

The call for reformation

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 September 2016

Preacher: Mark Norman

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning to you all. It's good to be back with you again. I think it's my last Sunday today, so it's been great visiting you and sharing God's Word. Some exciting things I see that you've got on the go. I'm just listening now to Nick talk about this mobile app. There's a friend of mine who's in the Re-South African Ministry, who remain nameless. He's into technology, so he came up with this idea that while the preacher was preaching, if you wanted to, you could SMS a question or a comment to the associate pastor at the back. He had his computer running, and so of course the poor preacher got so stressed out because every time he said something that was, I suppose, relatively obscure, everybody would reach for their cell phones. So in the end they decided to drop that practice, but I'm sure your idea, Nick, is very, very good. All right, well let's take up our Bible, and we're going to be looking at that passage in 1 Kings 15. We're going to be having a look at Asa, but our subject today is actually the Reformation. Some of you are aware of the fact, I think Nick commented on it a couple of weeks ago, that we are celebrating the 500th year, 500th centenary, 5th century, 500th year after the Reformation. So 500 years ago in

Europe, Europe went through what was probably the most profound spiritual revival in its history. Because the Church in Europe came to this very important point where it realized with great horror that it had lost its way, and that it had wandered away from the message of the New Testament. And as a result, God raised up great men like Martin Luther and John Calvin and others to reform the Church, to purge the Church of idols, and to bring the Church back to the preaching and the teaching of the pure Word of God. And we celebrate that at the moment.

Remember Glenn Lyons, our presiding bishop, commenting on this at Synod, that we need to remember that we ourselves as a denomination are the heirs of the Reformation. We would probably not exist if it were not for the Reformation itself, which is quite something for us to consider.

So today we're going to have a look at King Asa, and the topic I've chosen is simply the call for Reformation. Now as we look at 1 Kings 15 from verse 9 to 24 as read out to us, it focuses on King Asa of Judah who was clearly a reformer of the Church. And we need to start by defining what we mean by Reformation. And a common definition of Reformation would simply be the action or process of reforming an institution or practice. And 1 and 2 Kings and the rest of Scripture teach us that the Church of God needs constant reformation because it will naturally, human nature being what it is, it will naturally tend towards corruption over time. And if you know the Old Testament in the story of the books of Kings, the rot in Israel started with Solomon, very sadly. And as a result of Israel's idolatry, God then allowed the nation to split into two. And then the downward spiral continued with Rehoboam in the south and Jeroboam in the north. However, the Reformation of the Church arises from the desire of Christians to bring it back to the pure worship of God through the Word of God, purging the Church from idols.

So reformers know down all the ages that if the Church will not be ruled by the Word of God, it is doomed.

[4 : 0 9] One great Dutch reformer in 1674 said this, and I quote, The Church is reformed and always in need of being reformed according to the Word of God.

Now as we briefly have a look at the reign of Asa, not in too much detail, but we're going to ask essentially two questions. First of all, what do reformers look like? And then secondly, what does reformation look like?

So let's begin and ask ourselves the question as we consider this idea, this topic, what do reformers look like? Well, before we look at Asa, we can also briefly consider Asa's predecessor in your text, Abijam.

Abijam features in 1 Kings 15 from verse 1 to verse 8. I won't read it out to you, but you can go home and have a look at that, because Abijam, Asa's predecessor, reveals to us what a reformer doesn't look like.

And here we have a summary of Abijam's reign, and it's very tragic because it informs us that Abijam did nothing to stem the rot in Israel, the rot in the Church.

[5 : 27] It's much easier for us to be passive, is it not, in the face of idols and to merely maintain the status quo, allowing the rot to set in, compared to taking a stand against it and choosing rather to be a reformer.

But Asa, Abijam's successor, he took that stand. So once again, the question, what do reformers look like? What makes a reformer in the Church different to everyone else?

What's the difference between an Abijam and an Asa? And there are essentially three characteristics that are probably true of reformers in any age.

Firstly, reformers have a singular, untainted vision of the Gospel and its power to save the lost, and they never lose that.

Secondly, reformers perceive that without constant reformation, without constant vigilance when it comes to the Church's teaching and doctrine, the Church will always go into decline. It's inevitable.

[6 : 39] And then thirdly, reformers, whether in the Old or in the New Testament period, reformers acknowledge the cosmic struggle between light and dark, Christ and Satan.

They take the battle for the possession of their own hearts and the hearts of others very, very seriously, as we will see in our story of Asa himself. So secondly, what does reformation then look like?

And now we're going to have a look at Asa, the reformer, in 1 Kings 15 from verse 19 to verse 24. Now you'll observe from around about verse 9 to 15, the passage firstly deals with his spiritual activities, his spiritual reforms, followed by some political activity from verse 16 to verse 24.

I'm going to concentrate mostly on verse 9 to 15 as we look at his spiritual reforms, and I'm going to suggest that there are three signs that are present in any reforming Church, signs that I believe will be relevant to us all in our Church and our age.

The first sign is a constant reformation of the heart, and I refer you to verse 14, where we read, Asa's heart was fully committed to the Lord all his life.

[8 : 04] Very, very clear that personal reformation leads to the reformation of the Church. Just as spiritual decline in the Church begins with the spiritual decline in the heart of the individual believer, so too does authentic reformation in the community begin with individual believers turning afresh to God in repentance and renewed faith.

Reformation, true, real spiritual revival, authentic spiritual revival begins with the individual's inner life of prayer, repentance, and the seeking after God.

No, without personal reformation, there is no Church reformation. And therefore we all today need to ponder this verse carefully, because it tells us that Asa's heart was unswervingly committed and focused on God all his life.

This verse reveals for us this morning a powerful, a very personal spiritual discipline, an intense focus on Asa's part.

The struggle of all true reformers down the ages is the daily struggle with the inner life of the heart, because if we fail to perceive our own idols, we will be blind to the idols in the Church.

[9 : 38] Asa undoubtedly sought firstly to banish the idols from his own life, enabling him to clearly see the idols in God's Church, in this case, in Judah.

As we think about the Church today, I suspect that we have lost largely the reforming Christian zeal, the reforming Christian culture of self-examination.

But Asa's personal reformation enabled him to become the Spirit's instrument in the mighty and the great work of the reformation of the Church. So the first sign of a reforming Church begins not with the Church per se, but with the individual and the individual heart.

The second sign is a constant reformation of worship. The constant reformation of the heart leads to a reformation in the Church and a reformation of worship.

Now, of course, worship includes all of life and not just what happens during our meetings. Nevertheless, how we worship on Sundays is of paramount importance because our worship reveals what our priorities are and who we are, even down to the architecture in our churches, even down to little things like how we decorate our churches, how we handle the Lord's Supper and so on.

[11 : 11] Our style of worship reveals what our priorities are, who we are. Questions such as whether or not the pure Word of God is preached in our meetings and whether or not the very mechanisms of our worship are pure and pleasing to God are critical questions.

And these need to be constantly re-examined by the denomination, by the pastor, by the church council in the light of Scripture so that our church practice does not become corrupted by the world and the devil.

1 Kings 15 verse 11, we read, Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Notice, not man. In the eyes of the Lord as David his father had done.

In other words, Reformation is not only what we think about God, but Reformation is also what we do for God.

It embraces what we do for God. Our beliefs, our hearts of repentance, lead to a certain pattern of behavior in the church and in the world.

[12 : 21] And so Asa used the position God put him in to be a reformer. He used his power and his influence to cleanse the church from idols and to seek the face of God.

Have a look at verse 12. He put away the male cult prostitutes out of the land and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. We look at that verse, first of all, consider the bravery of his act of Reformation.

It's a very brave thing to do. It was a very brave and a very, very public act as he had to reject the values of his childhood upbringing. Reformers believe that to love God truly is to desire to see the glory of God established in the church and in the world above anything else, whatever the cost.

So we see that Asa was a brave man as all true reformers need to be. Secondly, consider the extent of his Reformation in our text. It wasn't half-hearted.

He rid the church of both the people and the idolatrous practices that were destroying it. It was a courageous and an extensive Reformation because without diligence, decline is inevitable.

[13 : 45] The church down the ages will always face the same temptation, which is to absorb the popular gods of the surrounding culture, whether we want to consider ancient Israel or 21st century Cape Town.

The situation is always the same. In Asa's case, it was Baal and his consort Asherah. Baal and Asherah offered their worshippers economic fertility and success in life in a manner similar to many idols today.

In fact, part of the worship process was to have sex with the priests of Baal, Baal's male prostitutes. But you see, when there is no longer any difference between the church and the world, well, then the church loses her capacity to confront the world and at that point the church becomes the world as Asa well realized.

So the second sign of a reforming church is a careful focus on worship and what is done in worship in our services and in our meetings.

The third sign is a constant reformation of what I've termed fear. A constant reformation of fear. I just imagine tackling the task of removing from the entire land all the idolaters.

[15 : 19] Imagine the outcries and the rage. Imagine the accusations of intolerance. The accusations of discrimination considering our contemporary society.

The accusations of hate speech Asa must have experienced. You can imagine the personal stress he must have gone through. The death threats and the screams of protest.

But Asa did it anyway as a true reformer without fear. He did it because his faith the word of God and the gospel demanded it.

And so he did it. However, Christians who fear the world and the people of the world cannot be reformers because they are passive people.

They do nothing. Nothing. They would rather warm a pew on a Sunday morning like many of us. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah he addressed the passive fearful people sitting in the pews of the churches of his generation in Isaiah chapter 2 in verse 22.

[16 : 37] Isaiah said this Stop regarding man in whose nostrils is breath. Of what account is he? Now having said this of course certainly I'm not suggesting that as reformers we are looking for trouble.

No of course not. We seek to live in peace with our neighbors. We don't seek conflict simply for conflict's sake. Nevertheless reformers are people who have conquered their inner fears of man.

Because there's no room for fear in the Christian life save fear of God only. 1 Kings 15 and verse 13 we read He also removed Marka his mother from being queen mother because she had made an abominable image for Asherah and Asa cut down her image and burned it at the brook Kidron.

Incredible thing he did there. Because in the ancient world often the queen mother or in this case the queen grandmother mother was the true power behind the throne.

She was the power. And Marka had without doubt ruled over Judah through Asa's predecessor Abijam her son. Now no doubt she sought to rule the country through Asa as well.

[18 : 00] There's no doubt a very powerful and a formidable old woman. Some no doubt would have called her a dragon. And yet she was a committed idolater and Asa removed her from power his own grandmother.

He took her out. He took this idolatrous abominable image of Asherah that she had made and he burned it at the Kidron brook. You know this was a huge rubbish dump in the great valley of Hinnom outside the outskirts of Jerusalem.

In other words Asa took out the trash. That's what he did. He took out the trash. Folks that takes courage. Reformers who truly desire to see the glory of God spread abroad in their community and in the world are men and women of great faith but also great courage.

They're not afraid of the world. They're not afraid of the devil. They're not afraid of idols. True reformers fight their own fears of men and their fear of the possible consequences of their reformation, the outcries and the recrimination certainly in Asa's case.

John Huss by the way was another great reformer who lived long long after the time of the Old Testament. Long after Asa he lived from 1369 in Europe to 1415 and he died at the stake for his beliefs.

[19 : 36] This is what he said before he was burned alive and I quote, Therefore faithful Christian, seek the truth, listen to the truth, learn the truth, love the truth, tell the truth, defend the truth even to death.

John Knox was another great reformer who was largely responsible for the reformation of the church in Scotland in the 16th century and this is what he said, let me quote Knox, he said, I will keep the ground that God has given me and perhaps in his grace he will ignite me again, but ignite me or not in his grace, in his power, I will hold the ground.

He also said this and I quote, I cannot in good conscience delay preaching tomorrow if I am not detained by violence and as for fear danger to my person my life is in the hand of him whose glory I seek and therefore I fear no threats I desire the hand and weapon of no man to defend me.

Like John Knox and Martin Luther King Asa here in our Old Testament passage, he didn't care about the personal consequences of reformation. He decided to do what was right in the Lord's sight and so he threw out the garbage.

Knox in considering the great need for pure doctrine and preaching in the Church of Scotland and the need for the gospel to go out again in Scotland said this quote, give me Scotland else I die.

[21 : 28] Friends, the Church of every age consists of spectators and reformers. Spectators are people like Asa's predecessor Abijah who maintain the status quo.

Spectators generally care very little about doctrine, the pure word of God and the advancement of the gospel of Christ in the community. God is looking today as he was in the time of Asa, God is looking for reformers and not spectators.

The challenge that comes to you today is into which category do you stand? Are you on fire for Christ? The Lord Jesus challenges us today.

Reformers are people like Asa. They burn for the gospel. They don't just turn up. They turn things around. They care with great passion for the purity of the church.

Brothers and sisters, if we are to be reformers of God's church, like Asa, we need to conquer our fears first. We need to be willing to step outside of the box.

[22 : 44] We need to, if necessary, stand against the status quo. We need to be men and women of great conviction and great courage. If we love the comforts of life more than the honor of Jesus, we won't be reformers.

The great Old Testament prophet Habakkuk also understood that it was hard to be a reformer in hard times, times like ours. In Habakkuk chapter 3 from verse 17 to verse 19, this is what he says, Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deers, he makes me tread on my high places. As we come now to celebrate communion, we need to think about the call and the need for reformation today.

As we come to the Lord's Supper, we also need to ponder the Lord Jesus as our great reformer, God. Because the Church is only as strong as the Gospel vision before her.

And that vision must be the desire for the pure Word of God and the pure Gospel of Jesus to be preached and shared in evangelism in the local community.

- [24 : 28] The Church must, of all ages, desire constant reformation, to be consistently renewed by the Word of God, presented from the pulpit and the Bible study, even if we are to be rebuked and reformed by the Word of God ourselves.

And of course, Jesus is our example of the greatest reformer of all. The greatest act of reformation, of course, ever seen is the cross of Jesus Christ.

The cross reforms everything because the cross cries out for total reformation, the reformation of the heart and the world from idols.

And when Jesus died for our sins on the cross, he rescued us from idols and the devil. Through his death and resurrection, gave to us the reforming power of the Spirit to set the Church and the world free from the devil and idols.

The power to reform the Church and the world. The question, of course, is do you believe it? Do you really believe the power of the cross, the power of the gospel, to reform the world and to change the hearts of the lonely and the lost?

- [25 : 44] Do we believe it as a church? Well, we'll show it, won't we, in the way we support our pastor and support the gospel program here at St. Mark's. The cross is the power of God's reformation in the world.

We also need to come to understand that as we publicly come to the Lord's table, what are we doing? we are publicly acknowledging the reforming power of the death of Jesus Christ, are we not?

We come to the Lord's table, we make a courageous public declaration, in public and before our peers, before the world out there, we declare our belief in the reforming power, the saving power of the gospel.

That is why we should not come to communion unless we truly believe by faith in the saving, reforming power of Jesus' death. So therefore, this morning, let us ask God today, as we partake in his great supper, let us ask God today to do a great and a new work in us.

Let us ask God today to change us from being mere passive spectators to becoming reformers, passionate, for the power of the gospel to be unleashed in our own homes, in our marriages, and in our community.

- [27 : 08] Let us this day place before our eyes as a congregation, unswervingly Jesus, the great and true reformer of the church.

Amen.