

## When We Criticize the Church

Four hundred and fifty-five years ago, on All Saints' Day, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the church door at Wittenberg. Copies were made in German of the Latin Theses and printed by friends for circulation all over Germany. The issues raised caused far greater stir than even Luther himself had imagined. The Pope thought it, was merely "a squabble of monks", but soon realized his mistake and tried to stem the tide, but failed. The, conflict had begun that was to usher in the Reformation. Many Protestants around the world still commemorate this great event that so drastically changed the life of the church.

Various issues led Martin Luther and others to protest against the Medieval church. The matters of justification by faith and the freedom of conscience were no doubt the outstanding points in question. The Reformers wanted to get back to the Bible and to restore it to its proper place in the church. And this needs to be done again today. Another Reformation is desperately needed. This is not the hour to glory in the Reformation of the past. Protestants should protest what is happening within the walls of the churches that are products of the Reformation. The churches are in a poor state. They are weak and in many ways faithless. Again and again the people of God have deserted Him, looked to other gods and other ways of salvation. So much is lip service. God cries out: Where is the love of my people? Some conservative churches can be described as moralistic or legalistic. But where is that intimate fellowship with God? Where is the protest against sin and the "thus says the Lord"? Have churches become mute? Have pulpits been silenced by people in the pew who want to receive the comfort of the faith. But do not intend to carry the cross? How many still see the cosmic meaning of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Other churches have let themselves become influenced by those elements who deny the basics of Scripture. Many churchmen are so eager to be all things to all men that they are willing to accommodate the Christian faith to virtually every fad and whim of secularism. Many have completely abandoned the authority of revelation, lest they be considered to be behind the times. No wonder the church is in such a sad shape.

It is not difficult at all to criticize the institutional church and churches. But when we criticize the church we criticize ourselves. Why? We are the church. This should never be forgotten!

How do we stand before God and His Word? Have we let the Word of God speak to the totality of life? Christianity has the answer if we only dare to say so. Only God's Word can provide an inner life-giving structure to human society. Christians should again be the salt of the earth. They should be active in the world and yet be distinct and different from it. It is not enough to say "Jesus saves". The Lord saves indeed, but that means not only saving your soul like a branch out of a fire! His saving grace redeems us here and now, and gives direction for our lives today.

Shall we see a new Reformation in our time? We will see it when Biblical preaching returns again to the churches. In the sixteenth century Reformation there was a hunger

for the preaching of the Word. And the revivals churches experienced have taught that scriptural preaching, accompanied by the power of the Spirit of God, is the divine means for extending the kingdom of God. This was the theme of Rowland Hill's sermon when he preached at the formation of the first interdenominational missionary society of modern times in 1795. Having spoken of the glorious revivals of the past, he declared: "What has been done, shall be done. God will ever stand by his own truth, and if he be for us, who can be against us? Preaching the Gospel of the kingdom does all the work." Let's return to the riches of the preaching of the gospel of Christ's kingship over all the world!

"Would He find faith on earth when He returned? Christ asked. Unless we pray and work (in that order) for true Reformation and revival, unless we return to the Lord, there is no future for any church. God. Himself will throw it away as saltless salt."

Johan D. Tangelder  
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