

IPC Churches: Distinctives

This is an attempt to summarise what is distinctive about the churches of the International Presbyterian Church, both those which already exist and those we hope to plant in the future.

As Reformed churches, our understanding of the gospel is set out in the Ecumenical Creeds and the Westminster Confession of Faith, all of which are subordinate to the Bible as God's word. None of what follows is intended to detract from or disagree with anything in these documents.

1. Gospel Distinctives

These are some key points and distinctives of our grasp of the gospel:

a) **The gospel is about knowing the Sovereign, Transcendent, Trinitarian God**

The gospel is about how the almighty, great and glorious God, who made everything and is infinitely exalted above all his creation, has called his people to know him. The Triune God calls us to know the Father through the incarnate Son by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is God's summons to know himself through himself. All the blessings of the gospel, now and for eternity, are to be understood as coming from the Father, won for us by Jesus Christ, and enjoyed in Spirit-given fellowship with him.

b) **The gospel is inseparable from the Word of God**

The gospel is good *news* (Mark 1:1): that is, it is a message to be verbally proclaimed. Furthermore, this message is the word of God (Acts 6:7), defined by the Scriptures. The Scriptures are God's covenant constitution for his church, through all of which the Holy Spirit brings the Church into existence and onwards to maturity. We therefore treat the Scriptures as having the full authority of God himself, and aim to understand it in continuity with the Church throughout history. For this reason we are a *confessional* church: not only must we say that we believe the Bible's teaching, but we must state clearly what it is we believe the Bible teaches. Therefore we hold to the ecumenical creeds and the Westminster Confession, as encapsulating the content of the gospel.

c) **The gospel is about forgiveness of sins**

As the angel announced to Joseph before his birth (Matthew 1:21), and Jesus himself said after his resurrection (Luke 24:47), the principle blessing he came to give to those who receive him is the forgiveness of sins. Specifically, forgiveness of us by God for the sins we have committed against him, through the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus at the cross, saving us from future judgment and justifying us for eternity. Important as other blessings of the gospel are, this is never to be neglected, eclipsed or displaced as the centre point of what salvation in Christ means.

d) **The gospel is about the whole of life**

Once the central place of forensic forgiveness has been affirmed, it is necessary to say that the gospel is not *merely* that. The gospel is that God in Christ is restoring and completing his creation: restoring what has been damaged by sin, and completing his original purposes when he created the world and placed man over it to rule it and fill it. This has been accomplished by Christ in his death and resurrection and will be brought to completion in his body, the church (Ephesians 1:22-23). The church is therefore humanity recreated in the image of God (Ephesians 4:24).

Forgiveness and justification are therefore the essential beginning of the work of redemption and transformation that encompasses the whole of human life. This means not only the whole of the life of the individual Christian (there is no area of a Christian's life which is not to be transformed in the power of the Spirit into the likeness of Christ), but the whole of human society throughout the world. The Church is an international body united in Christ (Colossians 3:11). Jesus gave himself to redeem us from all lawlessness and to

purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Titus 2:14).

e) The gospel is about the return of Christ

While we have a foretaste of these things now, we do not expect their full realisation now but only at Christ's return when Christians will be united with him in a resurrection like his (Romans 6:5). What Christians receive now from the risen and ascended Christ is a foretaste of these things, in their new birth in their 'inner man' (2 Cor 4:16) and in the life of the church, which is the nucleus of the new creation.

f) The gospel is about the church and vice versa

God's plan of salvation has always centred on his covenant people, the Church. The members of the Kingdom of God are the members of Jesus' Church; the Church is the sphere of redemption. It is not merely the meeting-place for converted people; it is the nation God has chosen for himself, the race who are being restored into God's true image, because it is the body and bride of Christ the true image of the invisible God. As such the Church is the nucleus of the new creation and salvation is all about being part of the Church. To be saved is to enter the Kingdom, to join the covenant people of God.

In his covenant God chooses a nation as his own, calls them to himself, binds himself to them and them to him by his words and comes to dwell with them, to be their God and to have them as his people. Far from being something which was scrapped with the coming of Christ in favour of a whole new mode of salvation (applied atomistically to individuals through faith outside of any context of covenant), the glory of the new covenant is that the gentiles have come to share in the blessings of Israel (e.g. Rom 15:27). Individual faith is vital because the promises of the covenant must be received in faith; and for just the same reason, faith must be in the covenant promises, made to God's people as a whole. The goal of salvation is the building of the Church, rather than the other way round.

This means the Church is the sphere where the whole-life gospel is put into practice. Calling people to salvation is calling them to Christ, which is calling people into his Church. Of course church membership must never be divorced from faith in Christ; but nor should faith in Christ be divorced from church membership. The Church is to be a counterculture where God's design for humanity, for all human relationships is restored and displayed for the world to see.

Because there is one Church, the one covenant people of the Triune God, connection and mutual accountability between congregations is important. Gospel unity needs to be maintained by appropriate accountability of elders to the wider church, and spurred on by mutual encouragement in the gospel. The Biblical pattern appears to be that these twin functions should be fulfilled by a council of elders from many churches – a presbytery (1 Timothy 4:14). Presbyterian church government is, therefore, both a court for the good government of the church and a catalyst for the growth of the church.

The individualised gospel of much of evangelicalism, while in God's grace having led to countless conversions, has unwittingly led to the growth of secularisation, as the Lordship of Christ has been successively excluded from the public domain, and the values of the Enlightenment seen as supreme instead. In our day, when this dominance of secularism is beginning to turn into active persecution of Christians, it is more important than ever that the Church learns to counter secularism by proclaiming Christ not merely as a saviour of individuals but as Lord of all who is building his Church as the nucleus of the new creation he will surely bring about at his return.

2. Church distinctives

All the above is simply an attempt to articulate a Reformed vision of the gospel and the Church as the covenant people of the Triune God. Our aim is to apply this vision to the world we live in today.

The practical application of this can be summarised under two headings.

a) **The Holy Spirit applies the blessings of the gospel through the means of grace.**

While the visible church, as seen by us in the present, is not to be identified with the true Church of those of genuine faith (which is invisible to us), nevertheless the ordinary means by which God gives Christians the blessings of salvation come through the visible church. Therefore the normal Spirit-filled Christian life is lived in the church and it is through the means of grace found in the church that the Holy Spirit brings people to faith in Christ and grows them to Christian maturity.

Therefore our churches, and future church plants, should have the following distinctives:

i) **Preaching**

God has always built his Church through his word; Jesus rules his Church through the written word, written and illuminated by his Spirit. Therefore the preaching of the word of God to the assembly of the church is the central act of the church's worship and the central means through which she submits to her Lord. Both expository and doctrinal preaching are important; expository preaching is of particular value in keeping the church under the authority of God's word. Both must constantly proclaim Christ crucified, risen and ascended (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

ii) **Sacraments**

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not dispensable additions to the Christian's life; they are given and commanded by Christ as sure signs of his grace and, when received with faith, means of communicating that grace to us. Thus while they are of no value if received with no faith (in fact they increase condemnation), and salvation does not depend on them, they are in ordinary circumstances essential parts of the life of the Christian and the life of the Church. They are (as the Westminster Confession says) signs and seals of the Covenant of Grace: Baptism of entry into that covenant, the Lord's Supper of continuing life within it.

As such, the Lord's Supper is to be a regular feature of our services and Baptism should be administered as soon as possible after a credible profession of faith. In line with their nature as covenant signs, infants born within the family of the church are rightly baptised to show their membership of the covenant people in which they will grow; and children giving a credible profession of faith, as judged by their parents and the church's elders, are rightly given the Lord's Supper.

When understood in this way the sacraments are a powerful visual proclamation of the gospel both to believers and unbelievers.

iii) **Elders**

Elders, also called in the New Testament overseers, shepherds and teachers, are Christ's ordained means of equipping the saints for the work of ministry so as to build up the body of Christ, and so bring his church to maturity. They do this through their example, their teaching, and their government of the church (Ephesians 4:11-16). Elders are to meet the standards set for them in 1 Timothy and Titus and obey Paul's exhortations in Acts 20. A healthy church should have a plurality of elders according to the New Testament pattern. It is the responsibility of elders to teach the Bible to their church and to dispense the sacraments appropriately. This includes the discipline of believers when necessary.

Eldership is to be seen as an immense blessing to the whole church; a gift from the ascended Christ to his people (along with the Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists), as the

principle route through which he applies the blessings of his word to his church, through preaching, teaching, governing and pastoral care.

Being instituted and ordained by Christ, the office of elder is not to be tampered with. Elders hold a delegated authority from Christ, and as such it is only an office for men, the distinct roles of male and female in human society being clearly laid out in Scripture.

The office of Ruling Elder, as one who exercises the authority of an elder without having the regular duty of teaching, is less prominent in the New Testament than in the Old, but still appears to be present (1 Timothy 5:17) and is to be preserved.

There are many godly brothers in Christ who do not hold to a covenantal view of the church as set out above, and therefore are unable to subscribe to the Westminster confession (for example, they might refuse to baptise the children of believers). Such men and their families are most welcome as members of our churches. However, since it is essential for the good governance of the church that elders hold to a common vision of the church, and the Reformed view of the church set out above is of great significance to the character of our gospel preaching, it is not acceptable for such men to be elders in our churches. At the same time, those with such convictions who are elders of other orthodox churches are to be treated as brothers and fellow-elders and dissension is to be avoided.

iv) Deacons

Deacons are entrusted with the care of the needy, starting with those in the church. Each church should aim to appoint deacons, to enable the elders to concentrate on the ministry of the word and prayer.

b) The Holy Spirit drives the church to Mission

i) Mission is essential

The covenantal view of the church held by Reformed churches demands active involvement in mission. The covenant with Abraham was always intended to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth; ever since Pentecost Christ has been gathering his people, through the witness of the Spirit to the word as it is proclaimed by the Church, from all across the world. It is therefore inconsistent and unbiblical for churches with Reformed convictions to be satisfied with self-preservation and not see winning disciples from the unbelieving nation in which they are located, and partnering with churches doing the same worldwide, as a high priority.

ii) Mission means drawing people into the covenant by the gospel

The covenant of grace is a counter-culture; it is not our ambition to assimilate to the culture in which we find ourselves but to transform those who join the church into the radically different culture of the Kingdom of God. British Christians have more in common culturally with fellow-Christians in Kazakhstan, and with fellow-Christians who lived in the Roman Empire of the first century, than with their non-Christian British neighbours.

iii) Mission requires laying aside stumbling blocks for those coming from within contemporary culture

At the same time, our desire to guard the apostolic gospel and live in a distinctive Christian way is not to be confused with a desire to preserve subculture, which may be no more than the relic of non-Christian culture of an earlier age. There is of course great wisdom in learning from where Christians in earlier ages have learned things from Scripture that we have missed; but there is no virtue in preserving (for example) forms of dress, or language, from an earlier age merely because it is from an earlier age. While finding our identity in Christ, and always wanting to reform all of life according to Scripture, we should be willing to do so in ways which lay no unnecessary stumbling blocks in the way of non-Christians coming to church, hearing and understanding the gospel, repenting and believing in Christ and joining his Church. Our passion and desire is that sinners in a world ruined by sin may hear and believe the gospel of Christ and find salvation as they come to him, join his church, and wait for his return.