

6. SHOULD NOT, IN THIS TIME OF APOSTASY, THE TRUE CHURCH RATHER *REPEL* OTHERS INSTEAD OF *ATTRACTING* THEM?

The reader will remember that we have already touched this question in a different context. Now we are going to take a closer look. It should be apparent from the start that this "dilemma," as a dilemma, an alternative, has to be rejected out of hand as being "false."

The first danger that lurks around the corner is that we would let our attitude, our behaviour and activities, better: our calling as church and Christians depend upon "*facts*" instead of upon the Word of God and its clear demands.

Be it readily admitted that there is much apostasy. But the present writer likes to scan old books, also books with sermons, delivered a century ago and later. Recently we found a passage that could have been written today, and for today. We used it in a certain company. The first reaction was: "That is now exactly the situation of today." One should know that the passage spoke about the many dangers our young people are exposed to nowadays; and that everywhere we could see that the world was coming to its end . . . etc. But, you know, these words were written about 125 years ago!

No one will deny that we live in a time of great apostasy, but "there is nothing new under the sun!" "What has been will be." Jeremiah preached in a time of such great apostasy that the LORD even said to him, "do not pray for this people anymore; I am going to destroy my own temple, my own city." Apostasy set in already in the Early Church at an early date. And what to think of the Dark Middle Ages? Did not the Reformation come in a time of great apostasy? Did not all reformations and revivals start in a time of great apostasy? Was that ever a reason for God's messengers *not* to preach the Gospel anymore; not to call people back to the LORD anymore? (Remember: Elijah thought he was the only one left?)

On the contrary!

Apostasy was exactly the reason why the church reached out, testified against the spirit of the age, more than they had ever done before! As long as God in His longsuffering has not yet given up this world, we are certainly not allowed to give up this world either! It is exactly His good pleasure to kindle His light in the prevailing darkness of the times.

There is, however, more. We have already agreed that there is great apostasy in various ways, on various levels. When we look at churches affiliated with the World Council of (Christian?) Churches, we discover that their church buildings are nearly empty on the Lord's Day; also that their missionary activities have shrunk to an unsettling minimum; it is their "leaders," their hierarchy, who are busily involved in trying to make a

better world, by opening their arms to “religious leaders” from Communist countries, and by supporting the causes of terrorists.

Yet, at the same time we see or hear or read about a surprising growth of so-called “evangelical churches”; i.e., churches, with whom we may not agree in everything, but who preach the Gospel of deliverance from sin and the necessity of being born again in order to gain eternal life. And many of these churches are mushrooming. Obviously, in this dark age many people are looking for a hold, something they can build their life on, and that can give meaning to their life. In short, the existing apostasy might be a tremendous opportunity for the pure and radical Gospel, undiluted and free from humanistic elements.

Coming back to the wording of this sixth dilemma: indeed, a true or faithful church should repel. Permit us to point once more to Acts 5. Two “respected” members killed by divine intervention. The result? Verse 13: “none of the rest dared to join them.” Who are meant by the “rest”? Obviously not everyone outside the young church. Because with the same flourish of his pen Luke adds, “but the people held them in high honour!” Commentators suggest that a group of people are meant here who were possibly planning to join the church, but when they saw what serious results it could have for them if they joined without being fully committed, they changed their mind: “such a church was not for them.”

But the story is not finished yet. Verse 14, surprisingly, informs us “that more than ever believers were added to the Lord,” i.e., “to His body, His Church.” Obviously, the “repelling” and the “attracting” happened at the *same* time! They were the two effects of the same event. If there is a lesson to be learned from this passage, it most certainly is *not* that, in order to remain a faithful church in the midst of great apostasy, we should rather repel “outsiders” — “imagine . . . we might lose our Reformed identity”

The conclusion should rather be that we take discipline a bit more seriously. We all know of certain “cases” that were and are dragged out for years without any noticeable change for the better, notwithstanding numerous admonitions. It even happens that members of the congregation start wondering why such “members” are still members. They hardly see them anymore in church. They hear that they live like unbelievers, and so on. We are convinced that several of our readers know what we are talking about.

Possibly we should do some more “repelling” of such persons who show all too clearly that they are no longer living members of the body. They even infect and endanger the body; they should be cut off. They slow down the course of the church. And, in the meantime, the Holy Spirit is grieved by the fact that they still are considered members of the church. “Repelling” such “members” might even make the church more “attractive” to what we call outsiders. A strict church is more attractive to people

who need a firm foundation for their lives than a church that is half-hearted in its discipline, and makes more the impression of a mixed company than a body of dedicated believers!

The present writer was requested to investigate a church that was very active in Mission. The consistory wanted to know how it was possible that one local congregation could support such a number of missionaries. During the talks the question came up about the spiritual "level" of the congregation. We were told that this church followed the rule that a member, who showed lack of interest, became irregular in church attendance, in paying the tithes, etc., got a letter in which he was told, "we give you six weeks to repent and to change your attitude; if that change does not occur, you will no longer be considered a member," period. That's quite radical, and we with our "system" of discipline are not prepared to copy this. Yet, there is a lesson to be learned. This same church is growing nevertheless; and they develop a tremendous activity for the spreading of the Gospel.

Most readers also know how depressing it is for the whole congregation when it is reported during a congregational meeting that a certain percentage of the members hardly contribute to the church. "Do we have to pay for others?" is then the reaction.

Well, this should be sufficient to underline that a faithful church should not hesitate to "repel" those who are not wholeheartedly committed to our Lord. *But . . .* never and never and never do we read in Scripture that the church of Christ should be "repulsive" to outsiders!!! And that is exactly what we are talking about in the discussion of all these

P.S. For more information on what we called "repel" the reader is referred to a recently published book by Robert K. Hudnut, *Church Growth is not the Point*, Harper & Row Publishers, New York, N.Y. 10022, XI and 143 pages, \$7.95. From the same author came in previous years *The Sleeping Giant* and *Arousing the Sleeping Giant*.

As the title makes clear, Hudnut wants to see the main emphasis put, not on growth, but rather on a shrinking of the church. "The loss in church membership is a God-given opportunity to turn the world upside-down." His motive for this provocative statement is that "most churches could be two-thirds smaller and lose nothing in power. In most churches the first third are committed, the second third are peripheral and the third are out." The word "most" should be stressed: not in *all* churches; it can alas not be denied that such is the case in many denominations. The picture in some might even be bleaker than Hudnut describes: the third group may be by far the largest.

The book abounds with Scriptural references and examples, as do his previous books.

Thus he has a strong point. "Church-growth" should not be the one-and-all, when the church itself is already a mixture in which the fully-committed believers are in the minority. Thus his point is well-taken.

Yet, the reader should not overlook the words we quoted first: "the loss in church membership is a God-given opportunity to turn the world upside-down." This boils down to what has been argued in this chapter, that we may do well to ask ourselves whether we "repel" the non-committed "members" so that we may "attract." Obviously the second will not be expected to happen without the first.

false alternatives that have greatly hindered the expansion of the church and full-fledged evangelism or Home Mission.

Therefore, let's never again come with this foolish dilemma. A faithful church should, in harmony with Acts 5, do both at the very same time: "repel" some of its own "members" and the "rest" of the half-hearted people, and be evangelically attractive to those who have lost the meaning of life, hope for the future, and whose hearts are empty, hopefully hungry for Lasting Food.