

7. ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS "SOW THE SEED"; IT IS NONE OF OUR BUSINESS WHETHER IT BEARS FRUIT; HARVEST TIME COMES LATER.

If anyone would have thought some of the previous dilemmas a bit far-fetched, he will certainly not say that of this dilemma: What is evangelism: "*sowing*" or "*harvesting*?" Among Reformed people the usual answer one can hear is, that we have as the only task to sow the seed of the Gospel, like in the broadcast, "The Voice of the Church." We bring the message — it is up to the hearer to react to it positively or negatively.

As with all (false) dilemmas, also this one contains elements of truth. In one of His parables our Saviour speaks about the farmer, who sowed seed in his field, and then went about other business, went to sleep, and the seed grew: "The Kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow *he knows not how*" (Mark 4:26, 27).

Even a stronger case for "only sowing" is what Paul writes, I Corinthians 3:6, 7: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but *only God Who gives the growth.*" We are all aware of this humiliating truth. Parents have brought up their children in the fear of the LORD, and behold, one or more of their children are like Esau. Preachers, missionaries experience the same. They labour and labour; they preach and teach, and sometimes they ask despairingly, where are the fruits!? The present writer has known, in his youth, a missionary who was in the field for forty years (in those days missionaries still spent their whole ministry on the mission field!) and did not see any fruits. He had nearly lost his faith when he retired. Only later, during his successors, came the fruits, and they came in abundance.

One may have heard the remark, "the minister can bring the Gospel no father than the ear, the Holy Spirit must bring it to the heart." Starting with this remark, one should note that also here a false dilemma may be pinned down. When the Word of God is preached, it is the Sword of the Holy Spirit; one should not put asunder what God has joined together. God's Word never returns empty; it either softens or hardens the heart of those who hear. "To one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (II Corinthians 2:16).

Yes, indeed, the secret of "how" the seed sprouts and grows is hidden. But that should not cause us to separate "sowing" from "harvesting!" The above-given quotation from Mark 4 was not complete! Verse 29 continues: "But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the *harvest* has come." It is the same farmer who sows and who harvests. He may "sleep" during the sprouting time, but certainly not

during the harvest. The harvest will not arrive in the barn if he would say to himself, "because only God gives the growth, I better leave it to Him to also bring in the harvest . . ." His barns would remain empty and the grain would rot in the field.

There is, however, more.

It is incorrect to give (or have) the impression as though the Bible gives to us only the task to sow; and then grants us permission to turn around, and leave what is going to happen to that seed completely alone, without any concern of ours.

Let us start with John 4, the well-known chapter about the Samaritan woman. Jesus Himself had sown the seed in her heart and she hastily passed it on to her fellow-citizens. They came out in crowds. Then, verse 35ff., "Do you not say, 'there are yet four months, then comes the harvest!' I tell you, lift up your eyes and see how the fields are already white for harvest (meaning the crowds that came from the city, many of whom believed in Him, verses 30 and 39, vD). He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruits for eternal life, *so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.*" No separation, let alone contrast, between the sower and the reaper; they are joined together and rejoice together. Then the Saviour continues, "For here the saying holds true, 'one sows and another reaps.' *I sent you to reap(!!!)* that for which you did not labour; others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour." But the result is, must, and may be, that "sower and reaper may rejoice together!"

It is pure fantasy to assert that God's Word gives us as our only task to sow the seed, and that — as a consequence — the harvest is "not our business"; maybe even "none of our business." Sure, it is tempting to put it that way. It seems to make our task much easier: just spread a good word here and there, now and then, and let's wait till judgment day to see if it did any good to any one. But it is not right, not true!

In order to prevent the reaction that we are founding our case (i.e., that harvesting also belongs to our task) on only one or two texts, here are some more. The first to be mentioned is nearly literally the same as was quoted from John 4; yet, it was spoken at a different occasion. Matthew 9:37, 38, "Then He said to His disciples; 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest *to send out labourers into the harvest.*'" We are not only sent into the sowing; especially not when we keep in mind that these words were preceded by "He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd." Indeed, this is a different figure of speech, but both complement each other. The harvest is also the gathering of the sheep into the one flock of the Good Shepherd. No one will deny that the Good Shepherd delegated this gathering to "under-shepherds," though it remains His work (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21). In the parable about the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24ff.) there is again

the same mandate, "gather the wheat into my barn." One may say, but does this not refer to judgment day (cf. verse 30) "let both grow together until the harvest-time"? It cannot be denied. But as little as the gathering of the church will only take place at judgment day but has gone on "from the beginning of the world" (Lord's Day 21), as little are we allowed to derive from this word the conclusion that all harvesting can and will be postponed till that final day. The point of this parable is that we cannot *now* pull the church out of the world: both the church and world grow together until the harvest.

Similar words are found in Luke 10:2 and 12:17 (although the latter one presents a different situation; the point is that also this farmer did both sowing and reaping). Paul wanted to come to Rome, not only to do some sowing, but "in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well" (Romans 1:13). In II Corinthians 9:6 he follows the example of the Master and also combines sowing and reaping, "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." Paul does indeed speak here about charity, but the point is again that the same person who sows, also reaps.

The same is the case in Galatians 6:8 and 9. ". . . but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart." This last text is referred to, not because we would claim that it speaks about evangelism, but to underline that if we want to reap, we should "not grow weary" nor "lose heart."

We trust that from these words of Scripture the conclusion may be drawn that the dilemma between "either sowing or reaping" is a false one. We recall the words of *Webster's Dictionary*, "if indeed we would have to choose between "either/or," *both* would be disagreeable and unfavourable"; and we add: also "unfruitful."

The complaint is often heard that, although "of course" we must "do something" in evangelism, it hardly helps — are there any results, any fruits? Well, if indeed "sowing" is our only task, and we need not be concerned about harvesting, this may seem to make it easy, but at the same time we "get weary" and "lose heart." Is that maybe the reason that there are hardly any fruits? We believe so.

Our Saviour cannot be misunderstood when He says to us, "You will receive according to the measure of your faith." His most common reproach of His disciples was, "Oh ye men of little faith!" Here is reason for self-examination. In what frame of mind are we doing evangelistic work (if we do it)? Do we really expect results? Do we really go out, not just to sow the seed, but to reap and to bring some harvest into the barn?

If among us the general attitude would be, "we have to do it, but let's not be too optimistic about any results," we might as well never start, but

save our energy for things we believe in. And that's exactly what many of us are doing.

They do not believe in evangelism (we assume that everyone understands this expression; we use it daily for all kinds of things). They believe in Christian education, but not in witnessing. Others would very much like to "believe in witnessing," but they are "weary" and "lose heart," and thus disqualify themselves for this work of harvesting. We will receive according to the measure of our faith. If we take the attitude that rather others should do this work, and bring many to the Only Name, the church will discover that she may also lose faith in Christian education, even in the power of preaching. And thus the church would wither.

Rejecting this seventh dilemma, we should say a few words about follow-up work. We could say much, but that would become another booklet.

Discussing the dilemma "sowing or reaping," the Vacation Bible School (VBS) may be used as an example of the need for "follow-up." If the only attention we give to these children consists of telling them some Bible stories during the summer, the only benefit may be that the parents of these children have a few quiet weeks, the mothers anyway. The purpose should rather be to reach the parents via their children. The simplest form is to conclude the VBS with a meeting to which all parents are invited, where something of the work the children did can be shown, but foremost appeal to the parents to continue what the VBS tried to do; offer help in providing biblical reading material; even offer some form of lasting relationship throughout the year. In our congregation this is done by a monthly "Link" magazine, while during the Christmas holidays a meeting with the VBS children and their parents is organized.

This is just a simple example of follow-up work which, when done in faith, may cause the "sower and reaper to rejoice together." This method can be applied to the distribution of the printed "Voice of the Church," spreading of other literature and so on.

Why is such follow-up work necessary? Because, if a person shows initial interest in the Gospel, and starts to open his heart (because "the Lord opened that heart to give heed to" the Gospel, Acts 16:14), all kinds of questions, problems, conflicts pop up. One cannot just leave a person with the message that Jesus Christ died for sinners. If even a man like Apollos, who was not only "an eloquent man" but also "well versed in the Scriptures" needed more, how then not a person who is not well-versed in the Scriptures, who hardly knows where to find the Psalms and the letter to the Romans?! Apollos had "been instructed in the way of the Lord" (Acts 18:25). Yet, "when Aquila and Priscilla heard him, they took (!) him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (verse 26).

If we as Reformed people have our doubts about mass-suggestion in revival meetings where people are pressed into instant conversion, and

then usually are left to themselves, we should be convinced of the need for much and patient follow-up work to expound to anyone who shows interest, the way of the Lord more accurately. This is a good transition to the next "dilemma."

But before we do that, we should for a moment come back to the remark, made previously, that in Acts 5 Luke does not write, "multitudes were added *by* the Lord," but they were added "*to* the Lord." Already the variation in translations should refrain us from blowing this distinction up to a contrast: "not 'by' but 'to' . . ." Apart from doctrinal considerations, Scripture itself states emphatically that faith is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-10) and the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Word; thus we confess in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25.

As far as translation is concerned, the order of words in the Greek original could cause us to choose for the NASB, "And all the more believers in the Lord . . . were constantly added." Luke had concluded chapter two of Acts with the well-known words, "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." Thus the Lord does the "adding."

This glorious truth, however, does not justify the conclusion that we have nothing to do with it. It has pleased the Lord to engage human beings in His gathering of the believers. To the disciples the Lord Jesus promised that "he who abides in Me, and I in him, *he it is that bears much fruit*, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Although all the life-giving "juice" comes from the vine, it is through the branches that the fruits grow! The Lord works faith in the hearts of our children, but parents are obliged to "bring their children to Jesus."

The parable of the great feast speaks of servants who not only get the task to deliver invitations, but to "bring them in." Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus (John 1:45ff.). Jude even writes, "And convince some who doubt; *save some* (!) by snatching them out of the fire . . ." (verses 22, 23).

The number of a dozen dilemmas would be doubled (as we could see time and again already) if we would turn — assuming that the RSV translation is acceptable — the "*by* the Lord" and "*to* the Lord" into an "either/or." We should leave it as the Scriptures describe it: "and/and." The vine produces the fruits, but the branches bear the fruits. *Without* Him they can do nothing, indeed. But *with* Him they can do much. "I can do all things in Him Who strengthens me," Philippians 4:13.