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Walking Without Slipping

[Chapter Four](#)

[Walking Without Slipping:](#)

[Instructions for Local Church Reformation](#)

*He will not let your foot slip
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
Ps 121:3-4*

The Purpose of this Chapter

Some who read this small book are in the middle of or soon will be in a reforming situation. It is my goal in this chapter to encourage the reformation now going on, and impart some of the things I have learned over the course of my life and ministry.

The first part of this chapter describes my own involvement in reforming one local church. I do not write as an authority on the subject of reformation, but I do write out of many years of experience in reforming situations. The years of experience have also included many mistakes. Experience is a queer old teacher. She first gives you the test and then the lesson. The principles discussed in this chapter are ones I've learned the hard way. Hopefully, recounting these things will spare some unnecessary shipwrecks in your local churches.

The second part of the chapter describes several essential principles applicable to reforming a local church. You should know that I have no blueprint or navigation map to offer. Each situation has different obstacles to deal with. The size of the church and the make up of the staff will impact the approach that should be taken, as will the kind of membership and the spiritual caliber of the leadership. I wish I could give you ten rules to guaranteed success in reforming a church, but it is never that simple. There are no ironclad rules. This is because reformation is Gods work. God uses human instruments as his means, but the determination of whether and when reformation fire falls is up to God. Therefore, the task to which we are called is to continue to work and pray. Perhaps God will open others eyes even as he has already opened our own.

An Example of Local Church Reformation

Although God has been pleased to permit me to be involved in several reforming churches during my days of service, there is no question that my greatest challenge occurred at North Pompano Baptist Church in North Pompano Beach, Florida. When I arrived, the church had been without a pastor for a year. Before they called me, they had gone through 35 applicants!

I preached my trial sermon in June 1977, and I had no idea what I was getting into. If I had known the alarming problems facing that church, I would never have even considered the call. Now, of course, I am glad I did not know the problems, and I am certainly glad that I did accept the call. Looking back, I can say that it was a very providential call. The problems that existed at North Pompano Baptist were no different than the problems that exist in many, many Southern Baptist churches. In a way, North Pompano was a microcosm of the modern-day Southern Baptist Convention.

I was the fifth pastor at North Pompano Baptist, and I was there for eight years, much longer than any of the four previous pastors. Yet my time there was not easy. Far from it. I soon discovered that the church was teetering on the edge of disaster.

For starters, I quickly recognized that the paid staff was far too large for a church of its size. We had about 900 people on the membership roll. Yet the paid staff included two church secretaries, a paid pianist, a paid song leader, a full-time custodian, six to eight paid day-care teachers, another paid custodian for the day care, and a paid cook for the day care.

Two weeks after I arrived, the electric company called to say it was coming to turn off the power because the electric bills had not been paid. The church was delinquent on its bills, while at the same time giving \$13,000 a year to the Southern Baptist Convention Cooperative Program. In my view, this was sinful.

Next, the bank administering the church's \$75,000 bond issue notified me that it would no longer service the debt because the church was continually late in making payments, and the bank was fed up with complaints from unpaid bondholders. This was an extremely serious matter. It would not have been easy to find another bank in our area to service the bond issue, since only banks large enough to have trust departments are qualified to handle such matters.

To make matters worse, we soon discovered that the financial secretary was embezzling money from the church. This cost the church at least \$23,000 and likely more that we could not document. As a result of the acute financial crisis in the church, there was always pressure put upon me by church leaders to have what they called a “make-up Sunday.” This meant taking a special offering for the purpose of making up what was needed to pay the bills. The church's financial situation wore on me. It was a major crisis and one I did not bargain for. God did not call me to be a fund-raiser but to preach the gospel. Nevertheless, I was in the middle of the mess, whether I had bargained for it or not. I did not know at the time that the church's spiritual problems were much worse than its financial picture.

Soon after arriving, I called two knowledgeable church leaders into my office to go over the 900 names on the church membership roll. We already knew that the church's finances were in shambles. We soon discovered that only about 110 people were carrying the financial load of the church. More importantly, we learned that the spiritual condition of the church was vastly more appalling.

One by one, we went through the names on the membership roll. I put an “R” (for regular) beside the names of all who attended church regularly (at least once a week). I put an “O” (for occasional) beside the names of those who attended occasionally (once a month). I put a “D” (for delinquent) beside the names of all those members we were positively sure had not attended, or even communicated with the church, for a year or more. This exercise was most revealing and very sad. Of the 900 members on the church roll, North Pompano Baptist Church had over 550 delinquents — people that I had never seen on the church premises, or even heard of, and most of whom could not be found. On a good day, only about 250 members bothered to show up for Sunday morning services. Only a handful attended Sunday night services, and only about twelve to fifteen attended the midweek prayer meeting. This examination revealed how false a picture of the health of the church the membership roll really was. If a business had falsified its records like this, its chief executive officer would have been sent to prison for fraud. This sad picture was the fruit of shallow man-made and man-centered evangelism.

Things only got worse. It soon became obvious that six of the twelve deacons gave no evidence of conversion. The remaining deacons were spiritually and doctrinally illiterate. They simply did not know what it meant to be and act like a Christian. Most

of the membership was in the same sad condition. Sunday school teachers were living in open adultery. After I had been at the church only a short time, one deacon's wife commented, "This preacher thinks the only thing we do right around here is sin." She was not far from wrong.

The spiritual condition of the church members put me into a state of shock and dismay. My thoughts were full of only questions — with no answers that I could see. What could I do? What needed to be done first? How could I go about it, whatever it was? Where should I begin? I had no book of ten easy steps to solve these deep-rooted spiritual problems. Moreover, even if there were such a book, I knew it would not help. There were some things I simply could not do.

I knew that I could not change hearts, but God could. I could not give spiritual life, but God could. I could not open their understanding, but God could. I could not give an effectual call, but God could. I could not make them see the truths of the Bible, but God could. I could not reveal Christ to their hearts, but God could.

Oh, how I thank God for the "buts" in the Bible. We were by nature children of wrath; "but God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4; NKJV). Only God could open Lydia's heart (Acts 16:14). Only God could reveal to Peter that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God (Mt. 16:13-17). Only God could change the hearts of the people at North Pompano Baptist Church.

I was certain that this church needed the same thing the discouraged disciples needed when they were on the way to Emmaus — Jesus "expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27; NKJV) but I was equally certain that they needed something more. "He opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures." (Luke 24:45; NKJV).

Only God could take the dust of this world from their eyes so that they could see beauty in Jesus. Only God could take the wax of this world from their ears so that they could savingly hear the good news of salvation. Only God could raise the spiritually dead.

This is what drove me to call on him to do what only he could do. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Luke 11:13; NKJV).

Only God could do what needed to be done.

And yet I knew that in most, if not all cases, God uses human means to accomplish his purposes. It is just as important for us to assert the true validity of the secondary agent, man, as it is to assert the final cause, God. I had often received much help and good instruction from the great apostle Paul's letters to the young preacher, Timothy, during dark times. So once again, I turned to read and re-read those inspired letters of 1 and 2 Timothy. This time, like never before, the following verses leapt from the pages of holy writ to my mind:

And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24-26; NKJV).

From these verses, I learned three things that were essential to know in order to minister in the helpless situation in which I found myself.

The first is the spiritual state of the unconverted. They were slaves to Satan, locked in his prison house, without a key to get out (v. 26). They were helpless, and hopelessly taken captive by Satan to do his will (v. 26). They were ignorant of truth; a point implied in the phrase "correcting those" (v. 25). This also is the reason the true servant of the Lord must be apt to teach" (v. 24).

The second thing I learned from this passage involved some much-needed instruction for my own heart in dealing with this appalling situation. I was reminded that the servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome or a man of strife. I was reminded that the servant of the Lord must be able to teach truth which his own heart acknowledges. That is, he must have a personal knowledge of the truth.

I thirdly learned that I had to depend on God for results. The phrase “if God” in verse 25 is a condition. God may grant repentance. He also may not. Hence, the servants hope is not in his theological understanding, nor in his preparation, nor in the subtlety of his wit or in the power of his persuasion. No! The servants hope is in God. And not only is it absolutely necessary for the servant of the Lord to put his trust and hope in God, but he must also teach the unconverted that their only hope of getting out of Satan’s prison house is in the God who has the keys and the power to turn the lock.

I placed these instructions from 2 Timothy on my desk where I could see and read them every day. I recommend these inspired instructions to every minister in a reforming situation.

After much prayer and analysis, I concluded that the basic need of the people of the church was a solid doctrinal foundation. North Pompano Baptist, like many others, had absolutely no doctrinal foundation. The people were doctrinally illiterate, and by the time I got there, the superficial superstructure that remained was falling apart.

This is not surprising, in retrospect. After all, any effort to be a practicing Christian without knowing what Christianity is all about will always fail. Indeed, to believe savingly in Christ involves first believing the right things about him:

Faith involves understanding who he was the virgin born Son of God. It involves understanding what he did suffered vicariously on a Roman cross. It involves understanding why he died on that cross because of a covenant with God the Father to redeem a company of sheep from every tribe, nation and tongue that no man can number.

In my eight years at North Pompano, I kept before me two churches. One was the “Ideal Church,” which was conceived from scripture. If I had ignored this one, I would have settled for status quo. The other was the “Real Church,” the one I faced every Sunday morning at 11:00 a.m. The joy was in seeing the “Real Church” move toward the “Ideal Church,” at first in baby steps, but soon in giant leaps.

The first foundation stone was what I called the "School of Deacons." I met with the deacons, the leaders of the church, and their wives every week, one hour before the Sunday evening service. In one year, I took them through the old London Baptist Confession of 1689. This was a very significant and profitable beginning. Some dropped out and left the church, but about half of them finished.

The second foundation stone was laid when I preached 27 messages on the Beatitudes, leaning heavily on material from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones book, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount. I emphasized Christs teachings on the composition of a true Christian.

The third foundation stone was laid when I set up a book table to expose the people to solid literature. This was very profitable.

The response to a renewed doctrinal teaching was as varied as the response in the Parable of the Sower. Some left the church. One casualty in particular was especially painful. David Clifton was one of the most respected men in the church. He had held every office in the church: chairman of the deacons, chairman of the pulpit committee, and chairman of the finance committee. We had grown to be very close friends. Hence, I was shocked beyond words when, on February 15, 1979, I received the following letter from Dave:

Dear Friends,

It is with very much searching of heart, Bible study, prayer and scientific research coupled with an air of sadness that I am persuaded to write this letter. My purpose is to 'be as honest and as open with you as I know how in expressing to you my present spiritual condition. This condition has caused me to conclude that I should resign as Deacon, Visitation Leader, Chairman of the Nominating Committee and as a church member.

My present spiritual condition has resulted from a gradual deterioration of faith in the authenticity of the Bible over the period of the last year. I have discussed my condition with Brother Ernie several times over the last six months and he has tried to help me. I appreciate very much his efforts, but a change in my condition has not been forthcoming. I have not discussed this with anyone else except my wife and I would

rather not do so; since in the process I might be tempted to defend my position and in so doing might cause someone's faith to be affected. My greatest concern in this announcement is that it might adversely affect some of you. I hope this does not occur.

I want to make it clear that I do not believe that the doctrines being taught by Brother Ernie and Brother Fred [Malone, my associate pastor] are unbiblical. On the contrary, I believe they are teaching exactly what the bible teaches. My problem is not with the teachers but with the Bible.

I shall miss seeing each of you and I shall always consider you my friends.

I was very saddened by Daves response, for I loved him very much. Others in the congregation wanted to get rid of the messenger. However, thank God, many repented and got right with God, although, of course, this did not happen in a weekend.

Today's Evangelism

My experience with unregenerate church members at North Pompano Baptist Church spurred me to write *Today's Evangelism* in 1982. That book had its roots in an unceasing burden to see biblical evangelism restored to the church and to see a proper relationship established between sound doctrine and true heavenly zeal in evangelism.

In thinking about the membership at North Pompano Baptist Church and many other churches I knew, I began to ask the following questions:

1. What was the caliber of supposed converts?
2. Was there evidence of a real conversion experience?
3. Was there a real conversion experience?
4. Had a supposed conversion led to new life in Christ, to new purpose for living, and to a new pathway of obedience to Christ?
5. Were the supposed converts brought into a living relationship with the Son of God?
6. Were the supposed converts led to worship God and serve him in the church?

I had become convinced that man-centered evangelism had brought disaster to the church in the form of an unregenerate, impure church membership. I was persuaded that the church desperately needed a return to God-centered evangelism. I wrote:

I am making a plea for every sincere Christian to examine all personal evangelism and public evangelistic preaching by this clear, New Testament, God-centered evangelistic message. Many of our serious church leaders and members know that there is something wrong with most of the so-called "converts," but they do not seem to trace the problem to the message of evangelism. This is why they are forever rushing on the contemporary scene with some new method, while the real problem is the message (p. 30).

God-centered evangelism presents the law to the unconverted person. If the law is ignored or left out, the meaning of sin is lost. Man-centered evangelism eschews preaching the law. There is bright singing, humorous witticisms, entertaining anecdotes, high-pressure techniques, and commercialism, but there is also a studied omission of the dark background upon which the gospel can effectively shine forth.

God-centered evangelism presents the lordship of Christ as a vital part of the gospel message. Our churches would not be filled with so many who give no biblical evidence of conversion if more ministers and members presented the lordship of Christ as part of the evangelistic message.

God-centered evangelism preaches repentance as a vital element of the message. Where saving faith is found, repentance is sure to also be found. Where evangelical repentance exists, saving faith will also be found. Faith and repentance are distinct but inseparable. As Calvin said, "Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith.... surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance." He continued: "Can true repentance stand, apart from faith? Not at all. But even though they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished... repentance and faith, although they are held together by a permanent bond, required to be joined rather than confused." Yet repentance is strangely absent from most of present-day evangelism. It is here that many poor lost church members are self-deceived. They have missed repentance and are as lost as lost can be.

God-centered evangelism recognizes and acknowledges the absolute necessity of the effectual call of the Holy Spirit for a person to be saved. It knows to be true what the Bible clearly teaches in John 6:44, that no man can come to Christ unless the Father draws him. Man-centered evangelism, on the other hand, acts as if the success of the gospel is owing to the power of persuasion or the eloquence of the person preaching the gospel. It ascribes the saving response to the gospel to mans will. God-centered evangelism knows better. No preacher, regardless of his training, preparation, eloquence, subtlety of wit, or power of persuasion can regenerate one soul.

God-centered evangelism believes that election is an act of God, not the result of the choice of the elect, that this choice is of individuals, not classes, and that it is by the good pleasure of God and according to his eternal purpose. Man-centered evangelism believes that salvation of individuals is merely the result of their own choice and perseverance, that Gods election is simply an election of a class, or that so far as the election of individuals is concerned, it was only as God foresaw faith on the part of the believing person.

God-centered evangelism stresses that faith is mans duty, but that it is not within his ability. Man-centered evangelism leads men to believe that they are saved by a decision.

In God-centered evangelism, follow-up of believers is not necessary the sinner willingly becomes a follower. Man-centered evangelism, however, is forced to cajole and pamper and beg so-called "converts" to do what everyone who is born again will want to do and will do without calling them every week to remind them and coerce them to worship and serve the Lord in his church.

Most evangelism of this day is not only superficial, but also radically defective. It is utterly lacking a foundation on which to base an appeal for sinners to come to Christ. The church desperately needs a return to God-centered evangelism. When it does, problems like those I faced at North Pompano Baptist Church would be avoided.

Despite all the hardships and difficulties, we were able to praise God for blessing the work far above what we could ask or think. Attendance at the prayer meetings more than tripled. Attendance at the evening service doubled. The debt was paid off, and the mortgage burned. We sent sound Christian literature to 3200 Southern Baptist

foreign missionaries and 2400 home missionaries. We arranged for the translation of Dagg's *Manual of Theology* into Portuguese. We distributed from the church book table thousands and thousands of books and pamphlets. We even started a mission church in the Palm Beach area.

Reformation is hard work. I think I aged ten years during the first year I was at North Pompano Baptist Church. Yet with God's grace, wisdom and patience, it can be done.

Principles of Local Church Reformation The Need for Reformation Today

I now want to turn to several principles that are essential for local church reformation. I hope these principles will be clearer to you after reading of my own experience at North Pompano Baptist Church.

The first principle is to recognize the need for reformation. Both the Bible and history record how the people of God are continually in need of self-examination and reformation. But in every case of reformation, there must be a recognition of the need. This is the first step.

Scripture records many accounts of true reformation. Sometimes whole communities, and in a few cases, whole nations, have been affected by reformation.

For example, Nehemiah had to be informed by Hanani that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates of the city were burned with fire. Nehemiah recognized the great need for reformation, as reflected in his prayer of confession:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. (Neh 1:5-7 (NIV)).

Habakkuk saw the sad condition of Judah in his day. He asked God, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice

never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.” (Hab. 1:3-4;NIV). Habakkuk recognized the great need for reformation, and so he prayed: “O Lord, I have heard your speech and was afraid; O Lord, revive your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy” (Hab. 3:2; NKJV). This verse shows us Habakkuk's fear. He was afraid. He heard an alarming voice that produced an appropriate prayer and serious plea. This verse also demonstrates the potent need for reformation “in wrath, remember mercy.”

The psalmists likewise saw the need for reformation. The sons of Korah pleaded in Psalm 85:4: “Restore us again, O God of our salvation” (NKJV). Three times in Psalm 80, Aseph cried out to the Lord: “Restore us, O God of hosts” (80:3, 7, 19; NKJV).

We could multiply texts and examples from almost every prophet in the Old Testament. In every case there was a recognition of the need for reform.

This is the starting place for us, too. Too many people in the church do not know the marks of a true church. Because they do not have a vision of what the church should look like, they see no need of reformation.

The discerning Christian, however, would not question the need for reformation. The fact that the church of today has little spiritual influence in the world is manifest. Mature and observant Christians recognize that there is no doctrinal foundation, no fixed objective standard of righteousness, because the moral law embodied in the Ten Commandments is missing from most churches. We should be more concerned than we are that the doctrinal foundations of the law have been removed or buried in powerless ritualism. For when the moral and doctrinal standards are removed, the church is swept along without a compass by every wind of change in a sea of confusion. The Bible asks the question: What can the righteous do if the foundations be removed? There is a desperate need for reformation in the church.

Our Lord's last words to the churches that needed to be reformed are found in His messages to the seven churches in Rev. 2 and 3. These final messages reflect his deep love and concern for his Church. These messages are rich in instruction, warning and comfort. These messages contain much that is very relevant for reforming churches on the contemporary scene. Many churches are sleeping the sleep of death. Some are sounder asleep than others. Some are like Laodicea they think they have need of

nothing, but in truth they are pitiful, poor, blind and naked. But the good news is that, despite the sad condition there are always some children of light living among the dead. When Jesus said to strengthen the things that remain, he knew that there were some that would remain and, hence, that could be strengthened.

My encouragement, then, to those of you in sleeping churches is this: Stay in the fight. As long as you are able, strengthen the things that remain.

The Kind of Man God Uses in Reformation

The second principle of reformation is that the man behind the pulpit must have a reformed life before the people in the pews can ever be expected to change. It has been said that the ministers life is the life of the ministry. This is certainly true when we speak of reformation. We can be sure that if there is no reformation in the pulpit, there will be no reformation in the pews.

What kind of man does God use as his instrument of reformation? By a careful look at reformations in the history of Gods people, we can discover the kind of man God uses, and therefore, the kind of man God expects you to be.

First, the man God uses in reformation is deadly serious about Gods Word and Gods work. If you are going to engage in reformation work, you must feel within yourself the responsibility to be a steward of the mysteries of God.

Indeed, when we examine the churches that have come alive, we see that the men leading them lived, labored and preached earnestly about eternity and eternity-bound souls. Horatius Bonar was such a man. As Samuel Zwemer wrote in the 1950 introduction to Bonars *Words to Winners of Souls*, the keynote of Bonars counsel to ministers was urgency. This was well expressed in the third verse of his hymn, "Go Labor On, Spend and Be Spent:

Go, labor on while it is day,

The worlds dark night is hastening on.

Speed, speed thy work, cast sloth away

It is not thus that souls are won.

Reformation men are serious men. They are not religious politicians seeking to climb the denominational ladder. Rather, they are men who have their eyes lifted to heaven. Everything they do and say is marked by earnestness, not just religious excitement. As was said of Richard Baxter, "When he spoke of weighty soul concerns, you might find his very spirit drenched therein." They are genuine men who know that necessity was laid upon them. They feel the urgency and weight of the cause of the gospel that is entrusted to them. They throw their whole soul into the conflict. As Bunyan said about his own preaching, they preach what they smartingly did feel.

Second, at the same time, reformation men are bent on success. If you are going to engage in reformation work, you must strive to succeed. You must be a warrior who has set your heart on victory. You must fight with believing expectation of victory under the guidance of our great Captain. I am referring, of course, to spiritual success, not worldly success. And, spiritual success is not necessarily correlated to statistical growth. Spiritual success may be had with statistical growth or without it. The point is, when a man enters Christs army, that is, the ministry, he must be bent on success in order to avoid being a traitor to Christ. As shepherds we cannot sit on the mountainside in the ease of the breeze, heedless to the straying, perishing, bleating flock; but rather, there must be a watching, guiding, guarding and feeding of the sheep committed to our care.

How does this emphasis on striving for success comport with the notion that, pursuant to Gods sovereignty, success is the Lords business? The reformation man must believe with all his heart what Jonathan Edwards put in his *Miscellanies* (#29):

When [God] decrees diligence and industry, He decrees riches and prosperity; when He decrees prudence, He often decrees success; when He decrees striving, then often He decrees the obtaining of the Kingdom of Heaven; when He decrees the preaching of the Gospel, then He decrees the bringing home of souls to Christ; when He decrees good natural faculties, diligence, and good advantage of them, He decrees learning; when He decrees summer, then He decrees the growing of plants; when He decrees conformity to His Son, He decrees calling; and when He decrees will, He decrees justification; and when He decrees justification, He decrees everlasting glory. Thus all the decrees of God are harmonious.

Third, the man who leads a reformation must be a man of faith. He must believe there is a time of plowing and sowing as well as a time of reaping. In other words, the man of God must plow up the soil of tradition and misconceptions and biblical illiteracy and then sow the gospel of the grace of God, believing that in due season there will be reaping if we faint not, knowing that our labor in the Lord will not end up in vain, knowing that we will return, bringing our sheaves with us. If you want to engage in reformation work, you must plead with God for men and plead with men for God. Fix your eyes on Gods promises and plead as did the psalmist: "Remember thy word unto thy servant, whereunto thou hast caused me to hope" (Psalm 119:49; KJV).

Fourth, the man God uses in reformation must have confidence in the Savior whose commission he bears. If you want to engage in reformation work, you must have confidence in the Holy Spirits mighty power. You must have faith in his power to take the wax of this world from the ears of poor, deaf sinners, faith in his power to open the eyes that are blinded by the dust of this world, and faith in the power of the Word of God and its gospel, knowing it will not return void (Is. 55:11). You must trust that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16; NIV). If you would see a church come alive, you must go forth with faith in the power of the gospel.

Fifth, the man God uses in reformation work must be a man who diligently works. Jonathan Edwards spent thirteen hours a day in his study, preparing for sermons. Martyn Lloyd-Jones accepted a heavy load of midweek preaching engagements all over England, but never neglected his duties at Westminster Chapel. George Whitefield, in 1750, preached every weekday morning at 6:00 and again at 6:00 in the evening. He preached three or four times each Sunday and twice a week at Lady Huntingdons church. During this time, he also sometimes conducted funerals, performed weddings, counseled enquirers, and kept up a large correspondence.

Sad to say, the ministry is infested with preachers who do not adopt the same attitude. There are a lot of fruitless preachers who do not labor for eternity. Yet for reformation to flourish, there must be some bearing of the burden in the heat of the day. There must be some unwearied toil of body and soul. There must be some of what the great apostle Paul speaks: "in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often in hunger, and thirst, in fasting often, in cold, and nakedness." Your attitude must be that there is no time for levity, sloth, or pleasure, for you are laboring for eternity. If

you want God to use you, keep your back to the world and your eyes on the goal. Do not become entangled with the affairs of this world, that they may please you who has been called to be a laborer in the vineyard.

Sixth, the man God uses in reformation must be patient. Remember what Paul told Timothy, the young preacher? The servant of the Lord must be patient (2 Tim. 2:24). James also tells us to be patient (James 5:7-11). There must be great patience in the work of reforming a church. There must be a willingness to labor long without seeing all the fruit that one desires. Sow...sow ...sow...day after day. Teach...teach...teach... week after week. You simply cannot be soon weary in well doing. You must keep in mind the passage from James that says "Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand" (James 5:7-8 (NKJ)).

Many a good plan has been aborted by impatience. Many a good day of toil has been thrown away by it as well. Neither you nor any other man can ever force reformation of a church. Yes, there must be intense longing for success, but much patience must be joined to that intense longing.

Consider that William Carey labored seven years before he baptized his first convert. Adoniram Judson toiled in Burma seven years before he harvested one soul. Robert Morrison sowed seven years in China before he baptized one convert. Robert Moffet waited seven years to see the first evident moving of the Spirit in Africa. Henry Richards spent seven long years in the Congo before he saw his first convert. What were these faithful men doing while they were waiting for results? They were patiently working, laying foundations, and sowing heavenly seeds, focusing on future generations.

Seventh, the man God uses in reformation must seek wisdom. The Bible tells us if any one lacks wisdom, he should ask of God who gives to all men liberally (James 1:5). God not only promises to give wisdom, but He describes this wisdom that He liberally gives: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17; NKJV).

Eighth, the man God uses in reformation must be bold and determined. Many who are Calvinists at heart are Arminians from the pulpit, and the reason is fear. But timidity shuts many a door of usefulness and loses many precious opportunities. Timidity wins no friends, while it strengthens the enemy.

Perhaps there was never an age where wickedness assumed a bolder attitude. Therefore, Christian boldness and courage is all the more required in reforming a church. Men must be strong and of good courage (Acts 4:13, 29, 31). We must adopt the attitude of Whitefield. When the vicar closed the church door, the evangelist preached in the churchyard!

Ninth, the man God uses in reformation is a man of prayer. Augustine said, "He that loveth little prayeth little, and he that loveth much prayeth much." Richard Hooker said, "Prayer is the first thing wherewith a righteous life beginneth, and the last wherewith it doth end." Bunyan said, "If thou art not a praying person, thou art not a Christian."

Prayer is essential. Many labor long and study much but pray little. We often hear requests to "pray for the work." Oh, my friend, I am convinced that prayer is the work! Take the attitude of Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, who arose each night at 2:00 a.m. and prayed until 4:00 a.m. because he found it difficult during the day to have uninterrupted prayer. William Grimshaw similarly had it as his custom to rise early in the morning, at 5:00 a.m. in winter and 4:00 a.m. in the summer, to begin his day with God. George Whitefield often rose from his bed in the night to intercede for perishing souls.

How, then, will your church attain to reformation? The answer is: By Gods pouring out his sovereign grace upon the people of God. By using human instruments (a) who are deadly serious about the Word of God and the work of God, (b) who are bent on success, (c) who plow and sow in faith, hope and love, (d) who labor and bear the burden and heat of the day, (e) who have much patience, and (f) who spend time alone with God in prayer. Reformation is possible only through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. But take heart. Luke 11:13 says, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (KJV).

John Knox, in his old age, was helped into the pulpit by friends, but when he arose to preach, the Spirit of Gods love burned in his heart in such a fashion that an attendant said, "So mighty was he in his yearning that I thought he would break the pulpit in bits." Oh, for some men with a deep yearning for God and for souls!

Laying a Foundation

The third principle of reforming a local church involves both the demolition of misguided theological notions and the laying of a biblical foundation anchored by the doctrines of grace.

It is impossible to over emphasize the importance of sound doctrine in the Christian life. Right thinking about spiritual matters is imperative if we are to have right living. As men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles, so sound Christian character does not grow out of unsound doctrine. J. C. Ryle once said, "You can talk about Christian experience all you wish, but without doctrinal roots it is like cut flowers stuck in the ground it will wither and die." To put it another way: the devotional house must be built on a doctrinal foundation.

Biblical doctrine is more important than most church members realize. Doctrine not only expresses our experiences and beliefs, but it also determines our direction. It shapes our lives and churches. It gives our churches unity and stability. The church that neglects to teach sound biblical doctrine weakens the church membership. It works against true unity, invites instability in its fellowship, lessens conviction, and stalemates true progress in the church.

Unfortunately, however, we live in a church age where the doctrinal foundations of contemporary evangelicalism have crumbled and been destroyed. But God is interested in laying anew biblical foundations for future generations. He calls patient, persevering workers who long for reformation and who seek his wisdom to lay solid, doctrinal foundations!

Study Pauls epistles to the Romans, Galatians or Ephesians, and you will see that he always laid a doctrinal foundation before moving to practical subjects. If a church is to be reformed and come alive, there must be a doctrinal foundation. I believe we are in

a reformation period of history. Many will be called upon by God to lay foundations of reform in churches. At the same time, in other churches, the foundations are being removed.

By contrast, the superficial man will think only of the “big show.” He will not be concerned about how it comes about. He is only concerned with the superstructure. His concern is: Does it work? It is not: Is it true? But God is concerned about foundations, not superstructures.

We live in a day of quick, cheap, slick and frothy foundations, and our churches are reaping the sad, pitiful, painful, pathetic results. Our churches are full of carnal men who are not interested in being in the foundation-building business. Carnal men are not concerned with leaving a spiritual legacy for future generations. The only men who are interested in constructing a true foundation are those who have their eyes fixed on eternity. Foundation work is costly. It is painful. It is laborious. It is not showy. Who wants to watch concrete being poured into a footing? Foundation work is hard, dirty work.

Yet God Himself was into foundation work. He began His creative work by laying a foundation. As the psalmist said, “Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth” (Ps. 102:25; KJV). Isaiah also declared of God, “My hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth” (Isa. 48:13; KJV).

What doctrines are we talking about? The doctrines that are worth dying for are foundational, biblical doctrines, not secondary ones. They are the doctrines believed in and preached by our Baptist fathers — men such as James P. Boyce, John A. Broadus, B.H. Carroll, John L. Dagg, Luther Rice, P.H. Mell, John Bunyan, Charles H. Spurgeon, William Carey, and Andrew Fuller.

We speak first of all of the doctrines of grace. Teach your people that they are utterly depraved and dead in their sins without God. Teach them that God chose the elect for salvation from the foundation of time out of his own mercy and desire, and that Christ died as a propitiation for his people. Teach them that it is the Holy Spirit who effectively calls sinners to salvation. Teach them that no one who has been converted can ever, for any reason, lose his salvation, but that true believers will persevere until the end.

In these doctrines we have a powerful message that is meant for today! We proclaim a powerful God who actually saves. Not a “little god” who can do no more than to help man save himself. Not a puny god who pleads with sinners to come to him and stands by helplessly, wringing his hands, while man makes up his mind.

We proclaim a faith that is utterly and completely God-centered. Our God is the source and end of everything that is, both in nature and in grace. He is sovereign in creation, sovereign in redemption, and sovereign in providence. History is nothing less than the outworking of God’s preordained plan.

A prominent leader in the Southern Baptist Convention recently said that God does not overcome mans ability to resist Gods grace. Our Baptist forefathers would not have agreed. They affirmed, as we do, that the Spirit’s work involves more than mere enlightenment. It is a regenerating work in sinful man. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit takes away mans heart of stone and gives him a heart of flesh, renewing his will, causing him to come to Christ — not against his will, but freely, being made willing by Gods grace. “Blessed is the man whom thou choolest, and causest to approach unto thee, that he may dwell in thy courts: we shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, even of thy holy temple” (Ps. 65:4).

The same Baptist leader who publicly denied irresistible grace also denied that Gods redemption is particular to those God chooses to save. Yet just as the Holy Spirit of Calvinism is a Spirit whose calling cannot be resisted, the Jesus of Calvinism is a Jesus who came to save, not to merely make salvation possible. The cross revealed God’s power to save, not His impotence. God was not frustrated at the cross. As Peter proclaimed after the Resurrection, “Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain” (Acts 2:23; KJV).

Along with the doctrines of grace, human responsibility to believe is another foundational doctrine, a hill on which to die. We must proclaim to every single person:

All are sinners. All are dead in trespasses and sins. They are not sick and simply in need of help. Rather, they are dead and in need of life.

Jesus Christ, God’s Son, is a perfect, able and willing Savior of sinners, even the worst.

yea, even the chief.

The Father and the Son have promised that all who know themselves to be sinners and who put their faith in Jesus Christ as Savior shall be received into favor, and none shall be cast out.

God has made faith and repentance a duty, requiring of every man who hears the gospel a serious and full casting of the soul upon Christ as an all-sufficient Savior. He is ready, willing and able to save all who come to God by Christ.

To the question, "What must I do to be saved?" we must respond to all who ask, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." What does that mean? It means: (a) knowing that you are a sinner, (b) knowing that Christ has died for sinners, (c) abandoning all self-righteousness, self-confidence and self-effort as a means of salvation, (d) casting yourself wholly upon Christ for pardon and peace, (e) exchanging your natural enmity and rebellion against Christ for a spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of your heart by the Holy Spirit.

It is these foundations that must be vigorously constructed in our churches. Upon the hearty preaching of these foundational doctrines, who knows but that God may be pleased to fan the flames of reformation fire.

Practical Suggestions for Local Church Reformation

The following practical suggestions for local church reformation are offered for your consideration. As I mentioned earlier, I learned these lessons the hard way.

Spiritual credibility. Don't try to reform a church until you have first earned spiritual credibility. This means you have to live what you teach in terms of holiness before you can even begin to teach it.

Accommodation. Study the biblical principle of accommodation. Accommodation is the willing restriction of the exercise of legitimate Christian liberty for the purpose of redeeming people whose consciences are bound by ignorance or misunderstanding resulting from mans fallen nature (cf. 1 Cor. 8:9-13). There is a fine line between accommodation and compromise. Compromise involves the relinquishment of Christian principles in order to accomplish ones purpose. In contrast, accommodation

involves the relinquishment of Christian liberty. This distinction must be carefully kept in mind, particularly with respect to the altar call and the general invitation system, which binds many Southern Baptists. You will need to find ways to engage in accommodation without compromise in your specific situation.

Planning. Three questions should be asked, and carefully answered, before implementing change: What is the right, biblical thing to do? How should change be implemented? When should change be implemented? My advice is that you not try to do too much too soon. Many mistakes have been made by doing the right thing in the wrong way or at the wrong time. Especially do not get caught up in the trap of thinking controversy and conflict in and of themselves are the ministers badge of courage. Do not shy away from conflict when it comes (and it will come), but do everything you can from your end to avoid beginning it. Make sure it is the gospel that is offensive, not you.

Priorities. The principle of priorities must be applied. You can't change everything at once. Start with the major doctrines of the faith God, Christ, and salvation. Dont get hung up on secondary matters such as eschatology. Find the essentials that must be changed in your situation, and focus on those.

The two churches. The principle of the two churches must be before you at all times. Keep in mind first the ideal church — the church, as it should be, conceived from the scriptures. Never abandon this. Consider also the real church — the church as it is — the one you look at 11:00 on Sunday morning. One must realize that the two shall never meet on earth, but you will find joy and satisfaction in narrowing the difference between them. When you look at the real church on Sunday morning, remember that your goal is to take small steps to move it toward the ideal one.

Church membership. Keep in mind the principle of church membership. Baptists have always believed in a regenerate church membership. Isaac Backus rightly said, "At all times the door of the church should be carefully kept [shut] against such as cannot give a satisfactory evidence of the work of God upon their souls, whereby they are united to Christ." At the same time, don't make church membership any narrower than the New Testament does. Dont make subscription to your favorite doctrinal tenets (even Calvinism) a requirement of membership.

Restraint. Remember the principle of restraint. Don't tackle the whole church at one time. Choose a few men who are sincere, teachable and spiritually minded and spend time with them in study and prayer. They will help you to reform. This principle is found in Titus 1: 5: "For this cause left I thee behind in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" (KJV). Acts 14:23 likewise says, "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" (KJV). See also Acts 11:30 ("Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul; KJV); Acts 20:17,28 ("And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.;" KJV).

Clarity. In the pulpit, don't use theological language that is not found in the Bible. Avoid terms such as Calvinism, reformed, doctrines of grace, particular redemption, etc. Most people will not know what you are talking about. Many that do will become inflamed against you. Teach your people the biblical truth of these doctrines without providing distracting labels for them.

Literature. Use sound literature, not indiscriminately, but wisely. Set up a book table in your church. Start with little things at first, that is, pamphlets and books with some doctrinal and experiential substance. Some possibilities are John Bunyans Pilgrims Progress, Martyn Lloyd Joneses Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, Joseph Alleines A Sure Guide to Heaven, Horatius Bonars Words to Winners of Souls, and J. I. Packers Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God.

When you use literature to foster reformation, keep in mind the three things you should know. First, you should know the books you give to others. Make sure you use books and literature that are consistent with the teachings of the Bible. Second, you should know the person to whom you give a book, including his needs and capacity. For example, when you are evangelizing, you may want to use Alleines Alarm to the Unconverted. When you want to help a Christian understand the connection between the doctrines of grace and evangelism, you may want to use Packers Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God. If a Christian is struggling with the role of the law in the life of a believer, use Samuel Boltens The True Bounds of Christian Freedom. Do not give John Owen to someone who is not capable of using his works profitably. The point is,

know the needs of the person to whom you give a book. Third, you should know the most serious areas of ignorance and the errors of our day. The doctor does not prescribe green pills to everyone; he gives medicine that is relevant to cure the problem. You must do the same. Finally, soak all the books you distribute in fervent prayer. You never know how a gift will assist someone come to faith or grow in their faith.

History. Check the history of your church to see if it has any early constitutions or declarations of faith. Often you will find, particularly in older churches, a statement expressing the doctrines which you desire to establish. A gracious appeal to such a document will help give you credibility. At least your congregation will know you are not coming from Mars. Stand behind these articles of faith. Stand behind our Baptist fathers, such as Bunyan, Spurgeon, Fuller, Boyce, Dagg, Broadus, Manly, W.B. Johnson, R.B.C. Howell and B.H. Carroll. (The use of creeds and confessional statements is discussed in more detail in the appendix).

Some additional points to remember are:

- Don't use the pulpit to scold people. You cannot scold people into reformation.
- Exercise common sense.
- Depend on the only weapons we have: prayer, preaching and teaching.
- Be sure that you understand the foundational doctrines of the faith and how they are related to each other and to your situation.

- Above all, remember that the proper motives for reformation are love to God and concern for His glory, love for man and concern for his good; love for God's Holy Law as the only perfect, objective standard of righteousness; love for Christ and His Church; and love and compassion for sinners.

Counting the Cost

Men in every reformation were abused, misunderstood, misrepresented, reviled, persecuted, ostracized, and excommunicated from organized religion, suffered mental and physical agony, and often death. We too can expect no less today. We should not expect to see reformation without cost. Jesus said:

And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build and was not able to finish. (Luke 14:27-30; KJV).

What are the possible costs of reformation? We can think of a few.

Denominational popularity and public approval. The work of reformation is not the way to climb the denominational ladder.

Pain in tearing down rotting superstructures. The pastor involved in reformation will, at times, be called to that awful task of tearing down some false superstructure that had been built without a doctrinal foundation, that had been built by cheap, shallow, man-centered evangelism. This rotting edifice must be torn down before a solid foundation can be laid. In genuine reformation of a church, three things will always happen: some will leave, some will want to get rid of the preacher, and thank God, some will get right with God. There will be results but not always saving results. Remember, in John 6 there were results Jesus preached the crowd away.

Suffering at the hands of the unregenerate. The pastor involved in reformation may have to suffer at the hands of a large, unregenerate church membership, and especially from unregenerate and religiously ignorant deacons and leaders.

Suffering in the form of being misunderstood. The pastor involved in reformation may also have to suffer the pain of being misunderstood by even well-meaning, but misguided church leaders, fellow ministers, and more painful still, sometimes by their own loved ones (for example, wives who do not understand their husband's position).

Financial sacrifice. The pastor involved in reformation may have to sacrifice financially, especially in some cases where carnal and ignorant church leaders will use money as a threat to drive preachers from the pulpit.

But along with these and other costs there comes the joy of a conscience void of offence before God and man. Isn't that worth more than all the disapprobation that man can offer?

Since nothing in this mortal life is more important than true religion in the soul and in the church, reformation should be diligently sought after, and carefully looked into. It is not enough to pout and complain about what is wrong in the visible church, but we must be occupied in reforming and restoring what is right and biblical. Strengthen the things that remain.

[Appendix: Teaching Others to Walk: \(http://founders.org/main/index-4/index-5-3/quieta/\)](http://founders.org/main/index-4/index-5-3/quieta/)

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Resources

[Founders Journal, Issue 92 \(http://founders.org/fj92/\)](http://founders.org/fj92/) -- Spring 2013, Be Strong in the Lord [\[PDF\] \(http://founders.org/main/wp-content/uploads/fj92.pdf\)](http://founders.org/main/wp-content/uploads/fj92.pdf)

[PLNTD \(http://www.plntd.com\)](http://www.plntd.com) - a decentralized network focused on establishing and multiplying confessional church-planting churches.

[Sunday School Helps \(http://founders.org/ss/\)](http://founders.org/ss/) for *Explore the Bible* and *Bible Studies for Life*

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