



“Semper Reformanda”

Study 1: An Introduction (Eph. 4:1-6)

o To understand the concept of “semper reformanda” and its relevance to us today.

I. Its origin and meaning.

1. The Reformation of the 16th century was a watershed in the history of the church. It was a work of God — a spiritual revival involving the preaching of God’s word, the salvation of souls, the recovery of biblical teaching and practice, and the founding of new churches.
 - John Calvin (1509-1564) may be considered a spokesman of the Reformation. In his *magnum opus*, “The Institutes of the Christian Religion”, which was revised and enlarged a number of times until its final edition in 1559, he says: Christ “loved the church, and gave himself for it, that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish,” (Eph. 5: 25-27.) Nevertheless, it is true, that the Lord is daily smoothing its wrinkles and wiping away its spots. Hence it follows that its holiness is not yet perfect. Such, then, is the holiness of the Church: it makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect; it daily advances, but as yet has not reached the goal.” (Institutes, 4:1:17.)
 - As the Reformation spread, there were calls for the *spirit* of the Reformation to be maintained. John Robinson, an early leader of the English Separatists based Leiden in the Netherlands, addressed those of his church migrating to America in 1620 (called the Pilgrim Fathers): “I charge you before God and His blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which are come to a period [i.e. a full-stop] in religion, and will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented, for though they were burning and shining lights in their times, yet they penetrated not into the whole counsel of God; but were they now living, would be as willing to embrace further light as that which they first received, for it is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-christian darkness and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.” (E. H. Broadbent, pp. 245-246.)
 - In Britain, the Particular Baptists were pushing for reformation beyond what the paedobaptist Puritans had arrived at. Writing against infant baptism, Benjamin Keach stated: “Our first Protestant Reformers were raised up to restore those grand fundamentals of faith, more than to reform matters of discipline, and about this rite of infant-baptism and

some other ceremonies. “The path of the just is as a shining light, that shines more and more to the perfect Day, Prov. 4. 18.” (Light Broke Forth, 1696, pp. 226-227.)

2. In the Netherlands, during the Second Reformation, which corresponded with the age of the Puritans in Britain, there was a similar call for the *spirit* of the Reformation to be continued. It was urged that the Reformation reformed the doctrine of the church, but the lives and practices of God’s people always need further reformation.
 - In 1674, a devotional was written by an important figure of the Second Reformation called Jodocus van Lodenstein, in which were found these words, “The church is reformed and always [in need of] being reformed according to the Word of God.” The verb is passive: the church is not “always reforming” but is “always being reformed”. Although the Reformers did not use the phrase, it expresses well their belief. This phrase is often shortened to “semper reformanda”, i.e. “always being reformed”.
3. Like anything good, right, and true, the term “semper reformanda” has been abused. It is often taken to mean the church must actively reform itself, by adjusting traditional doctrine and practice to suit the times. The principle of “sola scripture” is forgotten.
 - The Modernist Swiss theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968), used the phrase much to advocate change in the dead orthodoxy seen in the churches around him. From the 1960s, radical Roman Catholic theologians like Hans Kung used this term to advocate reform within the RC Church.
 - In 1967, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA rejected the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture under this modern understanding of the phrase. It is also used by the Federal Vision movement to advocate either a need to change Reformed theology or to recover an earlier version of it. According to the Federal Vision, no one is finally regenerate, elect, or justified until the last day. Their view of justification is in line with the NPP (New Perspective on Paul), the view held by the Karl Barth, and similar to Roman Catholic teaching.

II. Its implications.

1. While the term “semper reformanda” has been abused by some, it is more common to find those who are “Reformed” only in doctrine but not in practice. In other words, they do not adhere to “semper reformanda”.
 - The Particular Baptists of the 17th and 18th centuries were misunderstood and suffered much for holding to believer’s baptism, the autonomy of the local church, and the liberty of conscience. They held that the task of reformation should not stop at doctrine, but be extended to worship and church government, and to the separation of church and state.
 - Consistency in upholding “semper reformanda” would require that we separate from those in serious errors while reforming ourselves according to the Bible.
2. The doctrine of separation from sin, wrong teaching, and worldliness (Rom. 16:17; Gal. 1:9; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15; 1 John 2:16; 2 John 10) must be held together with the doctrine of love between the brethren (John 17:20-23; Eph. 4:1-6; 1 John 4:1, 7). These apply primarily to individuals within the local church but should be extended to interaction between churches.
 - Selective fellowship is based on *the truth* (Eph. 4:4-6), and also on *the spirit* of the truth (Eph. 4:1-3; Acts 4:32). The more truth we share in common, the greater is the likelihood of fellowship. The more love, humility and acceptance is found in like-minded people, the greater is possibility of fellowship.

3. The 1689 Confession states in Chap. 26:4 that Jesus Christ is the head of the church. In Chap. 8:1 it is mentioned that Jesus Christ is “the Mediator between God and man; the prophet, priest and king; head and saviour of His church”.
 - Chap 8:10 contains a clause, “This number and order of the offices is necessary.” This is not found in the Westminster Confession nor in the Savoy Declaration. Instead, it came from the 1644 Confession. The Particular Baptists, being Separatists, wanted to carry on reform by subjecting themselves to the three offices of Christ. “Semper reformanda” will require us to reform the local church according to the three offices of Christ.
 - It is further proposed that the Lord must be imitated in His ministry, not just in His character (1 Cor. 11:1). The apostles Paul shows this in his own ministry. An all-round ministry as shown by our Lord (Matt. 4:23; 9:35) must be aimed at in regard to the ministry of the church in the world.

= While practising separation from those in serious errors we will be helped in reforming our churches according to the three offices of Christ and the pattern of ministry set by the Lord.

Questions

1. How should we look upon the Reformation of the 16th century?
2. What did John Calvin teach about the holiness of the church when he expounded on Eph. 5:25-27?
3. What was John Robinson appealing for when he addressed the Pilgrim Fathers before they sailed?
4. In Britain, what were the Particular Baptists pushing for when they insisted on believer’s baptism instead of infant sprinkling?
5. What does “semper reformanda” mean?
6. How does the Federal Vision movement abuse the term “semper reformanda”?
7. While “semper reformanda” has been abused by some, what is the more common problem?
8. The Particular Baptists of the 17th and 18th centuries were misunderstood and suffered much for what issues?
9. Selective fellowship is based on what two ingredients?
10. State the conclusion of this study.

Assignment/Discussion

There are those who claim themselves to be “Reformed” but do not seem to uphold “semper reformanda”. How may we recognise such? Do they not have the right to be known as “Reformed”? Do we have the right to stop them from calling themselves “Reformed”?

Memory passage (Eph. 4:1-6)

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

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