

## 1. IS HOME MISSION THE TASK, EITHER OF THE SPECIAL OFFICES OR OF THE GENERAL MEMBERSHIP?

It has been said (and surely practiced!) that the minister should consider as his task, not only to proclaim the Gospel inside the church walls, but do it also outside those walls. And in case he is too busy for that, let's appoint an "evangelist" (in The Netherlands often an assistant preacher in days when — what a luxury! — there were more candidates than vacancies.) Here in Canada we have heard of the practice of appointing a "Home Missionary"; it has already been suggested that we should follow that practice.

And not only the minister has that task. We have a "law," a Church Order which, until and unless it is changed, still states that it is the office of elders, among others, "also to exhort others in respect to the Christian Religion," Article 23. Both demands have been watered down since 1923. From then on the "rule" was (and this was done at the request of two "Evangelism-Congresses") that "evangelism" should at least be under the leadership and supervision of the consistories.

Recently Reformed churches in The Netherlands have made "evangelism" a matter for the General Synod (!), and re-hashed the decisions of 1923. Also these recent decisions are ambiguous and leave many questions unanswered. The reason? Because they are caught on the horns of a dilemma! They did not overcome the "either/or." One need only think of the accepted rule that evangelism congresses in a certain place may not be held without the permission of the local consistory!

That is the one choice.

The other one is that evangelism is a matter of the membership; it is everyone's task. And no business whatsoever of ecclesiastical meetings. Everyone may do what is good in his own eyes . . . , or rather what his heart urges him to do. We have good confidence that the reader has already drawn his own conclusion, that it is not a matter of "either/or."

In a letter of call sent to a minister, and further in the Forms of Ordination/Installation of Ministers and Elders there is not a single word that points in the direction that *they*, as bearers of a special office, have a special duty, over and above the Christian calling of all believers, in evangelism. In their special office their duty is confined to the already gathered flock of the Good Shepherd. Elders have no supervision over the "others" mentioned in Church Order, Article 23; only over those who have put themselves under their supervision.

A minister may admit "outsiders" to his catechism classes, but their presence should not in any way change the character of those classes, i.e.,

to teach the children of the believers, the children of the Covenant. He visits "his" patients in hospitals and the like, and he may, occasionally, have a word for the others in the room, but (and we would like to stress that!) such a calling is rather for the believer who lies there as a patient among others. His "witnessing" is much more effective than that of the pastor of whom people think, and from whom they expect, that it is his "job" (he is even paid for it!) to speak a few religious words. How then to get rid of this unhappy dilemma, "either/or"? Simply by listening to the Scriptures.

On page 47ff. we have given extensive attention to Ephesians 4:11-16. Permit us to repeat here the gist of what Paul says there. *J.B. Phillips*, though not giving a literal translation (whatever that may be) in his *Letters to Young Churches*, often offers surprisingly correct paraphrase; here is his rendering of Ephesians 4:11ff.:

His "gifts unto men" were varied. Some He made His messengers, some prophets, some preachers of the Gospel; to some He gave the power to guide and teach His people.

His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up until the time comes when, in the unity of common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity — that measure of development which is meant by "the fulness of Christ."

Several translations have made the mistake of putting one comma too many in this sentence. That one comma changes the whole picture. It turns "pastors and teachers" into people who have to do all the running. They have to "equip the saints" — then a comma — "to do the work of ministry" — then another comma — and finally "to build up the body of Christ." Who would not shy away from such an impossible task?

However, the Lord, Whose yoke is soft and Whose burden is light, has only put upon their shoulders "to equip the saints for the work of *'diakonia,'*" Christian service in its widest sense. That "ministry" itself is to be done by the saints, by the membership. We readily admit that Paul does not in the first place speak here about the ministry of evangelism or witnessing, but equally readily we deny that this ministry or service should be excluded!

The point we want to make with this quotation from Scripture is, that the apostle formulates so beautifully the distinction, relationship and cooperation-in-harmony with what sometimes is called the "special" and the "general office"; rather, the mandate of the office-bearers and the Christian mandate so well formulated in Answer 32: "Why are you called a Christian?" (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12). Every believer is a prophet, priest and king. The first is, "that I may profess His Name" — and that can most certainly not be confined to the public profession of faith, once in a lifetime, and the weekly profession of the Apostles' Creed in the

P.M. service. That too, but our "professing His Name" should be heard outside the church walls as well. It is part and parcel of "the work of service" mentioned by Paul.

The task of the "pastors and teachers" is now to "equip" the saints by their preaching and teaching, so that they may be able to fulfil this task. Other translations bring out more clearly how strong the stress is on this "equipping": "in order to fully equip"; "for the immediate equipment"; "in order to get His holy people ready to serve as workers"; "that Christians might be properly equipped," etc.

The question could be asked whether this is fully understood by and in Reformed churches. Usually the purpose of catechetical instruction is formulated as "leading to profession and thus to the Holy Supper"; there it seems to stop, whereas there it should *begin*! Profession of faith is the first "station"; after that comes adequate involvement in the life of the congregation; then service in the Kingdom, in home-life, on the job, in our contact with those whom the LORD causes us to meet, i.e., our "neighbours." Consequently it would seem that there should be a follow-up to the catechism classes. All too often young professing members are left alone. "No one has hired us." Gifts and talents which, according to I Corinthians 12, are given to *all* members of the body of Christ, are not developed, anyway not engaged in active service. A more comprehensive program of "equipping" should be a priority for church members. However, going into *that* would lead us away from our first "dilemma." The conclusion of the above remarks must be that there is definitely not an "either/or" with respect to evangelism: either the office-bearers or the congregation. It is an "and/and," each in his and her own calling.

Fundamental to the Reformed concept of the church is that the congregation is not a "laity" in the Romanist sense under the guardianship of the clergy. "Laity" is not a bad word at all, if only understood as Peter understood it, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people (Greek: "*laos*," from which: "laity"), that you may *declare the wonderful deeds* of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9).

One should not say that till now we have been "carrying coals to Newcastle," an unnecessary work because Newcastle is a coal-mining city! In theory we know it all, but it is the considered opinion of the present writer that a nearly endless to-and-fro in Reformed circles, caught on the horns of this dilemma, has prevented the Reformed community from actually doing the work. For once these lines are not written to criticize others, but ourselves. That's not a pleasant business, maybe, but it is wholesome.

No tug-of-war between whether the special offices should engage in evangelism in some way or another, or whether the membership should do it: the membership! Not "volunteers" who seem to be looked upon as

“more evangelical than Reformed,” — a nonsensical “dilemma”! Let each remain in his own calling, received from Him Who has ascended, that He might give gifts to men, Ephesians 4:8ff. And let’s get going! Let us concentrate on more intensive “equipping of the saints” so that there may be more “service,” inside as well as outside the church.

This section should not be concluded without saying a bit more about a specific involvement of consistories, and possibly major assemblies, in the work of evangelism — more involvement than just “equip” the believers on the local level.

For a start we quote here some Articles from the Church Order of the *Christian Reformed Church*, as adopted by its Synod in 1965. Under the heading “*Mission*” we find no less than five articles, although only one of them, the last one (77) deals with what is commonly called “Foreign Mission.” The others, 73-76, deal with evangelism.

*Article 73.*

- a. In obedience to Christ’s Great Commission, the Churches must bring the Gospel to all men at home and abroad, in order to lead them into the fellowship with Christ and His Church;
- b. In fulfilling this mandate, each *consistory* shall stimulate the members of the congregation to be witnesses for Christ in word and deed, and to support the work of home and foreign missions by their interest, prayers and gifts.

*Article 74*

- a. Each Church shall bring the Gospel to unbelievers in its own community. This task shall be sponsored and governed by the consistory.
- b. This task may be executed, when conditions warrant, in cooperation with one or more neighbouring churches.

*Article 75.*

The *Classes* shall, whenever necessary, assist the churches in their local evangelistic programs. The Classes themselves may perform this work of Evangelism when it is beyond the scope and resources of the local churches. To administer these tasks, each classis shall have a classical home missions committee.

*Article 76.*

- a. *Synod* shall encourage and assist congregations and classes in their work of evangelism, and shall also carry on such home mission activities as are beyond the scope and resources of minor assemblies.
- b. To administer these activities synod shall appoint a denominational home missions committee, whose work shall be controlled by synodical regulations.

Thus far this Christian Reformed Church Order A.D. 1965 on evangelism. An impressive set-up, the one would say. The whole "denomination," on all levels, becomes involved (we italicized the terms: consistory, Classes and Synod). The other would rightaway say, "smacks of hierarchy" and reject the whole set-up out of hand.

Although there is reason to question, to criticize certain elements (does a synod have to regulate what consistories shall do? — to mention only one question) — *before we reject every element out of hand*, we should consider whether we might find here a connection with the original Church Order, as adopted by the Great Synod of Dort 1618/19.

This original Church Order has, as we have already seen, and hope to see again towards the end of this booklet, more than one article that applies to evangelism. At the same time this old Church Order contains also several "prescriptions" for what local churches should do or not do which may call forth the same question, "Does a synod have to prescribe all this?"

Apart from that, we have in that Church Order Article 38, the first part of which runs as follows,

In places where the consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, this shall not take place except with the advice of the Classis.

And then follows Article 39,

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be placed by the Classis under the care of a neighbouring consistory."

It is obvious that the Reformed churches, already since the seventeenth century, have agreed on the necessity of classical involvement and even right-of-binding-advice, when the possibility of instituting a new church has arrived. In fact, this rule is much older. Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordering*, page 39ff., remarks that Article 38 (of which we quoted only the first half; the second half deals with very small consistories, where a deacon may be "added to the consistory") contains two different articles. The Synod 1586 (notice the date!) combined the two. That means, that the rule itself is still older, and consequently was born in the first decades of the Reformation. The same is true of Article 39. This early date is important, because it proves that these articles bring us to that period in the history of the church when the Reformation was still growing and going on. It was penetrating more towns and villages, and thus the churches took care that the necessary assistance was given to the growing number of believers who should, as soon as feasible, be gathered into a regular church life with a consistory. Here we are faced with the fruits of evangelism: the true Gospel was brought to dark areas, it bore fruit and new churches were born.

It is also interesting to note that Synod 1905 added the words "for the first time." Thus the original reading was, "where the consistory is to be

instituted anew." That is, by Reformation, or also by gathering the believers who had been scattered when persecution started. Rev. Jansen makes clear why Synod 1905 added the words, "for the first time." Synod did so with a view to the fruits of evangelism that had been carried out in "blank" areas by neighbouring churches for a shorter or longer time.

Considering all this, the conclusion may be drawn that the present Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church, in the above-quoted articles, has — indeed — carried over from the distant and more recent past an important element of Reformed church-orderly responsibility and activity. Consistories as well as classes were involved in the institution of new local churches in areas where there had not yet been a church or where the church had disappeared, be it by reason of persecution or of apostasy or even of something else.

Maintaining the Church Order (which is under revision, hopefully with preserving the above-discussed elements) therefore means also that, in cases and places where evangelism bears such blessed fruits, the surrounding consistories and classes become involved, in assistance, advice and so on.

We even have ground to conclude that evangelism in such areas was, and should be, initiated by a neighbouring church. We may even take one more step, and assume that a classis was, and therefore should be, involved in "assigning" such an area to one or more churches of the classical region.

These conclusions do not negate what has been said in the first part of this section. They only point out that, as soon as the LORD blesses our evangelistic endeavours to such an extent that even new churches can and may be instituted, the consistories and the federation of churches become "automatically" involved.

We may draw here a parallel with the course of *discipline*. Discipline starts, should start (combine Matthew 16:18-19 with Matthew 18:15-18, or 20) with the membership, the congregation. When the desired result does not come, it is brought to the attention of the consistory. If hardness of heart prevents conversion, the consistory brings the "case" back to the congregation (cf. the three announcements before excommunication).

Evangelism should start with the membership. When, as a result, a new church becomes a possibility, the consistory becomes involved (even the classis); and once the new church has been instituted, they in their turn "sound forth the Word of the Lord" (I Thessalonians 1:8).