

“Our Guilty Silence”

WHY WE DON’T EVANGELIZE AND WHY WE SHOULD

by Johan D.Tangelder

If there is a time to be silent, there is also a time to speak (Eccl. 3:7). If the gospel is the Good News entrusted to us, we heap upon ourselves guilt if we neglect to pass it on. In his book *Our Guilty Silence*, Dr. John Stott lists four major causes for our silence. He said, “Either we have no compelling incentive even to try to speak, or we do not know what to say, or we are not convinced that it is our job, or we do not believe we shall do any good, because we have forgotten the source of power.” And we can add a few causes of our own.

Some have identified evangelism as an outgrowth of American activism. They think of it as a bag of clever tricks and techniques to gain church members. Other are caught up in the tension between evangelism and preserving the purity of the church. They struggle with the question: What comes first, preserving the truth of the gospel and restoring the church through a Reformation or evangelism and missions? But the Bible does not allow us to emphasize the purity of doctrine at the expense of evangelism. Of course, we must stress purity of doctrine and contend for the faith once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3). But I am also convinced that a church which keeps her doors closed out of fear that the world may enter is not faithful to the Gospel. A church which does not evangelize can be compared to a crew of a life board anxious to save the souls of her own members. She certainly does not resemble a rescue brigade out to reach our fellowmen, perishing without the Savior. When we live the Gospel, the tension between maintaining purity of doctrine and outreach into the community and world will not exist. We will spend our time and energy on both. In this article I will point to six reasons why we must be active in congregational outreach.

1 - The Commandment

First, we evangelize because our Lord commanded it. Evangelism is not an option, but a sacred duty and a high calling. We evangelize because we are commanded to as part of the all-inclusive task of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Our Lord's assignment is to proclaim the Gospel, bring new converts into the church, lead them to the sacrament of baptism and disciple them. Evangelism then is the work of the church in obedience to her Lord to make known the Gospel to those who are estranged from it or who have never heard it before and to call them to repentance, faith and conversion.

2 - The Glory of God

Second, we evangelize because we are zealous for the glory of God. As Reformed Christians we always had the glory of God as our motive for action. Reformed Christians, therefore, have been instrumental in establishing Christian schools, a Christian labor movement, a Christian businessmen's organization and a Christian farmer's federation. They are involved in Christian politics and in a host of other Christian activities. And rightly so. These very activities attracted me to the Reformed faith. But we must not only strive to win all things for Christ, but also all people for Christ. The ultimate goal of all things is the glorification of God. "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen." (Rom. 11:36). Our Savior Himself regarded the salvation of man as a means to bring glory to God. In His high priestly prayer He prayed, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." (John 17:4). Therefore, through evangelism we bring glory to God's name.

3 - The Love for God

Thirdly, we evangelize because we love God. Love for God should motivate us to do evangelism. R.B. Kuipwer called it, "The motive for evangelism, embracing and excelling all other worthy motives." If the love for God does not compel us, what will? Yet in much current literature on evangelism this love motive is rarely mentioned. The emphasis is more on the felt needs of the non-

Christians and on outreach techniques rather than on the force that should drive us to proclaim the Gospel - the love for God. "God is love." (1 John 4: 8,16). He has shown His love to us by sending His only Son into the world for our salvation (John 3:16). When we know why we are Christians and what we are saved from, we want others to share the same privilege. We cannot even begin to love people, if we have no love for God. John says, "We love because He first loved us." (1 John 4:19). The greatest command is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 22:37). As God has freely loved us, so we love Him. R.B. Kuiper comments, "Love for God and His Christ guarantees on the part of the believer loving, hence genuine and devoted, in distinction from external and legalistic, obedience to the divine command to evangelize the nations. And this love for God will keep us going even in the face of disappointment, lack of immediate results and discouragements." I too, am convinced that we must focus on God's love. We love God for His own sake. And when we love Him we will be affected by His love. The love for God will enable and encourage us to witness boldly for Christ.

4 - Love for Our Fellowman

Fourthly, we evangelize because we love our fellowman. Yes, we must love God for His own sake, yet love for God must find its expression in our love for our neighbor. Jesus said that the first and greatest command is to love God. And He added, "the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt. 22:39). And I know no greater expression of love for God and our neighbor than to bring the Gospel to him and in this way bring glory to God.

If we believe that our non-Christian neighbor is eternally lost unless he hears the gospel and responds to it, how can we remain silent? There is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. Hell has not frozen over. "The wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23). This is as true today as it was back in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve's fall into sin. Jesus spoke of eternal punishment for the wicked, but for the righteous eternal life. (Matt. 25:46). Those who are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). Shouldn't we ask, when we are honest with ourselves, "Don't we suffer from the sin of omission?" God does not want anyone to perish (2 Pet. 3:9). He finds

the salvation of one sinner so important that the angels in heaven rejoice every time a sinner repents of his sin and trusts Jesus as His Savior and Lord (Luke 15:10). But how can sinners put their trust in Him if they have never heard of Him? How can they hear unless someone preaches the Gospel to them? God will save many of the lost in the world, but He will do it only through men and women willing to go into the world with the Gospel (Rom.10). How can we, who subscribe to the truth that all who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved and all others are bound for hell, neglect to persuade them to turn from the road of destruction upon which they are walking? If we still believe in the reality of hell, evangelism will be indeed seen as a sacred duty. And we will say then with the apostle Paul, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 5:20). The late Rev. J. Overduin, a well-known Dutch author, pastor and evangelist, told the story of an atheist who had come to Christ and had become filled with love for Him. The converted atheist said that one thing he could not understand was that he had been living in a neighborhood where church people lived, but not a single one had ever told him the Gospel. I wonder how often this story can be repeated in our own neighborhoods.

5 - Love for the Church

Fifthly, we evangelize because we love the church and long for her expansion in the world. By and large, today’s church gets bad press. But the church is still the bride and the body of Christ. (Eph.5 :22ff; 1 Cor. 12). In His great commission, our Lord commanded His church not only to make disciples of all nations, but also to baptize them (Matt. 28:19). Evangelism, therefore, is not completed until the convert has joined the church. Professor Lindeboom aptly said, “Evangelism is not only a sign of health of the church, it also keeps her healthy. It is for every church a question of life and death. Through evangelism the church is concerned about her own well being.”

6 - Advance the Kingdom of God

Sixthly, we evangelize to advance the Kingdom of God. The Gospel which Jesus preached is

described as “the Gospel of the Kingdom.” (Matt. 4:23). Our Lord also said that He will not return until the Gospel of the Kingdom has been preached in all the world for a witness to all nations (Matt. 24:14). Our Lord taught us to pray, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is heaven.” Lord’s Day 48 confesses that this petition means:

“Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. Keep your church strong, and add to it. Destroy the devil’s work; destroy every force which revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. Do this until your Kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all.”

The Gospel of the Kingdom focuses on the whole person: the hungry, the naked, the afflicted, the mourning, the despairing, the exploited. Our world must be confronted with the claims of Christ. All who receive Him should honor Him as Lord. He is Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 17:14). The aim of evangelism, therefore, is to bring the world to the recognition of Christ’s Kingship. As a hymn writer put it:

“Let every kindred, every tribe, on this terrestrial ball,
To Him all majesty ascribe, and crown Him Lord of all.”

Conclusion

Since evangelism is imperative, I focused on the motives for reaching the lost for Christ. When we are rightly motivated, evangelism will be spontaneous. No packaged programs, no gimmicks, no marketing techniques will succeed in making permanent waves for evangelism. Only when the church is excited about the Gospel and Biblically motivated, will we see spontaneous evangelism. And this Biblical approach requires patience, understanding and empathy. As we reach the lost for Christ in obedience to the Great Commission, driven by our love for God and for our fellowman, we should remember what our primary calling is - not that we should be necessarily successful but faithful. In

conclusion, the apostle Paul's word of encouragement to the troubled church in Corinth, yet engaged in evangelism, is: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." (1 Cor. 3:6).

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