

A Tale of 3 Churches **Reformation and the Local Church**

(This address was given at the God's Glory Our Joy Conference held in October 2005)

Let me begin this morning by picturing three churches. They are all evangelical churches. If you visited any of these churches on a Sunday you would hear the Bible being preached. In each of these churches there's an evangelical minister who preaches the gospel clearly and directly. In each of these churches you would find godly, serious, zealous Christians.

The first of these churches we'll call *St Gamaliel's* and you've guessed right, it's an Anglican church, part of the Church of England. The vicar there is a very earnest, hardworking, evangelical man. He's been thoroughly trained in theology and Biblical studies and he's a fine expository preacher. He takes every opportunity to preach the gospel - at weddings and funerals, at Women's Institute meetings as well as in Sunday services. And he's seen a lot of people converted through that regular, Biblical, gospel preaching. Really he would sum up his work under two headings. He's there firstly to preach the gospel, to win people to Christ, and then secondly to disciple those people, and help them in turn to be good witnesses to Christ.

I like him very much. I love his seriousness and his concern to preach the gospel. But I have to say that I'm never quite at ease with him. I never find it easy to sit and talk with him about our different church situations. Because in the end, I don't honestly understand where he's coming from, and I'm sure he doesn't understand where I'm coming from either. There are things that seem to me terribly important and don't seem to be on his map at all. Sometimes I've tried to talk about them, but we never seem to get very far.

You see, he's vowed loyalty to the Church of England. When he was ordained he vowed to abide by all its rules and to use only the forms of service which it permits. Now that denomination acknowledges the Queen or the King as its Supreme Governor. It doesn't matter if the Monarch is a believer, an atheist, a good man, an adulterer. The monarch is the earthly head of the church. And the monarch's representative, the Prime Minister, has the right to appoint the bishops who lead the Church. He may be a thoroughly godless man but it makes no difference. He appoints the leaders of the Church. My friend doesn't think that the bishop in his diocese is a believer at all. But as a parish minister he's vowed to give honour to the bishop and every year he invites the bishop to come and confirm the young teenagers from the church. So this unconverted bishop comes and prays that the Holy Spirit will come upon these teenagers.

Everybody living in the parish has a right to bring their children to the parish church to be baptised, and my friend has a legal duty to baptise them. So he does, and he pronounces over them these solemn words: "Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren that this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's church, let us give thanks unto Almighty God..." Or he uses words from one of the more recent prayer books which say the same thing in updated words. My friends doesn't feel he can just rewrite the words, because when he was ordained he vowed he would use only the authorised words, and he's an honourable man. He knows he's got to abide by his vows.

And when any of the people who live in the parish die, providing they've been baptised as babies, my friend has the legal duty, if asked, to bury them. And he does, and these are the

words he reads at the graveside, “Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of his great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear brother here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ...”

Week after week, my friend administers the Lord’s Supper, and he gives it to all who come forward. Some of them he’s sure are unconverted, some of them are living openly immoral lives, but he doesn’t feel he can bar anyone from the table who’s been baptised and confirmed. Often people come in who are complete strangers but they’ve still got the right to take part. If he ever did turn people away because he knew they were living immoral lives, he knows he’d have a terrible row with his bishop.

Thankfully there are some situations he’s not had to face yet. You could have two openly homosexual men who turn up at the church. If they’re baptised and live in the parish, they’ve got a legal right to vote in the elections for the Parish Council. For that matter there’s nothing to stop them from being elected themselves onto the Parish Council. My friend cannot even try to restrict the membership of the church to true believers because everyone in the parish who’s been baptised as a baby and confirmed as a teenager is a member of the church automatically, with the same rights as all the other members.

Now my friend is aware of all these things. But they don’t seem to bother him. Sometimes I have just tried to probe a little about some of these issues. “Do you really think it’s biblical that the monarch should be the supreme governor of the Church? Do you think Paul would have been happy for Nero to be recognised as the head of the Church in his day? And do you think Pontius Pilate would have been allowed to appoint the leaders of the Jerusalem church? Do you really think it’s right that believers and unbelievers should have equal right to come to the Lord’s Supper?” And he grins and says, “Of course not”. But then he adds, “But you’ve got problems in your churches too, haven’t you? And at any rate,” he goes on, “the Church of England is a good boat to fish from. Providing I’m left alone to get on with preaching the gospel I don’t bother with all those things.” And he goes on to tell me what fantastic opportunities he has to preach the gospel to all the young couples who come to him to be married, and to all the folk who ask him to take granddad’s funeral. That’s his answer.

In the end, this man runs the church as far as possible as if it were independent and he tries to ignore what’s going on in the wider denomination. But he can never do that completely because he is still bound by the law of the land, and he has vowed submission to the Church of England and its rules. If he’s pressed he knows that the whole structure of the Church of England is unbiblical, but he feels it’s worth putting up with all that for the advantages it brings. He just gets on with what he sees as his two big jobs: getting people converted and then teaching them to live godly lives. But he’s not thinking in terms of building a church that’s patterned like the churches of the New Testament. Yes he protests from time to time when some apostate bishop comes out with some particularly outrageous heresy. In that sense, he wants reformation: he’d like to have Bible preaching in every Anglican church in the country. But if that happened, it wouldn’t alter the fact that the whole structure of the Church of England is unbiblical. And that doesn’t really bother him. He doesn’t really believe in Reformation. He doesn’t believe that we have a duty to reform churches - to bring them into line with the Bible’s picture of what a church is supposed to be.

Now my friend is an Anglican, and I’ve chosen to use him as an example simply because he highlights so plainly the fact that it’s possible to be an evangelical Christian, a Bible-believer,

to love the gospel, and still not really believe in Reformation.

But don't imagine that that mindset is limited to Anglicans. Let me move on to my second church situation. I'm thinking of a free church, an independent evangelical church. I won't give it a name but you'll recognise it if ever you visit it, because in the porch there are memorial stones to the two families who founded the church and have dominated it ever since. On one side of the door you've got a tablet celebrating the Medes and on the other side, one in honour of the Persians.

Again it's a truly evangelical church. The gospel is preached. People are encouraged to live lives of obedience to God's commandments. But there are some strange gaps in the preaching. The pastor believes firmly in preaching through books of the Bible, so if he lives long enough, he'll deal with the whole Bible eventually. But when he comes to certain passages, there are some questions he never seems to raise. So he's preached on Acts 2. And he dealt with the verses, "*Repent and be baptised everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ... Those who accepted the message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to the number that day, and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship and the breaking of bread and prayers*". And he talked about the importance of repentance, and baptism and being devoted to the life of the church. But somehow he never actually put it all together and said, "Here in this passage everybody who repented had to be baptised. And everybody who was baptised was added to the number of the church. And it was those people - all of them - who then devoted themselves to the teaching and fellowship and breaking of bread and prayer. And that's the way we should be doing things in this church". Why didn't he say anything along those lines? Well because that's not the way it's done in that church. In that church they have people in membership who have never been baptised. And they have people whom they've baptised who have never become members of the church. And they have people who come to the Lord's table who have never been baptised or become members of the church and who but clearly aren't devoted to the other aspects of church life: the teaching, the fellowship, the prayers.

And the pastor doesn't want to rock the boat and be divisive. You see, in this church of the Medes and the Persians, if you ask any questions about the way the church does things, you get the answer, "Ah but we've always done it this way". Once somebody dared ask, "Is it really biblical to pass round a collection plate and stick it under the nose of unconverted visitors so that they feel obliged to give?" Well you can guess the answer. "We've always done it that way". Somebody asked, "Is it really biblical to use the word 'Pastor' as a title and call him Pastor Smith? After all we don't call the deacons Deacon Jones or Deacon Brown." Answer: "We've always done it that way". "Is it really biblical for the church to be run by a committee made up of the leaders of all the different groups including the ladies' group". Answer: "We've always done it that way".

Maybe the pastor didn't realise how entrenched that attitude was when he went there. Maybe he went there thinking, "this is an evangelical church. The folk here believe that the Bible has complete authority in all matters of faith and practice". He looked forward with excitement to the years ahead. His vision was that he and the church together would be searching the Scriptures, making new discoveries about what a church is supposed to be, how it's supposed to operate, and then together putting those things into practice, reforming the whole life of the church step by step by God's Word. But he soon discovered that every time he pointed to some area in which the church needed reformation, he found icy winds blowing round his head. Now he just keeps silent. Just like my Anglican friend, he gets on with the job of trying

to get people saved, and helping them to heaven. But he's given up on the work of bringing reformation to the church. Now he just accepts the status quo.

But now let me mention the third church - yet another evangelical church. It's a church that is very serious about reaching people with the gospel, winning outsiders. It's actually called Four Winds Evangelical Church because it stands at a busy intersection: a crossroads where the winds blow from all directions. People who go to that church never know which way the wind's going to be blowing next. In the time I've known that church, a huge number of things have changed. They've got rid of the pulpit because they decided that "the man in the street" is democratically minded and doesn't really like having an authority figure standing at the front in an elevated position. The man in the street likes everyone to be on the same level, so if the church is going to get people in, that's the way the church has to go. They got rid of the hymn books and now they use the OHP for all services, because in our age people get bored very quickly singing the same things week after week, year after year. If we want to attract twenty-first century people, we need a constantly changing diet of new songs. They try to involve women as far as possible in public ministry so they have women serving at communion and leading in prayer in the services - why? - because in a modern society, people believe in the equality of the sexes, and find it strange if meetings are male dominated. If we're going to get outsiders in, we've got to try to make them feel at home.

This church is constantly changing things. And the rationale behind every change is this. They want to make the church accessible and attractive to unconverted people. They want it to be the sort of church that unbelievers will like, where they'll feel at home. So as far as possible they will root out old traditions, the old ways of doing things and they'll bring the church "up to date", so that modern people will want to be part of it, and be drawn in.

Now the seed of that thinking has been in our churches for a long time. It was D L Moody and his generation who brought that thinking to the British Isles from America a hundred and thirty years ago. To win people you've got to make them feel happy. So arrange special gospel meetings where everything is lively, quick moving, attractive. Sing them songs they'll enjoy listening to. Put on the platform people they'll be interested in. And that's what lies behind so much of the evangelistic strategy adopted by churches in the 20th century. If you want to win children, arrange midweek meetings where they can play games and have lively activities. If you want to win teenagers, provide table tennis and coffee (that was the sixties) or (to move it forward a few years) rock music and drama.

That's been the thinking for a long time. But what's changed in the last twenty or so years is that that same thinking is being used in many churches to decide how *everything* in the church is to be organised and run. In the past churches asked, "How can we make our evangelistic activities attractive to unbelievers?" Now, they ask, "How can we make our Sunday worship attractive to unbelievers". That's why at Four Winds, everything is changing all the time. The church changes to match the mood and the preferences of "the man in the street".

And the text that's always used to justify that thinking is Paul saying, "*I became all things to all men to win some...*". Which when you look at it carefully isn't a text about church life at all. It's about Paul's personal lifestyle.

The fact is that my third church is no more committed to biblical reformation than churches one and two. It's committed to change, but it's not committed to reformation. It's not saying, "We must change the church bring the church to bring it in line with God's pattern for a local

church”. It’s saying “we must change the church to make it attractive to outsiders”. And those are two very different things.

My first church is dominated by pragmatism. My second church is dominated by tradition. My third church is dominated by the desire to attract outsiders. But none of them are taking the duty of reformation seriously.

Now I’ve got three things to say this morning:

Firstly, every Christian and every church that’s loyal to Christ must be committed to biblical reformation.

Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, has given us in the New Testament a multitude of clear, unambiguous statements about what he wants a local church to be. Every church should be independent and self-governing. Every church should be free from interference by the state in all matters spiritual. Every church should consist of believers alone and those believers should all be baptised. Every church should be open to people from any racial group, social group, or language group, and they should all have equal rights within the life of the church. Every church should be governed by male elders and served by deacons. The elders in every church should be men apt to teach and they should be trained and set apart for that work. They should teach the whole Word of God in an orderly, systematic way and they should teach with authority. Every church should exercise discipline and expel from its membership those who turn away from gospel doctrine or holy living. Every church should celebrate the Lord’s supper and should admit to the table only those who show that they are truly devoted to their brothers and sisters in the church. Every church should sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and they should teach and exhort one another in the words that they sing. Every church should have an organised system to care for its needy members, the poor, the widows, the orphans in its midst. Every church should give a special place to its older members ; younger women should receive appropriate teaching from older women; younger men from older men. Every church should have its children present in its meetings, listening to the Word of God being read and preached. Every church should be training leaders for the next generation. Every church should be taking responsibility for commissioning and sending out missionaries into places where there are no gospel churches.

These are just a few of the clear standards that are laid down in the New Testament, for the functioning of local churches. If you know your New Testament at all, you will know where these things are laid down, either by direct command or by clear examples.

And if these things are laid down in the New Testament, they are laid down by Jesus Christ himself. Jesus says to his apostles plainly, “He who rejects you rejects me”. If I read the commands Paul wrote to the churches and say, “well I don’t really think these are all that important”, I am really saying, “I am not willing to submit to the commands of Christ. I feel free to discard the pattern he’s laid down. I’d rather build the church in a way that brings pragmatic benefit, or that’s been laid down by tradition, or that I think will be more attractive to unbelievers - or simply in a way that suits my own whim”.

When Jesus held that great commissioning service for his apostles before he returned to heaven, he said to them, “All authority in heaven and earth is given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching *them* to obey everything I have commanded *you*”. Did he mean

that or not? Are we supposed to obey everything he commanded his apostles or not? Are we ever free to say, “well I know it’s not really the pattern laid down in the New Testament but it’s a secondary matter?”

This whole idea of primary and secondary truth - and I’ve heard this distinction so often - what irreverence it is! Jesus says, “teach them to obey everything I’ve commanded you”. And then we turn round and say, “yes, but of course some things are primary and some things are secondary. Now the gospel, that’s primary - we must never deviate from that. But baptism, well, that’s secondary - we mustn’t make an issue of that. And church discipline, well it would be very divisive if we tried to go down that line and anyway it’s a secondary matter isn’t it?”

Jesus means what he says. He wants his people to obey everything he has commanded. He wants churches that are determined to put everything he’s commanded into action. He wants churches that are determined to reform all their thinking, their teaching, their structures, their practices to bring them into line with what he’s commanded.

And it grieves him and dishonours him when churches fail to do that. Remember, Jesus loves his churches. Let me remind you of the words Paul spoke to the elders of the church in Ephesus as he said farewell to them. Acts ch 20 vs 28: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God *which he bought with his own blood*”. And notice that the church of God there in that verse is the local church. Paul’s talking about the particular church which those elders must shepherd. And he says that Jesus Christ bought it with his own blood.

That is how precious every true local church is in Christ’s estimation. He looks at each church and he says, “I bought that church with my blood. I bought it so that it would be mine - my temple, my treasure, my chosen possession, my flock”. The church is *his*. And he has the right to declare just how it’s to be formed and led and disciplined and taught.

Take an even more startling picture. Paul again in 2 Corinthians ch 11 vs 2: “*I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him*”. Paul looks at the members of that church and he says that they are to be presented together to Christ as his virgin bride. Now we often talk about the universal church as the Bride of Christ. But here Paul is talking about the local church - and he tells us that each individual local church is to be a bride for Christ. That’s why Paul battles so relentlessly for the purity of the church. That’s why he weeps whenever a church moves away from Christ’s commandments, that’s why he pleads and urges and writes these passionate letters. He wants each local church to be a beautiful virgin fit for Christ her husband.

That’s why we can never say, “Oh I don’t think it really matters whether we follow the Bible pattern at this point or at that point”. The church is His bride, which he loves with all his heart and he’s told us just how he wants her to be dressed, and what jewels he wants her to wear. We don’t have the right to say, “Oh I think she’d look nicer with a blue sash. Oh I think we can leave off the head-dress”. Doesn’t Christ have the right to lay down exactly how he wants his bride to appear? Shouldn’t Christ be able to look at his church - at any gospel church - and say, “Yes! That’s just the way I imagined her. That’s just the way I wanted her to look”?

So there’s my first point. Every local church if she’s to be loyal to Christ must be committed

to biblical reformation.

My second point is this. The work of reformation is likely to be costly, slow and painful. Here is Paul again (1 Corinthians ch 3 vs 9): *“we - Paul and his fellow workers - are God’s fellow-labourers; you - the church in Corinth - are God’s field, God’s building”*. Each local church is a building belonging to God, which is in the process of being built. Now, Paul says, *“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation for that building as an expert builder.”* Paul planted the church. And now, he says, *“someone else is building on it.”* There were various leaders working now at the next stage of establishing the church. *“But each one should be careful of how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”* That’s settled: the church must be built on Jesus Christ, it must be a gospel church. But that still leaves the question of how different people approach the work of building the church. *“If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames”*.

Paul pictures two men, each setting out to build a local church on a gospel foundation. The first says *“I don’t care how long this takes or how costly it is. I want it to be perfect, exactly what God wants it to be.”* So he begins to seek out gold and silver and precious stones, and every stone has to be cut and polished. And just to put one jewel in place can be a year’s work. And he builds the whole house out of these precious materials. It’s hugely costly, and it’s incredibly slow. And at the end, the house isn’t likely to be very big - after all, the materials he’s using are very rare. But it’s beautiful. And when a fire sweeps through the neighbourhood, that house remains intact - you can’t burn gold, silver or diamonds. That’s Paul’s picture of Christians who build a church in the way God has commanded. It’s going to take huge patience, endless hard work. It’s going to be costly but it’s worth it. It brings eternal reward.

And then there’s the other man. And he’s just interested in one thing: producing something as big as he can make it, and as quickly as he can build it. He can’t afford the time to polish precious stones and fit them into place. He builds with wooden beams, and plywood and stuffs the spaces with straw and hay. The materials are easily available, they’re cheap, the house goes up very quickly - it’s big, spacious, impressive.

And when the fire sweeps through the neighbourhood, that house is gone in a lick of smoke, and the man’s left with nothing to show for his work.

It’s your choice. You can build God’s way, or you can build man’s way. You can build for time or you can build for eternity. For some of us, taking Paul’s words seriously isn’t just going to mean starting with gold, silver and precious stones. It’s going to mean pulling down the things we’ve built already: the wooden walls, the straw roof, and starting again. That’s why we talk about re-formation. Is it really worth it? Listen to Paul’s punchline. *“Don’t you know that you yourselves - the church in Corinth - that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you.”* Paul can’t aim for anything less than perfection in the way he builds - why not? - because he’s conscious that he’s building a temple for God. That’s what makes all the patience, the labour, the cost worthwhile.

My third point is this. With God’s blessing, the work of reformation may be blessed beyond

all expectation. Let me remind you of just one example within the pages of Scripture. I'm thinking of Timothy's work in Ephesus. There are plenty of others we could choose but this is the one that's been in my mind recently. Paul left Timothy in Ephesus because the church there had gone off the rails. Timothy had the job of reforming that church. Some of the leaders of that church, the elders had gone astray. They had wandered away from the gospel, they had become obsessed with Jewish myths and legends. And they had taken the church with them. And all sorts of abuses had entered into the life of the church. Women, loud, dominant, showy women had set themselves up as teachers; discipline had ceased to exist; widows in real need were being neglected while young women who could perfectly well have cared for themselves were being supported by the church; the church had stopped praying; there was no real Bible-teaching... the whole church was in chaos. And Timothy, a relatively young man, a single man in bad health, suffering from tummy aches and stress was told, "you've got to go in there and reform that situation". The church had already rejected Paul's authority, let alone Timothy's. It really was mission impossible.

And yet all the evidence is that that situation was completely transformed through the preaching, the prayers, the patient work of one man. That church was brought back to gospel preaching, holy living, and biblical patterns of church life. If any of you are struggling away, working for reformation in difficult situations and feeling that they're impossible, sit down, read 1 and 2 Timothy, get a feel for the situation Timothy was in. And then read the letter to the church in Ephesus in the book of Revelation. And see how totally that situation had been transformed. Oh yes, new problems had come in, but you can see how astonishingly Timothy's work had prospered. A church that was once infected with every sort of heresy and bad practice had become a church about which Jesus could say, "*I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, but that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not...*" And when you look to the next generation you find that the church in Ephesus had become a glowing example of godliness and love. One famous Christian leader wrote to the church in Ephesus forty years or so after Timothy had been there: "I've come to know your reputation, dearly beloved in God, which you've gained by constant righteousness, according to the faith and love which are in Jesus Christ our Saviour... I needed to be stirred up by you in faith, courage, patience, endurance..." The contrast between the situation when Timothy went to Ephesus and the situation when Ignatius wrote that letter is simply stunning. But you could find thousands of equally stunning examples in the pages of history. God can bless our efforts at reformation beyond all expectation.

Now where does all this leave you? I'm going to say just two things. Firstly, I want to speak to anybody here who is in an unreformable situation. Do you understand what I mean by that? I started by talking about my friend at St Gamaliel's. The church he belongs to is not reformable. He can preach his heart out in that church, he can evangelise, he can encourage, plead, rebuke, but he will never be able to reform that church and bring it into line with New Testament norms. Because it is legally, constitutionally unbiblical. I gave you a list at the beginning of all the things he's legally bound to do or not to do as long as he's in the Church of England. He can't restrict the membership to believers. He can't exercise church discipline. He can't shake off the headship of her Majesty the Queen as Supreme Governor. Within the system of the Church of England, you simply cannot build a biblical local church. So if my friend's going to take reformation seriously, there's only one way he can do it, and that's by leaving the Church of England; taking the church with him if he can; if he can't then starting from scratch, building again with gold and silver and precious stones, but this time on a true foundation.

Now it may not be the Church of England. There are other structures that are simply not reformable. It may be that the congregation that you belong to is tied into a denomination that will never allow it self-government. Or that will never allow it to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It may be that the congregation you belong to is one that by definition is restricted to people from a particular national group and that's written into its trust deed. Then it's not reformable. Leave it or - if I'm speaking to all the members - dissolve it. And start again. There's no point in shoring up a fine-looking building if the foundation is rotten.

Second application: for all the rest of us. I'm assuming that you are all members of evangelical churches of one variety or another. Well, every one of those churches is in need of reformation. There is no church on earth that is fully in line with the pattern laid down in God's word. Our *theology* needs to be constantly reformed. There are great theological truths that God has given to his people in the pages of the Bible. Scripture alone. The fact that Scripture is the one supreme, unalterable, totally authoritative word of God to his people. Grace alone. The fact that God's grace - God's electing grace, God's redeeming grace, God's keeping grace, God's saving grace - is the only reason why we enjoy any favour from God. Faith alone in Christ alone. The fact that all God's blessings become a reality in our experience only as we cast ourselves upon Christ alone, believing him, trusting him, obeying him. Glory to God alone. The fact that the whole purpose of our existence is to bring God glory and that everything we do must be for that end. These great themes throb through every page of Scripture. These were the great truths rediscovered at *the* Reformation. We'll never move on from them. But we must explore them more and more deeply. We must be reading our Bibles, studying, preaching, meditating with eyes open to see more and more fully all that these great truths imply. And then we must put these great theological truths into practice, in our personal lives, in the lives of our families, *and in our churches*. That is what Reformation is all about.

Let me give you some examples.

If we really believe in sola Scriptura, Scripture alone, that will affect the way we construct Sunday worship services won't it? In every one of them, the word of God will be central. We'll be conscious that we're a people who worship primarily by listening to God speak through Scripture and then responding in obedience and love. But it won't just be our worship services. Really believing in sola scriptura will shape all the activities of the church - and perhaps especially our planning meetings and our "church members' meetings". When it comes to decision making, we won't be asking, "how have we always done this in the past?" Nor will we be asking "will this appeal to the people of our modern society?" We'll be asking, "What does God's word say?"

If we really believe in sola gratia, grace alone, that will affect the way we preach the gospel to outsiders won't it? We'll stop trying to entertain them and make them feel happy. And we'll understand that our task is to make them feel what they are - wretched, destitute beggars who need to seek mercy at God's hand. Believing in grace alone will shape the whole life of the church - the way the leadership works, the way we organise the Sunday school, yes even the way we raise funds. How can a church that believes in free grace stick a collection bag under the nose of every unbeliever who comes in?

If we really believe in sola fide, Christus solus, faith alone, Christ alone, the Lord's supper will become something infinitely sacred in the life of the church won't it? - a company of

sinners feeding together desperately on a crucified Saviour, finding forgiveness and strength by faith in him. And it will become unthinkable that we allow people to come to that table who don't believe in him at all.

And if we really believe in the *solus deo gloria*, “to God alone glory”, then that will simply transform - or reform - everything in the life of the church. Can there really be a place in a *solus deo gloria* church for a drama group winning themselves laughter and applause? To God alone glory! I was at a baptismal service recently where people began to clap the candidates as they emerged from the water - give them big round of applause! How brave they've been! Could that happen if we had our eyes set on God - to God alone glory! And when it comes to that self-important minister demanding titles for himself, and making sure that all his degrees are listed out on the noticeboard - it's unthinkable. To God alone glory!

When all our thinking is dominated and shaped by those five great Reformation truths, when everything in the life of our churches is suffused by the power of those five great truths, when everything in our church life is shaped by Scripture alone, and driven by grace alone, and pointing to faith alone in Christ alone, and bringing glory to God alone, then we'll be able to call ourselves reformed. And we'll be able to say that the work of Reformation is complete. But not until then. And that is why we need to commit ourselves afresh today to the work of biblical reformation.