

40th Anniversary Of The Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Beginnings in Revivalism

In the years after the war (1948-50), there arose a group of men who were concerned with the spiritual welfare of our land. They were instrumental in the importation of national and international Evangelists who "maybe were just the ones" to bring "revival" to Tasmania, and thousands would be won to the Lord. Prayer For Revival

So with this in mind, prayer meetings would be "called for" on Saturday or Sunday afternoons, where some 10-20 persons would in turn pray that the Lord would send a "mighty revival" when many would be swept into the Kingdom. These prayer meetings were understood to be "battering rams" hammering at heaven's door. There was much shouting and excited laughter, as one by one thought that their prayer had prevailed, that they had "got through" to the Lord. Despite this folly the Lord did visit us many years later, but in the most unexpected manner. Banner Of Truth 1957

Some ten years now pass. Then around 1957, some books began to become available. Banner of Truth Trust had begun to reproduce works of the Puritans and others, which had long been out of print; i.e. John Owen - Death of Death; Martin Luther - Bondage of the Will; George Whitfield - Select Sermons; Spurgeon - Salvation all of Grace; A.W. Pink - The Sovereignty of God; Bannerman - The Church of Christ; Cunningham - Historical Theology Jonathan Edwards - Religious Affections; John Bunyan - Grace Abounding; and many other books of "Calvinistic Puritan Tradition".

I shall never forget sitting in on a discussion of the "Bondage of the Will" from the introduction to the book by J.I. Packer. What amazing stuff! We'd never even heard the likes before, it was revolutionary. What powerful concepts were now presented to the mind and understanding! What questions raised!

Was the fall in Eden so profound that man became absolutely spiritually dead, unable to will any spiritual good whatsoever? If this spiritual death is so universal in that the whole man is affected in will, affections, desires, ability, then how is a man saved? It must be by the sovereign, free, electing Love of God alone. ("Ye must be born again" took on a whole different meaning.)

To the Arminian mind and understanding, this was indeed revolutionary, but how exciting it was to experience the Truth of the Word pour into the soul and gradually push out the rubbish and errors of Arminianism! God's truth is wonderful! The Scriptures began to open up. We wanted to tell everyone we knew! Publications

Mr Ian Morgan and his wife, Betty, printed hundreds of copies of the studies as they progressed. As a "new truth" was discovered in relation to the Calvinistic doctrines of Grace, the "old gestetner stencil duplicator" was wound up, and copies posted to all our friends and associates. The late Mr Rex Ling, his wife Rita, together with my wife Audrey and myself and Miss Kaye Reynolds, purchased a fordigraph carbon and spirit duplicator on which was published some 34,000 pages in one year!

What started with just a handful of folks, Mr and Mrs. Morgan, Bob and Jean Gibb, Mrs. Joyce Faulkner and myself, was soon to grow rapidly, both in the original group, and far and wide. There was great excitement in the ranks when "eso and so" had embraced the truth, or that some one was very interested and requested all the literature we could send them. Baptist Union Assembly

Calvinism was soon to have its effects. The Tasmanian Baptist Union called its biggest assembly ever, which declared that Calvinism be banned from the Baptist Pulpits in Tasmania. A.W. Pink

The book on the Sovereignty of God by A.W. Pink was to have a profound effect; and prepared the ground for the reception of the Scriptural doctrine that Salvation is of God's Sovereign Free Grace alone; and that God has no desire for the Salvation of any other than His people, His elect. This book along with John Owen's "Death of Death in the Death of Christ", cleared away any false, universal ideas as to the atonement. Attempted Syncretism

Some attempted a "syncretism", maintaining that "Calvinism emphasised the Sovereignty of God", while "Arminianism emphasised Man's Responsibility". Needless to say, these people did not persevere in the Reformed Faith. The Spread Of These New Truths

As the Biblical truth of Calvinism poured into the soul, so the urgency increased to spread the truth to as many people as we possibly could. Articles and reprints of Whitefield's and Spurgeon's sermons, etc. were posted into the W.E.C. Missionary College, (to the Logans, Browns, Walkers, Higgs among many others); to the People's Fellowships in Hobart (R. Cameron-Smith) and Taranna (J. Lyons); Ulverstone Baptist Church, contacts in Winnaleah, Brisbane and Rockhampton; (as well as contacts in USA, PNG, and South Africa). Many of the folk in these centres were to make up the nucleus of our congregations that God would bring together some years later on.

What was happening in Tasmania, was something that could only be described as amazing. Where else would you find young men and women, who only a short while ago were fully "extended in grasping the meaning of a cartoon", now reading Reformed Theology, and young women, while standing at the sink peeling potatoes, indulged in deep discussion

over the "Order of Decrees" in the "supra and infralapsarian" concepts; or the Biblical grounds for Infant Baptism, e
Of Truth

The Reformed Church of Australia, along with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia (P.C.E.A.) were amazed at what was taking place. Never before had it been known that Arminians became Calvinists in the way of this movement, (without a Reformed background or input of a Reformed Church). Our Church, the "Evangelical Presbyterian Church" (or at first, the Reformed Evangelical Church) was brought about by the Holy Spirit, sending a "Revival". Yes, indeed, it was a "Revival of Truth". The Lord answered that prayer of many years before, but in the most unexpected manner. Baptist Or Presbyterian?

The movement in 1958-59 was predominantly Baptist with two Baptist ministers joining under the banner of the "Reformed Baptist Alliance". This Alliance was shortlived, as the movement began to go in the direction of Infant Baptism, Presbyterian Church Government and the "Double Decrees - Election and Reprobation". The leaders of the movement had agreed that if any issue arose which affected the whole movement, that no meeting would be held unless and until every one had been given the opportunity to participate in the discussion.

I had been lent a book which belonged to Rev. Ken Tuck, who was then the minister of Elphin Rd. Baptist church. Having finished with the book, I decided to return it one evening, only to find, on entering the lounge room at the Manse, a room full of long-faced men. "What is the Matter?" I asked. Mr Tuck got to his feet to inform me that they (Rev. Tuck, Rev. Alex White, student D. Nibbs, and others there present) had decided they could go no further with us. They could not go along with "Infant Baptism and the Double Decree" (Election & Reprobation).

This event, with its great sadness, I suppose was the beginning of the separation of the movement and development into Calvinistic Baptist and Presbyterian Reformed lines. The works of C.H. Spurgeon had a big influence, such as "Salvation all of Grace" and the like. It came to our attention that there was a Baptist Confession of Faith, to which Spurgeon referred to often in his writings. The Particular Baptists in England had recently re-published this Confession under the title "Things Most Surely Believed Among Us". This confession, also known as the Savoy Confession, is in the main, identical to the Westminster Confession of Faith, differing of course, on Baptism and Church Government. Some 200 copies of these were ordered and distributed amongst us, to everyone's excitement.

Take notice of the libraries of my generation, and you will find them stocked with Puritan, Presbyterian/Reformed works, well-read and well-marked as the readers excitedly grappled with the profound things that God had revealed of Himself in His Word. The enthusiasm and the excited wonder of Truth filling the soul, can at least be told. Westminster Confession Of Faith

A Christian man, Mr Hugh Diprose, a bookseller, introduced us to a book which he found. It was called the Westminster Confession of Faith. We now stand amazed at the marvelous providence of God here. Here was a document (which we did not know existed), literally dropped into our lap, and just look at it! It dealt with the very subject now occupying our minds, "Free Will" which was towards the middle of this book. We had started with the Will being in bondage to fallen nature and reasoned backwards as it were from this point.

If the will is so bound, then the fall must be more than we had ever imagined. It must be more than an injury or sickness; must be spiritual death, and if this be so then we have not that natural ability to choose the spiritual good. So it must be that a Sovereign God in sovereign unconditional electing love, comes to us first with life.

But now this document (WCF) began with the revelation of God in the Scriptures, the provision of a Redeemer, the sovereign work of Salvation in the soul of the sinner through the preaching of the Gospel, etc. What's more, this Document is "the Confession of the Historic Christian Faith"; the faith of the Christian Church of all ages, and what's more it is the Confession of the Presbyterians. Remember, most of the books coming our way at the time were the works of Presbyterian Puritans. No wonder they were all saying the same thing, that Salvation is "of the Lord".

Well, this discovery was no small event, I can tell you. Confessions were bought up from any and every quarter. Some old Presbyterian ministers who were Liberals and Modernists were only too pleased to blow off the dust and give them to us, with the passing comment - "Primitive man's concept of God". Over all, Confessions were hard to come by and it wasn't until recent years that new copies began to appear. Dutch Church

It was about this period, that we learned that the Dutch Reformed Churches also had documents along similar lines, which also had something to do with an event in history called the Reformation. We did not know all that much about this Reformation as such, apart from knowing that John Calvin and Martin Luther were two Reformers; but we were learning fast as we read books like Five English Reformers, etc., and Daubigny's History of the Reformation; so to cut a long story short...

Events moved rapidly to the point when the movement had to face the Doctrine of the Church Institute - which raised the question, "Is there a church existing which believes the truth as we do, or should we constitute separately?" The Holy Spirit brought us to understand that it would not be according to the Scriptures to remain separate, if there were already

existing Reformed Churches to which we could in all good conscience align ourselves.

We had contact with the Reformed Churches of Australia, who sent a Rev. John Heenan to prepare the ground for future close relations and possible union. This contact raised some unfamiliar problems like "presumptive regeneration of children in Baptism", and "a Grace of God common to all men, but not saving". While we did not appreciate the full ramifications of these doctrines, they "fell hard upon the ear" and "rattled" somewhere. Mr Heenan failed in his mission three weeks, but went home thoroughly converted to the "regulative principle" in worship! Presbyterian Church Of Eastern Australia

At this time also we were in close dealings with the P.C.E.A. who helped us immensely in the area of worship and Government of the Church and recommended that we constitute a church separate from them. They would constitute a special Presbytery (from Victoria) to ordain three leaders of the movement in Tasmania - Mr C. L. Rodman, Mr Hugh McNeilly, and Mr E. Turnbull, who would then, upon ordination, constitute the first Presbytery along with elders to form the "Reformed Evangelical Church of Australia". This took place September 28th. 1961 in Chalmers Presbyterian Church Hall, St John St., Launceston.

This special Presbytery of the P.C.E.A. consisted of Revs. Graham, Harman and Lee. The Rev. Graham was the elder man, a very godly and wise man who made a comment in passing, that proved to be very true in our history. He said in effect, "What God has done in Tasmania among you folk is truly wonderful, I wish you well, but you will have to battle for every step forward, because you bring no "Reformed tradition" with you. But I believe you will make it." How true the perception of this old soldier proved to be.

After the Constitution of our Church, there were many young men who wished to be trained for the ministry of the Word, and so we entered into a joint venture with the P.C.E.A. to meet this need of ours, along with their own. So with great joy and enthusiasm and hope for the future propagation of the Truth, we embarked upon the setting up of the "John Knox Theological College". Our little church was under full sail, but alas, this little ship was soon to be buffeted by a storm that within 18 months, would test the strength of every plank.

The doctrine "that there was in the nature of God a desire for the salvation of all men, including the reprobate, in the free offer of the gospel" was being taught to our students in the College. The sad outcome was to eventually divide our church down the middle. That revival of truth which brought our church into being was to so prepare us in the sound doctrine of God's Sovereign free particular Grace, that when the storm came, we were enabled by the loving mercy of God to discern this first attack upon the truth which we still hold so dear today. Praise be to God.

I do trust that this thumbnail sketch of our history, with its joys and struggle, will not go unheeded and unnoticed by the new generation present here today; but that you will have the same love of the truth in your hearts. So that as we fade out of the picture and take our place one by one at the side of our Saviour in glory to hear His "Well done thou good and faithful servant", you will in turn take up the baton in your generation, to serve the Lord, stand fast for His truth, for yourselves and your children ... and the glory of God.

Elder V.J. Connors, Launceston.

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