

Address on our 30th Anniversary

How I Came Into The EPC

As a young lad of 19 years of age, I came to Tasmania to study at the World Evangelistic Crusade (WEC) Missionary Training College at St Leonards, Launceston. Up until this time, I had mainly been associated with Baptist and Methodist churches, but more particularly in fellowship with what is known as WEC, which is the World-wide Evangelisation Crusade. I came, with eight or nine other young people to the College at St. Leonards.

It was during the time that I was at the College (2½ years), that the Lord really dealt with my soul and my heart. I had a very hard time at college, for I had no real, firm instruction or teaching in the word of God; and during the time I was in college, I came under great conviction of sin; and I came to a place of great depression.

I had no idea really of many of the doctrines of the Word of God which we take for granted so much today. I can remember asking the Principal of the College whether he would give me a book which would help me to understand and decipher between the Moral Law and the ceremonial Law, as we find it in the word of God; for I was greatly under conviction through the Law of God. I was all mixed up as to what really God was requiring of me. In the providence of God, the Principal gave me a book that is common in our midst, and is known as the Westminster Confession of Faith; and that was my first introduction to the Reformed Faith as such.

As a young student, I read a chapter of the Confession every morning in our quiet time, before we started our studies for the day. I can well remember reading the chapter on Christ our Mediator. You see, I was in that situation where I was aware of the fact that I was a sinner and a high standard of holiness was taught at the College. This standard of holiness that was taught, was acting as the Law to my soul; and the more the standard was lifted up, the more sinful I felt and the more depressed I became, for I had no hope. I understood not how I could come to God, because I had just this terrible sense of sin and depravity before Him, and I knew that God was righteous and holy, and I knew that there was no sin ever going to enter into heaven - so I was without hope.

I remember asking the Principal a question one day in our Theology class, and the question I asked him was a question that was coming from the depth of my soul at that time. I asked him, "How is it possible for any of us to enter Heaven if no sin or uncleanness is going to be in Heaven?" It might astound you and amaze you, but the Principal of the College did not or could not give me a very clear answer to that very basic question.

I can remember reading in that chapter "Christ our Mediator" and I can remember reading about how that Christ has come to seek and to save that which is lost; and there was something in me that just went out to that realisation that the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Son of God had come to seek and to save that which is lost. It is only a very simple verse, but it was in that verse that I found hope; for it was in that verse that I was able to say, "I know I'm lost; I know that I am a sinner and if the Lord Jesus has come to seek and to save sinners, He will do that" - and all of a sudden my faith was projected into Christ - into the ability Of Christ to do what He had promised to do - and that was to seek and to save that which was lost!

In the term break at College, we were invited to go to a place called Winnaleah, by some of the farmers there who took the students in their holidays so they could work on the farms and they gave them free board and lodgings. I went up to Winnaleah and some of the farmers up there were reading Reformed Literature, such as the Bondage of the Will, and Justification (by Buchanan), and for the first time in my life I heard about Justification by faith. This was a totally new concept to me. We are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; that our sins are pardoned and that we are accepted through the shed blood of our Lord Jesus, and that there were no works of righteousness that we could do to ever merit our salvation; that we were totally corrupt and depraved; that there was nothing that we could do to prepare ourselves for salvation, or to in any way do anything towards the salvation that God offered as a free gift in His Son. It was then that this doctrine of "Justification by Faith" became such a wonderful release to me. I could then see the answer to the question (that I'd asked the Principal) so very clearly - "How could I enter heaven?" I could enter heaven through the merit and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, because that merit and righteousness was given to me by God, imputed really to me; and so for the first time in my Christian experience, a joy and a peace flooded through my whole being.

There was an absolute release from the bondage of works, a release that gave me liberty in Christ. And so that was how I was converted as a young man, and of course I started to study the Westminster Confession of Faith and it became very precious.

I started to read Reformed literature and have fellowship with other people who were convinced in the Reformed faith over against Arminianism. I had been an Arminian for so long and believed in Free Will; believed that the Lord Jesus Christ died for the whole world, but it all depended on the will of man as to whether they were saved. All I understood was this Universalism and the Universal Love of God for all men - but the free will of man stood in the way - it was up to man to choose or reject.

I started to see the bondage of the will. The will is only free to do that which is evil. It is only the grace of God that can change the will, and cause the will of man to embrace Christ - that that is a work of God's free grace to do that. I understood all of a sudden that salvation is altogether by grace, and in that also there was a blessed release; for my hope was again not in myself, but in my Lord and my God.

After I graduated (it was a wonder they ever did graduate me because I believed such contrary doctrines to the college) and left college, I went with a man called Pastor McNeilly to Rockhampton on a mission; and after that time, I came back and lived at Winnaleah for a time.

I was only a young man working on the farm with some of the farmers, and we had what they called ministers' retreats, and because I wasn't married and had no binds, I went with the ministers and we studied - we studied Calvin's Institutes and "The Church of Christ" by Bannerman. We were starting to look into the doctrines of the Church, the doctrine of the Covenant, the sacraments, of worship; for before this we sang uninspired hymns, and with musical accompaniment. It was my privilege as a young man to be able to accompany those first ministers of our church as we went on these ministers' retreats. We went away for a week at a time and just studied together on all these points. Mr Heenan came with us. He was a minister from the Reformed Church - he studied with us and tried to help us in those early days.

They were wonderful days, they were days of learning, they were days of enquiring, of searching into and finding out so many of the wonderful truths of the Word of God. So it was, I went on from there and started to serve a little group of our people down at St Mary's. I'd work during the week, study on the weekends, then drive down and take services.

And so the story continues; but as a matter of great importance I want to draw your attention to the fact that it is not so much the case that we, in our Anniversary, are thinking of a particular denomination; we are in a sense, but we are thinking of the great goodness of God and the faithfulness of God in revealing to us so much of the beautiful truth; that inheritance, that faith that was once delivered to the saints. If it isn't for that doctrine, for which the church stands, then it is just an empty shell.

I want you to understand it is what we believe, and what we believe that the Word of God teaches, that alone can single us out as a church, and make us of any value in this world, as we have a witness in this world. The more we seek to walk and live by it, the more we will know the blessing of God.

Many of us here in this room will not see the next 30th Anniversary of our church. We won't be here, we'll be in glory. But it is my prayer that our church will continue faithful to those wonderful doctrines of grace.

Rev. P. Burley.

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