



## How to Raise Prophets

### **The man mowing the lawn**

As a general rule, I'm hesitant to tell stories about my kids. But I have one anecdote that needs to be shared: it was on a sunny Sunday, back in the summer, and we were leaving for church in the afternoon. Pulling out of the driveway, one of our little girls saw a next-door neighbour busily mowing his lawn. Being a good legalist (like most kids are), our daughter piped up from the back of the van, "He shouldn't mow his lawn on Sunday. He should go to church." I replied by saying something like, "Oh, but he doesn't go to church." At which she replied, quite matter-of-factly, "Then you should tell him about the gospel, Dad." Embarrassed silence, then: "You're right, I should!"

That leads well into the topic: our children, and evangelism and mission. Briefly put, we understand *evangelism* to be the sharing of the gospel within our own communities; and *mission* to be the sending of gospel ministers and workers to other communities. Are these really things that our children need to know about? If so, what can they be taught about doing mission and evangelism? And how can they be involved in it?

### **Knowing our calling**

Let's first speak about the missionary calling of the church. Because before we can assert what our children must know and do, we have to be clear on it ourselves, as adults. This may even be the main point. If evangelism isn't something that we care much about, or put into practice ourselves, then we can hardly expect it of our children, right? So what is the task that Christ has given us as church with respect to the spreading of his Word, the gospel of salvation?

A text everyone probably turns to in their minds is Matthew 28:19-20, those words of Christ to his disciples just before he ascended into heaven. You know them well:

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you."*

And it is a key text. In it we hear the missionary calling of the church clearly assigned. But is that our only text when it comes to the topic? If it all came down to just one passage, maybe some would try to explain it away. They could say, "Well, Jesus didn't mean that for us today – he meant it for the twelve apostles." Or we could say, "Fine, but there are many other things that we have to be busy with too, besides spreading the Word."

But thankfully the mandate to share the gospel isn't revealed in just one passage. It's revealed time and again in Scripture. It's hinted at already in the Old Testament, and then becomes part of the fabric of the New Testament: that the people of Christ must be busy with this work of going, making disciples, teaching them everything the Saviour commanded.

### **Hastening the end**

Without getting into many texts, a bit of theology can illustrate how essential this is to the Christian faith. As believers, we all look forward to the return of Christ from heaven, as judge and Lord. It's

one of the articles of our confession, and something we long for. But why hasn't He come back yet? Why is it 2012 and we're still waiting?

Someone might reply, "Well, it's obviously not God's time yet. He has set a day in his eternal counsel, and that day hasn't arrived." Which is true. But there's another reason we're still waiting – a more immediate reason, if you will. The reason Christ hasn't returned is because the missionary task of the church isn't yet done! There's still gospel-spreading to be carried out.

Peter says this in his second letter where he's talking about the approaching judgment, but also about how God seems to be delaying. Peter explains this by saying,

*"The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."*

(2 Peter 3:9)

Hear those words: God is being patient, and he wants all to repent.

Yes, the great day is certainly coming. It's what we pray for, and find comfort in. But before it can arrive, God wants the full number safely assembled. He has a timetable for this world, and it's a timetable linked directly to the gathering of Christ's church. This truth is placed front and centre in last article of the Belgic Confession. Speaking of the last judgment, we confess there,

*"When the time, ordained by the Lord but unknown to all creatures, has come **and the number of the elect is complete**, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven."*

(Art. 37)

God has ordained a time for Christ's return. It's a time unknown to all but him. But this is what we do know about the day of glory: it'll come, as soon as the church is fully gathered through the Word and Spirit. That day will come once the gospel has gone out to our neighbours, and gone out to all nations.

## **The ABCs of Christian living**

This underlines for us just how fundamental are evangelism and mission to the church's calling. It's not a subsidiary point in the grand scheme of things; it's not an optional activity, to be pursued only if we have the time and resources. No, it's fundamental! And now to the consequence: it underlines how we need to build an awareness of this calling in our children, to instil in them the need to tell others about Jesus Christ.

For when it comes to teaching our children, we don't hold off telling them about some aspects of their Christian calling, do we? No, we put it all out there in its proper time and place, the ABCs of Christian living. We tell our children about their calling to labour diligently with God's gifts, whether as a carpenter or a homemaker or an accountant. We tell them about their calling in the church, to help the needy and support the ministry. We tell our children about their calling with respect to family: the importance of choosing a godly spouse, the blessing of having children of their own one day, and so on. All this and more we share with our children because we know it's essential for them. We want it to become part of their thinking.

If we tell them all that, then we must also speak to our children about mission and evangelism. If this work is so integral to what it means to be a Christian in these last days, it's not something to start teaching only later. We start now.

## **"Just don't break anything..."**

So how can we enable and encourage our children to carry out this high calling? Let's start with what is (perhaps) easier: deeds. Today, many of our fellow citizens will recognize that there are good things that Christians do. We try to be honest in business. We try to be kind to people on our street. We value faithfulness in marriage. We place an importance on hard work. We take a different attitude toward suffering and even death.

Now, sometimes the quiet life of a regular Christian seems to attract very little attention at all. But at other times – and probably many of us have experienced this – unbelievers can't ignore it. When they look at Christians and they see stable homes, and friendly people, and active churches, they're struck by this testimony. It causes people to wonder, at least momentarily: Why the difference with these people? What's the reason for this unexpected kindness, this joy?

That's what we call living prophetically. Prophecy is pointing to the One who has called us and saved us. This is making known the message of the gospel by the character of your life. A godly walk of life isn't just capable of getting compliments or inviting curious questions. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, we confess in the Catechism, a godly walk of life is capable of winning someone for Christ!

This then, is one key lesson to teach our children: that God has put each of us in a certain place and position in this society and world. We all have neighbours. There's that family across the street. There's the people we come across in the grocery store. There's the relationships we all have already, and many more potential relationships.

Remembering that, consider what Paul said to the Colossians. He instructs, *"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity"* (4:5). When interacting with the people around us, our eyes need to be open to the opportunities that God presents. Too often we don't see how a simple deed of kindness across the back fence or a little gesture in the checkout line can speak volumes to someone else. But God tells us for a reason:

*"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders, and make the most of every opportunity."*

If that's true for us, it must also be true for our children. People notice our kids! Why, there's something about children that almost magnetically draws the attention of bystanders. Children's behaviour, their character, their interactions with one another and with Mom and Dad – all will be closely regarded. What are these children like? Are they kind? Are they respectful? Are they self-controlled? Are they obedient?

Sometimes our greatest fear when going out is that our children will embarrass us. If we're out in public, we just want them to behave. Well-known is the last-minute checklist of family by-laws: "Inside voices, please! Mind your manners. And try not to break anything!" But we can set the bar even higher. It's not too much to instil in children the understanding that they are ambassadors of Christ, wherever they go. Even as children, they bring a message from him into this world.

## **Tell the next generation**

That's the deeds part – which, we said, is perhaps easier. What about words? To what extent should we train our children to speak of the gospel? And just how much can we expect them to witness to the people in their neighbourhood?

Now, some will say we shouldn't have separate Christian schools for this reason. Our children shouldn't be "segregated," as it were, but they should be in the public schools so that there they can evangelize their classmates. Being together for six or seven hours a day provides almost endless opportunities to share the gospel. But this environment would probably put an awful lot of pressure on our children. Are they really able to do it, particularly in educational settings that are increasingly un-Christian, or even anti-Christian?

But there's still the question: In our schools and homes and churches, are we preparing our children for a life of remaining segregated from the world, now and always? Or are we aiming to make them into "missionaries" for Christ and prophets who will gladly speak of his Name? It should be the latter. Maybe not at once, for missionaries need to be trained! But if we impress on them even from a young age that this is their prophetic calling, it can be something they grow into. By the time they mature – having been equipped with a scriptural and confessional knowledge, as well as a discerning spirit – we pray that they'll view sharing the gospel as fundamental to being a Christian.

## **Things to be done**

Along the way, we can do a few things. First, we can teach them about the mission and evangelism that are already ongoing. Too often, our missionaries and mission workers are forgotten people. "Pay and pray," we like to say when it comes to mission. The attention falls especially on the former, where we get "assessed" or write our annual cheque, and consider it done. And paying is necessary! To better integrate a missionary awareness in the classroom and the home, we might train our children to give of their own material resources in support of the spread of the gospel. Sponsoring a child who attends a mission school is one way to put a personal face on this work.

The latter aspect of that duo, "praying," can surely also be improved. To facilitate meaningful prayer, we can tell our children what the countries and communities are like where missionaries do their work. We can talk about the many challenges that missionaries face. And while you're at it, remember to pray for those in your own life who don't know the gospel. Pray for your next-door neighbours, or Daddy's co-workers, or the many others in our land who don't know Christ and his salvation. That example of praying for the lost further underlines to children just how important is the spread of the Word.

A second part of training our children for sharing the gospel is teaching them the gospel. Such instruction already receives much emphasis at school, in the home, and at church. But evangelism can be seen as another good reason to impart a solid understanding of the faith. Learning the Scriptures isn't just for their own salvation, it's for the salvation of others! Children need to understand that without knowing the Lord Jesus, people are utterly lost.

When they have that understanding, children can be very bold when speaking about the gospel – often more so than adults. But while they may earnestly love God, and even fear for their neighbour's eternal salvation, it's not always easy for kids to express that. Therefore we need to spend time giving them the basics of salvation, so that they're prepared to speak. What can they say to others about who God is? Who Jesus Christ is? What can they say about sin? About creation? This is giving your children the tools to witness, so they can do it with confidence.

## **Things to be modelled**

And thirdly, we all know the saying, "Monkey see, monkey do." As was said at the beginning, we can't ask others to do something that we ourselves aren't willing to. If Dad won't share the gospel with the neighbour, then we've got nothing to say about him mowing the lawn on Sunday. No, our children are only going to do what we do. We lead by example, and show children that we mean what we say.

This is something every teacher knows: children pay attention to those things that you're passionate about. If you're droning on about some topic, you shouldn't be surprised to see a lot of eyes glazing over. But if you have an excitement for it, they'll not only pay attention but remember. Parents must know this if we're trying to impart a zeal for mission and evangelism to our children. Show that it's real to you. Show that it's important to you.

Sharing the gospel isn't easy. Even when we know all this – that it's part of the church's calling, and our responsibility as believers – we struggle with it. Instead of fearing God, we fear man, so it's hard to work up the courage to speak. But our God in Christ is gracious and powerful. May we learn to rely on him more and more, and may we likewise teach this trust to our children!

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