

CHAPTER III

History of "Gereformeerde Evangelisatie"

Importance

It goes without saying that this small booklet does not offer enough space for a detailed description of the history of evangelism in general; not even of the history of "Gereformeerde Evangelisatie." But that is not necessary for our purpose.

Previous chapters have already stressed the necessity of *Reformed* Evangelism. Several warnings were heard against possible dangers. Finally, it was already intimated that evangelism will only succeed if it becomes truly "congregational," a calling for all believers.

As a link between the previous chapter and a clearer formulation of what we consider to be Reformed Congregational Evangelism, a short survey of its history follows.

Our source is *Het Handboek voor Gereformeerde Evangelisatie* (published by Kok, Kampen) and especially the chapter on its "Geschiedenis." We will discover how the same issues, mentioned in previous chapters, were in the centre of the discussions. We are anxious to hear what answers were given.

How It Started

The *Handboek* starts its description of the history of Reformed Evangelism with the nineteenth century.

That's quite late! one is inclined to say.

One must, however, keep in mind that this late start does not deny or underestimate all that has been done in previous centuries. As long as there has been a Christian Church, there was "evangelism" one way or another.

The Jews, when scattered throughout the Roman Empire, made many proselytes who were among the first to accept Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

The early Christians, many of them martyrs, were living witnesses and readable letters of Jesus Christ. Eternity will reveal how many pagans were won for Christ by the simple but courageous testimony of God's children. During the "dark" Middle Ages it was time and again the work of lay-

preachers that had great influence upon the crowds and drew many away from the path of apostasy.

It has been written that the greatest influence of the Reformation was not exerted by the (few) Reformers themselves but by the farmers, bakers, and carpenters who could not keep silent. Their witness, their singing, brought many, many people to the Saviour.

The Light of the world has always been there; so has the salt of the earth. It could not remain hidden according to the biblical standard "I believe, therefore I speak."

In the above sense "evangelism" has always been there where the living congregation of Jesus Christ was present.

Yet, there was a reason for the *Handboek* to start with the nineteenth century. The reason was the changed situation.

Since the Reformation the Reformed Church had been, to a greater or lesser degree, the Established Church. That's why the Reformed fathers wrote in their (and our) Church Order, Article 23, that: "The office of the elders is . . . also to exhort others in respect to the Christian Religion." Although we have to return to this article, we want to state at this moment our opinion that Article 23 must be understood against its historical background. The same is the case with Article 21, which says that "Consistories everywhere shall see to it that there are good teachers . . .," etc. Maintaining the Church Order does, in our opinion, *not* include that we turn our *parental* schools into *ecclesiastical* schools, established and maintained by the consistories, i.e., the special office of elders. Nor does it mean that, according to Article 23, evangelism is maybe even exclusively, the mandate and calling of the elders, be it directly or indirectly. This Article 23 must be understood within the context of the position of the Reformed Church as the privileged religion. The church stood in the centre of town and village, exerted influence, and this decisively, upon the whole of life. The non-members, being a minority, could and had to be admonished, "You must also come to church." The elders of the church exercised influence upon the whole town and community.

This situation changed radically in the nineteenth century. The Secession of 1834 and the Doleancy of 1886 "produced" only a remnant, meeting somewhere in the outskirts instead of in the centre of town. This remnant knew itself surrounded by the great majority who went along with the deterioration of the Established Church. Reformation of the church was accompanied by the *Reveil* or Revival which reached out to that majority. The responsibility to call them back to the Scriptures was its motivation.

From that time on "evangelism" in its more modern sense emerged.

From the very start those who reached out to that majority met with the same or similar objections as have been mentioned in the previous chapter. Pioneers in the field of evangelism had to hear that they were in danger of imitating Methodist methods, that they acted as though they

belonged to The Salvation Army. It was sufficient "to *be* church." Everyone could, anyway should, know where the true Church gathered and should join. Our only responsibility was to keep the church pure. Then God would, in due time, send lost sheep to re-join the true flock of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand many Reformed believers felt that, although this was not to be denied, it was not the whole truth. The Scriptures say more. We learn about the Old Testament prophets not only that they preached in Judah but also that they went out, were even sent by the LORD, to the Ten Tribes, to call them back to the true religion. Jesus Christ Himself did not establish an isolated group but preached to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He illustrated His own activity and that of His disciples by means of the parable in which the King sends his servants to the outskirts of the city, to compel people to accept the invitation, "so that his house might become filled."

"To be church" includes to "get out" and seek the lost.

One of the first who realized this and was driven by a strong urge to seek the lost was Rev. (later Professor) *Lucas Lindeboom* who became a minister in 1866, and left for Zaandam in "dark Noord-Holland" in 1873. That part of Holland lived (if you can call it "live") in the clutches of ultra-modernism. This minister felt compelled not only to preach in his church on Sunday, but to do the same on Saturdays right in the streets. His method was as simple as any method of evangelism could be. He walked through the streets which, according to custom, were filled with idle people. He addressed the one and the other, started a talk, lifted up his voice, and before you could count to ten, people started gathering around him and he had his audience. He did not only say: You must go to church, or: Believe in the Lord Jesus. Any topic was suitable. The pitiable poverty of the common labourer, social and economic, even political issues. Anything! Soon he felt the need for a more regular tribune. He rented a room in the heart of the city and announced in the local papers that he was going to speak, there and then, about some interesting topic. Everyone was welcome and discussion was invited. These announcements were quite detailed. An outline of the speech boiled down to the proclamation of sound Reformed doctrine.

In addition he started to write tracts and have them printed and spread among the population. He wrote articles in the local papers, always hammering the same anvil: salvation for Noord-Holland would come only by a return to the living God, His infallible Word, and the true and complete, i.e., the Reformed, doctrine.

Thus Lucas Lindeboom became the pioneer of Reformed Evangelism.

The next phases in the nineteenth century history of Reformed Evangelism make it abundantly clear that our fathers put great stress on the word *Reformed*.

Already since 1836 Sunday Schools had been started by Dr.

Capadose, a converted Jew. These Sunday Schools were *not* meant for the young members of the church, to keep them quiet during the church services. Our fathers took their children to church. That also is a result of Reformed thinking and living. But these Sunday Schools gathered children of unbelievers to tell them about the only Name.

In 1886, as a result of the growing Sunday School Movement the *Nederlandse Zondagschool Vereniging* was established. This was a so-called “algemeen Christelijke” (general-Christian) Society. Members of various churches, with no regard for the differences between their churches, took part in it.

However, already three years later, in 1871, JACHIN was organized on the basis of the Reformed Creeds (in the above-mentioned *Handboek* one will find interesting information why this Reformed Society was started). The purpose of JACHIN was not to establish Sunday Schools itself, but to give guidance, advice, and above all the necessary *literature* for this important work in God’s Kingdom. We mention the yearly curricula provided for the Sunday Schools; a magazine which dealt with the various aspects of this work and gave Reformed guidance; textbooks for teachers (in 1917 one was published for the teachers which served several generations; I myself used it thankfully when, as a student, I conducted such a school), etc. In this way JACHIN became a great blessing.

In addition the year 1878 saw the birth of PHILIPPUS, a “Genootschap” established to provide the badly needed tracts, booklets, brochures and pamphlets, including day-calendars, to be used in the work of evangelism. Even books were published, one on the Synod of Dort! Our fathers believed this to be a need for evangelistic work. They were convinced that the Lord works faith by means of His Word and that evangelism cannot be done without the help of the written word. They were convinced that Reformed evangelism should produce and avail itself of a storehouse of Reformed information.

We should take that lesson to heart.

The danger is obvious that, being a small community with all the financial consequences thereof, we would borrow from the abundant market of evangelistic literature without asking whether it is solidly Reformed, that is, 100% biblical. The lesson is that we, as soon as possible, must unite energy and effort which the Lord made available for us, to produce our own evangelism material. We should strive towards imitating the example of JACHIN and PHILIPPUS.

One should, however, not conclude from the previous paragraph that everything was now smooth and perfect. On the contrary, from this history of Reformed evangelism in The Netherlands we learn that there was quite some confusion about the *method* to be used. The brethren were

convinced that the Reformed Faith must result in Reformed methods. But it was not right away clear to them what this method was.

Two *congresses* were prepared to study this problem, the first one in 1913, the second one in 1916.

The brethren met in Amsterdam in 1913. They had come to listen to and learn from three professors in theology. The reader should take good notice of this. In the first place they were convinced that evangelism is a matter of *theology!* In the second place professors in theology were available and willing to take the lead. One cannot say that this has always been the case since. There were exceptions. Next to Prof. Lindeboom, Dr. T. Hoekstra and Dr. F.W. Grosheide should be mentioned. But we state: if evangelism does not become the concern of the professors of theology, and then "down"(!) to the local office-bearers and the whole congregation, we will never arrive at our goal.

Dr. *H. Bavinck* spoke about the Concept of Evangelism and its necessity. Dr. *H.H. Kuyper* introduced "The Calling of the Church in Evangelism," and Dr. *H. Bouwman* discussed the right method.

The great importance of this first Congress for Evangelism was not only that for the first time workers in evangelism met from all over the country, but that great stress was laid on two principles: the first one that all evangelism must bear the mark of the Reformed faith; the second, that its purpose is the gathering of the (Reformed) Church. Shortcomings of the past were acknowledged. The promise was made not to abandon the nation, nor the apostate church from which the brethren had seceded in 1834 and 1886.

When the Congress came to a close, it was felt generally that a solution as to the right method had not yet been reached.

There were two divergent opinions that could not (yet) be reconciled. With all the stress on the central position of "the church" in evangelism, what exactly did the speakers mean by "church"? Did they mean to say that the church as "institution," i.e., the office-bearers, preachers and elders, must take the initiative, and not only the initiative? Do *they* have to become workers in evangelism among outsiders as much as they have to perform their respective offices "inside" the church? And what about getting the congregation involved?

The two positions were:

1. the consistory has to take the initiative and give leadership;
2. evangelism belongs to the mandate given to all believers.

The Amsterdam Congress closed on the note that a second congress would be necessary to find a solution.

In 1916 the brethren met again.

Although the titles of the speeches did not show it too clearly (they were "Evangelism and the Covenant of Grace" and "Training Workers for Evangelism") the dilemma of 1913 was present in everyone's mind.

Next to other decisions and conclusions the brethren unanimously agreed that evangelism was so necessary and important that the churches themselves, in their broader assemblies, had to consider the matter. Participants of the Congress were urged to prepare overtures which, "in de kerkelijke weg," could be submitted to forthcoming synods.

Already in 1917 the general synod appointed a committee of three (the speakers of the first congress!) to prepare a report and guidelines. By 1920 the committee was not ready yet but the synod of 1923 could deal with the finished product.

The result of synodical discussions was crystallized in a set of rules or *PRINCIPLES of Reformed Evangelism*. We have tried to translate them.

1. *The purpose of evangelism is to bring back to the LORD and His Church those who have gone astray.*
2. *This work belongs, according to the Scriptures, to the task of the Church of Christ.*
3. *The (only) means of evangelism is, to preach the Word of God, in agreement with the Reformed Creeds, to these apostates.*
4. *"Intentional" evangelism has to be initiated by, or at least to be under the guidance of, the consistory, which has to use the God-given gifts and talents which are available in the congregation.*
5. *If, in the work of evangelism, contact becomes necessary between sister churches in the same region, this contact has to be established by the consistories.*
6. *Production of materials for evangelism can be left to the existing organizations, provided they stand on the Reformed basis.*
7. *Ways and methods of evangelism must be left to the (freedom of the) local churches.*

I have several questions, even criticism, about these "principles" but before I discuss them I want to mention that, from 1923 on, the work of evangelism developed and prospered. In 1928 the *League of Reformed Evangelism* came into being. Its purpose was threefold. 1. To stimulate the work; 2. to give guidance; 3. to provide printed materials. Several periodicals and magazines (weekly, monthly) were started. Correspondence courses for workers in evangelism were made available. A long list of activities and organizations got going. We mention, next to the Sunday Schools, Clubs for Boys and Girls; Societies for adults, especially for women; work among students ("studenten-predikanten"); covering certain neighbourhoods by calling on people; street-preaching; distribution of tracts, etc.; special work, in Brabant and Belgium, among Roman Catholics and other sects. And finally, in a wider sense, the work and influence of Christian organizations, social, political, etc. An impressive list indeed!

We would be fools to neglect the lessons and conclusions of this history of Reformed Evangelism.

The first and most important lesson is: the exclusive stress on the Word of God, and equally, therefore, on the binding to the Reformed Creeds.

The next one is the primary attention for reading material. Modern communications, though available, can never replace this need. For that reason production of Reformed tracts, etc., should have first attention.

The third one is that children should not be forgotten. Work among them is, in a way, easier not only to organize but also to perform. Nor should students be forgotten.

The fourth one is that this "remnant" of the nineteenth century was motivated by a deep concern and responsibility for the nation.

The final one, the conviction that "bringing a sinner to Christ" includes "bringing him to the (true) Church of Christ."

One should, however, not overlook the fact that neither the second congress nor the synod of 1923 satisfactorily answered the question and solved the problem posed by the first congress. In other words, what is now exactly the relation between the (task of the) special offices in the church and that of the "general office" of all believers? We do not have much admiration for the (in those years often used) distinction between "the church as institute" and "the church as organism." The danger hidden in this distinction is that the two become so easily separated or even each other's opponents. Yet, using these terms for a moment, the question is obvious: Does the "institute" have to initiate evangelism or is it left to the "organism," the membership as they live and work in the days of the week?

Should we forget the historical background of Article 23 of the Church Order (mentioned previously) and add something to the Forms for Ordination of Elders and Ministers? Should we have to add a paragraph, that the latter do not only have to preach within the already-gathered congregation but also outside the church building, and accordingly not limit their pastoral concern to the members of the flock? Should we add to the mandate of the elders that they not only supervise the members and visit them at their homes but also make calls at other people's homes?

The fourth "principle" of synod 1923 clearly shows that there was still uncertainty about this (very important) point. It says "Intentional" (this term was used for "organized" evangelistic work in distinction from "unintentional," the life and witness of the believers in the midst of this world). "Intentional evangelism has to be initiated by, or at least to be under the guidance of, the consistory." What do these words mean? It is "either/or." The most desirable way seems to be that consistories start the work by *appointing* "gifts and talents in the congregation" for, let's say, Sunday School teachers, street-preacher, home caller, etc. But the synod added, "or at least . . ." We understand this as meaning that, if the ideal cannot be reached, then the consistory should be satisfied with super-

vising those members who started some kind of evangelistic work on their own.

The question is still unanswered, or at best, answered partially. Is evangelism the task of the consistory-as-such or is it the calling of the whole congregation as the people of God, the holy nation?

After the *Liberation* during the Second War it became clear that 1923 could not satisfy the brethren. I have attended congresses where the question of 1913 was repeated and repeated. Even the idea was propagated that there is no place at all for any organized work. The old adage again: "be church" and that is enough.

Recent developments seem to point in a different direction. Dr. Douma addressed the Evangelism Congress 1972 and offered a program for Evangelism that gives good hopes for a renewed awakening after (who can deny it?) years of doubts as to methods and necessity.¹

Before we return to that, we will have to try to find our own solution to the old dilemma: Is Evangelism a task of the special offices in the Church, or of the congregation as "the people of God"? Or is the solution to be found in the cooperation of the two; and if this is the case, what manner of solution do we find in the Scriptures?

¹ For later developments in The Netherlands see Part II of this booklet, especially pp. 96ff.