

CHAPTER VI

How The Church Becomes Visible

Personal Evangelism

Whenever the mandate and work of evangelizing is discussed, one meets with a feeling of frustration. The Lord Christ charged His apostles (and in them the whole church) to preach the Gospel to all nations. Thus, when you remind someone of his Christian calling to evangelize, the idea of "all nations" falls like a heavy burden on his shoulders. If that is our calling, where do we begin?! And because this is such a tall order, the first reaction is to shrink back. It is an endless task

There is nothing against agreeing with this: it is "end-less"; before the glorious day of Christ's return, the church, the Christian, will never be able to say that he has completed his task.

But endless is not the same as having no beginning.

We should not worry too much about the outcome; we should begin. We can begin right here and now.

It is peculiar, but true, that loving the Chinese is easier than loving the next-door neighbours. It seems easier to drive to the other side of the city and start knocking on doors than to start a Christian witness across the fence or across the street.

Yet — it is there where all evangelism must start.

Before thinking of winning the whole world for Christ (which will never happen) we should rather think, each of us, of winning one single "soul" for Christ, be it a neighbour, a colleague, a business friend.

Dr. Stott, mentioned above, wrote two little booklets about *personal evangelism* (see Bibliography). Some of his advice is very much to the point. We do believe that God works, so to speak, in an "organic" way; not by fits and starts. Our Catechism knew that already in the sixteenth century: "that by our godly walk also our neighbour may be won for Christ" (Lord's Day 32).

We cannot hide the fact that our walk is not always "godly" and that already for that reason it is easier to talk to people at the other end of town. This again reminds us of a previous conclusion that the conversion of others presupposes our own conversion as church and Christians. If our ways are sloppy, our children the terror of the neighbourhood, our

business dealings shady, we would do better not to think of evangelizing others at all.

The church becomes visible in the life of every single member.

Suppose that we all, adult Christians, would start trying to make one single unbeliever the goal of our attention, love, prayers and witnessing! Suppose that the Lord would bless us in this respect by "giving us" that person as a brother or sister in the Lord. That would double the church within a life-time.

Personal evangelism is the basis of all other evangelistic efforts.

It has been said that the church, in order to grow in membership, should first decrease in number. This sounds strange but we know that there is a bitter truth in it. There are always hypocrites mixed with the believers; there are hangers-on, half-hearted church members, people who by their attitude make it almost impossible for their neighbours to be eager to join "their" church.

We do not need to become Donatists or Anabaptists, in order to work for a church that consists of only committed members. Discipline should therefore be very strict in a church that is evangelism-minded (Acts 5). A church filled with lukewarm members does not have any attraction at all.

Let us not be mistaken. People are not drawn to a church by window-dressing, by elaborate liturgy and so forth. If they are attracted, they are attracted by the living preaching of the Word and the living message of the lives of the believers.

Personal evangelism is therefore the starting-point.

Compelled by Christ, we all, personally, should make it our first concern to make the cause of someone in our "organic" neighbourhood (street, work, plant, office and so on) our cause. Befriend him, show interest in him or her; try to let him feel that you care. Make it part of your daily prayer to ask the Lord that He may pave the way so that, some day, you may find an open ear for a talk that goes beyond the weather and ice-hockey.

If your talk is borne by your prayers you will find the right tone and attitude, not as a person who knows everything better and sits in judgment over his fellow man, but in great humility and at the same time great joy and gratitude. Does not Paul call God's mercy an "unspeakable gift"?

Stott provides some valuable guidelines. We do not deal with them here in detail because we are convinced that there are 1001 ways and methods; everyone finds his own way. Everyone who is compelled by Christ that is.

There is great benefit waiting for you as a fruit of personal evangelism. It turns you around. It gives your life deeper meaning. It makes you realize, not only how rich you are, but also that, if God had not started His work of redemption in you, you would never have been redeemed. Your neighbour or friend becomes like a mirror in which you discover more

about yourself. It helps you also to get rid of much unfruitful busy-ness in the church. We are too much shut-in. One of the results is that the atmosphere easily becomes polluted, by narrow-minded criticism, by worrying about unimportant details, by a Pharisaistic attitude.

When you have made it your concern and purpose to draw one single person into the light of Jesus Christ, your own life is illumined. Your prayer-life will be intensified. You will feel greater need for Bible study. Even if your endeavours seem in vain for a long time, maybe even completely fruitless, it will not have been in vain. We all must learn "how to give away our faith." By giving away — such is the rule in the Kingdom of Heaven — we receive double. This is not our primary purpose, of course, but it is God's gift to those who are too happy with their faith to keep it for themselves.

Neighbourhood Bible Groups

We have said before that the sermon is delivered within the walls of the church and has to be brought outside those walls by those who have heard it.

We remember Dr. Greijdanus' translation of two New Testamentic expressions: "naar voren houden," "naar buiten boodschappen."

We also have become convinced that the church, being the congregation, must "de-centralize" in the days of the week.

One important way of reaching this purpose is starting Bible Study Groups in our neighbourhood.

The Bibliography will inform the reader that this method of Bible-study, combined with congregational evangelistic effort, is nowadays nearly universally practiced. Already for that reason we want to give some attention to this phenomenon. We think we should start with pointing out and warning against certain dangers.

A. DANGERS in Neighbourhood Groups

1. Such groups may easily develop into an anti-institutional attitude and activity. We have heard too much already in recent years of the prophecy that the "institutional" or "official" or "established" church has had its time. Books have been written in which, as the great ideal, pictures have been drawn of the church-of-the-future without any organization, order, buildings, and so on. People seem to have an aversion to all that.

We will not try to dig for the deeper causes of this aversion. One thing, however, stands out. Big city-churches have been in danger of becoming impersonal. The bigger the churches, the more lonesome people seem to feel. If it then must be added that the sermons are not relevant and do not relate to the actual life which people live, it becomes

understandable that people are less than enthusiastic about such a centralized super-structure.

The danger lies at hand that such people see the neighbourhood group as an escape. This is especially evident among the many Roman Catholic members in the United States who try to find in a livingroom what they no longer find in the cathedral.

Depreciating and deprecating the God-given organization of the local church does not solve any problem. Especially Reformed people, who have been brought up with due respect for the special offices and for the Sunday worship service as the workshop of the Holy Spirit, may have — so we hope — a built-in resistance against this dangerous attitude. They should, however, not be too sure about themselves. Neighbourhood Bible Study Groups should not weaken the “official” local church, but, instead, they should strengthen it in a unique way.

2. Another danger, related to the first-mentioned one is that of *false ecumenism*. Starting with depreciating one’s own church, one proceeds with depreciating the differences between churches, taking them lightly, even erasing them altogether. Ministers, priests, and other ecclesiastical executives may be interested in preserving their holy houses, we the people know better. We meet with other people, people from different churches, in our neighbourhood and suddenly we discover that we have been deceived and led by the nose by our own leaders. There are really no differences between us. Other people also believe in God (as also the devil does, James would say). They are religious. What more is needed? All man-made partitions disappear in our lovely little group and there we really feel at home. As far as we are concerned, all churches might become one the day after tomorrow.

However much we thirst for the true unity of all true believers, we must call this tendency a great danger. We would not only disregard centuries of church history and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the birth of the Reformed Creeds, we would also sacrifice the truth to the unity-as-we-want-it.

3. A third danger is, if I am not mistaken, that such neighbourhood groups degenerate into “*sensitivity groups*.”

We know that this approach is “in” nowadays; that even mental institutions that bear a Christian name, apply this method. *Dr. Adams*, in his book *Competent to Counsel*, urgently warns against this method, which he considers to be fundamentally humanistic. The leading principle, as the publications of those who initiated this method prove, is that man has sufficient inner resources to help himself out of the morass and also to help others. In group-therapy (*Mowrer*) the participants are to exchange their feelings and experiences with each other in order to overcome their

problems. There is no place for Jesus Christ and for His Gospel in such a sensitivity group. Man does not need redemption, repentance, and forgiveness, but only a better understanding of himself.

Some Christians seem to have been awed by this method, not realizing that they thus have grieved the Holy Spirit.

When we, in following paragraphs, recommend Bible Groups, we want to make it clear from the start that we completely mistrust, and are even disgusted at the idea of holding hands, floating on the still waters of suspicious emotions, and the like. We do not "believe in pious people."

4. A (fourth) danger, of a different type, is that such clubs may easily derail into *debating clubs*. They may become the arena in which we are the knights who run down others who do not completely agree with our pet ideas. Paul wrote once (II Timothy 2:14), "Charge them before the Lord, to avoid disputing about words, which does no good but only ruins the hearers." How many hearers have already been ruined in this way! Hot heads, cold hearts.

5. Finally (there may be more) we mention the danger that such groups become *hotbeds for criticism*. Do we have to elaborate? Do we not know, by experience, how often on Sunday evenings (*Sunday* evenings!) the minister, the consistory, other church members whom we do not call our friends, have been subjected to our "treatment"? There seems to be an innate inclination in us, sinners, to think bad instead of good of those who should be so close to our hearts. This being the case, we should all be aware of the danger to be negative instead of positive in our contacts and talks with others. The Bible, Old as well as New Testament, has to say so much about this (think only of I Corinthians 13) that I deem it superfluous to quote texts.

We all know it. We do not always act accordingly. We should act as those two newcomers in a local church did. They were invited, very kindly, to a Sunday evening get-together. Most of the evening was spent in gossip and backbiting. On leaving, they were invited to "come again." Their answer was, "No, we will not come again because this evening has grieved the Holy Spirit."

Such are the dangers where sinners, though Christians and called new creatures in Jesus Christ, come together in small groups. Wonderful opportunities for the devil.

But also wonderful opportunities for the Holy Spirit.

B. Biblical Foundation

I believe that neighbourhood Bible Study Groups have promises. The New Testament provides a foundation for them.

I do not only think of the promise of our Lord, that, where two or three

are together in His Name, He is in their midst. This is, indeed, a wonderful promise. Its significance is not to be underestimated. Being together in Christ's Name is surely true for those who are together around an open Bible. We may state that the promise of Jesus Christ, to be in their midst, is not only given to the congregation as a whole when gathered on the day of the Lord, under the pulpit, and united in prayer and glorification, but it is as certainly given to smaller groups of Christians who gather for the same purpose.¹

In addition, we read in the New Testament sometimes about "the church at your house" (see Romans 16:1, 5, etc.). When we read this we keep in mind that in the earliest Church larger buildings were, as a rule, not available for the Christian congregation. The natural consequence was that believers came together at private homes in various quarters of the city. We are, however, convinced that this was not only "natural" but also "spiritual." Before our eyes we see these people gathering in rooms, knowing each other, being intimately related to each other, speaking together of the mighty acts of God, discussing the letter that had been received from Paul, and asking each other what the apostolic teaching meant for them.

These "house congregations" vividly recalled the situation in Jerusalem shortly after Pentecost. In those days the apostles went "from house to house." One gets the impression that being together, not only on the first day of the week but also on other days, was a wonderful and heart-strengthening experience. Joy seems to have been the mark of it.

To build a system of neighbourhood Bible Study Groups on one or two texts seems to be a risky business. I hear counter-remarks coming my way already.

My strongest foundation is not one or two texts (although they count heavily) but the underlying principle of being the church, members of one body, the one helping the other (I Corinthians 12). Our local church life should be more meaningful than, on the parking lot after the service, saying to the other, "See you next week."

I have already stressed the necessity of getting rid of the idea that the church building is the church. The church is the body of believers and that body is there, not only on Sunday, but every day. Being church member is an everyday business. After six days "in the world," on Sunday morning and afternoon, "the Church goes in" as the Scots say. At the end of the day "de Kerk gaat uit," gets out and goes out, back to everyday life, but still being the church and not just loose grains of sand.

¹ Matthew 18:20. We should not overlook that this "being together" here first refers to mutual supervision. Verse 19, however, gives the saying also a wider meaning.

At this point the reader would like to throw in a remark. Do we not have our societies, for young and old, for men and women, even in Dutch and in English? Is that not enough? Would you like to encourage more "uithuizigheid," maybe? Isn't there a great danger in having too many meetings? The families should not be torn apart but should rather be encouraged to be together as much as possible.

We agree.

We also, at the risk of much and severe criticism, question the relative value of "societies." Our argument is not, in the first place, that the Bible does not know about them. We are not "biblicistic." But we do speak in this booklet about evangelism. Whether you like this word or not, we mean by it that our going to church, our Bible study and so on should bear fruits. We wonder whether history has proven that "societies" are the best possible, maybe the only, way of preparing for fruit-bearing.

In the first place, "societies" are for "liefhebbers," for "verenigingsmensen." We know that quite a number of believers are not much in favour of this system. We should not condemn them right away. They may have heard how often whole evenings have been spent in hairsplitting discussions; how the meeting became an arena with most of those present being onlookers.

There is more however. Honest self-examination demands from us that we recognize the tendency that sometimes societies degenerate into "clubs." The benefit for the whole congregation, the upbuilding of the whole body, is not always and not easily seen.

There is still more. In a society, people from all over town meet. The same people live in a certain neighbourhood where some five or eight or more families of the church live. They may hardly have any contact with those families, though they, as faithful society members, are convinced that they are good church members. But is this true in the sight of the Lord? Is there not the danger in our present society, that the "strong" (as Paul calls them in Romans) come together without much regard for the "weak"? And should it not be(come) our first concern that we pull the "weak" along?

A neighbourly contact with fellow members is an excellent means to promote such "body-building"(!). In the next section some more will be said about this aspect.

For now we conclude with the reminder that we are talking about "congregational evangelism." What can we expect from that if, in the days of the week, members of the Church that live in the same neighbourhood hardly seem to know each other, even have next-to-no contact with each other; even have some petty bickerings and conflicts between them?

The church has to become "visible" in the neighbourhood. There, of

all places, outsiders should be able to see something of what it means to be Christians, and members of each other.

We repeat: if others are to be converted, the Church needs some conversion in this respect too.

C. How to Organize.

In the Bibliography the interested reader will discover some titles that may prove helpful. Mentioning them does not mean agreeing with them in every respect. Nevertheless I am thankful that I can refer to some of these publications. This relieves me of the duty to go into greater and even technical details on how to start and conduct a neighbourhood Bible group.

In my opinion the strongest recommendation lies in the fact that these groups have proven — I would say, all over the world — to be an excellent opportunity for witnessing, for drawing others into the circle of light.

Before saying more about this, I should make some remarks of my own, to add to what the reader may find in other books.

The first remark must be that, in my opinion, our speaking about the “body of Christ” rings false if it is not supported by the reality of being members of each other in the neighbourhood where God’s providential hand has made a dwelling place for us. “I know where you live.”

The Early Christian Church became like a magnet because outsiders could not refrain from saying, “Look how they love each other!”

The same must be stated here as when we were talking about personal evangelism. The first blessing comes down upon your own head.

When one serves and lives in a larger church, the experience is that, the larger the congregation, the less the communion. There are many more lonesome people in a large than in a small local church. This is one reason why, as a rule, the size of a local church should not be much bigger than 300 members at the most. This “poverty” can, however, be met by establishing more contact among members in the same neighbourhood.

Although this booklet deals with evangelism, our whole reasoning leads us to state that the first blessing is for the membership itself. Only then we can become a blessing for others.

A “first” for a neighbourhood group is: if you feel like starting one, you should NOT SELECT the people whom you like! You should invite the brothers and sisters whom Christ loves (He gave His blood for them!) in order that you may learn to like and to love them. The first concern is, again, to win your neighbour-in-the-church for Christ. That goes even for your family. Why then not also for your “spiritual” family?

Once regular contact is established, the main purpose should be to

study together the Word of God. There are, however, important "side-effects." As Reformed people we stress the principle of the calling of every Christian. Knowing each other somewhat better, in regular neighbouring contact, provides an excellent means for helping each other in time of need. Before deacons are called in or the V.O.N. nurse, we should ask how we can help if a mother is ill, or a brother is in financial straits.

If we do not learn to care for each other in this way, we will not learn to care for "outsiders."

We do, however, care for the latter too.

Once we have established such a group, we will find out that it is helpful in connection with contacts that we have made by "personal evangelism" as discussed in the first part of this chapter.

Many of us have had the experience that it is not so easy to get such a "contact" along to church on Sunday. It is a big building with many strange people; the liturgy is maybe also strange.

Do not misunderstand me. We do not by any means underestimate the value of bringing others along to church on Sunday. The ultimate purpose of evangelism is that the other become a fellow member of the Church of Jesus Christ.

We are now, however, talking about the beginning of this road.

Experience has proven (read some of the books) that such a neighbourhood Bible Group might prove to be an "easy" and fitting introduction to the life of the Church.

It will be quite a discovery for many a Canadian fellow citizen to find out that these church people do not leave the study of the Bible to the minister and that they do not only "talk religion" in church, but that it is living reality for them, even(!) on a week-day.

In such a group the church becomes indeed visible in its inner life and strength and beauty. There is no better means to make others jealous than to show them something of the Christian way and life, not only personally but also together: "Look how they love each other." Outsiders will come to the conclusion that "those Christians have something we do not have."

Oh yes, this method is far from easy. We repeat that it is much easier to organize a big meeting in front of City Hall with loudspeakers and a gifted "evangelist" than such neighbourhood witnessing. The neighbours look through the window, you know. They see how we bring up our children; how we behave and talk. All too often the behaviour of Christians has been the biggest obstacle for others to come to Christ Jesus.

But who said that evangelism is easy?

With regard to the organization of a neighbourhood Bible Study Group, any member can take the initiative. Never wait for someone else.

The group should not be too large, not only because livingrooms and recreation rooms have their limitations but also because the character of the group would be damaged by too large a number. One of the purposes

of such a group is that all talents that the Holy Spirit has endowed His Church with, come to the fore. The larger the company, the less people open their mouths. As soon as there are more than seven families in a group it should be split up.

Every group must be left completely free as to how often they want to meet. Experience shows, however, that every other week provides a good program.

I have been asked whether only "couples" should be invited. My answer has always been that the ideal solution is to take your "older" children along. There is no better way to get the younger members involved. Their presence will also greatly influence, I do not hesitate to say: improve, the discussions. There is no generation gap in the Covenant community.

The Bible must be in the centre. I do not in any way deny that a neighbourhood group offers an excellent opportunity to unite in prayer. The needs of the whole church as well as of the special neighbourhood, the participating families as well as outsiders, should be brought before the mercy seat of our God. But listening together to the Word of God is the most important thing.

Here the local pastor as well as the elders enter the picture.

The ward elders should, in my opinion, encourage the organization of these groups. If initiative is lacking, they should take the initiative. We conceive of the responsibility of a ward elder far beyond the regular, yearly family visitation. These ward elders should take the Old Testament highpriest as their example. He bore the tribes of Israel on his heart. So should they bear the families of their ward upon their hearts. They might think it feasible to convene a meeting of all families in their section to discuss what can be done to strengthen the fellowship of the saints and to promote the Christian witness in that neighbourhood. I envisage the elders as strong promoters of "body-building." Such is their responsibility in taking heed of the flock. Blessed the congregation that has such elders!

The minister should be ready and willing to provide help and guidance. The simplest thing is to prepare suitable outlines on the various chapters of a Bible book, every other week. Such an outline should only provide pointers to a helpful discussion of the Word of God itself.

I have been asked whether it would not be better to discuss the Creeds.

Strange though it may sound, my answer was negative. In a truly Reformed local church the Creeds have been taught thoroughly to the young members. These Creeds are like a map, helping us to find our way in the Bible. We, adult members, should, finally, be able to find that way and go to the Bible itself. If we never go from the Creeds to the Bible, we would unwittingly act against the Creeds. Let the riches of the Word of God offer themselves to us.

D. Method

With the above remarks we have already touched upon the method of such groups. "Examine the record!" The Bibliography shows that many helps are available. Some may prefer to produce such help themselves. If only they are real helps.

Stress should be laid upon a good preparation for the bi-weekly meeting. The chapter should be read beforehand by every family. It should be discussed by everyone before coming together. What a wonderful way to improve our family worship!

We have the promise of the Holy Spirit that, if we depend upon Him prayerfully, He will guide us. Therefore, humble and intensive prayer is a living part of our group-meeting. Let us, however, always keep in mind that it is more important that the Lord speaks to us than that we speak to Him.

The chapter under discussion should be read aloud in paragraphs. Different translations must be kept handy to help us in understanding the text better.

Three things must always be kept in mind.

First, let us get the facts straight. By this we mean: a clear understanding of what the text says.

Then, we should ask together what this means. One will be surprised how a simple remark of one of us can help us to see the light.

Finally, we must ask ourselves and each other what this Word of God means for us, and how He expects us to apply it in our lives.

Such a lively confrontation with the Word of God holds an abundance of promises. We should not hesitate to ask each other whether we indeed live according to this Word of God as we understand it now. This will strengthen our fellowship and produce a deeper faith-life.

E. Winning Others

From the above remarks the reader must have concluded that I do *not* favour what some books in the list recommend: that we establish such groups with every neighbour in the street, i.e., with people from various churches.

Remember our warnings against the dangers of such groups.

This does not mean, however, that we never invite outsiders.

Our whole discussion of neighbourhood Bible groups was done within the frame of evangelism. Not only what we do for each other is the topic, but also what we can do for others. If, by personal evangelism, we have established a closer relationship with someone, let us by all means take this person along to the group. There he will be introduced to the life of the Church. Our group should not undermine the Church by false

ecumenism but, on the contrary, build the Church by bringing those who are seriously interested, into the Church as it becomes visible in the neighbourhood.

This means of neighbourhood groups might well prove to be and become our strongest weapon to witness to those whom the Lord causes us to meet in His providence, and who are convinced by the Holy Spirit of their sinfulness and their need for redemption.