

## CHAPTER IV

# “Instructors” and “Frontsoldiers”

### *The Reformed Concept of the Offices in the Church*

The previous chapter concluded with stating that, after the Reformation of 1943-1944, a similar situation had arisen as in the nineteenth century.

Only a “remnant” (about 10%) remained truly Reformed and had to “start from scratch” in several respects. The restoration of the training for the ministry, building of churches and schools, and most of all the return to a truly Reformed church life, demanded all the energy and attention.

A renewed stress was laid on the Reformed principle of the independence of the local church which, at the same time, is totally dependent on her Head Christ Who governs her directly, without the intermediary of a hierarchy. People had become wary of any super-local influence because they still bore the scars.

At the same time the call was heard that the office of all believers should again become central. Church members in various places had had to take the initiative without and over against their consistories. They had learned to make up their mind, to exert their personal responsibility. It stands to reason that these factors would also play their role in the call and calling for evangelism. The renewed realization of the biblically defined tasks of the local office-bearers as well as the stress on, “you are the people of God, to proclaim His virtues” had to have bearing upon the approach to evangelism.

At that time I served as minister in the Liberated Church at Enschede, The Netherlands. This large congregation, with five ministers, had known an extended program of evangelism. Candidates in theology had been appointed to dedicate themselves completely to the work of evangelism. A central committee, appointed by the consistory, coordinated several activities, such as house-calls, distribution of tracts, street preaching, weekly meetings in outlying parts of the city, etc.

Because of the fact, mentioned above, that all energy was concentrated on guiding the church safely through the turmoil of struggle, this central committee felt somewhat neglected. The brethren were at a

loss as to how to continue the work. Did the events in the church have consequences for it?

The old conflict rose again to the surface. It was proclaimed that the synod 1923 had been all wrong. Some saw in 1923 already a beginning of what continued in 1926 (a general synod deposing a minister), in 1936 (a general synod interfering in prevalent discussions among the membership), and finally in the disastrous actions of the synods of 1939 and following years which resulted in a split. According to them 1923 was wrong. Consistories, let alone synods, have no task whatsoever with regard to evangelism. That should be left, completely, to the membership and then not so much in the form of all kinds of organizations but by a living faith and a godly walk.

In this situation the Central Committee approached the consistory with the request to give guidance and to deliniate anew the tasks of the central and sub-committees. In fact, a new mandate was elicited.

The consistory appointed a study committee which, in due time, presented some guidelines. After adoption of these guidelines they were published in a booklet, with further commentary, and sent to all members. The booklet, *Instructeurs en Frontsoldaten* was published by J. Boersma, Enschede. The present writer who wrote that booklet as member of the Study Committee and at the same time chairman of the Central Committee, still remembers vividly how all discussions were centred around the one issue of the Reformed concept of the (special) offices in the church. At that time, as well as during the 1972 summer course for the congregation in Burlington, the remark was heard (as it may also arise in the hearts of some readers). "Why in the world do we all the time speak about *how* we shall do it, and *who* shall do it?! Let's stop talking and let's start doing something! It is not important who is going to do it and how it is done. The only important question is that souls be saved and brought to Jesus Christ."

We must state that we do not agree with this position.

During the discussions in Enschede we were faced with the fact that one and the same church which had deposed hundreds of office-bearers and sent away close to one hundred thousand of its members, at the same time set up a grandiose and large-scale program of winning people . . . . We felt that this was a betrayal of the struggle of previous generations who wanted to be truly Reformed in evangelism and put all stress on gathering the church (instead of scattering the flock).

It was felt that, whereas in the whole life of the church, in electing office-bearers, administering the sacraments, and so on, the primary question always is: how is this to be done *according to the Scriptures?* the same must be maintained with regard to evangelism. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord's Day 21, mentions them in one breath. Jesus Christ *gathers*, and *preserves* His church. The preservation of the church is

bound, strictly, to the norms of Scripture. Why not, then, also the gathering of the same?

This conviction gave birth to the title of the booklet which must be considered and evaluated as an attempt to define in two words the relationship between the special offices in the church on the one hand, and on the other the Christian calling of all believers.

### *“Instructors and Frontsoldiers”*

One look at the history of the church tells us that, as soon as the so-called “special” offices (elder, preacher, deacon or whatever other names they may have borne at certain times) came too much to the fore and their presence (often a hierarchical presence) was felt everywhere, the general office of all believers weakened, suffered, and fell asleep.

Every true “reformation” of the church always included the attempt to restore that “general office” to its biblical height. “The church” is not the priest or the Pope or the assembly or synod, but YOU are the people of God! All God’s people are prophets! You are a royal priesthood.

For Reformed evangelism it is absolutely necessary to have a correct and clear understanding of the special character of both “special offices” and “the general office.”

We have made the choice of calling the office-bearers in the church *instructors*. It would be easy to provide lots of givens from the Creeds, the Church Order, the Forms for Ordination as well as from the Scriptures. Old and New Testaments, to defend that choice. We have, however, to confine ourselves to a few summary remarks.

What is a minister’s calling, according to the letter of call that was sent to him, and the Form that was read at his ordination?

We have already remarked in the previous chapter that, if indeed the minister has the task to preach outside the church as much as inside, a paragraph — and a very important and detailed one — should be added to the Form. As things stand now — and we prefer to stick to that — the Form clearly expresses itself in defining the minister’s task as one to be fulfilled within the already-gathered flock. He has to preach and teach unceasingly. His preaching, if biblical, will say more than only, “Believe in Jesus Christ.” His sermons will spell out what Christian life is all about. His teaching, in his catechism classes, is training the young members, not only for doing profession of faith but for commitment to the Lord. His pastoral counselling is done with the purpose that those who are overcome by troubles and problems, may function again in the church and kingdom of Jesus Christ. His share in discipline is to warn and call back those who have deserted from that kingdom-service and the life of the Covenant.

Equally the elders have their task limited to the congregation. They are not supposed to be the errand boys for the members and do all that

has to be done. They supervise the congregation. They visit the families and single persons in order to find out whether the seed, sown every Sunday, is bearing the desired fruits. They have to encourage their fellow-believers to show their gratitude by being joyful and thankful Christians, not only at home but also on the job and in their contacts with other people. These elders have to study the Scriptures unceasingly so that they may be able to lead, advise, and train the members for the work of ministry.

This last word, "ministry," brings us to the heart of the matter.

### *The case of the misplaced comma*

"A dead fly makes the perfumer's ointment give off an evil odour" (Ecclesiastes 10:1). A single comma can spoil one of the most instructive and beautiful passages of Scripture, a passage that should be the very basis on which to build Reformed evangelism.

Such a misplaced and super-abundant comma is found in Ephesians 4, verse 12. We read there, in the RSV,

"Christ's gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,  
for the equipment of the saints, (COMMA!)  
for the work of ministry, (COMMA!)  
for building up the body of Christ."

The comma after "the saints" shouldn't be there! You see how putting one comma too much after that word, changes the whole sentence, the whole picture even of the Church of Jesus Christ. *With* that misplaced comma you see before your eyes ministers and elders and deacons running around, doing all the work. Theirs (according to that evil comma) is a *threefold* office.

They must equip the saints (but do not ask me what for . . .). Then they must do (all) the work of ministry. And finally they must build up the body of Christ.

You haven't heard a word about what that body, the whole congregation, has to do. No, everything has to be done by the "special" office. Paul mentions here the "preacher and teacher." That would then mean that ministers have to do all the running (which easily becomes a running around in circles). But Paul would not object against adding the elders, even the deacons.

**BUT THAT COMMA SHOULD NOT BE THERE!**

The King James made the same mistake.

The new English Bible did a better job: "to equip God's people for work in His service." Other translations, correctly omitting that evil comma, run like this:

"with a view to the fitting of the saints for the work of ministering";

“to fit His people for the work of ministry”;

“in order to equip (or, ‘to fully equip’) His people for the work of serving”;

“His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service.”

We hope that we have made our point and made it clearly.

*With* the comma behind “the saints” the office-bearers have to do everything. They must not only equip the saints (for what?) but they must build up the body of Christ by winning outsiders and so on.

*Without* that comma the picture changes radically. The (only) task of the office-bearers in their quality as such, is to “equip” or train the saints, the membership. These saints then, in their turn, have to do the work of ministry. *And* in that way the whole body of Christ grows to mature manhood.

Some remarks must be added here right away.

In the first place, the Greek word for “ministry” is *diakonia* (our word “deacons” is derived from it). In the New Testament this word, in various forms, describes all the life of and in the Christian church. It certainly does not only speak about evangelism, though this is certainly included. *Diakonia* is for the minister as well as for the housewife the ideal description of the God-given task. Christian life is service; service of God and of fellow-man.

Or to put it this way. The special office-bearers are the instructors. They stay behind the front line; they train the new recruits. They do not do battle themselves but teach others how to do it. Those “others” are the ones that go to the front line. (One must not forget that an elder or minister is also and always a member and has, next to his special office, also the “general office.”) The believers, the whole people of God, the holy nation, go to the front line, right when they leave church, when they “get out.” They “get out” as disciples, as witnesses, as kingdom-servants. *In* the church they have to be trained and “equipped” with the necessary weapons to do battle.

Moreover, the special offices have to supervise the frontsoldiers, whether they give a good fight. It is not enough to ask, during family visitation, are you attending church regularly? Do you pray aloud at table? and so forth. Elders must also inquire what the members do with regard to other kingdom-work; whether they are faithful in their witnessing and what part they take in various activities.

Finally, the elders (including the three offices) must be “examples of the flock.” We said that they are also and always members, and thus have to do battle. Now we add two things. First, that an elder, if working in evangelism (in whatever form) does so *not* because he is an elder but because he is a Christian. His task-as-elder is confined to the church. When he comes “outside,” he is just a member of Christ.

Second, his extra responsibility is that (because he is an example to the flock) as a Christian he sets a good example for others with regard to witnessing for Christ as well as in all other respects. A person who does not contribute to the local Reformed School cannot be an elder. Nor when he has joined a union, and so on. A minister must be an example to the flock by the way he brings up his children. However, he does not bring up his children in his quality as minister (please not! — then you get the “P.K.’s,” (the preachers’ kids that have run into trouble) but simply as a father, a Christian father.

For some readers this may sound like hair-splitting — a miserable and unfruitful business. We are convinced that this distinction is fundamental to the New Testament teaching regarding the life of the church, and the only way to truly Reformed, congregational evangelism.

### *Another set of “PRINCIPLES”*

After this excursion we want to return, once more, to the discussions in Enschede and their results. From the whole set of consistorial decisions I quote here the following guidelines, in my own words.

1. It is the consistory’s responsibility to create more “preaching-places” in the city. Decentralization is the key-word. We should not start special meetings for “outsiders” (“Evangelisatiebijeekomsten”) but reach out into the community. The church in the city forfeits its chances to reach others if she sticks to one or two big, central buildings. In this way — as history shows — many church members got lost. For the double purpose of preserving and increasing the church, the number of pulpits should be expanded. This would also prevent the creation of a special kind of “evangelism-Christians” who would feel at home in their cozy meeting hall but strangers in the “official church.”

In my opinion the Burlington situation, where two local churches use one and the same building, is unhealthy. But it is only temporary! Instead of building large churches we should prefer to have an “annex” in some outlying section of the city or town.

The church-meeting on Sunday is sometimes called “the workshop of the Holy Spirit,” and rightly so. We confess that in our Creeds. But if that is the case, the special offices should strive to increase the number of such workshops, thus enabling the “general office” to bring others to the preaching of the Word of God.

2. It is the task of the consistory as the gathering of the local office-bearers, to instruct the membership, by all means available and according to the Scriptures, in the following respects.

- a. it is the calling of all believers to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and to call others to His Church.
- b. the elders have to admonish the members to be faithful in this

respect. This should have priority in family-visitations. Members who never open their mouth, should be admonished. Total absence of this primary Christian calling can, in the end, lead to discipline.

- c. the special office-bearers must be ready and available to offer all help and any advice to the membership. This is especially important when members are confronted with sects, and need further information about sectarian misuse of the Bible.
- d. the elders must always be ready to “receive” into the church those who have shown initial response to the Gospel. This “receiving” includes not only a kind gesture but the readiness to instruct these persons so that they may grow up in the faith and be led to its public profession.

3. Ward-elders should be conscious of their special responsibility to the families in their own ward. They should sit down together and discuss what can be done in that specific part of town. They can then encourage “their” families to give due attention to the opportunities that are available.

4. Special attention was given to the various existing organizations for evangelism. Are they necessary? And if they are, who has to start them and bear responsibility?

The consistory, whose views I am quoting, had some firm opinions regarding these matters.

First of all, the brethren did not believe in a beautiful, smooth organization with committees and sub-committees and all the works — and then trying to blow some life into it. An intricate set-up, appointed and initiated by the consistory, just would not work, unless the whole congregation is alive and backs it up with love and faith and prayer. Or, in other words, such an organization, if it ever emerges, has indeed to “emerge” from the bottom and not from above; from the grassroots of a living church and not from the top floor of an over-active executive.

In the second place they wondered — and their doubts grew stronger the longer they thought about it — where a consistory has the authority from to say to the one, “Go and become a Sunday School teacher” and to the other, “Go and preach Saturday evening on the street-corner.” A consistory does *not* have such a right (or duty!). A consistory has to make decisions, indeed; it has to take care of all that concerns the life of the local church. The brethren have to supervise the believers whether they are faithful in their commitment to Jesus Christ.

But — appointing them to certain specific activities is just one step too far. The initiative to any concerted activity, in whatever field, has to come from the believers, who hear themselves thus addressed by God: “You are God’s people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood.”

I have heard strong criticism against this “principle.” It was said that in this way all that has been done till now in evangelism, will crumble and

collapse. People want to be appointed. They have to be "called" before they get into action.

If that is indeed true, if there is such a low level of love and gratitude and commitment and zeal, then one wonders what Pentecost still means among us! Do God's children, grown to maturity, indeed need a letter from the clerk of the consistory before they rise up and act? Then there is something awfully wrong with the church. But we do not believe that it is that bad. If the special offices concentrate on their proper and unique task of "equipping the saints," and if they are going to do that more than they have ever done it, the fruits will be seen.

"No appointment" certainly does not mean "no encouragement," "no 'leadership' (to use that dangerous word)." Such encouragement is part of the preaching and teaching mentioned in Ephesians 4 and the primary purpose of "equipping."

5. Finally, the remarks sub 4. do *not* mean that there be no *supervision*. Suppose some young people want to start an "open house" or whatever they call it, with the purpose of drawing other young people and showing them what Christian life is all about. A consistory would be very unwise not to pay close attention and to exercise constant supervision in order that such activity maintain a biblical style and not degenerate into a "Christian" imitation of rock 'n roll or a hippie-style sit-in. Whatever we are doing, bringing up children, doing business, and so on, we know that Christ's elders have the calling to warn us if we head in the wrong direction.

The above directives are in no way "new." One may even say that they bring us back to the Early Church and the sixteenth century. We know nothing of special organizations (although we do not reject them all, as following chapters will show) but we know of living Christians. In the sixteenth century the reformers indeed produced a lot of literature, but "the common people" read them and distributed them and discussed them, without any special appointment.

This is the way of the church. This is the direction we have to take. Several other aspects and issues will yet be discussed. Some very important questions are still waiting for answers. How can and must the "general office" be motivated and activated? Which methods have proven to be most fruitful for the cause of the Lord? What more can "instructors" do than what they are doing now? How can the teaching ministry be improved and complemented? What are the things which can be done without any organization, and where do they become necessary and what kind of organizations do we recommend? What does the distinction between "unintentional" and "intentional" evangelism mean, and what is the borderline between the two? What opportunities unknown to previous generations does our time offer us?

But, after twenty-five years, I am even more convinced of the truth



and value of the directives mentioned before. There is no better way than the way of Ephesians 4: the saints do the work of ministry, being equipped by the gifts of Christ in the special offices, and thus the body of Christ is built to mature manhood.

When I have, repeatedly, referred to that “misplaced comma,” that does not mean that our whole cause hangs on a comma-that-should-not-be-there. The New Testament is full with this truth. And not only the New Testament. When Peter addressed the congregation as royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s own people, he did nothing but quote Moses!