

A journey into Reformed truth

My church life began in the Assemblies of God because it was to an AOG church that a friend took me when I was first converted. Never having attended church I didn't know one from the next. The people who welcomed me among their number presented the AOG as a modern, dynamic church where the truth was preached and practiced rather than tradition. As far as I knew this was correct.

During my time in the AOG I never heard a series of sermons on the 10 commandments; the character and attributes of God; the life of Jesus Christ. I never heard any expository preaching through the books in the Bible; I never heard explained in any depth the great doctrines of justification; propitiation; adoption; election, calling, etc. The thrust of the ministry I experienced could be summed up by the following points:

- You must be born again which means praying the “sinner’s prayer”.
- Serious believers are baptised in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues, those who don’t are inferior.
- Genuine faith is measured in terms of how generous one is with time and money.
- God’s primary goal is to prosper us which He will do when we are generous with our time and money.
- God has a wonderful plan for us which usually involves starting a business.
- We should present the type of flamboyant lifestyles that will make other people want to be Christians.

I came to the realisation that the church was not concerned with conversions but with growth. Consequently all offence was taken out of the Gospel. Sinners were not so much perpetrators as victims; faith and repentance were simply acknowledging that God wanted to bless us but would not do so until we asked Him. All one had to do to be saved was respond to the “alter call”, repeat the prayer offered by the preacher and attend church. This was far removed from my own experience and far removed from what I understood to Bible to teach. It did however force me to consider carefully what salvation actually involves.

As I did this I became increasingly perplexed by words like elected, chosen, predestined and born again. We were told that God chooses those who choose Him, even though this completely contradicts Jesus’ teaching in John 15:16, “*you did not choose me but I chose you*”. I couldn’t reconcile the idea of ‘being born again’ as nothing more than raising a hand and repeating a prayer. When Jesus said to Nicodemus he could not enter the Kingdom of God unless he was born again, He did not say anything about raising hands or repeating prayers. In fact according to Jesus the need to be born again equates to human inability.

For about twelve months I was extremely confused and unsettled. I actually felt like I was going to lose my mind trying to understand things for which there seemed to be no answers. Help however was not far away. In 1993 I applied to do two years study at Adelaide Bible College. Although ABC had a charismatic focus many of its courses were not without benefit. It also had a well stocked library.

It was through reading Martin Lloyd Jones that I first heard the term Calvinism. Calvinistic Theology then seemed to emerge in just about everything I read, including the Bible itself. The writings of Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, Walter Elwell, Charles Spurgeon, Loraine Boettner and others were like lights in the darkness. If nothing else I was initially relieved to discover that the issues weighing me down were not of my own devising. I was not asking questions for which there were no answers. I was having trouble understanding the Bible because it had never been explained to me properly. So much of it was ignored and so much of it taken out of context.

One by one the errors tumbled like dominos – speaking in tongues, alter calls, deliverances, healing ministries, words of knowledge, prophecies, the prosperity doctrine etc. In their place a foundation of Biblical truth was established. The great doctrines of scripture became meaningful and personal. In particular the Doctrines of Grace enabled me to understand how God saves sinners. Confusion and discouragement gave way to understanding and joy. This had actually become a very exciting time in my life as truth unfolded before my eyes. A year into my college course I came to the conclusion that my convictions were not Pentecostal but Reformed Baptist.

The Charismatic scene is more popular than ever, but in my experience it is shallow and riddled with error. No doubt there are many sincere believers among its ranks (I trust that I was one), yet it is always possible to be sincere and misled. I presented many scriptural reasons to the leadership of the church as to why I had to resign my membership. I was duly told that I was committing spiritual adultery and was outside the purposes of God. Not one single issue was actually given a thorough Biblical response.

Matt 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.²² Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?'²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'”

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