

N. Baas (1893-1974) Hawker of the Gospel

During the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia, 37 chaplains volunteered their services, and Christian groups from across the United States sang, counselled, distributed tracts and Bibles, and provided ice water to hundreds of thousands of visitors.

This evangelical outreach at the Olympics has a long tradition. During the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, Reformed as well as other Christians had an outreach program. New Testaments, tracts and magazines were distributed. There was also a small exposition of rare Bibles. A temporary building was erected to serve as an "Inquiring Office." The man who worked in the office each day from 9.00 a.m. to 11.00 p.m. was the Reformed (Gereformeerd) evangelist N. Baas, who was also deeply involved in organizing the evangelistic outreach to the athletes and spectators. Baas was a man with a burden for the lost. He called himself a hawker of the Gospel.

Baas was born on October 29, 1893, in Wormer, but spent his youth in Zaandam. His father was a prominent figure in church and politics, and a fervent witness for his Lord wherever he went. His parents had been catechism students of Rev. Lucas Lindeboom (1845-1933), a pioneer in Reformed evangelism, a founder of ministries of mercy, and a pastor of a flourishing congregation. Lindeboom organized a Bible tent at a fair and engaged a speaker for open air meetings. Many were converted. Each Sunday afternoon he sent his catechism students, two by two, to visit families and organize Sunday schools. After he left Zaandam, Lindeboom became an instructor at the theological school of the Secession (Afscheiding) in Kampen. Lindeboom had a great impact on the life of the young Baas.

Another pastor who left his mark on Baas was Rev. W. Breukelaar, an enthusiastic supporter of missions, who encouraged Baas to become a missionary. But ill health prevented him from going to the tropics. He became an office clerk instead. He also worked for seven years for a government insurance agency. In this period of his life, he met Rev. B. Wielenga (1873-1949), gifted preacher, theologian, philosopher and prolific author with a passion for missions. He succeeded in persuading Baas to come to Amsterdam to work as an evangelist.

In those days, church life in the Dutch capital was vastly different from today. Churches were well attended. The older ministers, who still preached for a full two hours, saw their congregations dwindle. But the young pastors drew large crowds. One had to be in church half an hour ahead of time to find a place in a pew.

In 1917, Baas was appointed as salesman of Bibles. But he spent more time preaching than selling. He went with Wielenga to Germany and Austria to study missions. Within a very short time he became an effective and much loved evangelist, who used one of the oldest means to bring the Gospel - street preaching.

Street preaching has its roots in Old Testament times. The prophets proclaimed the Lord's message in the streets and public squares. Our Lord used the same method, and the apostles followed His example. Through using this example, Baas reached many people who would otherwise never be reached by the Gospel. Through his influence, street preaching spread to many small and large Dutch cities.

Baas became well known through the country. In small halls, he often debated atheists, freethinkers and socialists. He gave catechism instruction in homes, visited hospitals, wrote many pamphlets and a few books, and from 1935 to 1940 he was a regular contributor to ***De Reformatie***. His column was the first one read. He was gifted with words and never dull. Through spoken and written word he expressed his love for his Saviour.

Baas was self-taught. He carefully read all the volumes on the history of the Reformation written by the 19th century Swiss evangelical historian Merle D'Augbigne. He also painstakingly studied Calvin's Institutes and Abraham Kuyper's two volumes on the catechism. And Baas was also influenced by Rev. J. C. Sikkel (1856-1920). Sikkel was one of the most independent and original followers of Kuyper. He was also a beloved preacher, prolific author, strongly opposed to moralism, an influential leader in the Anti-Revolutionary Party and the Christian Social Movement. Baas was a good friend of Rev. S. G. De Graaff. whose main work has been translated into English and published as ***Promise and Deliverance***. Its theme is the unfolding drama of the history of the covenant. Baas testified that he was unashamedly Kuyperian, though he was neither a slavish follower of Kuyper nor of anyone else.

Baas's independent study of the Scripture and his appreciation for Reformed theology led him to develop a thoroughly Reformed approach to evangelism as "labour in faith." The church must be obedient to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19f). Reformed evangelism confesses that the sovereign God initiates salvation. The Gospel is of God and not of man. The doctrine of free grace led Baas to accept the doctrine of election. He was a vehement opponent of Arminianism. He gloried in God's electing grace. He knew that he could not convert anyone. He considered himself only an instrument to introduce sinners to Christ - crucified, risen, and ascended. In the covenant, election is realized. When God's electing love touches our hearts, we immediately enter into a covenant relationship with Him. Baas wrote:

I believe in a church elected to eternal life! In this truth beats the heart of our confession.

Reformed evangelism links word and deed. "Be fishers of men." The Lord commissioned the church, not angels, to bring the Gospel to the end of the earth (Mark 16:15). Every Christian is a Christ confessor. All have gifts. Sunday school teachers, preachers, choir members: "Speak of Jesus! Sing of Jesus! Understand your privilege!" Visit families and teach catechism in homes. This is the method taught by the apostle Paul (Acts 16:31). This is covenantal evangelism. No rugged individualism. Youth,

students and the elderly must be reached. Distribute tracts. Conduct Bible studies. Develop follow-up programs. Have a church family "adopt" a non-Christian family.

Although Baas strongly advocated a practical deed ministry, he believed that the deed ministry should always be subjected to the Word. The preaching of the Word in itself is already a deed! Baas opposed entertainment, featuring famous personalities, or testimonies as a means to draw a crowd. No sensationalism, no adulation of personalities, no para-church movements. No surrogate church must be founded. A faithful evangelist directs converts to the administration of Word and sacraments in the church.

Baas disagreed with advocates of dialogue with unbelievers. Proponents of dialog think that the Gospel proclamation alone is not sufficient. We must patiently listen to modern man. Christians can no longer say, "This is it. God has revealed it." But Baas argued that "If man calls Light darkness and darkness Light, dialogue is not only impossible but also a betrayal! Not dialogue but Gospel proclamation is God's way of evangelism." Baas didn't apologize for the Bible. It is a powerful, caged, lion which must be set free.

Baas rejected higher criticism of the Scriptures. He wrote that we come across things in the Bible we don't understand. But if we understand everything, it would not be the Word of God. A God we can fully understand is no God. And the Bible is not just for the Church, it is for all people. It speaks to young and old, the sick and the healthy, the morally upright and the criminal. We need the Scriptures not only for our salvation, but also for the maintenance of human life. We must live by the Word. A spiritual revival always comes when there is a hunger for the Word of God. This Word is powerful and life-changing. When we believe on the basis of God's Word, we can truly live. We will then walk in the fear of the Lord and in the path of the covenant. Not popularity and the spirit of the age should control the mind set of the church, but the Gospel. The gate to eternal life is narrow and the road to destruction broad. The Word of God must not only be believed, but also proclaimed and understood. A sermon is neither a speech on a religious subject nor an inspirational talk. God has given pastors to the church so that the Word can be explained and applied. Expository preaching is the key to building the church.

Should the church employ user friendly language to reach a public ignorant of even the simplest Biblical terms? Baas used contemporary language. His messages were carefully developed, thoroughly Biblical, always clear and to the point. Yet he didn't shun Biblical terms. For example, Baas said that the word "conversion" doesn't belong in the theological museum. If we don't turn to the Lord, we shall perish. The Gospel contains both a blessing and a curse. We must be confronted with our sin; but there is no conversion without turning to Christ.

Baas had some strong views on the ministry. Although he supported a solid education for pastors, he was convinced that no man qualifies for the ministry because he has passed an exam. No theological faculty, classis or synod can bestow on a man the necessary gifts. The church must do more than provide a theological school, it must

plead with the Lord to have its students and ministers anointed with the Holy Spirit. A man may be a clever theologian and even a successful pastor, but without the call of God and the anointing he is not the Lord's man in the pulpit.

As I read Baas's sermons and book I was struck by his deep love for the doctrine of the covenant. He rejoiced in it. How many evangelists still do so today? For Baas the doctrine of the covenant was not a mere theological construction. He said that his father had helped him to understand it. He testified that the Reverends J. C. Sikkel and S. G. De Graaf always presented the covenant as the proclamation of the living Christ. When you speak about the covenant, you speak about Christ. The Lord is faithful; He remembers His covenant. The God of our parents and grandparents is also our God. God has covenanted Himself to His people. He promised to them His love and faithfulness. They promise in return to live by grace and to serve Him all the days of our life. And the signs and seal of the covenant are baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Baas rejoiced in His baptism, the seal of God's love. He once remarked that the village church, in which he was baptized in the Name, was never far from his mind. He testified that he would never forget the inscription in the church of his youth - "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses all sins." The water of baptism is a symbol and pledge of the blood of Christ. We are baptized into the blood and death of Christ. The blood seals the covenant of God's faithfulness. Baas hoped that if anyone wanted to speak at his funeral, he would say, "This man has been baptized and he believed in the God of his baptism."

Today many evangelical and even some Reformed Christians claim that Christian day schools are a hindrance to evangelism. Baas would have disagreed. He was an ardent Christian school supporter. In several of his published messages he pleads with Christian parents to send their children to the school with the Bible. In his meditation on Ezra 9 and 10, published in 1957, he notes that in our days there are believers who think: "In the past the Christian school and Christian organizations were necessary, but we are now living in different times. We can put on non-active the antithesis in every sphere of life. We don't need any longer a separate school and separate organizations." Baas abhorred this mentality. Children baptized in His Name should be taught in His Name. He even urged those thinking of emigration to build churches and schools in the urban centres of their new homelands.

Baas was a Calvinist to the very marrow of his bones. No neutrality! In politics, seek the rights of the Lord and the welfare of the people. Whether you vote in an election or choose a newspaper, you must seek the will of the Lord. The man who has no place for the Lord in politics may be a Christian in his private life but has no understanding of the covenant. Write in your political program the rights of the Lord!

The whole world belongs to God and must be claimed for Him. In every sphere of life we must reclaim lost territory. If we think that we can romp our way to heaven, not seeing the suffering around us, we may well find the pearly gates shut.

Baas was concerned about the lack of passion for evangelism that he witnessed in Reformed churches. He said that Calvinists tend to give an invitation to enter the doors of the church instead of searching for the lost. And long before urban missions became a North American specialty, Baas pleaded with the church to meet the challenges of the cities. He pointed to the rapidly growing cities in Holland. He saw in each new city street a new opportunity to bring the Gospel.

Today the church has a negative press. It exists on the margin of society. Even many evangelicals don't have a high regard for the church. Yet the Bible clearly states that all who receive Christ by faith become members of His body, the church. Baas knew the foibles of the church. Some people in the community have had sad experiences with church members. In the past the church said too little about social injustice. It has often been too one-sided in its preaching. But despite all the well known weaknesses and sins of the church, Baas never failed to direct new converts to it. Christians and the church cannot be separated. And the strength of the church does not lie in the broad masses favouring a "progressive" theology. The little people (kleine luiden), who are called old-fashioned and conservative by the progressives, are the hope of the church. Baas referred to the "common" folk in Holland who prayed for the reformation of the church the conversion of the nation.

Baas is a voice from the past. Yet we can learn from him today. Reformed Christians still have a message to bring to the nations. Through obedience to our Lord's mission mandate we bring glory to His name!

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April, 1997