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Evangelism according to the Scriptures (Part 1 of 3)

Evangelism is a topic which generates a variety of opinions among Reformed believers. On one side there are many who are *passionate* about evangelism. They are often disappointed, sometimes even frustrated, because they perceive that Reformed churches are too inward looking and too passive in fulfilling their evangelistic calling. On the other side there are many who are *reluctant* about evangelism. They fear that an emphasis on evangelism will cause the church to become more “evangelical” and less Reformed. They point to churches which are active in evangelism but Arminian in theology.

There is no doubt that both sides mean well and have valuable points to make. It is true that Reformed churches by and large do not have a strong performance record in terms of evangelism. On the other hand, it is also true that there is much outreach activity that does not reflect the full truth of the gospel. There is reason to be cautious.

In my opinion Reformed churches can be more effective and faithful in their evangelistic ministry without having to sacrifice anything in terms of Reformed identity. I am convinced that investing more time and effort in evangelistic ministry will

strengthen the church, provided it is done in a biblical way.

In a series of three articles I would like to make some suggestions with respect to the ministry of evangelism: (1) its Biblical basis, (2) the approach to evangelism which we have inherited from the Reformed tradition, (3) and the practice of evangelism.

Evangelism in the Old Testament

In order for us to get a biblical perspective on evangelism we have to start in the Old Testament. It is important to recognize that the people of Israel were set apart by the Lord to be a holy people and at the same time to be a light and a blessing to the nations around them.

The original calling of Abraham still applies today!

A foundational passage is Genesis 12:1-3, which tells us about the calling of Abraham. The Lord called him to leave his country, his people, and his father’s household and to go to the land the Lord would show him. The Lord promised Abraham that He would

make him into a great nation, that He would bless him, and that Abraham *would be a blessing*. The promise ends with these words: “. . .and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3). We know that this blessing would ultimately be fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah. In Him the nations were to be blessed. This is a theme that is found throughout the Old Testament: the expectation of the Messiah who would come to restore God’s people and to whom the nations would come to receive salvation and an abundance of blessings.

But the fulfillment of this promise was not restricted to the work of the Messiah. Israel itself was intended and called to be a blessing to the nations. Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Exod 19:6), set apart for the Lord and at the same time called to proclaim the glory of God to the nations around them. Throughout the Old Testament we read about the desire that other nations would acknowledge that Israel’s God is the only true God, good and merciful. We read about the young Israelite girl who was taken captive to the land of Aram and who told her mistress that there was a man of God in Samaria. We read how this led to the mighty commander Naaman coming to Israel and eventually

confessing "that there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

The desire that the nations would join God's people in worshipping Him is reflected clearly in the Psalms. Psalm 67 starts with a prayer that God might be gracious to his people, bless them, and make his face shine upon them so "that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations" (v. 2). In these words the priestly benediction of Numbers 6 is quoted ("the Lord make his face shine upon you"). The desire is that the nations of the earth would share in this blessing: "May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth" (v. 4).

More passages from the Old Testament could be quoted, but we see an emerging pattern: in the first place, Israel is God's special people, his chosen nation. He dwells among them and they experience his blessings. In the second place, Israel is intended to be a blessing to the nations around them. God's people (should) have an intense desire that the nations would be able to see that life in the covenant is good, and that there will be a future during which the nations will come and join God's people to declare God's praises.

Evangelism in the New Testament

The New Testament reveals that the prophecies of the old covenant have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He has accomplished everything which the Saviour was called to do: acquiring for God's people forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. These blessings are not restricted to the

people of Israel. Before He ascended into heaven the Lord Jesus gave his disciples the great commission: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).

The apostles went forth and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ who was crucified and risen from the dead. Beginning from Jerusalem, they moved to Judea and Samaria and then other areas, calling everyone to repent and have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. People from different cultural and national backgrounds were incorporated into the church of Christ: Jews and Samaritans, Greeks and Romans, blacks and whites. God's people are recruited from all nations in the world.

Reformed churches can be more effective and faithful in their evangelistic ministry without having to sacrifice anything in terms of Reformed identity

The new covenant differs from the old covenant in many ways. But some things have not changed at all. Believers are still aliens and strangers in the world. They are still called out of the world to be a holy nation, yet they are called to live in the world as a blessing and a light to the people around them. The original calling of Abraham still applies today!

Among the passages that highlight this aspect Matthew 5:13-16 is well known: "You are the light of the world." Followers of Christ are called to let their light shine before men, "that they may see

your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." A similar passage is Philippians 2:14-16, where the Apostle Paul calls on believers to "shine like stars" among "a crooked and depraved generation."

The first epistle of Peter also speaks eloquently about the calling of Christians to be a light to the people around. The Apostle addresses Christians as "strangers in the world" (1:1) who have been "chosen" and called *out of the world* (1:2). At the same time he emphasizes their calling *in the world*: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (2:9). Peter emphasizes both the "called-out" aspect and the "be-a-blessing" aspect of the Christian life.

1 Peter 2:11-12 reflects the same approach: "I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

It has been suggested by some that Christians are to witness by their walk of life only (not by verbally evangelizing others). In 1 Peter there is not really such a dilemma. The Christian walk of life is clearly important: Christian wives are called to win their unbelieving husbands by their godly behaviour (3:1). At the same time the Apostle exhorts Christians to speak up when there are opportunities. Peter says: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (3:15).

We may draw the conclusion that a consistent picture emerges from both the Old and the New Testament: God's people are a chosen people, called out of the world, called to live a holy life that (by the grace of God) will be instrumental in winning over others to repent and join God's people. While Christians are citizens of another Kingdom, they are called to be a blessing to others in this world so that many more people would find salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Balanced approach

A balanced approach is needed. The church is called out of the world but the church is also called to let its light shine into the world. Sometimes the "separation-from-the-world" aspect is emphasized so strongly that the church lives in isolation from the broader society. The social network of believers is limited to the church network.

Having contacts with un-churched people is frowned upon and considered to be dangerous.

God's people should have an intense desire that the nations would be able to see that life in the covenant is good

This is not what the Bible teaches us. The Apostle Paul assumes that believers have all kinds of contacts with outsiders. He does not exhort believers to avoid contact with unbelievers. He simply assumes that they have such contacts and he encourages them to "be wise in the way you act toward outsiders, making the most of every opportunity" (Col 4:5).

Sometimes, however, the missionary calling of the church is

overemphasized to the extent that the church is seen primarily as church-for-others. It is suggested that the church's main reason to exist is to be a mission to the world. The problem with this approach is that one forgets that the church is called to live a holy life, apart from the world. The church is not just a body of people that needs to increase in numbers – it also needs to be preserved. The Apostle Peter said on the day of Pentecost: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!" (Acts 2:40)

In the light of these considerations we may conclude that evangelism is one of the ministries which the Lord has given to his church. Every part of this statement is important: evangelism is a ministry given by the Lord (therefore we may not neglect it). It is a ministry given to the church (therefore the whole church is responsible). And it is one of the ministries which the Lord has given to the church (not the only one). The church has received a variety of ministries from the Lord: preaching, teaching, worship, pastoral supervision, diaconal help, and the spreading of the gospel in the world (mission and evangelism).

There is no doubt, then, that evangelism is an important calling of the church. Every local congregation should examine itself whether it is faithful in this calling. And the Canadian Reformed churches should examine themselves whether – as a federation – we are diligent and faithful in proclaiming the gospel to our fellow citizens in this country.

In the next article I hope to say more about the approach to evangelism which we have inherited from previous generations.





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Evangelism in Historical Perspective (Part 2 of 3)

In the previous article we looked at evangelism from a biblical perspective. In this article we look at the approach to evangelism which we have inherited in the Canadian Reformed tradition. We are looking for answers to questions such as: how important has evangelism been in the history of our churches? What methods and approaches have been used? Has evangelism been viewed as the task of office-bearers or rather the calling of ordinary church members? Has evangelism been a ministry that was discussed at major assemblies or was it left to the initiative of the local churches?

The New Testament reveals to us that both "ordinary believers" and "office-bearers" participated in the ministry of evangelism. In Acts 11 we read that Greek speaking Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene went to the city of Antioch "and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (v. 20). Here we have an example of ordinary believers evangelizing others. The Lord blessed their efforts. At the same time we note that Barnabas and Saul soon became involved in the work, teaching the gospel in Antioch for a whole year (v. 26). It is

a beautiful example of ordinary believers and office-bearers working together in the ministry of the spreading of the gospel.

Early Christian church

In the early Christian church the same approach was used. Ordinary believers would use their social networks, live a Christian life among unbelievers, use opportunities to speak about the gospel, and take friends and relatives to church. Once people started coming to church and showed genuine interest, they would enter a program of instruction aimed at bringing them to faith.

The church father Augustine wrote an evangelism course entitled "On the Instruction of Newcomers" (Latin title: *De Catechizandis Rudibus*). From this book and other sources we know that newcomers to the faith went through an initiation process that consisted of three stages. First, they were considered *inquirers*. If their interest was serious they became *catechumens* and received thorough instruction into the Christian faith over a considerable period of time. This instruction was given by office-bearers (elders, deacons, bishops). Finally, if it

became clear that they had come to faith they became *competentes* – which meant that they were ready to be baptized.

Throughout this process newcomers were expected to attend church services. It is interesting to read Augustine's sermons and to note that he often had a word of application or exhortation for the catechumens who were present among the congregation.

One of the lessons we learn from the early Christian church is that the initiation of newcomers was a *congregational ministry*. Both ordinary members and office-bearers were involved in the process. Another lesson we learn is that the early church was not afraid to take newcomers through a program of thorough instruction.

The Reformation

During the Middle Ages the Christian church lost much of its strength. The Reformation of the sixteenth century was, among other things, an attempt to re-evangelize Western Europe. By that time most people in Western Europe were baptized but it did not mean much. Many people were "baptized pagans" – they had been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church but they lived like pagans.

Church News

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From this perspective it is interesting to note that the Church Order of Dordrecht (1618-1619) stipulated that elders were "to comfort and instruct the members of the congregation and *also to exhort others with respect to the Christian Religion*" (emphasis added).¹ Clearly, elders were mandated to function as shepherds of the flock of Christ but they were also expected to exhort people in the broader society to repent and come to faith. Something similar was stated with respect to the mandate of the ministers. The Form for Ordination said (and still says) that the minister "shall teach the Word of God to the youth of the Church *and to others whom God calls.*"

The impression we get from these documents is that the early Reformed church followed the same approach we observed in the early Christian church: church members take friends and relatives to church; office-bearers instruct newcomers in the Christian faith, and elders and ministers are expected to speak to the unchurched as well, appealing to them to be reconciled to God.

Churches of the Secession

The ministry of evangelism has gone through good times and bad times. When the churches were in decline evangelism was also in decline. At other times, when there was reformation, evangelism activity would also be reformed.

A beautiful example of evangelistic zeal emerges from the history of the Reformed churches of the Secession of the nineteenth century. The Secession churches saw an urgent need for the re-evangelization of the Dutch nation. The matter was discussed in local consistories, at classis level, and even at regional and national

synods. Sunday Schools were started, evangelistic pamphlets were distributed, evangelists were appointed, and ministers took an active role in evangelism.

A famous name in this regard is Dr. Lucas Lindeboom. Before he became a professor at the theological seminary in Kampen, he served two congregations. In both cases he was very active in evangelism. On a Saturday afternoon he would be found in the downtown area of the city, handing out Bibles and pamphlets and speaking to the townspeople about the gospel of salvation. Lindeboom also took a leading role in some of the evangelism organizations which were formed in those years.

When the churches were in decline evangelism was also in decline

The picture which emerges from nineteenth century Reformed churches in Holland is similar to what we observed in the early Christian church: evangelism was a priority and it was considered to be a congregational ministry in which both office-bearers and ordinary members participated.

During the twentieth century the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands lost much of their evangelistic zeal. The explanation for that development is complex, but one reason was that the ministry of evangelism became a victim of the theological distinction between church as organism and church as institute. The question was asked: is evangelism the mandate of the ordinary believers (church-as-organism) or is it the mandate of the office-bearers

(church-as-institute)? Some defended the view that the proclamation of the gospel is an "official" duty and that therefore ministers should take responsibility for evangelism. Others defended the view that ministers should work strictly within the church and that ordinary believers should do the evangelizing. It was a discussion without a clear solution because it posed a wrong dilemma.

The "liberated" tradition

In the recent history of the Canadian Reformed Churches Rev. Gijsbertus VanDooren has done much to demolish wrong dilemmas with respect to evangelism. The title of his booklet on evangelism is eloquent: *Get Out! & Get Rid of Dilemmas*.

Rev. VanDooren's view was that evangelism is a congregational ministry and that both office-bearers and church members have a role to play. Building on that principle he suggested that the church members should act as *front soldiers* and the office-bearers as *instructors*. In other words, church members should evangelize outsiders and office-bearers should give instruction on how to do it.

Rev. VanDooren's efforts to promote evangelism among the Canadian Reformed churches must be appreciated. His emphasis on the responsibility of "ordinary believers" in evangelism was needed at the time. I am less enthusiastic, however, about his

use of the term “instructor” to describe the role of the office-bearers. In VanDooren’s view office-bearers are not to be actively involved in evangelistic activity – at least, not “as office-bearers.” A minister might talk to his unbelieving neighbour during his “free time” but then he would do so as a believer, not as a minister. A minister may instruct church members on how to do neighbourhood Bible study groups but he should not conduct such a group himself – after all, he is only an instructor.

I believe that in this approach ministers and elders are too far removed from the practice of evangelism. If we always keep our office-bearers away from the action of evangelism, we should not be surprised that the ordinary members (the “front-soldiers”) lose courage and direction.

It is interesting to note that the Synod of Cloverdale (1984) adopted a revised version of the Church Order in which the mandate of the elders was narrowed down to focus solely on work within the congregation. The phrase in the original version that elders should “exhort others with respect to the Christian faith” was deleted from the mandate of elders. In my opinion this illustrates that the Canadian Reformed churches had become more inward looking than the churches of the Reformation and the Secession.

Evaluation

Time has moved on and we need to ask: has the “instructors and front-soldiers” model worked for the Canadian Reformed churches? I do not believe it has.

I am not even sure that the CanRC have really tried to implement it. I do not really see our ministers giving instructing to church members on good evangelism methods and then the members going out to practice it. In a way this is understandable. How could ministers give instruction on how to evangelize if they do not have experience in doing it themselves?

Both office-bearers and church members have a role to play

The more common approach is that a CanRC consistory appoints an Evangelism Committee (EC). This committee is then mandated to come up with ideas on how to do evangelism. Sometimes even more is expected. I have seen an example of a mandate of a local EC which stipulates that the committee is to “stimulate, equip, and organize the congregation towards evangelism activities.” Note the wording! While VanDooren suggested that office-bearers should do the equipping, now we are expecting the members of the EC to do it. That is a tall order. The congregation generally does not take anything seriously unless office-bearers play a leading role. We are expecting too much from our ECs!

What is the solution? In my view the term “instructor” for the role of the ministers and elders should be dropped. It creates too much distance between the office-bearers and the practice of evangelism. We should also take

another look at the practice of farming out the evangelistic ministry to an Evangelism Committee. The office-bearers should be more actively involved.

Instead of sidelining our ministers and elders as “instructors” we should rather use them as “player-coaches.” The minister should, as it were, put on his skates, get his stick on the ice and take part in the action. In other words, the minister should be visibly active in evangelism – as much as time constraints allow.

It will be healthy for every minister to have some evangelistic contacts outside the congregation. Not only will it prevent him from developing a myopic view of life, it will also give his sermons and prayers an evangelistic flavour which will have a formative effect on the congregation as a whole. The same applies to elders. By definition, they are men who command respect. It would be great if our elders had the reputation that they are not afraid to use the contacts which they have in the broader society to “exhort others to the Christian faith.”

By saying this, I am not suggesting that the responsibility for evangelism should be thrown back entirely into the lap of the office-bearers. Evangelism is a *congregational* ministry, as we have seen. Both office-bearers and ordinary members should be involved in it. I hope to say more on the practice of evangelism in the next article.

¹ English translation quoted from Article 23, Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches (pre-1984 version); Acts of the General Synod of Orangeville 1968, p. 120.





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Evangelism in Practice

(Part 3 of 3)

In previous articles we looked at evangelism from a biblical and historical perspective. In the present article I would like to offer some suggestions for the practice of evangelism.

We need to start with something that may seem obvious but is easily forgotten: a congregation can be “successful” in evangelism only if it really believes what it professes to believe. If we do not seriously believe that unbelievers are under the wrath of God and that we ourselves have been saved from eternal judgment by the death of Christ, we will not be greatly motivated to proclaim the gospel of salvation to others.

Related to this, a congregation can hardly be successful in evangelism if it is not a *living congregation*. A church that has forsaken its first love like the church in Ephesus (Rev 2:4) or a church that has become lukewarm like the church in Laodicea (Rev 3:16) will struggle to attract outsiders. However, if believers are strong in their faith the congregation may “win the respect of outsiders” (1 Thess 4:12) and some of those outsiders may realize their position before the face of God and seek salvation.

People who are thinking of becoming Christians look at Christian believers to see whether they are serious and sincere in what they are doing. Imagine an unbeliever visiting a worship service of your congregation. If such a visitor senses no real warmth and enthusiasm, why would he take the Christian faith seriously? He will simply conclude that Christians do not believe in what they are doing. On the other hand, if the gospel is preached effectively and there is commitment, warmth, and love among the believers, the visitor may be impressed and led to conclude: “God is really among you!” (1 Cor 14:25)

Similar things could be said about the reputation which a congregation has in the broader community. If church members are known to be honest and reliable people who live respectable lives, this will serve to support evangelistic efforts. But if some members of the church are known to be corrupt businessmen or womanizers or drunkards, that will seriously undermine any evangelistic projects (unless it is known that discipline is exercised in such cases).

In short: it is hard for an unbeliever to find new life in a church that is spiritually dead. In order for people to come to faith and be born again, it is important that they have opportunities to be among Christians who are strong in faith and live their lives with integrity. This is the main factor which determines whether a church is “successful” in evangelism or not. If a church fails to draw others to church, the problem is usually not that there are no resources or man-power, but rather that the first love has grown weak.

Congregation-wide commitment

In addition to this, it is important that the whole congregation (not just a few individuals) should share the desire that unbelievers might be saved and join the congregation. Such a desire will only be found among believers who understand the principle of *sola gratia*, who realize that they have been saved only by the grace of God. Everyone in the congregation should desire that God would receive glory and honour by means of the addition of more people to the number of those who are saved.

The more we live in this faith, the easier it will be to use opportunities and speak to unbelievers. The best method of spreading the gospel is using personal contacts. Research has shown that for about seventy percent of converts to Christianity the most important factor in the process of their coming to faith was a relationship with a Christian friend, relative, colleague, or neighbour.

Ideally, members of the congregation would use their contacts in the broader society to talk about the gospel and invite people to come along to church. The congregation should then be ready and prepared to receive such people warmly. There should be programs in place for instructing newcomers to the faith. It is important, however, that such programs do not occupy an isolated place somewhere at the fringes of church life, but are carried by the support and the prayers of the whole congregation.

Missionary flavour

In the third place it is important that the church's activities be characterized by a *missionary flavour*. If our missionary endeavour is restricted to an annual Vacation Bible School (VBS) we should not be surprised if we struggle to attract unchurched people. A VBS can be a wonderful evangelistic tool, but if it is an isolated activity which is not integrated in congregational life, its effectiveness is seriously hampered.

What is needed is a missionary flavour to characterize regular church activities. Take for example the worship service. While the

minister addresses his sermon to the congregation of the Lord in the first place, he should be mindful that there are visitors in church. This will give his sermon a missionary flavour.

If a visitor senses no real warmth and enthusiasm, why would he take the Christian faith seriously?

The same applies to congregational activities such as Bible study meetings. It can be a challenge for a Bible study group if there are a few guests present who want to know more about the gospel. Of course, you don't want to bring in enemies of the gospel.

But if you have a friend or colleague who wants to know more about the gospel, why not take him along to the regular Bible study? You may find that the presence of such a guest adds a new and exciting dimension to the Bible study meeting.

During my time as a missionary in South Africa I often taught mixed groups of catechism students. I would encourage the young people of the mission congregation to take friends along to catechism class. The only condition was that these friends had to be willing to function in a positive way and do the homework, including memorizing parts of the Catechism. I can testify that the Lord blessed this approach and that over the years many young people came to faith through this avenue.



Office-bearers

In the previous article I made a few critical remarks about the expectation within the Canadian Reformed tradition that ministers and elders would work strictly within the congregation. It is unfortunate that ministers in the CanRC tradition have been discouraged from developing contacts with people outside the church. It would be more in line with the tradition of the early church, the Reformation, and the Secession, if we encouraged our office-bearers to do what the old ecclesiastical forms stipulated: “. . .also to exhort others to the Christian faith.”

The best method of spreading the gospel is using personal contacts

How this is put into practice may vary from place to place. The size of the congregation and the workload of the minister will play a role in this. Generally speaking it would be good if consistories expected their ministers to devote part of their time to evangelistic activity. A consistory could tell the minister, for example, that out of every ten home visits he should do two or three visits with unbelievers and report about them at consistory meetings. The minister should also generally be the one who teaches the new members' group. As we have argued in the previous article, the minister and the elders should visibly support

evangelistic activities. In this way, the congregation will understand that evangelism is an important ministry.

Church planting

So far, I have discussed evangelism from the perspective of a local congregation. But sometimes there is no local congregation where new believers can join. It is important, therefore, that we should also consider *church planting*.

The Canadian Reformed churches have been blessed by continuous growth over the past fifty years. On average one new church has been instituted per year. This is great and we recognize the Lord's blessing in this. At the same time, we know that most of the growth came from within. When a congregation outgrew the church building, the congregation would split in two and a new congregation would be formed at some distance (usually not too far away).

While there is nothing wrong with this form of growth, I suggest that the Canadian Reformed churches could adopt a bolder approach and consider sending missionaries or evangelists to plant churches in new areas. Why not plant churches in places such as Saskatoon, Regina, and Kitchener-Waterloo? Fast-growing urban areas are usually good places to start a new church. Other target groups which could be considered are immigrant communities (Muslims, Hindus).

In the previous article I mentioned that the Secession

churches in The Netherlands (nineteenth century) discussed evangelism at all levels of church life including the major assemblies. We can learn from this. It would be wonderful if evangelism was a regular item on the agenda of classis meetings.

Let me end with a very practical suggestion: there are eight classes in the federation of the Canadian Reformed churches. It should be possible for every classis to initiate and support at least one new church plant in Canada. If every classis did this, we would have eight church plants on the go within a few years. Is this impossible? I don't think so. We have the structures and the finances. We will probably have men who can be sent out to do this. We do, however, need the vision and desire to initiate this.

What is needed is a missionary flavour to characterize regular church activities

God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). May we so love our God and so love our neighbour that we use our opportunities and resources to spread the gospel of salvation here in North America. And may we be bold and creative in finding effective ways to do this.

