

3. WHAT SHOULD HAVE PRIORITY: EITHER HOME MISSION OR FOREIGN MISSION?

That's our third dilemma.

All will agree with the use of the term "priority" as fitting in this context of mission. When leaving for the throne, our Risen Saviour gave His church "The Great Commission," (Matthew 28:18-20), "Go ye therefore . . ." For some this statement seems debatable. They are convinced that this "Great Commission" was given only to the apostles, and, consequently, they believe that this task was completed by the apostles. Paul went through the whole Roman Empire, although he never could realize his plan to go to Spain. Thomas is said to have gone to China, where, in some regions, there are still remnants of churches which refer to Thomas, as we refer to Paul. And the other apostles must also have gone "somewhere," "to the ends of the earth." The reader knows that the New Testament contradicts this. One example is Galatians 2 verses 1-10, from which we quote, "they . . . gave to me (Paul) and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised" (verse 9). Thus Paul, with his assistants, was "the apostle for the Gentiles," although he was not present among the circle of apostles, when the Lord Jesus gave that Great Commission. Because the Lord Jesus will not come back before "this Gospel of the Kingdom has been preached to all nations," (Matthew 24:14), the Christian Church is still engaged in fulfilling the Great Commission. This is a priority.

Although as churches we do not yet send out many "harvesters" (later more about this "harvesting"), we are happy to state the love for mission and the desire to do more — but . . . the labourers are few . . .

It is exactly with a view to this Commission that within Reformed circles heated debates have been held; the bone of contention being: "either/or" regarding Home Mission and Foreign Mission. Especially around the year 1923 this battle reached its climax — although it isn't dead yet.

A booklet was published contending that the Reformed Churches, if they would engage in the work of evangelism, would lose their Reformed identity. They would become "methodistic"; and more of the same kind. The only calling we would have towards our surroundings would be, to live a godly life, as mentioned in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 32, which we have quoted and discussed before. As to "evangelism," thus it was asserted, "the church doors are open!" and that's enough . . .

Apart from the fact that Reformed church doors are not that very much "open," and that visitors, instead of being welcomed are rather stared at and will not easily come back for a second time, apart from that, the present writer has never been able to understand how a Reformed person could say a thing like that, and then present it, and claim for it, a

really good Reformed position, solid and sturdy, instead of that sweet souls-winning business To us the statement “the church doors are open” is a totally UN-Reformed statement. One of our standards is the Canons of Dort. In them we confess that our salvation is totally dependent upon God’s sovereign initiative. If He had not chosen us, and come to us, we would never have come to Him! “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). We might as well quote the following words too, “but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.” These words were spoken to the disciples first, but are they not meant for us too? Think of all those wonderful words in the same chapter, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (verse 5). Only meant for the disciples?

The statement “the church doors are open,” means that people, if they want to come to church, to Christ, are free to do so. That is pure Arminian thinking! It is giving to sinners, to enemies of God the initiative to become believers! It is unbiblical too. “But how are men to call upon Him in Whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe Him of Whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14). Suppose that the God of John 3:16 had reasoned that way: instead of so loving the world that He sent His only Son, saying to us “while we were enemies”: the doors are open; if you want to come, you’re free to do so. But I am not going to come to you

Instead, however, of getting excited about that Arminian attitude, let’s return to dilemma number three: What comes first, Foreign Mission or Home Mission?

Let’s start with full agreement on the point that there is indeed a clear difference between the two. Foreign Mission reaches out to the ends of the earth, bringing the Good Tiding to those who have never yet heard of it. Home Mission reaches out to those, close by, who — either themselves or in their forefathers — have broken away from the church, are Covenant breakers, or children of the Kingdom who rejected the invitation to come to the wedding feast, compare Hebrews 6:4-6. One should, however, not turn this difference into a contrast, not even make the difference greater than it is.

In the first place, the Gentiles all come from the Ark of Noah; they are the descendants of him with whom the LORD established, or continued, His Covenant. In a wider sense one may say that those nations, as summed up in Genesis 10, live within the context of that Noachic Covenant. That is behind the word of our Saviour, quoted before from Matthew 24, that He cannot come back until the Gospel has been brought to all those nations. In doing so, God is remembering His Covenant with Noah. It is also the frame within which Paul preached on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17). “He (the ‘Unknown God’!) made from one (Adam or Noah) every nation of men

to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation (again: Genesis 10), that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after Him and find Him" (Acts 17:26, 27). But, while the LORD was preparing the coming of the Saviour within His chosen nation, all the other nations lived in ignorance. However, "the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world . . . etc. (verse 30ff.). In other words: God let you go your own ways in ignorance, but He did not forget you! Now, He even "overlooks" (other translation: "shuts His eyes for your passing follies"), and comes back, yes: "back" to you. Why? Because God felt Himself bound to His Covenant which started out as universal, and must again become universal.

We may conclude from such biblical givens (there are more) that also Foreign Mission must be seen within the frame of that universal Covenant. The "wall of partition" (Ephesians 2) was only for a time. If one wants, one may say: also Foreign Mission is a covenantal matter.

As to what we call Home Mission, we mentioned Hebrews 6:4-6, which does not make us very optimistic as to winning back those who have tasted the heavenly gifts, and then became apostates. We should not underestimate the severe impact of this word. But one should not forget, either, that we are surrounded by millions who have never really "tasted those gifts," who are as much "pagans" as those who live "down under." The point we try to make is that the difference between the two, Foreign Mission and Home Mission, is not an absolute one, but a relative one. This already should make us careful in making a "dilemma": either Foreign Mission or Home Mission.

There is more.

Recently we had occasion to make a renewed study of the Prayer Forms in our *Book of Praise*; possibly the least-known part of this book. It struck us that in nearly all of them urgent prayers are sent to the Mercy Seat for "those who have strayed from the flock." Well, if these prayers are meant as examples for us, and if we, therefore, pray for those who strayed from the church, we should not only pray but also work, and go after them, to seek the lost, thus following the example of the Good Shepherd.

How can, we ask, a church be "enthusiastic" about Foreign Mission among people at the other side of the globe, and at the same time be unconcerned for those living close by, whom we can reach without having to travel to the other side of the world, and without having to learn a foreign language? That would look like the attitude of the Pharisees who were (Matthew 23:15) criticized by the Lord, "you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte," but at the same time they were totally unconcerned about the crowds "who did not know the Law," while the Lord Jesus had so much compassion for them.

Concluding these remarks on the third "dilemma," we should agree with the brother who, once during a Mission meeting, gave the correct answer to the question, "What is the best support the home-church can give to Foreign Mission?" His answer was: by being fully active in Home Mission! No dilemma, no either/or but and/and; possibly not even priority of the one above the other!