

Nettles, Tom. *Ready for Reformation? Bringing Authentic Reform to Southern Baptist Churches*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005. 140 pp. \$14.99.

Introduction

Tom Nettles, professor of Church History at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes *Ready for Reformation?* twenty-five years after the “conservative resurgence” began. He assumes that “a genuine movement of God’s Spirit has initiated a reformation among Southern Baptists,” but he goes on to contend that much more needs to be done (2). While the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has recovered the inerrancy of Scripture, he questions if the “root issue” has been reached (5). Holding to a firm understanding of the historically Baptist regulative principle, Nettles thesis is to “explore the material principle in its historical manifestations in Baptist life along with some of the practical outworkings of that biblical issue” (6).

Nettles sets his sights on the future of the SBC and its need to return to its historically conservative and theologically robust roots. By looking at the past, he encourages his readers to press forward towards a confessional reformation. In the process, he aims to cover a variety of theological and practical areas needing attention in the church today.

Summary

In chapter one, Nettles urges his readers to “Remember from Where You Have Fallen.” He cites the story of Jehu in 2 Kings, the trials of the Protestant Reformation, and the work necessary to bring about the Conservative Resurgence. He does this to remind the reader “how quickly reformation can fizzle if not pursued with self-critical and God-focused zeal” (11);

because in each of the above mentioned cases, the final one yet to be seen, the work of the Spirit relaxed and men pursued new theological errors and returned to lives of moral unrighteousness.

Chapter two makes a case for the need of healthy confessionalism. Contra Moderates who advocate a creed-less Baptist heritage, Nettles delves into the history of the Baptists to show that Baptists have always been conscientiously confessional. From John Smyth to Spencer Cone, Nettles lists eleven prominent Baptists who have made personal confessions (18). He considers the lack of self-expressive creeds to be indicative of those who would stray from the truth (19), and in the end argues that “reformation and confession cannot be separated” (27). To affirm his stance he quotes B. H. Carroll, “The more doctrines a church can agree on, the greater its power, and the wider its usefulness” (26). This kind of confessionalism is healthy and needed if the SBC is going to strengthen in the next twenty-five years and beyond.

Chapter three warns the reader of subjective understandings of the Bible, sentimentalism, and failure to expound the truths of Scripture. The whole chapter beckons a return to earnest proclamation of the truths of Scripture. Storytelling has replaced proclaiming the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and consequently it has diminished the power of the Word. Nettles quotes Robert Hall’s admonition, “Draw your instructions immediately from the Bible; the more immediately they are derived from that source, and the less they are tintured with human distinctions and refinements, the more salutary, and the more efficacious” (35). Contemporary speakers for the sake of freshness interpose their personal narratives into biblical exposition and the result is a distorted and muffled Word. For reformation to continue, the preacher must always and only proclaim the Word.

Chapters four and five make up a section on the need for understanding *effective* evangelism. Evangelism has been redefined as a decision-based event, instead of a “work” that

requires time and biblical persuasion (39). Nettles explores the contours of evangelism over the last two centuries and shows a deficit in doctrinal explanation and a rise in salesman-like techniques to urge sinners to confess Christ. He cites the historic employment of traveling evangelists, protracted meetings, and the anxious seat as innovative methods for winning souls (53-58). He analyzes these and from them shows evangelism's pragmatic drift, helping the reader to understand how modern evangelism arrived in its current condition.

Left in this condition, churches risk extinction. Without genuine conversions, Baptist churches will expire or at least dwindle given enough time. Nettles cites recent statistics that prove that exact point. Of all the SBC members in this country, only a little more than a quarter of them give any consistent attention to regular corporate Bible study and worship (61). Nettles solution to this is to increase Baptismal standards, improve church discipline in churches, and present the full gospel to people. The pastor and laymen should be looking to make obedient disciples from genuine converts and not just tallying momentary decisions for Christ. Such examples can be seen in the lives of Baptists from previous generations and must be seen again today.

In chapter six, Tom Nettles exhorts, "Baptists [to] Recapture the Complementarity of Law and Gospel." Again he settles in on historical issues that shed light on contemporary quarrels. After quoting multiple Baptist stalwarts repudiating antinomianism, Nettles considers the recent history of the Moderates, the American Baptist Churches, and the Conservative Southern Baptists. He warns SBC pastors not to cave in to the wants and worldly desires of church congregations.

To setup a striking contrast he quotes the former "pastor" of Riverside Church in New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Celebrating multi-perspectivalism, Fosdick says, "All these

types [Protestant, liturgical, Quaker, religious drama] meet real human needs and represent valid varieties of temperament, and we have put them under one roof” (74). Nettles critiques this humanistic method of ministry and turns to Baptist pastors to take up their God-ordained task of preaching the gospel and teaching the Bible. They must aim for congregational holiness, not universal happiness. Therefore, they must preach the exacting demands of the law and the good news of Christ’s merits in fulfilling the law in the sinner’s stead.

Chapter seven gets at the heart of the gospel of grace. Considering each member of the Trinity and their unique role in salvation, Nettles argues for a robust Calvinistic understanding of the gospel. Nettles shows concern for both the inattention and animosity expressed toward the doctrines of election, effectual calling, and particular redemption. Each of these, he asserts,] promote a grace-centered gospel. He writes, “When a person ignores the particularity of the grace of all three persons of the triune God, he courts theological disaster” (89).

Moving from the Trinity in chapter seven, Nettles moves to the centrality of Christ in chapter eight. Plumbing the depths of history, he relates the story of Andrew Fuller’s exaltation of Christ in his conflict with the Socinians. Furthermore, he tells of Spurgeon’s struggles to uphold Christ during the downgrade controversy. This he relates to the human tendency to always diminish Jesus Christ. If the Conservative Resurgence is going to effect lasting change, it must reaffirm the effective work of the Trinity and the centrality of Jesus Christ in its theological systems.

Chapter nine considers the ecclesiastical changes necessary for this reformation. Though error in regards to the church is not as perilous as error pertaining to Christ, misapplied ecclesiology in time erodes the glorious truths of Christ and his salvation. For, the church is the

pillar and protector of the truth. So for Nettles, three elements of church life need to be reestablished for the church to once again thrive. They are heightened standards for and emphasis on membership (104); the training and encouragement of men thoroughly acquainted with biblical doctrine who can rightly teach and lead as local church elders (107); and congregational commitment to church restoration and discipline (109). All of these are needed to maintain and improve “the protection and purity of Christ’s bride” (113).

Whereas chapter nine addressed problems within the church, chapter ten establishes the need churches have to be a light in a dark and dying world. In a world full of false worldviews that lead to debauched living, only a biblically transformed mind can cause true godliness. Thus Christians can only be holy witnesses when their minds are renewed and washed by the Word. Nettles shows the importance of a biblical worldview in this chapter and its effect on marriage, merciful benevolence to the needy, restoration of broken relationships, and evident personal holiness. In short, without attention to the Bible, holy living is only short-lived and superficial. It seems that spiritual maladies are corrected by doctrinal remedies—nothing else.

Nettles makes his closing remarks in the epilogue. Again he revisits the work of God in previous generations of men, and notes how the Word of God is always given prominence in times of reformation (127). He denotes that from this recommitment to the Word comes expressive confessions that articulate the beliefs of Scripturally-committed people (128). Also, he observes that such work often occurs in stages (129), with effects on local churches and individual members. Holiness is the primary effect. He is optimistic on the whole, but stresses that Spirit-led “self-judgment” is required to forage out deeply imbedded doctrinal and practical errors. Nettles names three in particular: “motivation for ministerial success,” “practical

pragmatism,” and conscious and/or unconscious neglect of biblical authority (130). Each of these must be addressed if the doctrine is going to continue to be purified and the church edified.

Conclusion

At the onset of *Ready for Reformation?* Tom Nettles stated “The following pages suggest several areas for expanding, energetic, and brotherly conversation” (10). His book has accomplished that task. By tracing the roots of historic Baptist beliefs he has shown us our heritage and he has urged us to consider their beliefs and imitate their faith. He has introduced topics ranging from evangelism to the doctrine of Christ to regenerate church membership and local church discipline. In all of these things he has accomplished his goal of setting out areas that must be discussed and decided. Now that the battle for the Bible has been won, what will we believe in the Bible? Anything less than full devotion to Scriptures authoritative instructions will lead us again into compromise.

Ready for Reformation is a dated book, but that is Nettles intention. One hundred years from now the message will not have the effect that it can today. Historians will read it and know what SBC leaders were concerned about and arguing for at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the message will not be for them. The message is for us today. It is a call to arms. It implores pastors, ministers of the Word, and local congregations to cherish the Word providentially salvaged from the wrecking ball of liberal theology. It makes evident that this inerrant deposit must be explored and expounded. This is the usefulness of this book. It rightly assesses the conditions swirling through the SBC today, and it boldly exhorts us all fill our heads, our hearts, and our mouths with its life-giving truth. Brothers, let us heed the call to preach the whole counsel of authoritative, inerrant Scripture, in and out of season.