

## CHAPTER V

# How to Overcome “Our Guilty Silence”

### *Let's Learn Our Lesson*

Having come this far, there will still be readers, no doubt, who disagree with our course-of-action in this booklet. They say, “Where is the action?” By now we have had four chapters and we are still talking about Reformed and Principles and Doctrines . . . .

We hope, however, that most readers will agree with the necessity, maybe even with the contents of the previous chapters because they have gradually come to the realization that there will be no real evangelistic effort if the church does not receive the blessing of a “revival.”

If evangelism is indeed the mandate for the whole body of Christ; if we agree that evangelism has to be a grassroots movement — then we also realize that we have to clean our own house.

We used the term *revival*. Some may not like this; they would prefer the word *reformation*. Although we do keep in mind that the word “revival” has acquired a specific meaning since the world has seen “revivalistic movements,” we believe that it is a good expression and a desirable cause.

Revival should be the sister of Reformation, as it has often been in the past. If Reformation (by which we understand a return to God's Word in the life of the church) is not accompanied by Revival (by which we mean a renewal in the life of the church members), Reformation tends to silt up in externalism and formalism, maybe even in Pharisaism.

Or to put it differently, as soon as the question of evangelism is on the table, the church finds itself standing before the mirror, looking at itself, and asking, “Are we ready for it?” Can we “give away our faith”? Is our “cup of salvation brimming”?

Evangelistic effort forces the church to examine itself.

There is a tragic confusion in the minds of people when you mention the word “church.” Although we know better, we often forget that “church” is not the *building* where people gather on Sundays but the *people* themselves. Instead of saying, “We go to church” we should say, “We, the church, go to meet in our building, our meeting place.” Dutch people say, when the worship service has come to an end, “De kerk gaat

uit." That's a wonderful expression. Equally wonderful is the Scottish saying, "The church goes in" (when the service starts).

*Roxburgh* (see Bibliography) remarks that, if we agree that the minister's task as preacher lies *inside* the church building, we the people have to bring it *outside*.

Where is the church on Monday, on Tuesday? The building is empty. The church is now scattered all over town, in kitchens and livingrooms, in plants and workshops, in offices and educational institutions. From Monday to Saturday the church is in the market place. And it is there where it becomes clear whether the church is really church, God's own people, to declare His virtues.

It is there that we are reminded of and embarrassed by our "guilty silence." If we, as God's people, cannot break through this guilty silence we will never see the day of "congregational evangelism" for then it will never become a grassroots movement.

*John R.W. Stott* wrote a booklet, *Our Guilty Silence* (see Bibliography) which we recommend to the reader. We thankfully borrow from him in this chapter.

He describes the history of two major attempts in England to reach the whole nation with the Gospel. These attempts were born (and died) during the two world wars.

The first one started in 1916. It was called, "National Mission of Repentance and Hope." The trumpet was blown all through England. Evangelical councils were established in every diocese. Everyone was enthusiastic. Yet, after some promising starts here and there, the whole movement petered out. Why?

The second one was started in 1943, under the slogan, "Towards the Conversion of England." The thrill of a new hope was felt. Church attendance and the Christian style of life had gone down terribly in England. But now conventions were held, information-offices were opened for the public. "The vast majority needed to be converted." Yet, after some initial "successes" this second movement also crumbled. Why? Stott's answer is, "Because a large number of church members needed to be converted too, but it didn't happen." And instead of England becoming more Christian, the reverse happened. Why?

### *Causes of Guilty Silence*

Why? "Because the laity is shy in speaking about the things of God."

The word "*laity*" is not necessarily a bad word. It became a bad word in the Romanist Church, as the opposite of "clergy." The word itself, however, is derived from the biblical word "*laos*," the most beautiful word for the church: the people (of God). And this people of God is shy in speaking about the things of God? How far are we estranged from Paul's confession, II Corinthians 4:13-15:

Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had who wrote, I believed and so I spoke, we too believe, and so we speak, knowing that He Who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into His presence. For it is all for your sake, so that *as grace extends to more and more people*, it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

A minister recently confessed, if not complained, "My biggest job is to open the mouths of the people in the pew." Are we of the same mind as the two lepers outside the gates of Samaria, who all of a sudden interrupted their glee in the spoils of the enemy and said to each other, "We are doing wrong; this is a day of good news, yet we are holding our tongues"?

We hear about a new movement, called *Key '73*. Many churches join efforts with the purpose of reaching the whole continent with the message of Jesus Christ. Although we hate to be pessimistic, we fear that the same will happen as in England during both wars, unless the people of God overcome their shyness and guilty silence.

Stott discusses the "four major causes of our guilty silence."

The first one, "we have no compelling incentive even to try to speak."

The second one, "or we do not know what to say";

The third one, "or we are not convinced that it is *our* job";

The fourth one, "or we do not believe we shall do any good, because we have forgotten the source of power."

I believe that we should point out a fifth cause and that this cause should be mentioned first. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. If we are filled with joy and gratitude because of the wonderful privilege that God has adopted us in Jesus Christ, we are "hot." Now we are so often lukewarm. Yes, indeed, we can become "hot" when certain issues are at stake. We can blaze away when we differ about minor things, but keep our mouth shut when there is an opportunity to proclaim the love of God for a lost sinner.

We need more prayer, more living communion with the source of Life, the Holy Spirit. We may, as Reformed people, also need a turn-about from "*isolation*" to "*separation*." The two are most certainly not synonymous. There may be too much isolation while at the same time there may not be so much separation anymore. We may have the tendency to isolate ourselves and in the process hide the light under a bushel. But at the same time we may become infected with worldly attitudes in our interest for money, to mention one example. "Separation," if understood biblically, means living a Christian style in every respect (even with respect to "family-planning," to mention another example) but at the same time we are a salt for our environment.

"Verbeter de wereld, begin met je zelf." If we want the world to become a better place we should start at home.

*The way to overcome shyness is a permanent surprise because we have received the unspeakable riches of God's grace. "I believed and so I spoke."*

#### A. "Compelled by Christ"

The first major cause of our guilty silence is, according to Stott, a lack of incentive and motive. Christian life should be a life of obedience to the command of God, "Show forth, forth tell." Christian life should also be a life of love, love for the neighbour who is in dire need and in deadly danger.

We should be touched by the *jealousy of God*. Stott says important things in this context. The second commandment informs us that God is a jealous God. What does that mean? He refers to marriage as an example. The LORD our God was jealous when His people left Him and went after "other men," the Baals. To be jealous is to be intolerant of rivals. It is the strong desire to be the only one for the beloved.

The apostle Paul knew this jealousy. When he walked through the streets of Athens, he was "provoked, upset" by what he saw, and thus he spoke on Mars Hill. Are we "provoked" and "upset" by the idolatry, the superstition and ungodliness which is all around us? Or are we indifferent? Does it hurt us when other people misuse the beloved Name, and does it upset us when we see a neighbour, a colleague, running towards eternal damnation?

This "jealousy" is most of all concerned about the glory of God. It should be our strongest motive that God receive the glory due to Him. Reformed people prefer the Psalms above many hymns which centre around the poor soul that needs salvation. Our Psalm Book is filled with the glory of God, His mighty acts, His honour and glory. We sing these Psalms with heart and mouth. We worship Him. But we must never forget that *worship* and *witness* are inseparable. One example from the abundance:

"I will extol Thee, my God and King, and bless Thy Name for ever and ever. Every day I will bless Thee, and praise Thy Name for ever and ever. Men shall proclaim the might of Thy terrible acts, and I will declare Thy greatness . . . Thy saints shall speak of the glory of Thy kingdom and tell of Thy power, to make known to the sons of men Thy mighty deeds."  
(Psalm 145)

#### B. Do We Know the Message?

Is the cause of the silence of so many church members that they do no longer know what the message is that must be proclaimed?

In our time even ministers, church "leaders" seem to be uncertain about it. The newest fad is that Christians should not speak too much about their own faith (or whatever is left of it) but should rather sit down

and listen to other religions and try to appreciate other people's convictions. On many mission fields the Christian message is lost because modern-day mission is supposed to find common ground with paganism. The apostolic message is replaced by the idea of "horizontalism." We have to be "man for the other."

The message of the Scriptures, however, is unalterable! Methods of communication may need some change but the message remains the same. And it is the only message the world of our day needs. We have to proclaim Jesus Christ the same way Paul and the other apostles did. The Christ of the New Testament Who is the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Our first task is not to distribute "Christian principles" for industry, business and labour, although the Christian message includes good tidings for the whole of life. But Paul had only one thing in mind when he arrived in Corinth: "Jesus Christ crucified." He died for our sins; that's what a sinner must hear. Because he is a sinner, indeed. Whatever may be true in the thesis that "man has become of age," he is still the old sinner. He lives under the wrath of God and must be told. He is a slave of sin, he is not really free and we must point that out to him. He is helpless, completely helpless to do anything for his own salvation, and he must learn to realize that. Man is "*sin-sick*" however affluent our society may be. That was the message of Jesus Christ to the rich young man, of Peter to the crowd on Pentecost Day, and of Paul to the Philippian jailer. The message is the call to repentance and surrender, the call to the obedience of faith.

Reformed people find a wonderful help for proclaiming this message in their *Reformed Creeds*. The Confession of Faith deals, in the first place, with the source of the message, the Infallible Word of God. Then it proclaims God as the Triune. No one who denies this doctrine can be saved. In the following articles we find a clear and scriptural confession about creation, man, his fall into sin, the coming of Jesus Christ, the true Church in distinction from the false church, and finally, judgment day.

The Catechism brings the same message in the form of the unsurpassable "trinity" of sin — salvation — service.

The Canons confess the sovereignty of God in the redemption of the sinner. How beautiful that first chapter is, especially with regard to Mission, Foreign and Home Mission! Some people seem to have trouble with the doctrine of predestination and election as soon as they think about evangelism. But this doctrine is our only hope, precisely with a view to evangelism. If we did not know that God had elected an innumerable multitude from fallen mankind, everything would be hopeless. But now we know that the number will be full and that the Lord realizes His election by way of our preaching and witness.

The Reformed Creeds contain the most beautiful "complete doctrine of salvation." That does not mean that, in evangelism, we can do without the Bible! What a foolish thing to say. Creeds, Confessions, do only one

thing: they point to the Scriptures; there you find in fullness what we say here in a modest summary.

### C. *Is It Our Job?*

I will not repeat what has been said in previous chapters but we must (with Dr. Stott) once more consider this important question. It cannot be denied that still many church people think (though they may not say it): "Can't we leave the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified to others? We have a minister, haven't we? We should have a good committee and they should be active so that we can proudly say, 'Our church does a lot of evangelism.' Or let's appoint an evangelist, let's pay his salary and let him be the mouthpiece of the church to outsiders."

We do not reject the idea of having a special "evangelist" (I plan to return to it) but the people of God can never shift the duty from their own shoulders to those of "others." The church, that is, the congregation, is the evangelizing agency *par excellence*.

Yes, we should be humble. We are at the bottom of the list.

First God Himself proclaimed the Gospel in paradise.

Then He sent angels, and prophets.

Finally He sent His Son to make the Father known.

After Him the Holy Spirit came to convince the world of sin and salvation.

The apostles became His instruments and established churches; they were the gift of Christ to the saints (Ephesians 4).

And, finally, we appear on the scene as the royal priesthood of God, to proclaim . . . .

We are at the bottom.

But let's not minimize our calling. God could have easily done *without* us. But He did not and He does not.

The Scriptures make abundantly clear that "it is our job."

From Stott's booklet we borrow the following references. They are only a few from a multitude.

The first one is already well-known to us. Peter, in quoting Moses, calls God's people a holy priesthood (I Peter 2:5, 9). It should have our attention that the apostle ascribes a *two-fold* mandate to all God's people. In verse 5 he tells them, us, that we have to "offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You may call this "worship"; we do that on Sunday in our church meetings. But that is not all. In verse 9 Peter repeats the great names for God's people and then continues, "that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him Who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light." Some seem to identify this "to declare" with the words of verse 5, "offer spiritual sacrifices." In other words they say that this "declare" also takes place in the church service, by singing

and praying. This is a misunderstanding. Other translations are: "tell forth, show forth, make known." *Dr. S. Greijdanus* translates it by "*naar buiten boodschappen*." An "eVangelist" is to be an "eXangelist" ("exangelein" is the verb that Peter uses here.) Again, *worship* and *witness* are considered inseparable.

The same is the case in those places where the New Testament calls the believers "witnesses." See Acts 1:8, John 4:14; 7:37-39 and many other instances. A special one is Philippians 2:15, 16. There we find the "whole program" of evangelism, so to speak. The first is, "Be blameless in the midst of a perverse generation." Be different, be separated. However, this attitude is not only negative but also positive: "You shine as lights in the world."

Then comes the third part: "holding fast the word of life." We are inclined to interpret these words as an admonition to keep the confession of the church pure for inside use. But "holding fast" should be read as "holding forth." Let's again listen to *Dr. Greijdanus*. He translates, "*naar voren houden*" so that others can "see" it. Other translations are: "offering to men the message of life" (20th Century New Testament); "holding out to them the word of life" (New Testament in Modern Speech); "for you are to them the light of life (translation: Lamsa).

The picture is clear. Paul's words are not part of an address to theological students or a ministers' conference; he wrote them to the whole congregation. It is not enough to live a godly life; every Christian has to offer to men the message of life. It is indeed "our job."

Stott mentions some more aspects. The Lord Jesus said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 17:18; 20:21). Jesus Christ did not remain in heaven. He came into this world and identified with this world. He touched the untouchables. He did not "shout over the fence" but went out where the shipwrecks were. Christians should not be like rabbits who peer out of their holes, sometimes venture to get out, stricken with fear, but then run back and hide in their holes most of the time. Though they are not "of the world," their only legitimate place is "in the world."

In addition, the children of the kingdom are called the salt of the earth. Stott calls this "the holy wordliness of Christians." In the world, but as a holy nation. It has happened all too often that "outsiders" refused to become "insiders," not because it was their intention to reject the true Christ of the Scriptures but the Christ as they did or did not see Him in the Christians. A local church is (supposed to be) a redeemed community. Such a church is like a lighthouse in the community. "By Christian love, by friendship between the believers, and when they bear one another's burdens, people are attracted." "By this people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

It goes without saying that such a spectacle of love cannot be left to

the special office-bearers. This is the "job" of the whole congregation as a necessary pre-condition for evangelism.

It is revealing to compare John 1:18 and I John 4:12.

In the Gospel we read, "No one has ever seen God, the Only Begotten has revealed Him." But God's Son has returned to heaven. How can people now see the Father? The answer is in John's epistle. "No one has ever seen God (N.B.: exactly the same words, vD); if we love one another, God abides *in us*." The words "in us" should have all the stress: Now the Father can be seen when you see His children. And how do we give proof of that? By loving one another. In that way not only the Church of God but also the God of the Church becomes "visible."

That starts in the Christian home, which is the primary agency also in evangelism.

It is extended to the neighbourhood, where members of the same body have constant and loving contact with each other, gather around the Bible and invite others to share in their riches. Bible-study, however, is not enough. The relationship between Christians living in the same neighbourhood is also one of Christian service, which is never self-service.

From there on evangelism becomes "congregational." It is a matter of grassroots!

#### *D. Do we believe in results?*

We have met this question before. Dr. Stott considers it in detail in his book, *Our Guilty Silence*. For our purpose it will be sufficient to make only a few remarks in addition to previous ones.

The first one must be that evangelizing is, indeed, a very difficult work. It is in fact impossible as far as we are concerned. A person's heart must be changed and who can do that? Not even the person himself, who is by nature unwilling also.

The Holy Spirit has to do it. But we may add right away that He is willing to do it. We have the promise that He works by means of the Word of God, which is His Sword by which He cuts right into a sinner's obstinate heart.

Stott then speaks about revivals, i.e., about the undeniable fact that at certain times and at certain places there seems, all of a sudden, to be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Sinners stop sinning and openly confess their sins. Church members who have taken their membership for granted for years on end, suddenly become "hot" and are ashamed of their former lukewarm attitude. Works of love abound. Church buildings are too small for the crowds.

We know that not everyone has the same appreciation for these revivals. Reformed people are (should I say, by nature?) somewhat suspicious about the fast and numerous conversions. They fear that Arminian



and Methodistic tendencies took over and that the results will not last long.

Such suspicions are, at least partly, justified. If the true church is not built and gathered by such a movement, where is the lasting effect? If emotions run high, many people may feel deceived after the high tide of emotion subsides.

The day of Christ will reveal what they meant for His Church and Kingdom.

The point that Stott makes is that those people are wrong who say that it has no sense to start evangelism unless and until there comes such an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Revivals cannot be "made" or "ordered." They are God-sent and come at His bidding. From that point of view they are none of our business. Our business is to obey the command, described in previous paragraphs, which stands forever. Christians are not to wait for "special times" but have to be witnesses always. The results are left in God's hands.

Granted that there are special times of refreshing (who does not thirst for such a time?!), that does not mean that the Holy Spirit is inactive at other times. The Son once said that His Father works always; so did He Himself. Would not the same be true of the Holy Spirit?

Moreover, we should diligently search the Scriptures to learn more about what the Spirit is doing constantly. He convinces the world of sin. A very important part of evangelizing is preaching the demands of the *Law*. How can one convince others of sin unless the commandments of the LORD are being proclaimed? We cannot bypass the Law. Especially not in our day of changing codes and so-called "new morality."

The central testimony of the Holy Spirit is, indeed, the testimony of Jesus Christ. By preaching the full and glorious tiding of the Christ the apostles came "in the demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit." He is still the same, working conversion and regeneration by the proclamation of the Gospel according to His good-pleasure.

That last expression should not result in our saying, "Well, then I have to do nothing." On the contrary, it is His good-pleasure that faith be "multiplied" and that it be done by means of our witness.

Let God be God indeed! But know that His Word never returns empty and without result. If our witness is underlined by a truly Christian life and by constant prayer, we may expect fruits of the Spirit. That fruit may and will also be a hardening of hearts, "a fragrance from death to death," but for others our witness will be "a fragrance from life to life" (II Corinthians 2:16).

We will receive according to the measure of our faith.

Faith is built upon the promises of God. There is no promise that the whole world, or even the majority of mankind, will be saved. We know better. Such a faith is therefore not asked of us. But Scripture promises

that Jesus Christ will go on gathering His Church; that, if children of the Kingdom despise His grace, others will be called in and will answer that call so that the palace of the King will be filled. We have the promise that the gates of hell will not overpower the Church. Apostasy will be the cause of empty places, but those places will be filled by others. The biblical concept of "a remnant" must not lead us to the conclusion that heaven will remain half empty. It will be an innumerable multitude.

"Pessimism" and "optimism" are not the words we like to use here. The gathering of the Church is beyond both.

We have no doubt anymore that it is "our job" to hold forth the Word of God.

The love of Jesus Christ compels us.

We know the message; we have a word for the world.

We believe that God is still able to make from stones Abraham's children.

Can we then keep silent any longer?

I believe and therefore I speak "so that grace extends to more and more people."