

MONEY MAKES THE GOSPEL GO AROUND... OR NOT?  
PRAXIS AND PRINCIPLES IN BELGIAN FAITH MISSIONS CHURCHES

According to the “faith principle”, evangelists should not trust in churches or mission agencies for financial security, and even less in the government. One simply needs to trust in God. The modern Protestant “Faith Missions” movement, famous in the person of Hudson Taylor, arguably originated with the praxis and principles of early Plymouth Brethren missionaries Anthony Groves (1795-1853) and Georg Müller (1805-1898) (Dann 2004; cf. Fiedler 1994). Groves refused to arrange financial matters before going into missions in Baghdad and described it as an expression of lived faith (Groves: 1825). Müller argued that “living by faith,” i.e. praying rather than seeking for money, is an option for all Christians and that, by doing so, they function as visible proofs of God’s loving care (Müller 1906:173).

In the 1970’s, three couples of Canadian Plymouth Brethren landed on Belgian soil to bring the Gospel to this Catholic nation, each “commended to the grace of the Lord” by their sending assemblies (Marinello 2013). The “faith principle” was upheld and shared as an important Scriptural principle with the converts. All support from the newly established congregations was refused and the missionaries argued against the use of offering plates in the Sunday services, based on the oft repeated axiom “The Gospel is free”. Not before long, Flemish young men came to be full time involved in the work of evangelization and church planting, all holding to the “faith principle”. Simultaneously, however, the missionaries urged the young congregations to take up financial responsibility for Gospel work in their region.

Now, forty years later, a denomination with 26 churches (the *Evangelische Christengemeenten Vlaanderen* – ECV) is the fruit of this work. Ten Flemish Gospel workers are fulltime involved in the ECV assemblies today ([www.ecvnet.be](http://www.ecvnet.be)). The “faith principle” is still part of the theological discourse, but the meaning is shifting as ecclesial policies have changed fundamentally. Half of the Flemish Gospel workers are paid today by a private foundation that was set up in 1996 for their financial, social, health, and pension care. In addition, five young men receive full salaries from the Belgian State as Protestant ministers, a corollary of the official governmental recognition of ECV assemblies as Protestant churches in 2003. As the ECV is a Bible believing association, this evolution required serious transformative efforts, both hermeneutically and interpersonally (De Kegel 2002, e.a.). Notably, however, it seems not to have led to serious discontent or fraction within the young denomination.

This paper aims to lay bare evolutions regarding “the faith principle”, finances, and biblical hermeneutics in the praxis and principles of the ECV, on the basis of interviews and archival research. It reflects a preparatory path for a larger research project on Church, State, and Money in Belgium.

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