

Minorities and the Reformed Churches

John M. Frame

Why are there so few African-Americans and Latinos in the PCA? Or in any Reformed church, for that matter?

This is, I think, an important question. The Church of Jesus Christ is to embrace all nations, as God fulfills in Jesus his promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3, Matt. 28:19). This does not mean that each congregation must have a quota of members from every people-group (see my paper on “Racisms”), but it does mean that the church as a whole should reach out to everybody.

Some would argue that since the PCA (to use one example; others would do equally well) is only one denomination of the church, it shouldn't be expected to try to reach all types of people. They would recommend that the PCA focus on upper middle class, well-educated whites, with whom they typically have the most rapport. Leave the poor and minorities to the Baptists, Independents, and Charismatics.

But this approach will not do. In the first place, denominations are unscriptural (see my *Evangelical Reunion*). The church should be one organizationally as well as spiritually, and that one organization should be ministering to people of all nations and social strata.

Second, denominations typically claim to function as *the Church*. That is, they claim to have a complete message, complete sacraments, a complete organizational structure. They claim to be sufficient as “churches” to carry out the Great Commission. They must make this claim; otherwise they have no reason to exist. Jesus assigned the work of the Great Commission to the *church*, not to some religious club. If the PCA wants to do the work of the *church*, without organic connection with other denominational expressions of the church, then it must do *all* the work of the church, meaning in the present context that it must reach out to all nations and socio-economic groups.

Third, the Reformed denominations have claimed to have a sounder formulation of the gospel than non-Reformed bodies, as well as sounder methods of evangelism and nurture. They claim, therefore, to be better equipped than others to carry out the Great Commission. If they are not reaching some ethnic and social groups, that is cause for concern.

I have no statistics on the success of Reformed churches in reaching out to American minorities, but my observation (and I trust the reader's as well) is that we have been very weak in this respect. I am not entirely clear on the reasons for this, but I mention the following possibilities:

1. Historically, the Reformation has been a movement of academic scholars. (See my paper, "Hurting People's Feelings.") In the churches, preaching has followed something of an academic model in style and intellectual content. This approach appeals to the well-educated, who are also often the relatively wealthy members of society. It tends to turn away others, in the present case the relatively poor minorities.
2. Being an intellectual movement, the Reformation in some circles disparaged feelings, in my judgment to an unscriptural extent. (See again, my paper, "Hurting People's Feelings.") This attracted rather Stoic kinds of personalities and discouraged those who with greater need of emotional support. It discouraged also the emotionally demonstrative. That is one source of our ethnic hyperuniformity.
3. Similarly, the minimalist aesthetic of Reformed worship (questionably derived from the Second Commandment) limited the churches' ability to communicate effectively to some cultures.
4. Some Reformed theologians, particularly R. L. Dabney, have made statements deemed racist. These are largely forgotten today, but Reformed churches in America must bear the burdens of the history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. Other denominations and traditions in the US bear the same burdens.
5. It is interesting to me, however, that although there is an African-American Methodist denomination (the A. M. E.) and various African-American Baptist conventions (such as the National), there is no African-American Presbyterian, Reformed, or Anglican fellowship. The reason, I fear, is not that white Reformed churches have been more welcoming to African-Americans than other churches, but that these folks had too little interest in the Reformed Faith to even form such fellowships. So in the era of segregation even the option of a single-race Reformed church was not possible. This indicates how high a hurdle we must overcome. The history of the last two hundred years is a major obstacle to the progress of the Reformed gospel among African-Americans.
6. The Reformed emphasis on objective, absolute truth has sometimes been misused. It is one thing to insist on the absolute truth of Scripture. But Reformed theologians have often insisted also on the unchangeable divine truth of various traditions of worship and church life. Music is a conspicuous example today. This traditionalism is ironically closer to Roman Catholic theology

than to the Reformation *sola Scriptura*, and it forms a major barrier to communication between the Reformed churches and minority cultures.

7. One of these traditions has been the tradition of a “learned ministry,” which I will discuss at greater length. The academic emphasis of the Reformed movement has led to an emphasis on academic qualifications for pastors. Reformed denominations typically demand an A. B. degree or equivalent, plus some amount of seminary training. And they give to pastoral candidates rigorous examinations in biblical languages, church history, and theological subjects. Members of minority groups typically don’t have the financial or educational prerequisites for this kind of study. The result is that very few minority people qualify to become Reformed pastors. But to attract minority church members it is necessary to ordain minority church officers. This is, I think, a major barrier to minority participation in Reformed churches.

There is much to be said for the concept of a “learned ministry.” The “parson” of early American villages was often the one member of the community with an academic training. He became the de facto local expert, not only on theology, but also on science, history, etc. Some would like to see the Christian church regain this cultural ascendancy.

But it can hardly be argued that such a degree of learning is a biblical requirement for ministry. The New Testament requirements do include the provision that an overseer be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2), and we may infer from 2 Tim. 4:2 that he should be able to “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage...” Compare Tit. 1:9. Surely these responsibilities require some head-knowledge as well as heart-knowledge. But they do not require, even in our present-day culture, an A. B. or equivalent. The apostles themselves were perceived to be “unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13). With the exception of Paul, they were not trained in the rabbinic schools, let alone what we would now describe as the disciplines of the liberal arts. The New Testament writers express themselves, not in the Greek of the poets and philosophers, but in the *Koine* of the common people.

Western missionaries planting tribal churches in areas new to the gospel often encourage these churches to install indigenous leadership as early as possible. Such leaders need to know the Gospel and the basics of the Bible. But no one insists that a young

church need wait until some members of the tribe earn A. B. degrees before they can become pastors or elders. Yet Reformed churches routinely insist on such educational requirements (with some slight flexibility) in preparing people for ordination in America.

Why should there be such a discrepancy between our standards for mission churches and our standards for home churches? The mission field exists on US territory today. Educational expectations differ greatly in different ethnic and cultural communities. It still makes some sense to require college or university education of those called to be senior pastors of largely white suburban churches. It makes no sense at all to require such education of those called to work, say, with Hispanic migrant farm workers.

So my suggestion is that we recognize a broader range of educational requirements for different kinds of ministry, rather than having a common set of requirements for everybody who is to be ordained. Of course, some requirements must be met by all candidates: all must have a good knowledge of Scripture and Reformed theology. All must have good ability to communicate these truths in preaching, teaching, counseling. (I would actually elevate the requirements in these areas.) But there should be no requirements as to *how* this knowledge is obtained (whether by seminary, tutoring, private study). And of course there should be an emphasis on the qualities of character that dominate the Pauline lists of qualifications for church office (1 Tim. 3:1-10, Tit. 1:5-9), qualities that need to be emphasized far more in Reformed churches. But there is no reason also to require college preparation of all ordinands.

It may be that those who are ordained with lesser preparation will need more supervision when they enter ministry. Normally in Presbyterianism we assume that once a man is ordained to the teaching ministry he has all the tools: he is fully prepared to take any responsibility in the church, without any additional help. Of course, in our hearts we know that is wrong. Every pastor needs help, especially in his first years in ministry. In Presbyterianism, supervision of young pastors is supposed to come through presbytery, but that supervision is often very slow in coming. For this purpose, one is attracted to something like Episcopacy, in which one man is charged with supervising the ministries of other men. Presbyteries can approximate this by energizing their committees on "The Minister and His Work." Through some such mechanism it could be recognized that the education of ministers is an ongoing thing; it doesn't end with

ordination. Given such a system, those who enter ministry with less educational preparation than others could receive regular guidance and counsel from more experienced and knowledgeable church leaders.

Does this mean that minority pastors would hold a second-class ordination? No. In my judgment every pastor should be under authority, under supervision. We should not assume that ordination gives the right to autonomous ministry, following the supervised trial period of licensure. Ordination rightly confers some privileges: rights of participation in session and presbytery; rights to administer sacraments. But it should not be the end of accountability. If every teaching elder is accountable to some fellow-presbyter (s), then we need not worry that this process will distinguish some as second-class.

I have focused on the seventh barrier between Reformed and minorities, for I have had some specific suggestions for overcoming it that needed to be presented at length. But the other problems should also be addressed. If they are, I think we might at least make some progress toward making Reformed churches more multi-ethnic: that is, toward making Reformed churches more like The Church.