

HARD AND SOFT

Where have we become hard where we should be soft?

by Jonathan Deenick



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Hard and Soft

That might sound like a bit of a strange title for this week's 'thought' but we talked about being 'Hard and Soft' at the recent Ministers and Wives conference. What does it mean? It describes the way we ought to approach any sort of ministry, especially evangelism. By ministry I don't just mean what pastors do, but what every Christian ought to be doing as part of the body of Christ. As we do ministry we are to be both hard and soft.



We are to be hard when it comes to the gospel; we must hold the essential gospel truths very firmly. There is always a temptation to import our own ideas into the gospel to make it more appealing or effective (as we consider it) or moving. We should never do that. If you want to think some more about faithfulness to the gospel read the letter to the Galatians.

We are also to be soft; we are to be flexible and open to new ideas when it comes to our method and practice. Paul, who held very firmly to the

gospel, expresses this attitude in 1 Corinthians 9, 'I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.' Paul willingly altered not only his ministry method but put aside personal preference so that he might be involved in the salvation of people.

I think it is pretty safe to say that traditionally we in Reformed circles have been good at being hard on the gospel.

However, we have also been hard on practice. We are hard and hard. So we often struggle to reach out to people who do not already culturally match (both church culture and national culture) where we are at. It means that many, especially in today's unchurched society will find what we do completely irrelevant even when we present the gospel.

Why are we 'hard and hard'? There are, no doubt, many reasons; 'we like it this way, it is comfortable to stay the same, it worked last time...'. However one particular reason may be that we have

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confused practice with the truth of the gospel. That is we see our methods and practice as belonging to that core of truth that must not be tampered with. If that were true it would be right not to change. But the question we must face is, 'how much of our method and practice belongs there?'

There are some things we do that are guided by the truth of the gospel and the teaching of scripture, which we will not change. For example we have elders ruling the church and shepherding the flock. The role will not change but the way they carry out their role might. In fact, there are many things we do that could be done many other ways. Even when everything we do is shaped by the truth

of the gospel and the character of our God there is still room for a great deal of flexibility and innovation.

Where have we become hard where we should be soft? This is a question I have been wrestling with since the Ministers and Wives conference and I encourage you to wrestle with it too.

Points to Ponder:

1. Jonathan Deenick asks the question: where have we become hard where should be soft? Think about your own ministry setting? What criteria would you use to decide where you should remain “hard” and where you should become “soft”?
2. Do you agree with Deenick’s assessment: when we are hard in practice “many, especially in today’s unchurched society will find what we do completely irrelevant even when we present the gospel”? Why or why not? Think of some examples.
3. Stephen W. Hinks, in this book *The Journey Ahead For 21st Century Church & Its Leadership* makes the point that as a church we should **manage at the core, but lead from the edge**. Like Deenick, Hinks suggests that we as church leaders need to become more innovative and flexible in ministry. We need to know how to move a church through adaptive change. What are these “core” aspects of the church which are non-negotiable as we journey into the 21st century? How can you as a church leader “lead from the edge” and welcome innovation, freedom, originality and creativity within your ministry setting?