



Reformed evangelism— An oxymoron?

Several years ago an acquaintance of mine made a troubling observation about Reformed churches and believers that has stuck with me. He remarked that evangelism is the "Achilles heel" of many Reformed churches. Though Reformed believers have a good reputation for their emphasis upon expository preaching, God-honoring worship, and careful adherence to the teaching of God's Word, they are laggards at best when it comes to reaching the lost with the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. Reformed churches do many things well, but evangelism is not one of them. If you want to find a church which has a keen interest in reaching others with the gospel and enfolded them into the fellowship of the church, you will have to look elsewhere than the Reformed community.

Now it would be relatively easy to dismiss this observation. You could say that it is a "generalization" to which there are many exceptions. Is it fair to paint all Reformed churches with such a broad-brushed stroke of criticism? After all, there are Reformed churches and denominations that have distinguished themselves by their work in world missions and evangelism. Furthermore, the history of the Reformed churches suggests that many of them have been deeply and intensely involved in communicating the gospel to the nations. To say in such a general and unqualified way that Reformed churches have been remiss in this respect betrays a lack of appreciation, even an ungrateful ignorance, of so much that has been done and is being done by them.

Or you might reply by arguing that the criticism reflects too narrow and unbiblical a view of evangelism. Admittedly, many Reformed churches may not do well in reaching people for the first time with the gospel and bringing them into the fellowship of the church. But they do often manage to communicate the gospel by Word and sacrament *to believers and their children*, maintaining the covenant of grace from generation to generation. To be sure, if evangelism means, narrowly considered, reaching the lost, those outside the fellowship of Christ and His church, then many Reformed congregations are not very active or successful in this area. But if by evangelism we mean, broadly considered, the preaching of the gospel to and discipling of the nations (Matthew 28:16-20), then many Reformed churches have experienced a rich measure of the Lord's blessing in communicating the gospel from one generation of believers to another. Who can calculate how many people have been saved as the Lord gathers the church by His Spirit and Word *in this manner*?

Sometimes it is also maintained that Reformed churches find their niche, not so much in bringing people to Christ for the first time, but in nurturing believers in the more rich and solid food of God's Word. Though evangelical and charismatically-inclined churches may be instrumental in reaching people with the gospel initially, it often happens that, as believers grow in their knowledge of the Word, they find their way into a Reformed church where there is a richer diet of solid doctrinal preaching and teaching. Thus, the Reformed churches' contribution to missions and evangelism is to provide a kind of "second level" Christian experience, one characterized by a more richly confessional and theological form of teaching. If you want your Christianity "lite," you go to an independent Bible church or charismatic fellowship. If you want your Christianity "heavy," you go to the local Reformed or Presbyterian church. Among the smorgasbord of churches in North America, you pick the church of your choice according to your tastes. If it happens to be Reformed, it is likely because you enjoy a more intellectual form of Christian experience.

No doubt the beginnings (but no more!) of a defense of the Reformed churches against this complaint could be made along these lines. However, I am not interested in attempting such a defense at this point. Rather, I am interested in taking a careful look at the complaint, which

requires that we listen carefully to the way it is articulated by those who find the Reformed churches lacking in this area. Rather than being defensive and apologetic about it, I would like to see why this judgment is often made about the Reformed churches. For, if it is true, it represents a rather serious defect in the life and ministry of the church. Churches which pride themselves on being "true churches" may not avoid taking a hard look at themselves in this mirror. For if there is evidence of unfaithfulness in this area, then the only biblical recourse is the way of repentance and reformation of life.

Clarifying the terms "missions" and "evangelism"

Before taking a closer look at some of the reasons suggested for the failures of Reformed churches in the area of evangelism, I need to pause a moment to clarify some terms. In traditional discussions of this subject, a distinction has often been made between "evangelism" and "missions." Evangelism is customarily conceived of as the bringing of the gospel to the unsaved who are near at hand, who live within the reach of the church. Missions, on the other hand, is thought to have to do with the bringing of the gospel to those who are at a distance from the church. According to this distinction, evangelism is something the local church does in its neighborhood, missions is something the church (or churches) does at a distance, often in another part of the world. Furthermore, what often distinguishes evangelism from missions is that, in the case of the former, a church already exists, but in the latter a church needs to be planted for the first time.

Though this distinction may have a relative usefulness — there is a significant difference between proclaiming the gospel to people in your own language and culture, for example, and proclaiming the gospel to an as — yet largely unreached people in a significantly different language and culture — I will work with a rather simple view of evangelism. Evangelism is the proclamation of the gospel. Evangelism is the work of the church in teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, making disciples of the nations, baptizing believers (and their children) into the name of the Triune God. J. H. Bavinck, in his still useful volume, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, defines missions this way:

*"Missions is that activity of the church in essence it is nothing else than an activity of Christ, exercised through the church — through which the church in this interim period, in which the end is postponed, calls the peoples of the earth to repentance and to faith in Christ, so that they may be made His disciples and through baptism be incorporated into the fellowship of those who await the coming of the kingdom."*¹

If evangelism has to do with the proclamation of the gospel to the lost and aims to enfold believers into the fellowship of Christ's church, what accounts for the fact that Reformed churches and believers are lacking in this respect? What kinds of reasons are often given for the uneven track record of Reformed Christians in evangelism and missions?

Though this is a difficult question to answer, there seem to be two general kinds of reasons offered for this lack. The first kind has to do with various confessional and theological obstacles that are allegedly detrimental to the work of evangelism. The second kind has to do with a more subtle and sensitive matter: cultural and ethnic barriers to effective outreach with the gospel.

Confessional and theological obstacles

It is often argued that the reason Reformed churches lag behind in their zeal for and practice of evangelism stems from important features of Reformed faith and theology. According to this argument, it is no accident that Reformed churches are often ineffective in evangelism. This ineffectiveness is a natural and inescapable consequence of some of the distinctive features of the Reformed faith.

For example, it is sometimes alleged that the Reformed emphasis upon God's sovereignty, particularly as it is expressed in terms of the doctrine of unconditional election, serves to diminish a proper appreciation for human responsibility. If salvation is wholly of the Triune God, from its

design within God's pretemporal decree to its application by the irresistible working of the Holy Spirit, then it seems to follow that we ought not to emphasize too much the responsibility of Christian churches or believers to evangelize. J. I. Packer, in his *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, describes this allegation as follows:

There is abroad today a widespread suspicion that a robust faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is bound to undermine any adequate sense of human responsibility. Such a faith is thought to be dangerous to spiritual health, because it breeds a habit of complacent inertia. In particular, it is thought to paralyse evangelism by robbing one both of the motive to evangelize and of the message to evangelize with. The supposition seems to be that you cannot evangelize effectively unless you are prepared to pretend while you are doing it that the doctrine of divine sovereignty is not true.²

When Reformed believers stress the sovereignty of God, they insist that the salvation of sinners is *God's work, not ours*. And since God will undoubtedly realize His sovereign designs for the salvation of sinners, no failure or inactivity on our part will frustrate or imperil this work. Moreover, since sinners are totally depraved, incapable of doing any spiritual or saving good, there is no basis for seeking to bring sinners to faith and repentance by any other means than simply *"waiting upon the Lord."* The Lord will save His own in His own time and manner, regardless of the church's failures or the sinners incompetence. Indeed, the less we attempt to do in this area, particularly in resisting all of the "measures" employed by Arminians in seeking to persuade sinners to believe and repent, the better.

But it is not only the doctrine of God's sovereignty that inhibits a vigorous pursuit of the work of evangelism. It is also argued that there is a problem with the Reformed view of the gospel message in respect to its content and the manner in which it is presented.

If as a Reformed Christian, for example, you believe the doctrine of limited atonement, then you will be uncomfortable, even opposed, to any gospel presentation that addresses *all* with the message of God's love and grace in Christ. Because Christ's atoning work was designed and accomplished only for the elect, it cannot be indiscriminately presented to sinners as a work which is available to or suited to their need. It would be wrong to say to all sinners, without discrimination, that Christ died for them or that His blood could benefit them, were they to respond to the gospel's summons. Because the audience for the gospel is a mixed company of elect and reprobate persons, the *gospel promise* of salvation to all who believe and repent cannot be addressed to all sinners in the same manner. For, in the strictest sense, there is no good news, no promise, that may be addressed to reprobate sinners.³

Thus, when the proclamation and administration of the gospel is viewed from the standpoint of election and reprobation, the preacher of the gospel finds himself in a difficult spot — he does not know who is elect or reprobate and, therefore, finds himself unable to speak forthrightly of God's love and grace for sinners in Christ. The indiscriminate preaching of the gospel to all sinners is thereby hindered, because of the fear that Christ's atoning work may be made to seem universal and indiscriminate in its design. Thus, the warrant for responding to the *gospel summons* ("**believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved**") gets complicated by the perplexity regarding whether this warrant holds for all to whom the gospel is spoken. After all, the hearer may be someone whom God reprobates, so that this gospel is not addressed to him as a word of grace or mercy in Christ.

For similar reasons, the proclamation of the gospel in a Reformed setting is rendered problematic in terms of its manner of presentation. May we speak of a gospel "offer" or "invitation" that is extended to all sinners, head for head? Or is this a subtle form of "Arminianism," suggesting the idea that it depends finally upon the sinner's believing and repenting whether he be saved? For fear of the error of Arminianism, then, the Calvinist is reluctant to offer Christ too freely through the gospel.⁴ The Calvinist preacher or Christian is cramped and constricted in his presentation of the gospel call. Rather than risk offering Christ too openly and energetically, with too much earnestness and entreaty, the Reformed believer is the one who would prefer the safety of preaching the gospel only to the already saved.

So too as we become too fixed upon the ways and means of getting the gospel across to sinners, we not only risk assuming prerogatives that are God's alone but we also reveal a spirit that is too generous and liberal toward all sinners. If God hates the reprobate and has purposed not to save them, and if (as some infer) this means that He does not even "desire" in any sense that they should turn from their wicked way, then we should act similarly. Rather than desiring the salvation of all sinners without exception, and earnestly inviting them in Christ's name to believe so as to be saved, we are obligated to present the gospel in a more indifferent manner, allowing God to make it a savor of life unto some, a savor of death unto others.

A cultural and ethnic covenantalism

In addition to these alleged confessional and theological obstacles to vigorous evangelistic activity among the Reformed churches, there are also factors that are more subtle in their consequence for evangelism. These factors are best described in terms of what I would term a "cultural and ethnic covenantalism."

Reformed believers are known, not only for their emphasis upon divine sovereignty in salvation, but also for their emphasis upon the covenant. The Triune God of the Scriptures administers His grace in Christ *covenantally*, that is, through the preaching of the gospel promise, accompanied by its sacramental signs, to *believers and their children*. Accordingly, Reformed churches oppose the kind of individualism that often marks evangelical churches. The goal of gospel preaching is not the salvation of an individual here, and another individual there. It is not enough to snatch a few "brands from the burning" by calling individuals to a "personal" faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, Christ gathers by His Word and Spirit a "community" of believers, united in the true faith, and joined in a common covenantal inheritance. The growth of the church is, therefore, an organic reality, gathering believers from one generation to another into a distinctive covenant community.

In the actual practice of this covenantal understanding of the gospel's communication, however, something happens that often inhibits the preaching of the gospel to the lost. What occurs is that the gospel promise is *restricted* to believers and their children, and it is not communicated as well to others. To use the language of the apostle Peter's sermon at Pentecost, the reach of the gospel is limited to those who are already embraced by the promise and it is forgotten that it is intended also "*for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself*" (Acts 2:39). Often, out of an understandable (but misguided in its application) conviction that the covenant people of the Lord must be radically separated from the world, Reformed churches develop an ethos in which sharp lines are delineated between those who are "inside" and those who are "outside" of the fellowship. And because the gospel is often communicated along generational lines, the idea begins to live that this is the common, if not exclusive, manner in which the church is gathered.

Furthermore, when this rather restricted view of the reach of the gospel's promise is intermixed with cultural and historical factors such as common ancestry, national background, ethnicity, differences of language and history — it often produces a doctrine of the church that has *naturalized* the gospel and lost a vivid sense of its *spiritual power* to gather more and more people into the fellowship of Christ.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me put this in rather candid terms. As a Reformed Christian who was nurtured within a largely *Dutch* Reformed church, I have often met believers who seem to believe that the church is a kind of an extended *natural* family. Their Reformed identity is frequently so linked to their cultural and ethnic identity that it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish these two. Attitudes and practices are adopted that, though not intentionally designed for this purpose, inevitably alienate those whose membership in the church is not by reason of family history or background. Language ("outsiders"!) is used to describe those who are gathered into the church by evangelism that betrays a seriously distorted conception of Christ's church. And when those who may be gathered into a Reformed congregation leave for another congregation, it is often explained with the lame excuse, "but they were of a different background and culture." Seldom is it imagined to have been the result of sinful indifference and inhospitable attitudes on the part of the "insiders."

The point here is not, of course, that any Christian should apologize for his or her cultural and historical identity. Within God's providence, differences of culture, history, and ethnicity, are not to be denied but celebrated. But what is often lamentable is the *introversion*, the being-turned-in-upon-itself character, of many Reformed churches, especially those of a particular historical and ethnic tradition. When this serves to hinder an eagerness to reach out, to embrace in the name of Christ, those lost sinners whom He is gathering to Himself by His Spirit and Word, there is a deformed and less-than-biblical form of Christian practice.

Conclusion

Now I do not mention these claims regarding Reformed churches and believers to indicate that I agree with them in every particular. I mention them because they are serious claims which require our attention. They also demand our careful consideration of the Reformed faith and its implications for evangelism. Does the Reformed faith, in its genuine and proper expression, truly hamper the work of evangelism? Or does it call for a pattern of conduct that, though unlike many improper evangelistic efforts, is serious and urgent in its communicating of the gospel to the lost? To these questions we will have to turn in future issues.

Cornel Venema

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¹ (Trans. David H. Freeman; Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1960), p. 62.

² (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1961), p. 10. Immediately after this statement, Packer goes on to argue that this allegation against the Reformed faith is "nonsense." Though Packer is correct from a confessional and theological point of view, it is the case, sad to say, that some Reformed Christians employ the kind of logic that plays God's sovereignty off against our responsibility. In my own pastoral experience, I can keenly remember church members who protested any serious attention to evangelism by noting, "but, pastor, the doors of our church are not locked. If God wants to bring 'them' in, He will do so!"

³ Readers familiar with the "love of God" controversy in the Christian Reformed Church in the 1960's will recognize in this the gist of professor Harold Dekker's argument. Dekker, who was at the time associate professor of missions at Calvin Theological Seminary, started the controversy by arguing that the doctrine of limited atonement impairs evangelistic activity. Cf. Harold Dekker, "God So Loved — ALL Men!" *Reformed Journal* 12/11 (Dec., 1962), 7: "The doctrine of limited atonement as commonly understood and observed in the Christian Reformed Church impairs the principle of the universal love of God and tends to inhibit missionary spirit and activity."

⁴ Lest it be too quickly argued that this could not occur, it should be noted that some "hypercalvinists" have taken this position. For example, among the "particular baptists" in England, there were many who rejected any presentation of the gospel that actually summoned sinners to faith and repentance. Termed a preaching of "duty faith," this sort of gospel presentation was carefully avoided. For two recent studies of this kind of hypercalvinism, see: T. E. Watson, "Andrew Fuller's Conflict With Hypercalvinism," in *Puritan Papers*, ed. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000), vol. 1, 271-82; and Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism, The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995).