

What is Reformed Evangelism (1)?

Several of our readers have asked for a Reformed perspective on evangelism. Since this is such an important matter, we hope to spend several issues on it.

First of all, then, let us be sure that the Reformed faith is not uncomfortable with evangelism. The two are not incompatible. Indeed, the Reformed faith and churches have the only real ground for evangelism. It is the Reformed doctrines of sovereign unconditional election, limited atonement and irresistible grace that give a reason to do evangelism and hope for fruit in that great work.

Think of it this way: how can there be any real hope of *lost* sinners being saved through evangelism if salvation depends on their free will? Sinful men and women have difficulty choosing which shoes to wear when dressing in the morning. How then shall they choose to be saved, especially if they truly are *lost*? How shall sinners whose minds are darkened by sin (II Cor. 4:4), and at enmity with God (Rom. 8:7), come to the knowledge of the truth, unless it be by sovereign, effectual grace enlightening their minds and freely granting them all of their salvation?

It is here first of all, therefore, that Reformed evangelism is unique. It sets out the true Biblical basis for evangelism. It does not believe that God loves and wills the salvation of all, that He sent Christ to die for all without exception, and that it now depends on man's free choice whether he will or will not be saved.

Rather, the Reformed faith teaches that God chooses who shall be saved (Jn. 1:12-13, 15:16, Rom. 9:16, Phil. 2:13, Jas. 1:18) according to His eternal love for them in Christ; that He provided salvation for them in the death of Christ on the cross (Gal. 6:14, Col. 1:21-22) and that He powerfully and infallibly gives them that salvation by the irresistible work and grace of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 6:37, 44, Eph. 2:8-10). Thus, in Reformed evangelism there is the sure hope that these at least will be saved. There is no such hope in the teaching that salvation depends on man's willing or running.

But how does the preaching of the gospel fit into this? Does this not, as some charge, make the preaching of the gospel unnecessary? Evangelism, after all, has to do with the preaching of the gospel. That is what the word "evangelism" means.

In answering these questions the Reformed faith teaches two things about the preaching of the gospel. First, it insists, as Scripture does also, that the gospel is the *means* God uses to find His elect (Acts 14:47-48) and to bring them to saving faith in Christ and so to salvation. In the second place, the Reformed faith teaches that the gospel as means is *powerful*. That power by which men repent and believe does not lie in the sinner or in his will, but *in the gospel*. By it sinners are powerfully called (Rom. 10:17), given repentance and faith (Acts 11:18), have their minds and wills changed, and are thus sovereignly, irresistibly, and sweetly drawn to Christ (Rom. 1:16, I Cor. 1:18, 24).

It is the doctrine of free will, therefore, that destroys evangelism. The teaching that God loves all men simply reassures sinners that all is well with them. The idea that Christ died for them only

confirms them in the mistaken notion that their situation is not desperate. To say that they have the critical choice in their own salvation - that God depends upon and is waiting for them - just establishes them in their rebellion against God and teaches them that they are as gods! It does nothing for the salvation of lost sinners! *Rev. Ronald Hanko*

What is Reformed Evangelism? (2)

In this issue we continue to give a Reformed perspective on evangelism. We emphasize this time the important truth that evangelism is nothing more or less than *preaching the gospel!* If we are preaching the gospel we are faithfully doing evangelism.

As obvious as this seems, many have forgotten it. Thus they talk endlessly about evangelistic methods and spend a great deal of time drawing up complicated and expensive evangelism schemes for their church. It never seems to enter their mind that evangelism means *preaching*.

Believing that evangelism is preaching the gospel we reject the dreadful, though long-established, practice of setting aside every Lord's Day evening for an evangelistic message - teaching in the morning, evangelism in the evening. There is nothing Biblical about this practice.

Apart from the fact that such evangelistic services tend to degenerate into services where the same message is heard week after week, but "hung" on different text each time to the utter boredom and frustration of those who desire to learn the truth, this practice has forgotten the simple truth that *all* gospel preaching is evangelism. No matter what passage of Scripture a person is preaching upon, if he is preaching properly he is preaching the *gospel*. There is *no such thing* as a special "evangelistic" message.

Perhaps, however, Christians and Christian ministers have forgotten or do not understand that *all* Scripture reveals Christ and is therefore the gospel in the fullest sense of the Word (Jn. 5:38-39). If the Scriptures are properly preached, Christ is preached. If Christ is being preached, the gospel is being preached. And if the gospel is being preached, then sinners will be saved by it. It is God's appointed means for their salvation.

We are afraid that the practice of having evening "gospel" services betrays a lack of trust in the gospel as the means God has chosen to use for the salvation of His own. Thus, such services tend to become attempts to arouse emotions, to frighten people, or to produce some kind of "decision." Certainly there is very little of the Word of God expounded in such services and even less dependence upon the Holy Spirit for fruit.

But there are other reasons why devoting a service each Sabbath to preaching to unbelievers is wrong. It betrays a wrong view of the church, as if the church is ordinarily a place for unbelievers, and it overlooks the teaching of in I Cor. 14:23. There the Word suggests that it is not a normal but an exceptional thing that an unbeliever comes into the worship services. The church is for believers and their children.

There is another problem here as well. That is the idea that the work of evangelism ceases as soon as someone "gets saved." If evangelism is preaching the gospel, and if preaching the gospel is preaching and teaching "the whole counsel of God," then the work of evangelism has only begun

when a person repents and believes. At that point he still needs by gospel preaching - evangelism - to have the way of God expounded more perfectly (Acts 18:26) and to be rooted and grounded in the truth (Col. 2:6-7). This aspect of evangelism is almost entirely neglected today.

This does not mean, however, that there is not a difference between preaching the gospel in the church and to those who are outside the church, or that Reformed people believe only in preaching the gospel within the church. The gospel must be preached everywhere that God in His good pleasure sends it! *Rev. Ronald Hanko*

WHAT IS REFORMED EVANGELISM? (3)

We have established the fact that evangelism is nothing more nor less than the preaching of the gospel. That is what the word "evangelism" means. From this it follows that all preaching of the gospel is evangelism, including preaching to those who are already saved, the members of the church. This aspect of evangelism is almost entirely neglected today so that God's people are destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hos. 4:6).

We have also established the fact that gospel preaching is preaching "the whole counsel of God," that is, all of Scripture. There is, therefore, no such thing as, nor any need for a special "gospel" message or "evangelistic" service, especially when that is nothing more than haranguing sinners or pressing them for some decision.

We would add that the call to repentance and faith is not just for unbelievers either. Those who are already saved need to hear that call in order that they too may turn from their sins (and they do commit sin as long as they are in this body of flesh) and that their faith may be stirred up and strengthened. This is also part of true evangelism.

With this in mind there is no need for the preacher to divide the congregation up into groups in his own mind or in his preaching, directing some of his preaching to one group and some to another. ALL the hearers need to hear whatever God the Lord says in a particular passage of His Word. There is not one message for the church, another for the world, one for the "unconverted," another for those who are "saved and safe" (as a certain preacher once put it).

Even the promises of the gospel, though they concern and are only for those who repent and believe, must be heard by all, if for no other reason than that their condemnation may be the greater when they do not believe. True gospel preaching is the exposition of the Word of God, including its solemn call to repentance and faith, to ALL who hear.

In that connection we wish to emphasize here that the Reformed faith believes in the preaching of the gospel to those who are outside the church as well as to those who are saved and are members of the church, to the heathen as well as to Christians. Here also the Reformed faith is not the enemy of evangelism.

Even here, however evangelism may not be limited to those who have never heard the gospel. Those also who have heard and departed, those who make a profession of Christianity but do not know the truth of God's Word and those who are members of churches where the gospel is not preached or not

preached purely are also the objects of evangelism. When Jesus spoke of fields white for harvest He was thinking especially of the multitudes who were fainting and scattered abroad as sheep that have no shepherd (Matt. 9:36-38).

What the Reformed faith does oppose is the preaching of lies - that God loves everyone and wants to save everyone, leaving the impression with the unbelieving that all is well. It is the enemy of the idea that the promises of gospel are for all (note: they must be preached to all but are not FOR all). The things promised are only for such as repent and believe under the preaching of the gospel, not for everyone conditionally. To preach otherwise is to give false hope to those who do not believe and to suggest that God is helpless in the face of continued unbelief. This Reformed evangelism may not and will not do! *Rev. Ronald Hanko*

What is Reformed Evangelism? (4)

We have been emphasizing the truth that evangelism is nothing more nor less than the preaching of the gospel. If this true then ALL gospel preaching is, strictly speaking, evangelism, whether it be to the heathen, to the scattered sheep of apostatizing churches, or to the congregation of God's people.

Evangelism can be described, however, as preaching the gospel to those who are *outside the true church* with a view to their salvation. There *is* a difference between preaching the gospel in the church and to those outside, to Christians and to the heathen, whether to the heathen living in foreign countries who have not heard the gospel, or the to the heathen who are so numerous in our own Western countries where the gospel has been preached for many years. These differences while important are not essential.

The differences, we believe, are three.

First, in preaching to those who have not heard the gospel before, the message must be simplified and preached in such a way that those who hear understand clearly what the evangelist is saying. This is especially difficult when preaching to heathen who have never heard of sin, grace, redemption, and of so many other gospel truths.

Let us remember here that Jesus, when He preached to the people, preached to them in parables, so that even those who continued unbelieving would hear and see what Jesus was saying. Thus, in His parables he used illustrations taken from their everyday life to make the truths of the gospel as plain to them as possible.

Second, this kind of gospel preaching will address the audience *as unsaved* in showing them the need for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. The preacher will beseech and persuade those who hear, pressing upon them the demands of the gospel and the urgency of their own need (II Cor. 5:18-21, cf. also Matt. 3:7-12).

There is, however, no essential difference *in the message* that is preached to professed unbelievers and to the church. The difference is in the audience and their need, and in the aim of the preaching (saving the unsaved). This will to some extent affect the presentation and emphasis of the message, but it is the gospel which must be preached.

Indeed, we must see that even in preaching to the heathen and unbelieving, the *whole counsel of God* must be preached, including predestination, limited atonement, the Trinity, creation, providence, and all the other truths of Scripture. Jesus and the apostles preached these truths even to those who were not saved (Jn. 10:11, Acts 2:23, 13:17, 14:15-17). We must continue to preach them today.

These truths are very often neglected in mission preaching and even rejected as unsuitable for preaching to the unsaved. This is not only contrary to the example of Jesus and the apostles, but cuts out the heart of the gospel message, i.e., that GOD was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself (II Cor. 5:19).

Third, mission preaching involves *going out* to preach to the unsaved (Matt. 28:19). We have already pointed out that the church is seen in Scripture as the gathering of believers and their children and that the presence of unbelievers is thought of as an unusual and exceptional thing (I Cor. 14:23). It will not do, therefore, for the church to attempt to carry out its calling to engage in missions by holding an "evangelistic service" every Lord's Day evening. *Rev. Ronald Hanko*

What is Reformed Evangelism? (5)

We have emphasized that evangelism is preaching the gospel and that whether in the church or in missions it is the whole gospel - the whole counsel of God - that must be preached (Acts 20:26-27). It is wrong to neglect certain revealed truths or to suggest that they are a hindrance to evangelism.

Reformed evangelism, however, not only preaches the sovereignty of God and the doctrines of grace, but it is *controlled* by them as well. We have already seen how the doctrines of grace control the evangelistic message in that they require a message that does not declare a Christ for all, a will of God to save all, or a universal love of God.

The sovereignty of God also controls the goals and methods of evangelism. For one thing, God's sovereign command limits the means of evangelism to the preaching. As important as such things may be, medical work, education, building and agriculture are not evangelism and are not the calling of the church as she engages in evangelism. In Scripture there are no such things as medical and agricultural missionaries. These things may and even ought to be done *alongside* the work of evangelism, but they are not the church's work, nor does one need to be ordained and sent by the church to do them.

So too, we would emphasize the Biblical truth that evangelism *is* the work of the church, not of mission boards and societies. The command to preach the gospel is a command that Christ gave to His church and to no one else (Matt. 28:19-20).

And, since Scripture teaches that evangelism, the preaching of the gospel, is the work of ordained men, there is no place for women missionaries. We find it very curious that churches who would never allow women to preach and hold office at home, see nothing wrong with sending them out as missionaries to preach the gospel to the heathen.

Nevertheless, the Sovereignty of God does not only control evangelism in requiring preaching as

the God-ordained means of evangelism. The doctrine of God's sovereignty controls even the aims of evangelism.

For example, a church that believes in election ought not think that the goal and purpose of evangelism are to "give everyone a chance." In that case her goals in evangelism contradict the truths of predestination and limited atonement she confesses.

Nor is the goal of evangelism to save everyone. In preaching the gospel both in the church and on the mission field the evangelist (preacher) must understand that preaching has a twofold purpose. That purpose is the salvation of God's elect and the hardening and condemnation of the rest (Rom. 9:18, 11:7, II Cor. 2:14-17).

Those who are not willing to preach the gospel on those terms ought not be engaged in the work. Indeed, Paul suggests (II Cor. 2:14-17) that ignorance of this twofold purpose of the preaching is the reason many corrupt the word of God as they do today by hiding, neglecting, or rejecting certain truths of Scripture in their evangelism.

The goal of evangelism is not even preaching to everyone. Both in the OT and in the NT the gospel is sent by God when and where He wills (Acts 16:6-8). There are those who lay a huge burden of guilt upon the church by suggesting that the church is not fulfilling her calling as long as the gospel is not preached to every living person, when the Lord has given neither the opportunity nor means to do it. This is wrong. Our sovereign God determines also when and where the gospel will be preached. *Rev. Ronald Hanko*

What is Reformed Evangelism? (6)

In this last installment on Reformed evangelism there are several more things we wish to emphasize.

First, and in connection with our last article, we wish to point out that evangelism is the *calling* of the church and must be pursued vigorously, both within and outside the church. The fact that God does not desire the salvation of all men without exception and that the gospel throughout history is only preached when and where God wills, should not limit the church or cause her to neglect her work.

In the work of evangelism the church of Jesus Christ, in obedience to His command, for the glory of God, and for the salvation of God's elect, must seek and pray for the opportunity to preach the gospel (Col. 4:3-4, II Thess. 3:1), for men to preach it (Matt. 9:37-38), and for fruit on the work of preaching (Rom. 10:1). And, when God graciously gives the means, men, and opportunity, then she must use that opportunity to the utmost.

Indeed, the opportunity to preach the gospel (referred to in Scripture as an "open door" - Rev. 3:8) is seen as one of the blessings God in Christ gives to the church when she is faithful. What a disgrace if the church despises that blessing of God!

Second, we wish to clarify what we said in the previous article about evangelism as the work of the church. If it is the calling of the church to do evangelism and to engage in missions, then it is

also her calling to support those who are sent to do that work. Missionaries and evangelists are preachers of the gospel and it is to the preachers of the gospel, wherever they labor, that Scripture refers in such passages as I Cor. 9:7-14. We abhor the practice, common in so many places, of sending the mission preachers out to raise their own support. So too if mission work is the work of the church, it the calling of the *church* to provide this support, not mission societies and mission boards.

Third, we need to emphasize the fact that because evangelism is the work of the church all believers have an important part in that work, though they themselves do not preach. They have the important calling to pray for the work, to support it in that way and with their gifts, and to be themselves witnesses of the truth in all their life. Without faithfulness on the part of God's people, no evangelism work can prosper.

May this important and necessary work be done faithfully, therefore, and may God add His indispensable blessing to it. *Rev. Ronald Hanko*