

9. SHOULD WE IN EVANGELISM APPROACH ONLY UNBELIEVERS OR ALSO MEMBERS OF OTHER CHURCHES?

Although this is not a “dilemma” in the strict sense of “either/or,” we deal with this here because it came up in the discussion at one of the meetings mentioned before, and gave the start to quite some pros and cons. The first need is to make clear what we understand by the terms “unbelievers” and “members of other churches.”

If we take the Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 21 strictly, we agree that true faith is in the first place a sure knowledge of *all* that God has revealed in His Word. This “knowledge” is, when considered in the light of what follows in the same answer, certainly more than an “intellectual” agreement with the contents of the Scriptures. That becomes clear in the following answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, Question 22; “What is, then, necessary for a Christian to believe?” Answer: “ALL that is promised in the Gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.”

Before someone says, “But, the Catechism speaks here “only” of the “promises of the Gospel” we would remind him, that the Twelve Articles start with Creation, Genesis 1, and conclude with Everlasting Life, Revelation 22. The conclusion must be: the “all” in this answer means the same as in Answer 21: the full contents of the whole Bible from beginning to end. Someone who picks out of the Scriptures a part here and a portion there, is, according to Reformed conviction, not a true believer.

Someone, like a Jehovah’s Witness, may flood you with many texts, in order to demonstrate that he (also) believes the Bible, but he falls under the condemnation, which we uphold in the Athanasian Creed, “which faith except every one do keep, whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” And further on, “He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.” And, coming to the two natures of Christ, this Creed states unblushingly, “Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also rightly believe . . . , etc.” And again, at the end, “This is the catholic faith which, except a man believes faithfully, he cannot be saved.”

All this may sound harsh, but everyone who knows his Bible, also knows that these so-called “condemnatory clauses” rest squarely on the Scriptures. “He who does not have the Son, does not have the Father”; “he who denies the Father and the Son, is the antichrist” (I John 2:22) and so many other teachings, especially in the writings of John. One could mention other biblical doctrines, like the Virgin Birth, but the heart of the Christian faith is The Triune God, and the God-man Jesus Christ. If we

really want to evangelize in a Reformed way, we should not start by denying the heart of our faith.

Are so-called liberals, Arminians, Bible-critics “true-believers?” But what, then, about not-so-true “believers” who confess to believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour, while they “cannot” (so they say) believe everything of the Bible? We are not to judge individuals, but we should be strongly convinced that such “believers” are going in a terribly dangerous direction, and — if we meet such a person — it is certainly our calling to warn him, and to call him to a humble submission to *all* the Scriptures. The Bible is one, and thus it is all or (in the end) nothing!

We are not telling you anything new when we state that there are millions of people who “believe something”; they “believe that there is a God,” that “death is not the end”; “that we are not perfect,” but does their “faith” show the picture of Answer 21 of the heidelberg Catechism? We certainly have a calling towards those people, when the LORD causes us to meet them, thus making them our “neighbours.” How much more, then, must we be concerned about one who is commonly called an “unbeliever?”

From what has been said above one may already conclude that our answer to the question whether we should also “seek” such who are “members of other churches” is in the affirmative. In the first place — but we need not discuss that here — we should strive for the unity of all true believers, for which our Lord prayed (John 17).

They said, “Let us with one accord
Go to the temple of the LORD.”

Psalm 138

Second, we must keep in mind that there is a great variation in churches. We may not agree with every word of the Westminster Confession, chapter XXV, the truth of the following words cannot be denied, “Particular churches . . . are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught, and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.” There are no perfect churches without “mixture and error,” but “some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ but synagogues of Satan.”

Again, one may not agree with every word and expression, but the fact is that there are, to mention just one example, Baptist Churches which, though wrong in the matter of infant baptism, desire to preach and hear nothing but the Word of God. One simply cannot and should not put them on the same level with “churches” where Bible criticism reigns supreme, where so-called Horizontalism has replaced the redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ and where discipline simply does not exist but everyone is admitted to the use of the sacraments.

We do not deny that we should try to convince a Baptist believer of his error re: infant baptism, but his conviction is not a conscious rejection

of God's Word; rather a lack of right understanding of the same, in one respect. We hasten to add that this one misunderstanding easily breeds more.

Next to this calling we should, without much discussion, all agree that if we want to be Reformed in our evangelism — we have a grave responsibility towards all who belong to a "church" which clearly shows the marks of the false church, as described in Article 29 of the Confession of Faith. On Pentecost Day Peter warned the young believers, "And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation'" (Acts 2:40). That "crooked generation" went to the temple, continued to bring sacrifices as though there had been no Cross on Golgotha. The believers should resolutely break all connections with what had become a false church.

We think we should read Article 28 of the same Confession of Faith in this light. We find in this article the well-known but also much-discussed expression, "and outside of it there is no salvation" (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, an old Christian adage). Part, or rather one aspect of this clause is, the way we see it, that one is not really "safe" in such a church. Article 28 (one should read the whole article) is addressed, in the first place, to those believers who, for whatever reason, had stayed behind in the Romanist Church. They did not agree with its superstitions, even less with the persecution of the "heretics," but they did not, and did not dare to, join the church of the Reformation. Article 28 is a loving and urgent appeal to them. "You are bound to join and unite yourselves with this congregation of Christ." "Bow your necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ" and find rest for your souls. Are you afraid? Do you think of your parents and grandparents who always belonged to the Church of Rome? Do you fear loss of property, even persecution? Do not fear! Join us, "even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though you should suffer death or any other corporal punishment." Because, if you do not "separate from all those who do not belong to the church," you "act contrary to the Word of God," and you are not "safe," you endanger your eternal salvation and that of your children. Thus our fathers spoke. Thus sons of the Reformation must speak, if they want to remain faithful to their Confession of Faith.

We have now mentioned two "extremes" so to speak, the Calvinistic Baptists on the one hand, the Romanists on the other hand. Without calling more churches by their names, we trust to find agreement with the reader, that there is a whole "scale" of churches in between these extremes. Some have since long fallen away from the standards of a true and faithful church; others have still retained several elements of biblical truth, and yet go into a direction which, we fear, might lead them to further decline, even apostacy. These undeniable facts are "caught" by the Westminster Confession of Faith in the words "more or less pure."

Some may object to this formula and to the distinction between "more or less pure churches." We have, however, the impression that this objection comes exactly from those who use this distinction for "their" own churches within the one Federation!! One who is not a stranger in Jerusalem, knows what we are talking about. One sister-church (or members thereof) weigh other sister-churches and the result is that the one is more "pure" than the other. Mind you, we would not deny that this may be the case. The one local church may be more faithful in upholding the marks of the true Church than the other, but if that is already possible within one Federation of sister-churches, how much more would it not be true of all those churches around us, if we do justice to the facts. They certainly are not all on one and the same level of obedience and/or disobedience to the Word of God. The Lord is just in His judgment!

Let's, however, return to the issue at hand, which is whether we should approach only outspoken unbelievers, or also "members of other churches." Our answer, after all that has been said, is a clear "Yes!"

Let us, for a moment, meditate on the name the churches, to which the present writer belongs, have chosen — "Canadian Reformed Churches." We are, as far as we know, the *only* churches who have the word "Canadian" in our name. Others may have "in Canada" or "of Canada," but "Canadian" . . . , no. Looking outside our borders, for example, at The Netherlands, there was and is a church, which originally was a "state-church" and, accordingly, calls itself the "Nederlands Hervormde Kerk"; translated, it would be the "Dutch Reformed Church." It is the church not *in* but *of* that country. Which, of course, is incorrect. It is the Church of Jesus Christ, "not of this world" but living *in* a certain country.

An attempt to change that name (in 1962) failed and for obvious reasons. Thus, we are saddled with that name. It should, at least, mean that we want to be the home for all true believers in our country, because, in addition to calling ourselves "Canadian," we uphold the pretension, the claim that we are *the* (only!?) True Church in Canada.

If we really mean that, and we assume so in the spirit of love, we should make an all-out effort to gather, with Jesus Christ (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 21, Answer 54) all God's children into unity with us. We can only do that when and if we "show our face" as churches in such a way that others (not we) say, "Yes, that church there is something special; we want to belong to it!" These "others" would, of course, be and have to be true believers. We are not allowed to say (although our attitude sometimes betrays that we think that way), "let them stay where they are"

Becoming "attractive" for other believers (c.f. the dilemma "repulsive or attractive") means not only that "the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church," Confession of Faith, Article 29. It also concerns "those who are

members of the church, they may be known by the *marks of the Christians*: namely by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Saviour, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof" (same Article 29). In short, the members bear "the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22). Who would dare to suggest that in the eyes of our God the marks of the Christian are less important than the marks of the Church?

One who is steeped in the teachings of the late Dr. K. Schilder regarding the church, will agree with us that the church is never, should never become, frozen in its life and attitude, but always be "on the go," always fully alive in gathering with Jesus Christ. The church is never an "already-business," always a "not-yet-business." Never "arrived" before the Day of Christ's return. If she would take that attitude before that Day, she would become "frozen," easily frozen to death.

The conclusion is that there always remains a tremendous challenge and task for us. Even — however terrible that would be — in case we would hardly ever "add to the Lord" (Acts 5) those who pass from darkness to light, we may not fold our hands in our lap, or rather keep our mouth shut. We must convince other believers who are not "safe" in the church to which they now belong, because they do not hear the "pure preaching of the Gospel," of their predicament. They belong to a community where discipline is neglected and where not "all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected" (Confession, Article 29).

In short, we must warn them that they are in danger of sliding back with the crowd; that they endanger the future of their beloved children. They must be told that they "act contrary to the ordinance of God" (Article 28). For their soul's salvation they must "join and unite themselves" with the true church.

It goes without saying that all this has to be done in "love, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness" (Galatians 5:22), and not in a harsh and condemnatory manner, which so easily gives us the appearance of a holier-than-thou attitude. We would repel instead of attract brothers and sisters in the Lord with whom we would so very much like to sit at the same Table of the Lord. The end of the matter is, no dilemma of "either unbelievers or members of apostate churches." Seek to gather both into the sheepfold of Christ.