

Developing Mission-minded Congregations

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Published on 20 March 2012



In a previous Bit to Read I reported on the first speech Rev Henk Drost had at the recent 2nd annual conference sponsored by the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. That speech, you will recall, focused on the Basics of Reformed Evangelism. A few hours later Rev Drost delivered a second speech, this time on being a mission-minded congregation. Rev Drost argued that the congregation itself benefited the most from being mission-minded. Given that we as congregation are sending church in mission work, I've no doubt you're keen to know how the speaker worked out his thesis.

Christ's kingship

Scripture is emphatic that the ascended Christ has been appointed Head over all things for the benefit of His church (Ephesians 1:22ff). Implication: Christ's unlimited energy is focused on His church –us!- and from there extends out into His broad world. As He gathers His church in this world, He seeks growth within the church – and part and parcel of that growth within is that this church reaches out into the King's big world.

Growth within

That growth should happen within the church (we're talking about spiritual growth) is obvious from the Biblical view of what the church is. Biblically speaking, when we think of 'church' we need to think first of God. None less that almighty God makes a covenant of love with people; Christ in turn gathers this people, and the Holy Spirit causes this people to live in unity (see Canons of Dort II.9). Christ's work follows the Father's choosing work, so that He gathers together those whom the Father has given Him. The point is important. Many churches around us focus on results, where 'results' refers to personal faith displaying itself in holy living. There is, of course, a valuable side to this insistence, for you cannot be a missional church if the congregation members forget or minimize sanctification or personal holiness. Peter insisted on Christians live a certain lifestyle so that people may be prompted to ask you questions – and you receive opportunity to explain the hope that you have (cf 1 Peter 3:15). But, Rev Drost warned us, if you emphasis holiness while you neglect God's prior covenant claim, your approach could become merciless and harsh. For who can live up to the high expectations of holiness? The impression you give will be that only people seen to be holy can be members of church.... We need, we were told, both sides of coin. Without neglecting an emphasis on faith and sanctification, there needs also to be an emphasis on God's choosing work. Then one can speak to a weak Christian not just about what he needs to achieve (greater holiness), but also of what God has already done for him (claimed him in His covenant, and so given His Son

for his sins). That approach moves the focus away from the weak sinner and onto almighty God, and in so doing the weak sinner is encouraged to pursue further growth. These two aspects –moving from God’s covenant claim to increasing holiness[1] are together essential for growth – be it in inner strength as well as in numerical growth.

Reaching out

In much of North America’s church planting movement, new churches appear under the guise of mission work. In practice, though, these new churches do nothing more than attract people unhappy with their existing church. This pattern serves to promote fragmentation of Christianity and undermines the unity of the church. New churches, Rev Drost argued, ought to begin only through mission work, that is, through bringing new converts to Christ. Starting a new church in a particular area in order to revitalize an existing church is not according to Scripture. If a church is stuck in tradition or liberalism, or if a church has no missionary outreach, church planting is not the solution. In the face of Laodicea’s lukewarmness, Christ Jesus did not call for a new church to start in town, but for the Laodicean Christians to repent – and so grow spiritually from within. Where this leaves us? According to Rev Drost, reformed thought accepts and accents both revitalizing existing churches and mission work, growth within and reaching out. Consider Lord’s Day 48: the church prays that Christ “preserve . . . your church,” and that’s to say that we ask God to build up the congregation where the Lord has given us a place (“growth within”). At the same time, the Lord’s Day would have the church petition Christ to “increase your church,” a petition that involves reaching out. In fact, a church becomes healthier when attention is given to mission work, outreach. In this connection, Rev Drost drew attention to the reason why Jesus Christ gave office bearers to his church. According to Ephesians 4, their purpose is to equip the saints for the work of service, so that in turn the body be built up (vs 12). Given that a church is healthier when attention is given to outreach, the Consistory would be failing to build up the church optimally if it develops no vision for outreach. A vision for outreach includes that attention be given to relations with God, relations with others in the church, and relations with people outside the church. How these three relations function is determined by the confessions, and can be caught in three terms: grace, communion, witnessing. Rev Drost suggested that the churches develop a plan around these three themes.

Grace

One hears from time to time the complaint that “instead of being witnesses in the streets, many Christians are listeners in church.” According to Rev Drost, we do wrongly to play these two themes off against each other. The gospel of free grace lies at the heart of what the church is all about, and so it is vitally important to be a good listener in church. Precisely that listening, though, is in turn to drive the congregation to the action of witnessing. That makes it essential that the preaching convey the grace of the gospel. If the gospel is proclaimed as pure grace, people touched by this gospel will also want to touch others. He was insistent: the preaching of grace gives members a missionary flame in their heart.

Communion

Christian communion within the church is not based on mutual agreement but on the grace of Christ. Through His Spirit He gives us to each other in church again and again. So the church has something unique to offer our society. In society-in-general, you need to fight for your place whereas in church you are given a place through the Spirit. The elders form the engine of this movement. That’s to say: the consistory is not only to stimulate people to live holy lives, but is also to stimulate members to use their gifts. The gifts Christ has given are not intended only for internal use, but also for the benefit of those outside. According to the grace God has given, the one person focuses on administration in church, while the other focuses on speaking to outsiders. Consistory can play a role in training members to use their gifts well – including training members how to open their mouth to witness. According to Rev Drost, reformed churches around the world are weak in training their members to develop their gifts to be as much a blessing as possible for those outside.

Witness

We live in this world, with so many other people who struggle with life's countless questions. How can one speak with the people of the street in an edifying way? The answers to so many of the questions our compatriots face are actually found in our Confessions. Think, for example, of the countless questions about suffering, God's nearness, coping with sickness, etc. In that regard, it would be helpful to devote study sessions to our confessions, learning anew the answers to today's questions and how to communicate them in today's world. Evangelism happens through church members using the relations they already have. So: how shall the church equip and train its members to use their connections well? And once an outsider is interested in the gospel, how does one proceed with teaching him the gospel further?

How do you get outsiders to know the congregation? According to Rev Drost, the consistory would do well to prepare evenings for training and discussion, including developing opportunities for newcomers to get integrated into the congregation. All of it invariably involves a process. He pleaded that when consistories deal with a request for membership, they consider not just questions of knowledge but also questions of integration. That latter element points up again the same two aspects mentioned before: there needs to be growth inside the church, both in knowledge and in faith, as well as growth through outsiders coming in. In fact, outsiders coming in compels growth within (both in knowledge and in faith), and growth within (in knowledge and faith) attracts growth from outside.

My take?

One can quibble on formulations (and I hope I have conveyed Rev Drost's intent well). Nevertheless, I found the big picture of his presentation very helpful. It is indeed true that a congregation gripped by the deep grace of God to the undeserving sinner (oneself!) cannot be callous and detached about the unbelieving neighbor. A heart for his (spiritual) need prompts further growth within oneself – and so within the whole body of the church. Our elders indeed do well, then, to have mission of their minds as they shepherd the flock – and not just mission in Timor.

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March 8, 2012