

## **“Notes of the True Kirk”**

A presentation by Rev. Rufus Burton to the  
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One of the most striking features about the Faculty Initiative Group of the Re-Forming Ministry project has been our experience of a doctrine central to the Protestant Reformation and the Reformed faith. In a climate characterized by divisive rhetoric and ecclesiastical tempests, this cluster has been remarkably unified in its discovery of a fundamental confidence in the “Notes of the Kirk.” In the end, what we have come to understand is that from the beginning, the true preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments of Jesus Christ and ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered have been the rough measure used to evaluate and critique the current state of ministry and ministerial formation in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). (These three things as a fruit)

While definitions, shades of meaning and priorities varied among the members of the group there was always a foundational (or non-foundational) confidence in this portion of the *Scots Confession* to reflect accurately what scripture leads us to believe and do. Not simply as an external and applied standard, but as a reflection of what the lived reality of ministry looks like. For example, it has always been assumed, that the purpose of seminary training was to equip ministerial candidates precisely for the tasks associated with true preaching, right administration of the sacraments and upright discipline. Whatever else seminaries teach, this remains at the center. Likewise, as a group we have always assumed, and fundamentally believed, that ministry looks like biblical preaching, liturgical presidency and moderated polity.

Early in our discussions we were reminded of the fundamental pessimism that surrounds a fractured ecclesial ecology; that institutions of family, congregation, presbytery, college, seminary, synod and assembly have an increasingly difficult time relating to one another in our new cultural reality. Thanks in large part to the work and reflection of Paul Hooker on the notes of the Kirk and their implications on our work, we too were increasingly insistent that “the Reformation Notes are precisely that description of the church’s mission necessary for the present situation” (22).

### *The true preaching of the Word of God*

Each day began and ended with services of prayer, each of which contained an active reflection on the meaning of scripture for our work, our lives and our discipleship. Likewise, most of our seminar work was centered on or returned to the Bible. The most storied of which were the passages concerning the daughters of Zelophehad at the end of Numbers. Our work was intensely Presbyterian, and therefore theologically informed and biblically grounded. It was this conscious biblical grounding as well as our common habit of centering our lives and reflection upon the text of scripture that most displayed our dependence on the living word of God.

As the faculty initiative group much of our reflection centered on ministerial candidates, their seminaries, their presbyteries and the ecclesial system that works to shape them for

ministry. The importance of a ministry shaped and informed by the Bible was never doubted. There was, for example, never any serious doubt about the importance of skill in Greek and Hebrew for approaching the Bible. If the reformation of ministry depends upon the Word of God, our reformation cannot be achieved without a deep love for, and therefore knowledge of the text.

Likewise, we were constantly reminded by our interactions with each other and with ministers from other situations that a great deal of proclamation depends not only on the text but on the context in which that proclamation takes place. In one example, a pastor intentionally mislabeled a Bible study as a “sewing class” in order to enable abused migrant and undocumented women to encounter not only the text but their own worth as those for whom Jesus died and risen again. The point here was that ministers in order to speak faithfully to the gathered people of God need to handle the text well and see their own context theologically in order to address it meaningfully. On several occasions we were reminded that seminary was not a black box of magic solutions that turned mildly pious youth group members into superstar preachers. Ministers are formed into a particular way of being a disciple; as with most things in the Christian life it is the combination of habit, ability, learning and wisdom which form ministers.

The true preaching of the Word of God requires both an understanding of the Bible as well as an understanding of the context in which a minister preaches and in which a congregation engages in the mission of God. The Bible and theological reflection on life remain central to the church’s work of ministry. They are the first note by which the true church is to be discerned.

#### *The right administration of the sacraments of Jesus Christ*

The Lord’s Table stood firmly in the center of our life together as a community. The common table and the Lord’s Table served to ground our lives and to bind us more firmly to each other in Christ. We are reminded at the table that Christ instituted the feast to strengthen our communion with Him and with each other. In this promise the Lord has been true. (We have never celebrated a baptism together, though at several points we have variously appeared as legitimate targets for evangelism). As the people of God we are gathered by the word, washed by the bath and nourished at the feast. Whatever else a Reformed ministry is about, it has at its core these three: the book, the font and the cup.

Some of our richest reflection focused on baptismal identity and vocation. As the baptized all who belong to Christ have been claimed for ministry and claimed for a life lived in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This means primarily that ordained ministry grows not out training, expertise of rhetorical skill but out of the call of Christ in the waters of baptism. So located, ministry proceeds from the church towards the church for the good of the world. Ministry is not imposed by a church council, much less a seminary. It is a gift of God from among the baptized, to the baptized and those who have yet to be baptized. Ordination is not a sacrament, but it is the sacraments that nourish and seal the Christian life of all of the ordained.

The table also entered our reflections. While its importance to the Christian life was never in questioned; we did, on several occasions deal with what it meant to be placed in a position of liturgical presidency by a presbytery. In essence, the question was one of context and authority. What does the table mean here, how is it that in this place and a this time you are

helping us to taste and see that the Lord is good? These questions forced us to examine much more closely the link between the Word proclaimed and the word sealed.

At its most basic the right administration of the sacraments of Jesus Christ is the ability of the ordained officers of the church to help the people of God see the world theologically through the eyes of a faith nourished by the body and blood of Christ. At the font and at the table Christians are encountered by the living claim of God on their lives.

*Ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered*

Within the context of an authority obsessed denomination we too struggled with issues of polity. True to the kinds of ministry to which we have been trained we focused on what it means to be a presbyter in a presbytery. The locus of our own membership in the church became important because it helped to focus us on the issues that surround ministerial authority and ministerial vocation.

On several occasions Tim Beach-Verhey helped us explore the fractured ecclesial system that confronts American Presbyterians with a view to helping us understand the potential implications of a Reformed view of providence. In essence, we find ourselves here at God's direction in order to find our way, with the Lord's help, somewhere else. Most important here were the broken relationships between institutions, or more precisely, the between the people who help to run, shape and serve the church's various bodies and causes. One particularly moving presentation was on the work Tim had led in his own presbytery dealing with the 2006 report of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church. When gathered around the Word, the table and common bonds of Christian discipleship the presbytery functioned well. The test came when the traditions of men, (namely General Robert) were used by some in an attempt to manipulate the work of the presbytery. Happily, the presbytery faithfully lived into its identity and calling.

We also came at the issue of discipline uprightly ministered with a view to ministerial authority. One of our important learnings was that specific cultural contexts in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have their own norms regarding ministerial authority. What would be construed as dangerously overreaching by a minister in one context is the barely capable handling of a situation by a minister in another. While the models may differ widely, faithful leadership is always the goal.

The important thing about the third mark of the Kirk is that discipline is ministered, namely discipline is part of the servant work of ordained members of the church. Discipline is third in the marks precisely because it is third in importance. As proclamation must be informed by the Bible and the local context; as the sacraments must be celebrated with a view to Christ's institution and the local context; so too is discipline informed by the Bible, the sacraments and life and context of the local congregation. The *Books of Order and Confession* never exists in a vacuum. The polity of the church is lived identity of the church.

*The Notes whereby the true Kirk shall be determined*

It is no surprise then that a group of Presbyterian ministers, pastors and professors expressed a profound and abiding trust in those things which the Lord has given to us – in the word

proclaimed, in the sacraments administered and discipline ministered. Ministers, as those who have been given authority to encourage and celebrate the ordinary means of grace, we are bound to help give those means of grace meaning in a local context. Practically this means that a minister's ability to view the world in which she finds herself theologically is central to her ability to faithfully help the church discern the call of Christ on its life.

The obvious critique is that Knox conveniently abandoned Calvin's insistence that the Word not only had to be proclaimed but heard as well. In speaking to the fractured ecclesial ecology we have to agree. A call for reformation of the ministerial corps is also a call for reformation of the church. Congregations and not simply pastors are responsible for all three notes of the church. No matter the skill of a minister, a congregation unfamiliar with the Word, unaccustomed to the sacraments and disciplined by an index to a *Book of Church Order* will find itself weak precisely in those places where the Lord calls it to be strong. The fact of the matter is, however, that *the Westminster Confession of Faith*, and therefore the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) insists upon the importance of hearing the word proclaimed.

Whatever prescription we have for the church grows from our confidence in the fact that where faithfulness grows the fruits of the word truly preached, the sacraments rightly administered and discipline uprightly ministered there the true church will be found. The single implication for seminaries is not that curricula need to change, but that students need help reinforcing the skills needed in speaking a theologically articulated view of the world. To be sure these skills are learned largely and of necessity in the pulpit, after seminary. It is not even primarily the seminaries problem; our inability to think creatively and imaginatively about the place where we find ourselves is a symptom of our inability to think creatively and imaginatively about the three notes whereby the true church may be known.