

CHAPTER I

Obstacles

At the start of this chapter we cannot come to a decision as to whether there should be a question-mark or an exclamation-mark behind the word "obstacles." We will leave the choice to the reader, after having read the whole chapter. It may even be that we have to keep both, the question and the exclamation.

Not so seldom the statement or accusation can be heard among us that we are to blame, that it is our own fault if others, "outsiders," do not join "our church." One hears and reads about evangelistic movements and revivals with tremendous successes — some "evangelistic" churches or groups have doubled in size in a couple of years — but we hardly ever see an adult baptized, nor are many persons motivated to join us.

The answer is then that we ourselves are to blame because we have built several *obstacles* that make it almost impossible for others to join our church wholeheartedly. They may come once or twice, they seem attracted by the preaching and by the strictness of our "rules," but after some time they seem to see so many things that do not attract them, but make them feel as strangers, that the end result is negative.

We must bring this accusation into the open and seriously consider all the obstacles or so-called obstacles which are mentioned. We will have to do that with the willingness to examine ourselves whether it is indeed true that we build and keep up obstacles which are insurmountable for others.

1. We are a "strange body."

The first accusation (or statement or whatever you call it) is that we are and behave like strangers. No, not in the sense in which, for example, Peter speaks about the strangers in the dispersion. The critics do not mean that we should feel completely at home in the sinful world and forget that our citizenship is in heaven. But their objection is that we have added a second strange-ness, however understandable this be in the first analysis.

We came from another country. We were, and still are in many respects, immigrants. And, having come from another country and continent, we did not join any of the existing churches, thus integrating into our new home country as far as "religion" is concerned.

No, we started our own public worship meetings and afterwards built our own church buildings. We spoke, and still do speak, a strange

language. Our manners are different and in some respects offensive. We have certain customs and traditions which seem very strange to born Canadians. We even compiled our own Psalm Book with tunes that are utterly foreign to those who are accustomed to the Moody & Sankey melodies.

In addition, we do not act kind and inviting. We are "stiff" in our attitude and manners. A stranger may attend our service but is hardly ever greeted kindly and accosted after the service. People look at him and talk about him, but he gets the feeling that he is not too welcome. After two or three weeks he stops coming because no one said to him, "We are glad to have you in our midst, and we would like to share our treasures with you."

Also our ministers (N.B.: we are still summing up the several aspects of this first criticism!) are to blame. Their sermons are too "heavy." They use big words and expressions which are abacadabra for newcomers. The message is not (always) simple and straightforward. Even, there is more "law" than "gospel" in it.

Finally, as to this first "obstacle," we have — at least, in the first years — seen and experienced our Sundays as an escape from the surrounding everyday world, as a safe and cozy island in the turbulent waters. By doing this we, by the same token, turned our backs upon the surroundings, our neighbours, our community.

What is to be the answer to this statement or accusation?

Several remarks can and must be made.

First, there is no sense in denying that during the first years and the first generation of the immigrants the language was a main barrier. All energy was needed for and concentrated on getting established, on building up a career, a farm, a business. All attention was given to the first need, gathering the dispersed believers into local congregations and thus building up our church life. Endeavours were made to live according to the Church Order; the necessity of training for the ministry had the attention from the start; a beginning was made with compiling a Reformed Psalter; Saturday Schools were started to provide the beginnings of Christian Education.

One cannot — at any rate, should not — blame newly arrived immigrants that not much interest was shown as yet in the surroundings; hardly anyone knew what really was going on in this (for us) new country. We could say yes and no, but who knew the English words for the terms of our Confession, like Covenant, regeneration, etc.? Who was able to keep up an intelligent discussion about the main doctrines of our undoubted Christian Faith?

This, again, is not said in order to play down the influence and witness of a God-fearing life. Reformed people were known and sought for being good workers, for being thrifty and having a strong family life. This did not remain hidden.

Yet, it cannot be denied that not only we ourselves felt like a strange body but that we were also looked upon as such by others. Would our attitude have been different if we had stayed in Holland and seen the many labourers from Spain, Italy and Turkey coming to our country not only to work there, to make a living, but also to live there according to their religious beliefs? We would have appreciated that to a certain extent in these people, but we would not have dreamt of joining them!

However, this situation is now fast disappearing. The second generation has grown up, and the beginnings of a third generation can be observed. With them the language is no longer a problem, although — to be honest — they need uninterrupted training in the Scriptures and the Reformed doctrine, in order to become and be witnesses of Jesus Christ.

The first generation built churches, even schools. On that foundation the second and third can build, realizing that all preaching and teaching, according to the New Testament, has to result in our being readable letters of Christ. In that way the Churches which put the name of their new home country in their own name must now make this name true. Now we must “become” what we confess to be, in several respects, not in the last place with a view to our evangelistic calling.

Second, we must face the “accusation” that we have “added another church” to the many that were already here; was this really necessary?

We do not in this context propose to engage in a discussion why it was necessary that the first immigrants established their “own” churches. We are only interested in the question whether this (“adding another church”) can really be called an obstacle for evangelism in this our country. We do not believe this. *All* churches in Canada are, if you wish, import-churches. All immigrants of previous times brought their church along, so to speak. No one has ever felt this as a hindrance.

Third, instead of being ashamed of our specific Reformed character we should be proud, or better: thankful for our Reformed heritage, especially (as we hope to point out later) with a view to our task of witnessing. No one in his right mind will demand from us that we shake off our past as far as our deepest convictions are concerned which have been handed down throughout the generations. Nowadays one calls this “losing or keeping one’s identity.” We do not, however, think in terms of a multi-cultural society but rather agree with *R.B. Kuiper* in his book *God-centered Evangelism*, “It is my firm conviction that the only theology contained in the Bible is the Reformed theology” (p. 9).

Finally, in answer to this first accusation of building obstacles, we should all agree without further discussion that it is a Christian’s duty not to build any unnecessary obstacles. A Christian is a world-citizen, being a member of that church that is being gathered among all nations. His first mark is not being of Scottish or German or Dutch descent but being a new creature in Christ. This also means that we should do some serious

thinking about the possibility that our convictions and attitudes might be mixed up with traditions which are nothing but human traditions.

2. We have extended our separateness-on-Sunday to the weekdays by building separate schools, and thus not allowing our children to mix with the children of the nation. How can we expect fellow Canadians to mix with us if we continue to build more walls?

Again several remarks can and must be made here.

Providing Reformed Education for our children does *not* put us on a level with Mennonites and similar sects. They try hard to build a society completely of their own. Our schools aim to prepare our children for fulfilling their Christian calling *in* society. In addition, we were not the first ones, neither are we the last ones, who built what is called a "separate" school system, or even a "private" one. This is a growing movement. Other Christians have also discovered the necessity. "Private" education may even become the rule in the future and "public education" the exception, if the latter will continue to disintegrate.

Moreover, one should not underestimate the tremendous testimony that sounds forth in the whole community from such a private school. We speak from experience. The local population learns this way that there is a group of citizens no longer satisfied with the public school. They are prepared to bear the financial burdens and thus build in stone and books and teachers a monument against the apostasy in our country. We have been told by born Canadians that, if we have so many objections against the public system, we should have remained part of it. We should have stood up for our convictions in P.T.A. meetings and tried to change, to reform the public school. However, when we talk about schools, we talk about young children. Should we begin with entrusting them to a so-called "neutral" but in fact anti-Christian education and then try (for how many years?) to change it? What is more important in such a situation, words or deeds?

In the third place, if our schools are really "Reformed" (and not "reform"!) then they are or become institutions to prepare young Christians for service in the kingdom of their Master. In this context it might be profitable to sit down and discuss among each other which tendency is the strongest in our own minds. Is the direction of Reformed Education "church-ward" or "world-ward"? Such a discussion would bring to light that, although we agree concerning the necessity of Reformed Education, we might disagree as to its direction, its set-up, its goals. We are convinced that we should build these schools for the promotion of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. The goal of this education is not only to make better church members but to train them for service in the midst of the world. As such these schools can become a strong weapon for "evangelism."

But what do we mean by “evangelism”? If it is “God-centred,” it is more than “saving souls.” True evangelism is a prophetic witness against the apostasy of the world in which we live. It is all-inclusive. The Gospel is not (only) for bringing “souls” to heaven. It changes lives; it renews society; it is a leaven that permeates the whole dough. People know the name of Jesus, maybe they even call themselves, “Jesus-people,” but that does not mean that Jesus Christ, God’s Incarnate Son and our Risen King is recognized and obeyed in the whole of life.

Our conclusion must be that Reformed Education is a very important part of our Reformed witness, or, if you want, of our evangelistic duty just as the “separate” church to which we go is a strong testimony.

3. We keep the “salt-of-the-earth” outside the pot by our attitude towards Unionism, Lodges and the like. Another wall . . .

A similar answer must be given here. “If we object against the way Unions work today, we should join them and speak up in their meetings, and thus try to get them to steer in a different direction.” (The reader understands that we do not discuss here the whole and complex problem of labour-relations. We are only interested now in the “accusation” that we render all our evangelism-endeavours fruitless by building walls, obstacles, thus making it “impossible” for others to join us in serving the Lord the way we deem necessary.)

This recommendation to join Unions in order to witness in their midst is un-ethical. Is it indeed a Christian’s calling to join an organization in order to blow it up from the inside? Especially if, by joining, one must promise to build such an organization, to obey the leadership and the rules and — on top of that — to keep “sectarian” propaganda outside? One might also ask what those Christians who have joined these Unions have meant and done for the development of Unionism. Experience tells us that they have only made the lot of fellow-Christians harder.

In the second place, one should — again — not underestimate the tremendous value of “public relations” which have resulted from court-cases and appearances before the Labour Relations Board. Reporters were interested. Whole pages of newspapers, with pictures and everything, informed the public at large that Mr. or Miss or Mrs. so-and-so openly declared that he wants to serve his Master in his daily work; that his and her only comfort is to belong to Him with body and soul.

What witness is stronger, that of the man, even the chairman of the local Union, declaring that “I am also regenerated, but the church looks after the soul and the Union after the body . . . ,” or that of the young woman who tells the Union’s lawyers that they “remind her of the men who tried to ensnare the Lord Jesus?”

There are far too many people in our country who claim that their soul has been delivered and will go to heaven but in the meantime they go along with compulsory membership, thus having received the "mark of the beast" (Revelation 13). It is to be noted that Scripture informed us that this "mark" does not consist in being allowed to believe in a heaven for souls, but in being allowed to buy and sell, to do business and take one's place in social and economic life.

Our conclusion must be, for the third time, that these so-called "obstacles," instead of being obstacles, are extremely strong instances of witnessing. With the apostle James we must say: Show your faith by your works! You say you believe that God is One? That's right, but the devil also believes that. It is easier to hand out a tract than to "risk" your job by refusing to become a slave of men. People may hate you (is that something new?), they will laugh at you, persecute you, but that is to be expected. The martyrs of the early Christian Church drew many more converts than later Christians who went along with everything the Roman Empire offered them.

The next "obstacle" is of a different kind, though there is a strong underlying connection.

4. We are so strongly "covenantal."

The reader will right away understand what is meant by this statement. For Reformed people the Covenant is everything. We think in terms of the Covenant. The result is that for us and among us infant baptism is the rule, adult baptism the exception. We are so accustomed to this line of the generations that we seem to have a hard time believing that "others," outsiders, might become ingrafted into the Christian Church. Do we really have faith for (the results of) evangelism? Although we rejected the strange idea of "presupposed regeneration," are we not in fact adherents of it? We know the saying, "Genade is geen erfgoed" (mercy is not hereditary) but we come very close to denying it Some of us are even opposed to the baptism of adopted children, and consequently must oppose adoption as such. We are such a close-knit group. We hear about other communities, like Baptists, Pentecostals, etc., who sometimes grow like mushrooms. We seem to lack faith that "our church" would mushroom. That would even endanger the whole Covenant concept

Thus the stress on the Covenant becomes an obstacle for evangelism.

The reader will realize that this is a very serious accusation. We will have to face it. At the same time, more than one question is hidden in this "obstacle."

In the first place, being "covenantal" is so basically Biblical that no one should touch it with one, critical, finger. How we love Psalm 105 and so many other Psalms! Our Bible is divided into the Old and the New Testa-

ments or Covenant. Take the Covenant away and we have lost our Bible, even our Covenant God. Is it, indeed, that fundamental.

But — in the second place — this should be turned into (!) a strongly evangelistic motive.

One of the biggest problems in our day is that of the estrangement between parents and children. We found a term for it, the generation-gap. And we believe that this generation-gap, above anything else, is caused by a breaking and forsaking of the Covenant. In this respect there is no essential difference between "Foreign Mission" and "Home Mission." Our missionaries (have to) approach the pagans with, in the back of their minds (and not only in the back . . .) the Biblical teaching that these nations broke away from the Covenant made with Noah (Genesis 9, 10; Acts 17:22-31, Paul's preaching on Mars Hill in Athens).

In our Western society we see a terrible illustration of the truth of the second commandment: the LORD visits the iniquity of the fathers in the following generations. There is, therefore, only one way out and one way back for that society. The hearts of the children must return to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to their children. The family must be restored on the basis of the Covenant. Evangelism should not seek individuals only but families (later on we hope to discuss the relevance of this truth for Vacation Bible Schools and the like).

There is more.

Christians must not only show in their family life that God's gracious Covenant heals and prevents generation gaps, they must realize that Reformed and God-centred evangelism must be a call to repentance from the sin of Covenant breaking. They call to mind the Canadian past when the church was still in the centre. They must take into consideration the destruction of life brought about by "dualism," the same sin that destroyed Israel. The Covenant is all-encompassing, it is the essence of everyday life. But our nation, though still very "religious," severed the Sunday from all other days of the week. It tried, and tries, to serve the Lord and Baal at the same time.

Therefore, instead of suppressing, abandoning, neglecting our stress on the Covenant, we should strengthen it. We should do so in the belief that the second commandment says more than has been quoted. It does not only bind upon our hearts the way and manner in which to serve our God. It also promises great things for those who (again) keep His Covenant. With our God there is an open door for those who return to Him.

We must now return to the accusation, or let's call it a question, "Do we really have faith for evangelism?" The same James who told us that faith must be shown by works, warns us not to become like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. Doing evangelistic work but not believing that "it will work" would make us double-minded. We "must not

suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord" (James 1:6-8).

Although in a later chapter more will be said about our *motives* for evangelism, we have to say something about this question already here.

It goes without saying that also with a view to witnessing we will receive according to the measure of our faith. People who do not believe that the hardest hearts can be broken by the hammer of the Word and the Sword of the Spirit, are indeed not able to do this witnessing. They should, for the time being, stop talking to others and start talking to themselves.

The best thing to do is to consider your "own case"! Do you not agree that it is a complete, divine miracle that you are a believer? Our Reformed confession uses the absolute terms of regeneration, faith as a gift of God, and so forth. Should we not, with Paul, confess that it may be a great miracle that other people are children of God, but to me the greatest miracle is that I am one! God made Paul an "example," a demonstration and illustration of the fact that a number one sinner can become an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Only when you consider how you yourself have been delivered from hell and damnation (and when this is for you a constant cause of wonder) you will become motivated to tell others about such a miracle, and you will become deeply concerned about people around you who are still strangers to this miracle. Evangelism is only for the joyful, thankful, and amazed Christian. "Amazing grace" indeed.

We have arrived at the final "obstacle" that we want to discuss in this chapter. There are more, of course, but they will be discussed later on. We only mention at this moment that we must ask ourselves whether the whole organization of our local congregational life mirrors the New Testament picture of the church. Is there not a tendency towards "clericalism" among us? The special office-bearers must carry the whole load. We sit back and look on. Are Reformed congregations really being organized for action? Are they trained for "the work of ministry" as Paul describes it in Ephesians 4? This will be discussed in greater detail in following pages. The cause of the trouble may be that — as already has been remarked — we as Christians are not wholly dedicated to our Lord and Master, that our whole attitude to Him and His world needs correction. But this, however important, falls outside the scope of this chapter.

Thus we come to the fifth "obstacle."

5. We stress "preserve Thy church" at the cost of "increase Thy church" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 48).

The first remark is quite obvious. What God has joined together, man shall not put asunder. It is *one* act of Jesus Christ which the church confesses, "That the Son of God . . . *gathers*, . . . and *preserves* for Himself

a church chosen to everlasting life" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21). Therefore she prays daily, Thy Kingdom come, "So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit . . . ; preserve and increase Thy church . . . ; ("Lord's Day 48). To sacrifice the one to the other is always wrong. A church that is only interested in increasing and does not care much about a faithful confession nor about upholding it, and at the same time neglects discipline, will not hold out. If one, therefore, wants to criticize and to condemn, one should do so to all sides. What lasting result will one expect from an evangelistic movement which is undertaken in cooperation with Pentecostals, Salvation Army, etc., when the three marks of the true church — pure preaching, faithful administration of the sacraments, and strict discipline — are neglected? Do not forget, Jesus Christ gathers and preserves "*unto Himself*"!

In the second place, one wonders whether we indeed put such a great stress on the preservation of the church! The Saviour warned us against the possibility that salt loses its strength. "Salt" conveys the idea of utmost care for preserving the true character of the church. Playing down this preservation in any way is not only utterly dangerous for the church itself but it will also undermine all true, God-centred evangelization. History is there to prove this statement. The answer to why the nation is in the process of becoming de-Christianized is that the church forsook its primary duty! Many churches have fallen into decay and only preserved an outward resemblance to what they were in the past. True Reformation will, in God's own time, result in the blessing of increase. A faithful church will become a magnet for those who really and seriously want to give their lives to Jesus Christ. It is a well-known fact that new converts are radical and want to draw the consequences of having become new creatures. Thus the stress on "preserve" should never be used as a reproof, let alone as an "obstacle" to evangelism.

History teaches us this lesson. Returning to the Word of God and again "managing all things according to the pure Word of God" (Confession of Faith, Article 29) have resulted in great increase. Think of the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Scripture teaches the same lesson, not only in the Sermon on the Mount but, to give one example, in Acts 5. Ananias and Sapphira were both excommunicated by God's own hand. Then we read, in verse 13, "None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high honour." And in verse 14, "And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women." Thus preservation and increase went, and still go, hand in hand.

This has not been said in order to defend the attitude of a church which is completely "turned inward," which has interest only in itself and does not care about lost sinners all around her, nor in the glory of her King, Who wants to put enemies at His footstool. But we should agree that such

a church is not really “preserving.” It is sitting on its treasure and will lose it in the long run. The treasure of the Church is the Gospel which is always prefaced by, “Go ye therefore . . . !” True preservation is also preserving the Great Commission. A church that neglects this, does not preserve the pure Word of God.

The two, preservation and increase, are one.