

5. SHOULD WE NOT FIRST HAVE A GOOD, REFORMED, THEORY ON EVANGELISM BEFORE WE PRACTICE IT?

Although this question is not put in the “either/or” form, in fact it has, all too often, been made into a dilemma. It cannot be denied that the attitude, expressed in this question, and “betrayed” by it, has kept Reformed people from actually getting engaged in evangelism activities. There is sufficient willingness to “do something”; committees are formed or appointed, meetings are held, and then the questions multiply: *what* should we do now, and *how* should we do it? In the meantime not much, if anything, is being done.

No one should conclude that we do not see the need for a good “theory.” We would not have tried to give some guidelines in *Get Out!* if we were of the opinion that it does not matter how you do it, and that no principles are involved in evangelism. On the contrary.

Let’s have a look at those two words for a moment: “*theory*” and “*practice*.” They are not each other’s enemies but rather twins. “Theory” comes from the Greek verb that means: “to look at something,” while “practice” is directly related to the verb “*prattein*” or “*prassein*” which means: to do something.

Well, if you plan to *do* something (possibly a hobby), you are first going to have a good look *how* to do it. If you want to build a tower, you first sit down, have a look at the blueprints and figure out the costs. Nothing wrong with that — all for it. Thus, we need a good, a Reformed, theory, even a “theology of evangelism” as much as we need a “Reformed theology of Missions.” However, if we are going to wait for the completion, polishing and perfection of such a theory before we start doing anything, we fear the Lord will have returned before we have finished our theory! History teaches a number of lessons on that score.

Two examples will be sufficient to prove the point that “practice” cannot and will not wait till “theory” is perfected. There is first the tremendous expansion of the Early Church. We once read a thick volume on evangelism by the Early Church, but cannot at the moment lay our hands on it; sorry. What we remember best can be described in the following manner.

First, the expansion was tremendous. Second, it came spontaneously; and it was the work, not of the “clergy” or “the official church,” but of the Christians, the common members. Third, they simply *had* to talk about their faith, or rather about their Saviour, about “God so loving the world” They kept on being amazed about the “unbelievable” fact that God indeed had appeared on earth to save sinners. And thus, the mouth spoke from the abundance of the heart!

Did these early Christians have a “handbook” on evangelism? Did they have a smooth, well-rounded theory? We do not think so. There was that abundance in their hearts that flowed over into their witnessing to unbelievers. And thus the church grew.

The second example is the Reformation of the sixteenth century. It is well-known that men like Luther, Calvin and others did not do all the work that resulted in a change of the face of Europe. They trained people. Although there was quite a number of preachers who paid with their life, yet the great majority of the “martyrs” (from “*marturia*” which means, “witnessing”) were common people, bakers, blacksmiths, young women, etc. It has been said that the greatest expansion of the Reformation came from *singing*. People sang during their work, and in the streets, and certainly at the stake. Eternity will reveal how many have been won for Christ by the singing of the Psalms and other songs of the Reformation. But the fact is that every Christian (and there were not many church members during the persecution who were half-hearted, indifferent, hangers-on . . .) could not but speak out about the wonderful Tiding they themselves had received in their hearts.

Thus again the question, “did they have a good theory” on how to do it? We doubt it with good reason. But they felt compelled by the love of Christ, and simply had to speak about Him. The Gospel was a fire burning in them; it could not be contained within their hearts: the flames flared out.

The conclusion must therefore be, first, that we by all means should keep on studying, discussing, etc. on the right methods. But . . . if that would keep us from actually evangelizing, we might as well ask ourselves whether indeed our hearts are burning, even bursting with the love of Christ.

It could be that *there* lies the answer to the question why so often in Reformed circles conferences and congresses have been held, and we kept on talking about the a-b-c of evangelizing, while in the meantime the years rushed by and the time became shorter and shorter.

If “theory” means “looking at something that has to be done,” then let’s look at the Cross, at the love of God in Jesus Christ, at ourselves as not better than anyone else in this world, and that “theory” might, under God’s blessing, result in intensive “practice.”

But an “alternative,” an “either/or”? Never!