Britain, having exposed the problems in Charismatic and Pentecostal churches in several other papers.

## **General church problems**

### **Large churches**

Churches with a very large congregation always lead to the majority of people feeling depersonalised. Very few godly Christians actually like large churches; even the untaught know deep inside that this method is unbiblical; although they cannot articulate Biblical teaching they feel deep in their gut that this isn't right. An individual in a large congregation can easily feel that no one cares about them and that they are a small cog in a

big machine. Furthermore, they feel that they have no input into the decision-making processes of the church, because they don't. They feel that only those in leadership have any say and they have little purpose.

In such churches there are few or no opportunities for members to discuss important local or personal issues. Advice from a leader necessitates making an appointment via the website and this puts people off seeking counsel unless the issue is extremely important. There is no sense of family, informality and no open access to leaders. Any question that is seen as upsetting the status quo, or questioning leadership strategy, is met by a closed door or worse. Indeed, some large churches are so callous that they actually expect people to leave if they don't like the way it works. The idea of leaders going after lost sheep is entirely lost upon them.

Another serious problem with large churches is that the financial needs are always great – funding large buildings and maintenance programmes, a multi-tiered leadership and so on. This leads to continual demands for money to keep things going as well as pushing for a high level of tithing sent straight to the church treasurer. In this situation members often feel that they are mere tithing-units, pumped dry to keep a big machine oiled. The church becomes one big organisation of strategies, programmes, bureaucracy, demands and re-organisations; in other words it becomes just like a business corporation and so unlike the simplicity that is found in the teaching of Christ.

Now while this is a symptom of many Charismatic churches, it is also applicable to a number of Reformed works. There is a famous Reformed church in California that has a membership of 3,000+ people. It is impossible for such a large church to be able to manifest genuine Biblical church life, which requires intimacy, openness, friendship and mutual edification in a small group. As members become wiser regarding the Bible, they begin to see the contradiction between NT teaching on meeting together, structure and leadership and they eventually leave, feeling that they have wasted years of their lives.

### **Unbiblical meetings**

Though Reformed churches are less guilty in this than Charismatic ones, still there are many that have developed a host of unbiblical meetings. The Bible knows of only one chief meeting – the family gathered together on Sunday to break bread and edify one another. There is no indication of a morning and an evening meeting, but one long meeting that follows a communal meal, usually in the afternoon / early evening (Acts 20:7). Depending upon the need of the church, there may be another meeting to specifically study doctrine when required (Acts 20:20) and there may also be prayer meetings to deal with specific issues as necessary (Acts 12:12).

However, today we have a host of meetings that have no Biblical provenance: children's meetings, teenager's meetings, Gospel meetings, healing meetings, administrative meetings, Sunday schools, men's meetings, women's meetings, celebrations, regional gatherings etc. These arise from the church being organised wrongly in the first place where people's needs fail to be met. Where the church meets Biblically in a home under fatherly eldership, focused on the Lord's Supper in real fellowship these extra-Biblical meetings become redundant; people receive all they need in the main meeting because it is a family gathering.

### **Church splits**

One church leader said that the average Christian will go through three church splits in their lifetime. I have seen more than that in the last 40 years. Splits always cause a great deal of hurt and sometimes even lead to the fragmentation of families. The Toronto Experience alone caused many church splits with the resultant damage in multitudes of families up and down the country.

### **Preaching centres**

Many Reformed churches, even famous ones, are little more than preaching centres based upon a single man. There is virtually no fellowship, no intimacy, no friendship, no participation and sometimes they don't even break bread from one month to the next. These places are not churches by definition; they are academies. These places may produce great ministry, but they are not churches.

Many Reformed UK pastors model themselves on the powerful preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones but this is a great mistake. As pastor of Westminster Chapel, Lloyd-Jones established a popular preaching ministry that many people came to hear, even though they were not actually members of the church. That Lloyd-Jones helped very many people is beyond dispute, but he himself recognised that the chapel was not a functioning church. In fact, he told the local Baptist pastor that he was the minister for the locality and Westminster Chapel financially supported Westminster Baptist Church. When Lloyd-Jones died the church gradually slid into decline because it was based upon a man. The following pastor had some success for a while but he did not have the gifts or orthodoxy of Lloyd-Jones. Gradually many left the church demoralised and when Charismatic errors were later introduced many left scandalised. Today it is a shadow of its former self where the few members attend the local Anglican church in the evening.

Churches cannot succeed just on the basis of the powerful ministry of one man. They may appear to succeed, being popular, but they are not doing the congregation any spiritual good. The local church is the sum of all its people, and all are required to be functioning in their gift. The reality is that preaching centres are places where the congregation is focused upon a man and not Christ. This is humanism rather than Christianity and it is a recipe for disaster.

### **Neglect of the poor**

The godly must always look to the needs of the poor.<sup>7</sup> While the priority must be given to the needy in the church (Gal 6:10), our local neighbours should be assisted, whoever they are. The modern church has singularly ignored this requirement of the faith. In many cases the member's money is diverted to fund unbiblical items, such as buildings and unbiblical leadership salaries, and there is no money left. In fact the modern church is not just ignoring the poor, but giving to charitable organisations and missionaries is much diminished and some are closing down. However, a bigger scandal is where the poor within a given church are ignored while leaders are affluent. This is a basic sin which the apostle James castigates in his letter.

### **Focus on instrumental music**

This used to be more of a problem in Charismatic circles, but many Reformed churches are copying Charismatic practices in the hope of attracting more people. Consequently they have begun to develop small bands or augment simple piano playing with additional instruments. That this is a wrong direction is demonstrated by the simple fact that the apostles don't encourage any instrumental music and never mention it as being a part of the church's worship at all.

Some instruments began to creep into some eastern churches as a result of pagan influences and these were initially condemned by the church fathers. In fact, it was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that musical instruments became widespread throughout the Catholic Church, but it was hundreds of years more until Reformed churches began to adopt them. Calvin, Luther and even Spurgeon had no musical instruments. Only in the middle 19<sup>th</sup> century were small organs or pianos used in British Reformed churches.

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<sup>7</sup> Ps 112:9; Prov 22:9; Isa 58; Matt 25:35-40; Rm 12:20; Jm 2:15; 1 Jn 3:17.

The reason is that worship must be pure. The human voice is sufficient to make harmonious praise; as soon as instruments get involved, there is occasion for the flesh to drum up emotionalism and excitement. Occult religions use instrumental worship to whip up feelings, and like many other things, the church gradually copied them over time.

So using any instruments is unbiblical, but gradually adopting more and more instruments is worse. Additionally many Reformed churches are now using Charismatic songs and hymns without discrimination. The hymnbooks of Reformed and Charismatic churches are becoming more and more similar.

It is always wrong to adopt measures that are specifically designed to attract members. The church never needs to do this. Its purpose is to glorify God, worship Christ and edify the brethren; the matter of being a few or being many is irrelevant. What is ungodly is where pastors adopt unbiblical methods, and ruin the life of the church in doing so, in order to attract members. God is the focus of the church not having lots of members.

### **Being out of step with society**

If you visit any traditional British Calvinistic FIEC or a Reformed Baptist church you will find the all men in black or brown suits and the ladies dressed as if they are going to the opera. I have even read church leaders write about the need to wear your best clothes to go to church and use the argument that if you were visiting the queen you would want to wear your best. This is following an attitude that disappeared after WWII.

Before the mid-50s people always wore suits even in manual labour; it was even common for men to wear a sports jacket indoors. That was the fashion then and many modern clothes items just did not exist in the UK. No one wears a sports jacket indoors now; indeed few even wear them outdoors. The wearing of suits, jackets, ties etc was the fashion then and it was also all there was. Denim jeans hardly existed at all until the late 50s while bomber jackets, Harrington jackets, golf shirts, sweatshirts, and so on, only began to appear in high street shops in the 60s. Trainers did not appear until the late 70s. The idea that men must wear a black suit, collared shirt, tie and black shoes reflects a situation that prevailed up to the late 50s because there was little else. It is a reflection of a time that no one has the right to inflict on someone else today. To demand that men wear suits to church is to demand that people follow the fashion that you grew up with; there is no Biblical command to do this.

Now, I do not advocate slovenly dress in church gatherings, neither do I condone men in shorts and barefoot sandals or women in very short skirts and low tops. What is required is normal respectful casual clothing. We are not going to a formal reception at Buckingham Palace, we are meeting together as a family to worship God. Family members do not get dressed in suits in order to eat their dinner. The idea that suits are required reveals that such folk have no idea what church is but cling to a formal idea developed by men in the past.

The disciples did not dress up to be with Jesus, they just wore normal working men's clothing. Indeed they were probably a bit smelly when the fishermen followed Jesus and left their nets behind. When an Israelite brought a lamb to be offered at the Tabernacle altar, he did not first get dressed in fine robes and get blood all over it, he just came as he was after picking up a dusty old sheep and carrying it in his arms, getting his clothes dirty. God does not want us to put on airs and graces, that mean nothing, in order to worship; he wants us to come as we are and with reverence. Thus clothing that is irreverent is out; also clothes must respect others in the meeting and this includes ladies dressing modestly so as not to attract men's attention. But it doesn't mean dressing in clothes that are only normally worn at funerals.

Church should just reflect the prevailing respectful mores of society. So a wedding or a funeral or meeting the queen is not the model, these are exceptional events. Most people only wear their suits at such events and rarely elsewhere outside work. What is required are modest, respectful, casual clothes to suit the season. Modesty and decency are commanded (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Cor 14:40), but not certain type of clothes; that is men's legalism.

### **Simple bad relational behaviour**

Let's be honest – there is a great deal of animosity, bitterness, antagonism, unpleasantness and hypocrisy in the Reformed church world.<sup>8</sup> Folk may not want to admit this, but it is true. After 40 years of a wide-ranging experience in the church I believe that the Christians have been more guilty of causing harm to friends than people in the world. Every experienced Christian leader I know feels exactly the same. One ex-pastor says that all churches should carry a governmental health warning – '*churches damage your spiritual health*'. There is no doubt that Christians hurt each other more than the world does. By this I mean: a) that the world loves its own more than Christians love other believers, and b) the world generally causes a believer less problems than other believers and churches. I have never seen the world or non-Christian friends completely break a man, but I have repeatedly seen people destroyed by churches.

Some make excuses. It is true that unbelievers do not have the devil tempting and ensnaring them, but this is hardly an excuse. The fact that Christians have opposition is never given as an excuse for bad behaviour in Scripture. Indeed, this argument ignores the fact that we have Almighty God on our side supplying all the grace we need to do right. Furthermore, in church history there were times when the devil plagued the church with the most fierce and hostile persecution and temptation, but brother stood with brother and even children died in faithfulness rather than apostatise. In a day when believers have never had it so good materially, their behaviour to one another is probably the worst in history.

There is no excuse for hurting one another. It should stop immediately and be repented of.

### **Elitism**

There is a strong sense among certain evangelical churches that they are the holy huddle and all that matters. They have little to do with other local churches, even like-minded ones, and act as if the world outside is something to be avoided at all costs. This is nothing like the early church, which moved out to the people outside the church and brought the Gospel message along with good works. They even did this when their life was at risk under ten Roman imperial persecutions.

Although the church members may not wish this to happen, such elitist behaviour ensures that outsiders feel isolated and unwelcome by such a church, and thus the churches never grow. Neither do they do have a good reputation with their local neighbours, but are viewed with suspicion. This is an appalling testimony and the opposite of what a church should be.

### **Lack of participation**

I will develop this in my proposal later and so will simply touch upon it here; it is the worst problem facing Reformed churches. A crucial problem for them is the total lack of fellowship in a place that is supposed to be for fellowship. Fellowship is sharing – giving and taking, and is meant to involve the participation of all members. Reformed churches appear to be oblivious to this and allow one man to do everything. It is for this reason that

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<sup>8</sup> Bt this I include all aspects of church life that is supposedly based upon Protestant Calvinism in its origins. This includes: Presbyterians, URC, Baptists (including Strict, Particular and Grace Baptists), FIEC, Affinity, and independent evangelical churches with no affiliations to a network.

there is no life in the churches. It is impossible to read the New Testament and fail to see the continual encouragement of every member ministry. Reformed churches, which claim to stand on the truth of Scripture, disobey God very severely in ignoring this.

## Problems in church leadership

It behoves every church leader to consider what is happening. There is something terribly wrong with the church which is disappearing at a rate unheard of in history. Even during the times of intense persecution the drop off rate was not as high as this. What is wrong with the leadership of evangelical and Reformed churches in the UK?

### Ungodly leadership behaviour

The sheer volume of leadership sins is an utter disgrace. Furthermore, much of this is widely known and tolerated; this is a bigger disgrace.

This toleration arises from the undue authority and respect given to leaders, especially senior pastors. Now I am all for elders receiving the honour that is due to them for their hard work, but there is no place for treating leaders like little kings to which deference is required even when they err.

Firstly, there is no Biblical basis for this elevation anyway; there is no such thing as 'senior-pastor', 'reverend', 'Minister' (in the sense of leader), 'lead-elder' or any other such title of senior honour. There are only elders, plural, in the church, and none with more authority than another. A man who labours more in the word may be honoured more, but he has no extra authority for doing so.

The whole Reformed preoccupation with leadership figures arises from the pedagogical roots of Protestantism, where often senior figures in the church were also professors at the university. In some denominations this situation still continues. There is nothing wrong with a man teaching in the seminary and preaching in church, but there is something wrong if he is treated as having more ecclesiastical authority as a result. The mighty intellectual John Owen was most happy when sitting at the feet of the Bedford tinker John Bunyan, and recognised his humble but spiritual ministry.

What is worse is when certain leaders become fashionable and get treated like celebrities in their own right. People will travel miles to hear such preachers, driving past many equally good but unknown local preachers in doing so. Often a group will hang on the word of a certain preacher, even if it is unbiblical. Nothing the man says is ever questioned and the idea of being Berean is completely out of mind. If someone dares to question such a man he is trounced upon and despatched with rigour, even if he has pointed out scriptural irregularities in the message. This fashion is just as much evidenced in Reformed churches as it is in Charismatic ones and it shows a lack of respect for God's word, treating an individual as if he is above it.

However, much worse is the ungodly behaviour demonstrated by preachers and leaders. I have personally experienced the most shocking behaviour by Reformed church leaders. It is common for such men to slander others when they feel threatened and to publish lies in order to demonise another leader with whom they have fallen out. I have even known famous leaders state that a certain preacher had left his wife, taken drugs, become a bohemian and run off with another woman and left the country – none of this was true. When I confronted the person with the facts there was no repentance and no retraction. This is shamelessly sinful behaviour. The victim was left depressed and his wife harassed, but the perpetrator was soon headlining a famous Reformed conference. In the world there

would have been a lawsuit and the matter corrected with reparations, but genuine Christians do not want to take other Christians to court; so the victim suffers. In this case several other Reformed leaders added fuel to the fire by making false public statements; none of them repented. With good reason a preacher friend of mine calls the general leadership cartel of the Reformed church ‘the Reformed Mafia’.

There are many other forms of godless leadership behaviour that could be mentioned here (including theft, fraud, gossip, backbiting, false witness, plagiarism, libel, lies, membership of Freemasonry) but enough negative statements have been made to make the point. There is something very wrong in the higher levels of Reformed ministry in this country.

Then there is the issue of rehabilitation. There have been leaders who publicly sinned in a gross manner, stood down for a short time and repented (often this was publicly stated to be a break for health reasons), and shortly afterwards were back in ministry as if nothing had happened. In some cases this has happened more than once.

Firstly, leaders who sin must be publicly rebuked in the presence of all (1 Tim 5:19-20). It is wrong for the sins of a leader to be hushed-up and confined to a private meeting of a small cartel behind closed doors. The sins of elders are to be treated as worse than the sins of anyone else, not the other way round, that the rest may fear. Then the time of suspension must be determined by the seriousness of the offence and the measure of the person’s repentance. The church must weigh this carefully and apply wisdom. If the repentance is not considered to be genuine (if it does not show the fruits of repentance), the man must not be allowed back to minister, no matter how gifted he is.

I once knew a pastor that had an affair with a church member and continued in ministry without a break at all. He claimed to repent but this was not genuine. He was not disciplined properly and not publicly rebuked; indeed most of the church did not know what was going on. The pastor was treated with too much respect and not dealt with biblically. Things drifted on for a couple of years but eventually this man committed fornication / adultery with many women in the church. There was widespread confusion and hurt, people were affected for years afterwards, and the church collapsed and vanished.

### **Immoral, hypocritical or unethical leaders**

That this should be the case in God’s church is a scandal; and yet it is far from uncommon and a key reason why people become disillusioned and leave the church. In the last 20 years there have been major scandals where a famous preacher has quit the ministry after being exposed as immoral or unethical in some way. One famous Reformed leader and book writer left the ministry and his family to live with another man. In the past it has emerged that famous preachers have been closet alcoholics or sinful in other ways. Such cases always leave a very damaged flock and many disillusioned people fall away.

### **Refusal to receive well-meant criticism**

I once had need to criticise a man who is a famous Reformed leader, who is the chief assistant to another more famous American preacher. He was already against me since I had criticised his leader – however, this famous preacher later recanted of the error I had pointed out earlier, so my criticism was accurate. The point of issue was an article in a very famous London-based Reformed magazine, which was riddled with errors in order to push a certain erroneous teaching. I wrote directly to this man, as I know a British leader connected to him, and dealt with his errors one by one and gave supporting evidence. The reaction was horrific. He wrote a scathing set of emails that slandered me and called me all sorts of names and yet did not answer even one of my criticisms. He used the trick of ad hominem argument – attack the person but not the criticisms. This is a seriously

unrighteous way to behave, yet this man soon afterward addressed a national Reformed conference. God will requite him according to his deeds.

Another famous historian and article writer required my criticism due to extremely erroneous statements made in a Reformed Baptist magazine that I also wrote for. These statements were of a Biblical, doctrinal and even historical nature. Some of his mistakes were facile, such as suggesting that David was a priest. This man had an enormous influence over a certain type of Reformed Baptist and would do a great deal of damage; so a rebuttal was required. The response was appalling. Again I was called names and a vitriolic host of academic sophistry and pseudo-intellectual arguments (of no relevance to the point) issued forth. But worse, this man claimed to be above criticism by ordinary people (the opposite of Acts 17:11). He said that I had no right to criticise him unless I was at least the dean of a university since he was such a highly ranked academic professor. This tells you all you need to know about his lack of righteousness. This man continues to write books and articles and be well respected in a certain Baptist audience.

It is essential that preachers listen to criticism; it is the only way to be safe. If Paul was happy to be checked out by the noble Bereans then it is certainly OK to check out anyone else. [Yes, I welcome criticism (in fact I have been far too welcoming and suffered for it) and there are people who constantly check out my work and ask questions about it. These questions usually lead to fruitful conversations and sometimes to new papers.]

### **Leadership Burnout**

A study in America revealed that leaders are quitting the ‘ministry’ in droves. Focus on the Family found that 1,800 leaders were giving up every month in 2007. This figure is astounding, but it demonstrates that there is something very seriously wrong with the way church is being organised if it causes this result. Very few people are personally qualified to be successful in modern leadership because the whole thing is unbiblical.

Modern church leaders are called to be: professional, able showmen, celebrities, psychological counsellors, adept at music, meetings chairmen, conference speakers, organisers of all sorts of things, administrators, web designers, financially competent, business managers, and overseers of media issues as well as being able to expound the Bible and protect the sheep. This is all nonsense. The reason that many leaders burn out is because they are performing many tasks which are unbiblical in the first place. There is no reason for leadership burnout when the church is small, meeting in a home and where there is a team of equal elders. This is the Biblical pattern and it works.<sup>9</sup>

A Biblical home church needs almost no organisation at all. There is no need for a formal name, advertising, letterheads, websites or any modern paraphernalia if God is trusted. If ministry is simple and informal there is much less pressure on teachers yet so much more benefit when teaching arises from discussion, questions and answers – just as Jesus modelled.

### **Authoritarianism**

It is not just Charismatic churches that suffer from this problem; far too many Reformed churches have leaders that act like petty kings. Sadly it seems that the congregations of these churches seem happy to be dominated by such men, especially if they are also celebrity preachers. However, there are always sensitive people who get damaged by the domineering attitude of these men and such folk leave the church disenchanted.

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<sup>9</sup> Plural elders: Acts 20:17 (Ephesus) 21:18 (Jerusalem); Titus 1:5 (Crete). Financial support: 1 Cor 9:14; 1 Tim 5:17.

There is never an excuse for authoritarianism. The Biblical precedent is for the leadership of the church by a team of equal elders. This ensures that no one person has any more authority than another. The domination of the flock by one man is a sin, pure and simple, and contrary to the Lord's teaching that leaders must be servants and Peter's exhortation not to dominate the flock. A single authoritarian leader is an example of following the sinful world's methods of leadership and ought to be repented of.

### **Legalistic leaders**

Legalism is a common problem in UK Reformed churches. So many congregations are dry, stuffy, and effectively dead (that is, there is no apparent life in the Spirit). There is no vigour in their gatherings and rituals are stringently followed even when the numbers are few. I knew of a Reformed Baptist church in Brighton which had a congregation of four. Despite this, instead of meeting in a side room or at home and fellowshiping properly, the pastor preached from a platform, the flock sat on seats in the rows of pews distant from one another and the service was conducted formally as if the church was full. This is a charade and nothing else. It has nothing to do with vibrant Christianity.

Many pastors seek to apply Christian ethics in a legalistic fashion, often by adopting sets of rules which people must follow. As well as teaching Mosaic Law as if it were still the basis for Christian living (which it is not; the Law of Christ is – Gal 6:2; the Mosaic Law emphasises sin) there were also these additional rules, such as: Christians must not play cards, must not dance at weddings, must not drink alcohol, must not mix with unbelievers, must not go to the theatre or movies, must not watch TV, must not read fiction and so on. Now these may be good practical advice or they may not, but men cannot impose them as divine commands. Worse still, when someone disobeys them, such as by dancing at a wedding or playing cards with a child, they are looked upon as great sinners. This is disruption of Christian fellowship with the rules of men.

### **Poverty of teaching and lack of catechising**

I will explain this more in my proposal. In general, the church suffers from an appalling lack of sound teaching, both Biblically and doctrinally, but especially doctrinally. Even expository preaching is insufficient if it does not lead to doctrinal development and practical application in the hearers. It is shocking that young converts are not catechised and properly taught the basics of the faith.

### **Lack of home visitation**

I also develop this subject later in my proposal so I will avoid duplication here. Essentially, pastors today rarely bother with seeing church members in their homes unless it is a serious crisis. In fact, home visitation should be regular and to impart teaching and counsel all the time, not just fire-fighting.

## **Proposals for a way forward**

Here I want to be as brief as possible because I have written much about the church's problems in many papers.

### **Pastors must teach sound theology and Biblical studies**

*If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed. 1 Tim 4:6*

It is just not good enough to spout a delightful message, or two, Sunday by Sunday; indeed this can actually make the situation worse. If we ignore the matter of rubbish sermons and just consider expository messages, there is the problem of not actually improving the state of believers but putting them off. When a pastor spends hours or days preparing a solid

message and then delivers a polished study in 30-45 minutes, this comes over as a professionally engineered bit of teaching that is way out of reach of ordinary people. The congregation is impressed by it but considers such study as out of their reach.

Teaching in church is meant to actually equip the saints and not entertain them. The sermon method (not an apostolic method for teaching the church by the way but for preaching the Gospel) just does not deliver the goods, as great preachers have admitted for centuries. People retain about 4% of a spoken sermon. Polished good sermons can be worse in that they put young men off considering a teaching ministry because it seems unattainable.

What is needed is discussion, questions and answers, ministry adapted to the needs of the audience, ministry that is taught from house to house and from person to person. When a pastor spends all his time preparing two fantastic messages each Sunday, then that pastor is failing his job and his church is little more than a preaching centre. Churches are not places to elevate men and entertain members, they are places where the elect are gathered to be equipped in order to learn how to serve themselves.

Crucial in training to equip saints is the need to teach sound theology. It is not enough to just give Bible exposition (though this is good), the people must be taught a system of doctrine that will help them deal with life. Some people sit under great expository ministry for decades and yet have no understanding about theology at all. This is a failure. When we measure good ministry by a professional sermonic performance, we are failing the church. The test of a good church is the level of doctrinal understanding of the people.

### **The crucial need to explain the doctrine of God's sovereignty**

**O LORD God of hosts, Who /s mighty like You, O LORD? Ps 89:8**

Many folk in the modern Reformed church no longer really believe in God's sovereignty. Their Gospel has become Amyraldian, not Calvinistic, and their attitude to events in the world is confused. Here I will simply quote from my old paper, *'The Current Deplorable Situation in the British Church'*.

Everything men do is under God's control, even their sin.<sup>10</sup> God controls and fashions our lives in order to further the development of our character to suit an eternal purpose, and also to facilitate his plan in the earth. This means that God is an electing Saviour, that is, he chooses who will be saved and who will be left in sin.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it means that God predestines all things. He is in control of all that happens and every event works to a divine strategy. Every earthquake, hurricane and tidal wave is planned and has a reason, just as much as a single hair falling from our head. Our difficulties and trials are divinely ordered as much as a tsunami or outbreak of flu that kills thousands.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, every nation is under God's control, along with their government, both good and evil.<sup>13</sup> This is all basic Biblical knowledge, hardly ever seriously questioned in church history until about 1600.

Satan does not rule the earth but God does.<sup>14</sup> He both owns it and controls it for his purpose. Everything that happens is under his control and for people to give that authority to Satan is near blasphemy. If God allows Satan to overpower his people (such as Job), or threaten the disciples in a boat,<sup>15</sup> it is always so that he will be

<sup>10</sup> Gen 50:20; Deut 8:3; Ps 37:23, 139:5; Prov 16:9, 19:21.

<sup>11</sup> Deut 10:15; Ps 65:4; Prov 16:4; Mt 11:27, 22:14; Rm 8:28-33, Rm 9:15-23, 11:28; Eph 1:4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 10:30, 19:29; 2 Kg 17:25; 1 Sam 2:25; Ex 4:11; Isa 45:6-7; Lam 3:37-38; Amos 3:6; Eph 1:11.

<sup>13</sup> Prov 21:1; 2 Kg 15:37, 19:25; 1 Sam 4:2-3; Acts 17:26.

<sup>14</sup> Ex 9:29; 1 Sam 2:8; Ps 24:1; 1 Cor 10:26,28.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 8:24-26; note the waves were rebuked.

glorified in some way or another. God is Lord, not only in the Gospel but in all things. It is to the modern church's great shame that she has neglected this most important of doctrines. All other doctrines will founder when this is neglected. The modern church has failed God in this testimony.

### **Pastors must catechise and perform home visitation**

I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house. Acts 20:20

Large churches have leaders that are out of touch with the members and rarely see them intimately. The congregation becomes like the workers of a factory that has no meaningful contact with the management. But even small churches adhere to this isolation of people from pastors. Where the minister becomes just a sermon producer and the sheep become sermon fodder there is no real fellowship; yet that is what the church is all about. As well as genuine friendly relationships between the pastor and the sheep, there must be personal development in knowledge and home visitation.

The first way in which this is done is to ensure the basic equipping of young saints in Biblical doctrine. This is performed by the pastor visiting the disciple at his home and teaching him doctrine through a catechism on a weekly basis until it is finished. I cannot emphasise this enough; it is an absolutely vital ministry that almost all churches utterly neglect. But once catechising is completed, the pastor must still regularly visit all the members of the church throughout the year. He must be able to understand the current spiritual and domestic situation of his flock all the time; how else can he pray effectively for them?

This, of course, means that flocks are small enough for a pastor to do this. Large churches are anathema. A church meeting in a house is ideal for this, and it is the Biblical precedent. Such a church, with probably twenty people or less and with two elders, can easily accommodate such personal ministry. Slightly larger churches would require more elders, but no churches should outgrow the ability to fellowship meaningfully within a house.

### **The true Gospel must be effectively preached and the people sent out to preach it**

The Lord had called us to preach the gospel. Acts 16:10

Today's presentation of the Gospel is a shambles! It appears to me that few people today even understand what the Gospel is let alone being able to communicate it properly. I have repeatedly questioned different people about what the Gospel is and have received all sorts of answers, rarely are these centred upon the Biblical fundamentals.

One significant problem is the misrepresentation of God to fit in with modern culture. God is made to look tolerant, approachable and indifferent to sin; yet these things are totally unbiblical. God is intolerant of evildoers, unapproachable by sinners and wrathful against sin. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God without a Saviour (Heb 10:31). Despite this many churches (following the debased and defunct Seeker-Sensitive methodology) have done exactly this and their churches have been corrupted as a result.

Part of this misrepresentation of God is the modern idea that God loves everybody. This is the triumph of Arminian ideas even within the Reformed church. Ignoring clear Biblical statements otherwise, the Gospel is presented as a forlorn attempt by God to get people interested in the Gospel by saying that 'God loves you'. The corollary of this is that conversion becomes the exercise of man's free will to accept the Gospel and believe in Christ. Such preaching will never be effective but will only produce professing converts. The true Gospel is that God hates sin and will punish sinners for their lawlessness in eternal hell fire. There is no hope for sinners unless they fly to the only Saviour from sin, Jesus Christ, and cry to him for mercy, repenting of their sin and determining to follow

him in faith and obedience. No one can repent or believe in their own strength but must first receive grace from God to even see that Christ is the only Saviour and Lord.

Many modern Reformed churches are Amyraldian, though they claim to be Reformed. This is a hopeless fudge trying to mix Arminianism with Calvinism by saying that God loves everyone and Christ died for everyone, but since man will not be saved and will not choose Christ, God chose the elect for salvation and gives them grace to believe. It is contradictory nonsense, which is why the scheme is called 'Hypothetical Universalism' by theologians. The universalism is only hypothetical and not real.

Contrary to the common procedure found in most churches, the evangelism of the church is not performed by bringing as many people into the church to hear the Gospel, but by the church members going out with the Gospel and preaching it one-to-one. The attraction of sinners into churches, by all manner of methods, has been demonstrably useless since the churches have been dwindling for decades. It is useless because it is unbiblical. It is people who preach the Gospel to their friends and relatives, not just pastors to an unwilling, shut in audience.

This is why church members must be properly equipped with knowledge. They are the main ministers of the Gospel to the world. A congregation of twenty can do far more effective Gospel preaching than the minister alone, as long as the people are properly trained.

### **Pastors must establish the correct church structure**

Set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.

Titus 1:5

So many Reformed churches are bound to unbiblical structures, not just in that they don't meet in a house, but their leadership structure is also unbiblical. We have mentioned the problems of the senior pastor or minister, these need not be restated. But many Reformed churches, especially independent ones, have all sorts of oddities. There are churches ruled by deacons, despite the fact that in the Bible a deacon had no spiritual authority of any kind. Deacons were servants to help the leaders deal with money and secure the interests of the poor. They were not leaders.

Then there are churches ruled by a domineering elder who does not preach; in many cases these churches have no minister and get different people to preach every week. Scores if not hundreds of churches do this. One wonders why it is that it is so easy to get preachers each week but not a minister. Could it be that in reality the dominating elder doesn't really want one?

Then there is the problem of a church where there is a minister and there are elders, but the minister will not delegate and the elders are useless, just holders of a titular office. The problem here is the insecurity of the minister. Such a situation will not bear fruit, and yet this is also commonplace. A similar problem is where elders do actually preach occasionally but the pastor dominates the church strategy and leads it in directions that are against the good, and even the will, of the church.

### **Pastors must liberate the frozen chosen**

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit *of all*. 1 Cor 12:4-7

Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. 1 Cor 14:26

There is no doubt but that the mutual edification of all believers is a clear apostolic truth; and yet most churches behave as if this were never written down in Scripture. God expects that the members of the church should all participate in the church meeting as their gifts apply and God's Spirit directs. Ministry is mutual and open.

The situation where a congregation does nothing at all throughout every meeting is horrifying and ungodly. In many churches the pastor does everything, from preaching to the final prayer; he even reads the notices. This is a scandal.

Although we condemn the Charismatic usurpation of the spiritual gifts, there are genuine spiritual gifts which all the church are meant to share with each other. God's word is absolutely clear on this. Gifts that are claimed by Charismatics as supernatural are usually much more mundane; the word of knowledge is teaching instruction; the word of wisdom is good counsel; prophecy is knowledge on fire that encourages and exhorts rather than didactic teaching; and so on. What is obsolete are the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues. These finished in the first century and have disappeared as unnecessary today, being the speaking of languages by people untrained in them. They were a sign of the divine authenticity of the early church and are no longer required.

For some reason modern Reformed people are scared of any kind of gift-sharing; yet these are vital. Calvin himself even saw a place for prophecy, as did Luther. If ever there was a time that the power of God needed to be manifested through churches committed to the truth of God's word it is now. The members of the whole body are gifted by the Spirit for ministry of one sort or another, and these gifts must be released for the church to properly function. One reason for the slow death of Reformed churches is that these gifts are squashed.

Whatever our feelings about supernatural gifts, the church meeting is to be a place of mutual edification through use of spiritual gifts in fellowship.<sup>16</sup> That this is clearly and repeatedly confirmed in the NT is without question, so how can one man be allowed to dominate a meeting and do everything while members sit staring at the back of other's heads and never participating at all? The truth sets us free, but many Reformed churches that hold to the truth just put their members in bondage, never letting them speak. Even open times of prayer are rare in a Sunday service.

Leaders must serve and be totally geared up to discover, nurture and release new leadership. They are there to make the flock grow into their own ministries. They are not there to govern like a manager of a commercial company or a king of a nation.<sup>17</sup> In this they are to act like fathers not managers.<sup>18</sup> This is because the local church is a family not an organisation.<sup>19</sup> This is why leaders are home-grown and are never imported; neither are they academically trained but are taught by the Holy Spirit in their own circumstances or are disciplined by older men on an apprenticeship basis.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Here I refer to the more 'ordinary' spiritual gifts like: sharing an edifying word, powerful praying and intercession, encouragements, mercy gifts, helps, comfort etc.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 20:25-28; Eph 4:12.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Thess 2:7, 11; 1 Cor 4:14-16; Phil 2:22.

<sup>19</sup> Eph 2:19.

<sup>20</sup> Jn 16:13. Even Paul, the only apostle certainly trained academically in religion, counted it as rubbish (Phil 3:7-8).

## Conclusion

This is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject; I am sure that with more time I could have enumerated yet more problems facing the churches at this time, but enough has been said. What is important is to stop pretending that everything is fine and the problems in the ecclesiastical world are all out there with somebody else. Sure Charismatic churches have many problems but Reformed churches have almost as many and this needs repenting of. If we do not fix these problems then we do not deserve to survive and numbers will decline yet further and finish off the formal church.

It is my view that this is actually inevitable. I believe that all formal churches meeting in dedicated buildings will do one of two things as the end times press upon us: they will either disappear under continual pressure and eventual outright persecution; or they will become more compromised and eventually be absorbed in a corrupt state-sponsored liberal system.

The only way forward is to follow the Biblical model and for the church to meet in homes led by a team of elders. These can adapt easily to changing circumstances and will survive longer under persecution. It has happened many times before in church history and it will be the way that the church prepares for the return of the Lord at the end. Formal, institutional churches in dedicated buildings with traditional liturgies and leadership structures have no future; still less if they are surrounded with the sorts of problems we have mentioned here.

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