

Called to the Ministry

I did not grow up in the Protestant Reformed Churches, but in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), a liberal Presbyterian denomination. My mother instilled into me a love for the scriptures from childhood, and I cannot remember a time when I haven't read God's word. I suppose there must have been some true preaching left in the denomination when I was growing up, but in recent years that denomination has deteriorated at an alarming rate. When apostasy begins, it usually snowballs, unless checked by discipline.

I studied foreign languages at the Queen's University in Belfast. There I got to know (now Rev.) Angus Stewart, who was at that time pursuing biblical studies. He and I shared a house with other students in Belfast. He introduced me to the Reformed faith, something about which I had heard almost nothing in the PCI.

Around that time (1996) I met Rev. Ron Hanko, the then missionary in Ballymena, and his family, and attended some of the meetings held in the CPRC. I also attended the British Reformed Fellowship (BRF) conference in England that summer. Although the Conference was excellent, I felt uncomfortable, because many of the visiting Americans kept asking me which church I attended. Many of the Americans assumed that I was a member of the CPRC. I was hesitant to tell them that I was not, as I was secretly ashamed of my own church. One never likes to admit to oneself, and especially not to others, that the church of which one is a member is apostate. At that same conference, Angus Stewart decided to leave the church of which he had been a member and joined the CPRC.

I did not, which is something I regret.

During my last year at Queen's University (1997-1998), I believed that I was being called to the ministry. I could see the apostasy in the Presbyterian Church, and I believed that there was

a need for sounder men in the denomination. I had an interview with my Kirk Session (consistory), and then with the Presbytery Students Committee. Presbytery decided that I should be deferred for at least two years, as they judged I needed some life experience. The Presbyterian Church allows applicants to lead worship services *before* they even enter the theological college, so I was asked to lead two services (including preparing and delivering a sermon) in my own congregation. Knowing little about church polity at the time, I agreed to lead the services. I had had no training whatsoever at that stage. However, I see now that such a practice is wrong. I have those sermons still—I cringe when I listen to them, not because they are not orthodox, but because they were poorly organized and delivered.

After graduation, I moved to Dublin, Ireland, where I worked as a customer service representative for UPS (1998-2000) and then as an insurance underwriter (2000-2005). At the beginning, I tried various churches in the Dublin area. My home church went from bad to worse. I realized as the years went by that the apostasy in the PCI was not going to improve. I knew too that if I survived the higher criticism and heresy of the Theological College and graduated from there, that no congregation in the PCI would accept me with my theological convictions, so I did not re-apply after that two year deferral period.

In those intervening years God preserved me and did not suffer me to fall from the truth. God is faithful to his covenant. Of that I am convinced. Although I had no real church home in Dublin, I continued to read and study the scriptures and Reformed literature. That is how God fed me in those arid years in the spiritual wilderness. It is not an experience that I would recommend.

Around 2004 Angus Stewart (who had since become the pastor in Ballymena) contacted me to tell me that he and his wife Mary were planning to visit Dublin. I had not seen him in

years and felt quite guilty that we had lost touch. We enjoyed a very profitable time of fellowship; I learned about Rev. Stewart's ministry, and I started listening to recordings. They were excellent, but they are no substitute for face-to-face fellowship in the Lord's house. I started regularly to attend the CPRC in Ballymena. In those days that meant a long journey to get to my parents' home. I would arrange a ride to Ballymena and attend services there. Some weekends I would spend the whole weekend with the Stewarts. On one such occasion I had the privilege of attending catechism class as a visitor with Rev. Stewart, after which he remarked, "Martyn, one day you'll be doing this." To that I just smiled.

Various members of the CPRC urged me to consider going to seminary. They also made pointed remarks about the need to move house and job so I could join the CPRC. In my heart I knew they were right, but I did not want to uproot myself from my comfortable life in Dublin.

In August of 2004, I attended the BRF conference on "Keeping God's Covenant." Again the teaching and fellowship were wonderful. During the conference Prof. Engelsma agreed to begin an e-mail forum on the subject of church membership. This later became the book *Bound to Join* (RFPA, 2010). As a result of that teaching, I relocated to join the CPRC and became a member in October 2005. It took me a long time to move—too long. But the Lord has been gracious.

My desires for the ministry were rekindled around that time. They had lain dormant in my heart, but I could not pursue the ministry in an apostate denomination. When I joined the CPRC, I saw the great need for the Reformed faith here, for Rev. Stewart brought me on his visits to Wales and Limerick. The saints in Ballymena saw in me gifts for the ministry and encouraged me to pursue that call. Frequently I heard the prayers that God would send laborers into the harvest. Spurred on by such suggestions, I thought, prayed, and studied, and then

applied to the seminary. Synod approved my application in June 2006, and I started seminary in September 2006.

Seminary was a very happy time for me. It was so refreshing to be in a faithful Reformed school, a new experience for me. I remember that on my first day Prof. entered the room and said, "Let's open." I looked around, wondering what he meant: the door, the windows, the books? And then he started to pray. I had never been in class where the teacher opened with prayer before! The studies at seminary were rigorous and the workload was heavy, and some aspects of seminary were intimidating—especially practice preaching—but the students and professors became my friends, and the love showered upon me by the PRCA moved me deeply. Those were great times of camaraderie, friendship, and deep fellowship.

What really confirmed to me that the Lord was blessing my seminary training and confirming my call was that he enabled me to do the work. It is really that simple. Each new task at seminary was a milestone: Could I do Greek? Could I do Hebrew? Could I make a sermon? Could I deliver the sermon in front of the professors? Could I teach catechism? Could I (after I was licensed to speak) lead a worship service? When I found that I was able to do these things—and I never have been a confident public speaker—it greatly encouraged me to continue. And the more I did it, the more the Lord encouraged me. I also discovered that I *enjoyed* doing the work. I enjoyed studying; I enjoyed translating Greek and Hebrew (there were times where I enjoyed it less); I enjoyed writing papers, sermons, and catechism lessons; I enjoyed teaching; I enjoyed helping the saints. Never underestimate that: If you cannot imagine spending a long time studying, the ministry is not for you. If a minister does not study, he will have nothing to say when he is in the pulpit, catechism room, or pastoral visit. A minister is not a glorified social worker. He must bring the word of God, and he must know that word. Another thing I might say

to naturally timid young men is this: do not rule yourself out for that reason. Timothy was naturally timid; Calvin was naturally timid. The word alone gives boldness. The word of God can transform a man so that he is courageous. That's my testimony.

Being a missionary is different from serving in an established church. When I started seminary, neither I nor the CPRC who sent me had a clear idea where I would serve the Lord. I knew I wanted to be trained—the seminary is like a boot camp for spiritual soldiers—but I did not know where the Lord would choose to deploy me. Especially during my final year at seminary, the *Limerick Reformed Fellowship* grew, which made it possible for us to begin a full-time work here. Thus when I graduated from seminary—the synodical exam was another major milestone—there was a call waiting for me back home. I had already met some of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship (three of them came to the Calvin conference in September 2009, when I was interning at Southwest PRC, and I had been several times to Limerick with Rev. Stewart when he lectured there) so they were very excited to have a missionary-pastor.

One thing is indispensable for the ministry: love for God's people. Young man, do you love the truth? Do you love God's people? Do you love the Lord Jesus who redeemed the church? Will you serve him by serving his church? Pray for the church, for her ministers, and consider—seriously and prayerfully—the ministry as a calling for yourself. The church (your friends and family) need the word. The Lord is pleased to give her that word by preaching. Perhaps he will be pleased to use you.