

8. DO WE HAVE TO PREACH THE *GOSPEL* OR INSTRUCT IN THE *SCRIPTURES*?

Again an "either/or." At first glance one may be surprised to learn that this is also considered a dilemma. Some further explanation will take this surprise away.

The idea behind it is that evangelism, as the word says, means to bring the "evangel" as Christ commanded His apostles, "go ye therefore, evangelize all nations" (Matthew 28:18). This "evangel" can, then, be written on a nickel: "Jesus came into the world to save sinners; believe and you will be saved." Is that all we have to preach? Of course not! The problem, however, is how do we go from there, i.e., how do we proceed with a person who seems to be ready, or is in fact ready to receive Jesus Christ as the only Saviour?

Anyone who has ever been engaged in the work of evangelism, knows that then a necessary but difficult task lies before us. There are, of course, differences. When Paul preached during his journey, he could nearly always start in the synagogue, meeting people who knew the Scriptures, the promises of the Messiah; and then declare: I may tell you, the Messiah has come, and He died and rose again. Then, as in Beroea, people went home and "examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). The apostle followed here the method of the Master Who went with the two men on their way to Emmaus: "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

This method cannot be used on the Foreign Mission field, where people have never heard of the living God, let alone about His Covenant with Abraham and the history of revelation and redemption. Missionary preaching cannot be discussed here; it is only mentioned as quite different from the situation in which Paul found himself, amid Jews and proselytes who knew the Scriptures.

Our "objects of evangelism" (some expression!) may be somewhere in between these two "extremes." They come from a background which, if you go back far enough, in many cases was a religious one. They have swerved from the way of life. They are children and grandchildren of people who had grown indifferent to the glorious message. Still, they are not total strangers to Church, Bible, Gospel, Christianity. They must be called "back" lest they perish forever. They know the Name of Jesus Christ, maybe only from swearing, and must be called "back" to the way of the LORD, the way of the Covenant. The Bible must become for them the Lasting Food, the daily guide.

Think for a moment of your own children, your own youth. You were born in a Christian home; your parents taught you to pray, they read the

Bible to you. You, most of you, went to a Christian School, then attended catechism classes for seven, eight years before you were ready to publicly profess your faith and be admitted to the Lord's Table. Even then you were probably, and hopefully, told that you were only at the beginning yet. If you wanted to grow in the Lord, to grow spiritually, you should continue to earnestly study the Scriptures, attend Bible study societies, attend church regularly — and even after all those years of instruction, how often does one not become disappointed about the low level on which many church members live, as far as Scripture knowledge and depth of spiritual life is concerned!

How then about our "objects of evangelism?" They did not have such a young life; they are far behind; have to catch up a long distance to arrive at the level where the average believer lives, should live anyway. The conclusion is therefore obvious: this dilemma "either the Gospel or the Scriptures" must be rejected out of hand.

Most assuredly, we must start with the call to repentance, the call to surrender to Jesus Christ. But most of these "objects" will hardly know what you are talking about. Thus we must "further expound the way of the Lord." This cannot mean that we suggest to him or her, to start reading the Bible in Genesis 1 and continue till Revelation 22 is reached. Not only that this would take years, but the person will soon get lost in that very same Bible. The present writer once tried this advice, just to find out how it would work. The man, from Romanist background, hardly able to speak English, got stuck already in Genesis 2: "What in the world is this all about?" Thus we must begin with a guide, a summary, like the Catechism, or even the Compendium, to give them a general idea of "the complete doctrine of salvation."¹

Under a previous heading we have discussed the dilemma: "Is evangelism the task either of the office-bearers or of the congregation?" It is not an either/or but an and/and. As believers we all should reach out to save some from eternal death. We should "take them to Church," but this should not only mean, invite them to accompany us to the Church service on the Lord's Day. That would already be quite something, because it would mean to help the person afterward to understand the sermon ("further explain," just as it is the parents' task to do that to their children, after church). But when our Saviour, speaking about discipline, used the words, "if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church" (Matthew 18:17), He meant with "church" the overseers (Heidelberg Catechism,

¹ We once attended a Church which provides two courses, each lasting six hours; the first, "A walk through the Old Testament"; the second, "A walk through the New Testament."

Lord's Day 31, Answer 85: "or those who are thereunto appointed by the church").

Because "discipline" essentially means "training for discipleship" (and we should train ourselves to think of it that way, the positive way), we would like to hear in the words of our Saviour also the mandate that, if we find someone placed on our way who is not averse from the Good Tiding, we should bring him or her "to the church" so that they may be trained to become true disciples of Jesus Christ.

This would include quite some more than repeating John 3:16, "For God so loved the world . . ." Christ is the Christ of the Scriptures. In order to know Him, one must know the Scriptures. Although a mature believer is considered able to do much of this "further explaining" — if this person wants to become a believer, he will (have to) become a member of the body of Christ, His Church. One cannot bring a person to Christ without also bringing him to the church. And that's where the elders of the church enter the picture. If it is for real, a young believer will be eager and hungry for more knowledge of his new-found Saviour. Thus teaching starts as the way to public profession of faith.

Preparation for this profession of newly won "souls" should be the same as for covenant-children. Although, at first, a separate and special class or group may be advisable, they should as soon as possible join the regular pre-confession class.

Having said all this we should not underestimate, let alone overlook, the power and work of the Holy Spirit Who, once having opened a heart, is able and willing to illuminate the heart that was dark not so long ago, and work mightily, so that the young convert need not go through as many years as our children, before they are admitted to the Lord's Table. However, we should keep the standards high. A young believer will only appreciate that, and receive the opportunity that his new-found love for his Saviour urges him to know about Him as much as possible; and only the Scriptures can tell him that.

Concluding the discussion of this "dilemma," we may once more refer to the Early Christian Church. From the fact that it "exploded" by the enthusiastic witness of its members, one should not derive that this growth can in any way be compared with the "easy" and instant mass-conversions that seem to be the result of today's mass-revival meetings.

The so-called Church Fathers had set up a solid, even intricate system for the admission of new believers. They were called "*catechumens*." They had to go through successive courses and steps which altogether took at least two years before full membership was granted. This period of preparation to be added to the Church was not only necessary for intensive teaching, but equally for a not less intensive "testing." The candidate for membership had to show in his and her life that they were fully prepared to commit their whole life to the Lord, even if it would bring martyrdom.

Yet, history tells that this strict system did not repel them, but rather attracted them the more. This seems to be a general rule. To be admitted to the Communist inner circle of full party membership means first to go through a rigorous training. In so-called primitive religions the young person also has to submit to rigorous, often painful preparations before being admitted to the full rights and rites of the tribe. Should, then, joining the army of King Christ be made easy? It could even be that the lack of serious demands upon the candidates for membership is one of the reasons that evangelism has not born such fruits, and lasting fruits, as everyone of us would hope and pray for.

Let us learn that lesson, and thus get rid of the dilemma between "only the Gospel" or "the complete doctrine of salvation." In one respect we should not imitate the example of the Early Church. Up till the moment of full acceptance the candidates were kind of kept outside the "inner circle," for example in that they were not permitted to stay in church when the Holy Supper was celebrated. Even if a person has only shown the first signs of interest, he should feel the warmth of the motherly arms of Mother Church.