

11. "WHAT IS THE REASON FOR OUR BEING AFRAID TO 'GET OUT!,' A LACK OF BIBLE KNOWLEDGE LIKE MORMONS AND JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES HAVE, OR ARE THERE OTHER REASONS?"

The quotation marks indicate that this was a question during one of the meetings where some of the "dozen dilemmas" were analyzed. Thus it is not a "dilemma" in the proper sense. It contains, however, an "either/or" and as such may find a place in our list of dilemmas.

The answer to this question is not so easy to give. First, there are a number of presuppositions in this question which deserve a closer look. It is stated that "we, i.e., Reformed people, are afraid to 'Get Out.'" No one should deny that this statement contains elements of truth, although we should first try to decide whether this "being afraid" is a natural, necessary aspect of being Reformed, or not.

When one looks at the history of the people who find their root in the Great Reformation, one certainly cannot say that they were afraid to get out. On the contrary. The Reformation gave a great impetus to getting out, even to the ends of the world. The first motivation in the so-called Golden Century may have been to "conquer the world" and establish a world-wide empire. From the tiny country, a speck on the globe, Dutch ships sailed, and could be found all over the world. They established a colonial empire in the East Indies, a somewhat smaller one in the West Indies. They sailed around the Cape and even established New Amsterdam, which is now called New York, because the Dutch regents saw no future there . . . and sold the whole business for a penny. If they had held on, the language of the present United States could have been Dutch

Yet, to do justice, it should be remembered that on every ship there was a preacher, not only for the crew, but to establish the Christian religion in faraway countries. The missionary methods were not always perfect, but that could be said of all missionary methods of those days. The Synod at Dort, 1618/19 did more than write the Five Articles against the Arminians! They also busied themselves seriously with missionary problems. One may only mention the long discussion on the baptism of young people who were "adopted" as servants in the homes of the explorers.

Afraid of "getting out?" It may have been true of all kinds of spiritualistic sects, like the Anabaptists, but certainly not of the children of the Reformation. They changed the face of the greater part of Europe, and later of parts of other continents. This expansionism was part and parcel of the Reformed life- and world-view. "The earth is the LORD's," (Psalm 24). "All authority has been given unto Me" (Matthew 28:18).

Thus we see a similar trend in the nineteenth century. Although the Secession of 1834 in its first decades may have been embroiled in inner conflicts, after that a tremendous growth occurred, and when combined with the second Reformation of that century, the Doleancy in 1886, the Reformed Faith and life took great steps forward to changing the face of the country. Even to such an extent that, for a time, the majority of the National Cabinet consisted of sons of the Reformation.

The explanation for these historical developments must be sought in the fact that Reformed Faith is not confined to "saving souls" but it wants to put its stamp on all aspects or "spheres" of life. The establishment of the Free University in Amsterdam was the clear expression of this desire.

When we, therefore, speak about a "Reformed Witness," we should not only think of evangelism in the narrower sense of winning people for Christ, unless this "winning" is understood as winning them for committing themselves to their new Lord in the whole of their lives, as workers, as citizens, as scientists, and so on and so forth.

During the Congresses on Evangelism, which have been mentioned in previous pages, it was therefore clearly expressed that Reformed evangelism should bear fruits in the field of labour, politics, social and scientific endeavours, and the fruits came!

Our present position as Reformed churches which — it cannot be denied — is one of isolation, and that for several reasons, may already provide a partial answer to the question at the head of this chapter. If we, indeed, would have a "commanding" position in the life of the nation, such "being afraid" might not exist. But we have been "strangers in a strange land" and that had decisive consequences for our evangelistic endeavours, or rather for the lack of it.

However, this may not be used as an excuse. The sons of the Reformation were at first a persecuted and martyred minority. The sons of the Secession, 1834, were despised, pushed in a corner, and many of them fled the country. Yet . . . they were not afraid! Their testimony was heard and in God's own time bore many fruits, according to the promise of John 15: "Abide in Me and you will bear many fruits."

The conclusion must be that "being afraid" is not an inherent trait of being Reformed. On the contrary. Thus there must be other reasons, if indeed the statement in this question is correct.

But, before we examine this further, let us turn to a second presupposition in the question under discussion. Is it true that, in comparison with Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses (and presumably more), among Reformed people there is little Bible knowledge?

Before we examine ourselves as to the truth of this statement, let us first try to find out if indeed members of the two mentioned sects have a great Bible knowledge. We make bold to deny that. Sure, from discussions the reader may have had with them it could be concluded that here

we have people who quote from the Bible, left and right, the one text after the other being "shot" at you as from a sten-gun. But the words "left and right" say it already: knowing whole series of "loose" texts is not the same as "Bible knowledge!"

It is the specialty of sects to feed their followers with a mixture of texts which, in their peculiar combination, seem to support the totally personal views of their leader. Such a leader became the founder of his sect because he had a very strange complex of ideas in his head (one need only think of the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith) and who then tried hard to find ground for these ideas in the Bible. He knew that he would never gain influence and following if he would be unable to do that. Their writings are sprinkled with texts "from left and right." Their followers, under strict discipline, are forced to learn by heart whole series of texts. But it is well-known that with "texts," taken out of their context, one can prove everything under the sun.

Experience has taught us that, when you try to "nail down" a Jehovah's Witness on certain texts he mentioned, and say to him, come on in, sit down, let's open the Bible and see where that text is found; let's find out from the context, and also from other parts of Scripture, what is really said there, then they are at a total loss; they want to come back later, after having spoken with their leader, or they even want you to meet that leader. That leader, however, if he comes and if you confront him with the Scriptures as a unity, as the recorded history of revelation, will not be able to save his hide either!

The same experience has also taught us something else. When you ask your visitor Jehovah's Witnesses what their church background is, they will answer (we quote a "true story"), the one that she came from a Roman Catholic family, but her family did not "practice their religion" very much. Conclusion, never any real instruction in the "complete doctrine of salvation." The other came from a liberal church, originally the Dutch state-church, but his parents hardly ever attended church, only for the baptism of their children, on Good Friday, and New Year's Eve and that was that. No wonder that such people all too easily fell victim to a sect which seemed to them to really have the truth and be able to teach them that truth in two, three months.

The Bible explains all this to us. Dr. K. Schilder once, in answer to a question why sects grew so amazingly, pointed to II Thessalonians 2:11, where Paul speaks about the *energy* of error or heresy. Other translations, "an active delusion"; "the full force of evil's delusion"; "powerful heresies." The "*energeia*" or energy of these heresies comes from the devil. While God has revealed his "energy" in Jesus Christ, Colossians 1:29, Ephesians 3:7, Philippians 3:21, etc., the power of the Gospel, the devil, deluding the world by the "false prophet," makes victims by the millions and millions, Revelation 13:14ff.

Small wonder, because the human heart is evil, and people believe the lie rather than the truth. That truth is indeed *for* man, but not "according to man," to his taste, etc. "The natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God." I Corinthians 2:14; by nature he rejects them. To succumb to the energy of heresy one does not need a change of heart, a rebirth by the Holy Spirit. But "unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God," John 3:3.

That is the reason why heresy is sooner accepted than truth, and that may also be part of the reason why sectarians, as mentioned above, are "bolder" in advertising their heresies than Christians are in proclaiming the truth of God.

Let us, however, return to the question: "Is lack of Bible knowledge the reason why we are afraid to 'get out'?" The first remark to be made here is that Reformed believers are not second to sectarians in Bible-knowledge, not because the former's Bible-knowledge is so excellent, but because the latter do not have real Bible-knowledge.

A Reformed believer has been instructed, since his youth, in the "complete doctrine of salvation," which means that, by having been taught in the Heidelberg Catechism and the other Creeds, he has learned to find his way in the Scriptures. He has an over-all view of the unity of Scripture. He has been trained, by memorizing, to formulate what true faith is, what the inspiration of the Bible means, what are the grounds for infant-baptism, the meaning of Holy Supper; whereby the true Church can be known, and so on . . . a long list.

And yet . . . something seems to be lacking. For finding that out we must, as always, start with the home. What does amount to real "family-worship" that deserves this name? Recently we heard this truth from a People's Church preacher, that, "if you like something, you will always find time for it!" That goes for sports, for hobbies, for anything. If we say that in this modern, busy life there is hardly any time left for sound family-worship, we betray that we do not have much love for it. If the Bible is our daily guide; if, at the table or at another time of the day, the father and mother discuss with the children what they just read from God's Holy Word, Bible-knowledge will grow by the day. But does it?

The second look may go in the direction of the Catechism class. Is that only an endless memorizing of the text of the Catechism, or is the Catechism used the way it wants to be used, as becomes clear from the many Scripture-references? Which means that in the Catechism class the Bible should always lie open, and the teacher take his students by the hand, to show them that what the Catechism says is nothing more but "saying the same" (= confession) as what the Bible says. If that is done for seven, eight years, the student will learn his way in the Scriptures.

Alas, we know that this is not always the case. It happens that a minister is called by an adult church member, one who has been a pro-

fessing member for several years already, who asks him, "Reverend, I had a talk with someone — Baptist, Jehovah's Witness or others, as the case may be — could you please help me? Where does the Bible say that children should be baptized? that God is the Triune? that Jesus Christ is truly God? that it is proper to celebrate the "sabbath" no longer on the seventh but on the first day?" and so on . . . and so on These are all "true stories." Is that not terrible?

In addition, we hear the repeated complaint that in Bible-study societies and/or groups, the members soon go off on a tangent, and fill the evening with an endless exchange of "opinions" on a certain issue, but the Bible seems forgotten, and the Scripture passage is hardly looked at anymore. No, we should not generalize, but the truth of all this cannot be denied. There are happy exceptions. We have people who carry the Bible with them, a Bible that is filled with underlinings, notes, etc; people who really look up the parallel texts and study the references, but we fear they are not the majority.

The pulpit should not escape our attention either. Does the preacher deliver a "speech" on the basis of a (usually very brief) text, or is he really "opening the Scriptures" so that his hearers, when going home, not only are enlightened by more knowledge, but also stimulated to open the Bible for themselves in order to know more?

In conclusion, what we as Reformed churches may lack is an integrated system of "training in the truth."¹ For the importance and need of such training we have only to refer to Paul's Pastoral Letters to Timothy and Titus.

In the nineteenth century the people of the Secession were called "the people of the One Book"; this was meant as a nickname, given in a derogatory way: these narrow-minded people have only one book . . . ! We wish that we would deserve that name again, even if others would use it the same way as in the previous century. Never mind! If we are no longer "people of the One, Book," but have our heads and minds and . . . hearts filled with all kinds of factual knowledge and worldly wisdom, yes indeed — then there is a lack of Bible-knowledge, and then we should indeed be "afraid to get out" because we might find ourselves at a loss as what to

¹ To such an "integrated system of training" we would also like to assign the task of training for youth-leadership, for the offices, for Sunday School teachers, for special assignments in evangelistic work, and possibly more tasks. The Holy Spirit has given talents and gifts which must be discovered, developed and put to work. "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service (*diakonia*) but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working ("*energies*"), but it is the same God Who inspires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:4-7).

As long as we as Reformed churches do not make a serious attempt to develop all those talents and put them to work, we run the risk of not remaining Reformed but slipping back to the level of a "clergy" and a "laity."

say, if people come with their counter-arguments which seem, but only seem, stronger than the truth we have told them.

This chapter should not be concluded without stating that lack of true knowledge of God's Word is a proof of lack of love! We remember the moment, when we had a "weak" candidate before the consistory who, notwithstanding the minister's objection, insisted to be examined that he might be admitted to public profession. In such a case the minister says, Okay, if you insist, let the consistory decide whether I am right or not in that I think you are not ready for it. Well, soon it became clear, the young man missed nearly all the answers. Then one elder asked him, "Do you love the Lord Jesus?" The answer came right away, "Yes!" But the elder was not satisfied with that. He said, "No, that can't be true, because, if you really would love the Lord Jesus you would want to know about Him and His Word as much as you by all means can." The young man has "disappeared."

If we really love our Saviour and the Father Who sent Him and the Spirit Who was poured out into our hearts, we would overcome our fears, even a "natural" shyness; when the heart is full, it overflows from the lips. But the same love would also compel us to search the Scriptures, to have an answer to all questions about the Good Tiding, and the "power," the "energy" of the Gospel would be greater than the energy of error, because the power of God, revealed in the Gospel, is greater than the power of the evil one, revealed in heresies.

Lack of evangelistic zeal betrays lack of our submission to the great commandment, without which the Great Commission can never be fulfilled, i.e., "that we love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our mind and with all our strength, and that we love our neighbour as ourselves." It is that serious! And thus "being afraid" is that bad.