

## **CALLED TO MAKE CHRIST KNOWN**

### **Heidelberg Catechism LD 12**

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As a church we are all aware of the urgency to share the gospel. With the apostle Paul we say (Romans 1:16) *"... I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes..."* We know our calling from Jesus (Matthew 28:19) to *"...make disciples of all the nations..."* And yet, here's the thing: how do we go about sharing Jesus without freaking out? The NCLS survey our congregation filled out in 2016 revealed that only '6% feel at ease talking about faith with others and look for opportunities to do so.' So, we have a bit of work to do to follow up our church Mission '...to grow as disciples who make disciples of others.' Here are some things to think about. Research shows that 85-95% of people who come to believe in Jesus, do so via a personal relationship. So, for all that we might try by advertising, pamphlets, church signs and the like we won't get much traction. Nor will the things that will scare off most of us, like door knocking or street corner preaching, witnessing at shopping centers. Given our changed culture those approaches are barely tolerated anyway. Most conversions come via a family member, a friend, workmate, school or uni friends. There needs to be a relationship to share life as well as our faith.

But here we strike a problem. Many of us as Christians do not have a lot of non-Christian friends. Other research shows after a person has been a Christian for about two years they start losing their non-Christian friends. That's because the new believer starts to change their old lifestyle, which means they have less in common with their old friends. And church folk are often too busy with their own family and church commitments. As an elder complained in a previous congregation, 'I don't even have time for my own family, let alone time to make friends outside the church.' It raises the issue of how we balance being 'in the world but not of the world'. How do we form genuine close relations with people whose lifestyles are not Christian, but not follow the ways of the world? As John writes (1 John 2:15) *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them."* And Psalm 137:4 says *"How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?"* Church goers can be critical of others because they spend too much time in the pub. They don't share their views on sexual promiscuity or orientation. They are critical of their language and gambling. And these can be genuine concerns. But it creates a dilemma. On the one

hand it is said 'We should not associate with those people until they change their ways. Until they become Christian'. But on the other hand, 'How can they become Christians unless someone spends the time with them and through the relationship shares the gospel?' The Apostle Paul writes (Romans 10:13) "*...everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved...*" But then he raises the question "*...but how are people to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?*" Yes, how are people to believe and become Christians, and change their lifestyles, if they have never heard the gospel? And I mean the real gospel. Sure, most people have some concept of the church. Much of it now is very negative, especially after the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse and the Same Sex Marriage debate. Even if they are not negative, people tend to have vague understandings about God and tend to see ministers as dispensers of morality. A few decades ago our culture was uniformly Christian, and people would be concerned about going to heaven after they died. So, we could start an evangelistic conversation 'Are you sure you will go to heaven if you died tonight?' Now we live in a time when there are a variety of different religions and over a third of the population now have no religion, says the latest Census. Ours is the most biblically illiterate generation in Australia. In our post-modern world, we cannot even assume the basics. Sin is an unknown concept, so why would we need Jesus to save us from our sin?

Now who is going to tell this generation of Australians the gospel? Whose job is it? It's yours and mine. All of us who belong to 'The Christ'. It is part of our office of being Christian. Remember what we said last week of Jesus being 'The Christ', 'The Office Bearer', the majestic 'Lord of lords'. We "*...share in his anointing*" and hold the three-fold office of prophet, priest and king. And in this case, it has to do with our calling as prophets. As the confession says we are to "*confess the name of Christ*". The word 'confess' means 'to openly make known, to declare'. A prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of God. They reveal God's Word to others. The confession says that Jesus as "*...our chief prophet reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God for our deliverance.*" Jesus did this not just by telling us about it. He brought it about through his death and resurrection. Jesus as prophet does not just speak the word. He is the Word of God. He is God. Now, because we "*...share in his anointing*" we are called to be Christ's body to the world. It is now our task to reveal God's message to our communities. Remember it is the Christian, now holding Christ's office, who now goes about doing the work of 'The Christ' on his behalf. So, we have no choice in the matter. This is our calling. This is the reason we exist. People are saved or condemned by their response to our witnessing. We bear a great office. And a huge responsibility. And yet, as we said at the beginning, it is in this very area that many of us have problems. We don't mind so much confessing our faith in church. But when it comes to confessing the name of

Christ outside the church, to our workmates or neighbours, then so often we tend to develop verbal paralysis. We so often become all embarrassed and knotted up inside. And we end up saying nothing. Or very little because we don't know how in our changed culture. We can be like the Jews in Babylon and shrink back from "singing the Lord's songs" to those who are 'foreigners'; those who are not of us, who don't understand or might mock us. The predicament inside of us is that we both shrink back from witnessing and at the same time keep telling ourselves we should be doing it. What often happens is that we develop a guilt complex about it all. But the witnessing paralysis stays with us.

Perhaps we console ourselves by doing a lot of work inside the church. We spend all our energy on 'confessing Christ' to each other in the worship service and at Bible studies. We 'confess Christ' to our children in God's Own and Hope Kids and Youth. All of this is very important and very much part of our prophetic work. But when we have 'confessed the name of Christ' to each other and to our children then we are not finished yet. We cannot stop there. Then we must also 'confess his name' outside the church. Now, of course, there are many things that work against witnessing. For example, to ask a person if they 'know the Lord Jesus personally as saviour' is just not the done thing socially. The prevailing attitude in our society is that religion is a personal thing. You just don't talk about these things. There are times when certain methods of witnessing are in appropriate. Like walking up to a man who is working under his care, whose very frustrated because he can't get the pieces together. You ask him to come out from under the car with his hands full of grease, his nerves on edge and you ask him 'What does Christ mean to you?' Or like knocking on the door of a shift worker trying to get some sleep. And then as a stranger asking out of the blue 'Would you go to heaven if you died tonight?' Would we as a group go and sing hymns to the drinkers in the pub? Not all situations or time are appropriate. However, the question is still with us. (Psalm 137) 'Can we sing the Lord's song to foreigners?' Our first reaction might be to say we will not (Matthew 7:6) "...*throw the pearl before the swine*". We will sing the Lord's song to those who are searching, to those in desperate need. But we will not sing the Lord's song to those who couldn't care less, to the arrogant and the blasphemous. No one wants to give a red-faced and embarrassed testimony to someone who listens with amusement and then laughs in your face. And yet, the Christ whose name we bear, whose office we hold, insists that we "confess his name" to all the world, to all people, in all circumstances.

Perhaps we need to look at it in another way. We must be ready in every area of our lives and in all personal relationships to witness for the Christ. As Peter writes (1 Peter 3:15) "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for*

*the hope that you have.*" In other words, we must be ready when the time and situation is right. There are times when verbal personal witnessing will do more harm than good. There are times when a quiet living witness says so much more than words. The average person in Australia is not impressed with many words and prepackaged witnessing. They look for genuine lifestyles. They ask, 'Are these guys fair dinkum?' Often the hero in Australian literature and films is the underdog. He is one who does not say much but gets on with the needs at hand. For example, think of a man who is angry because of the suffering life has thrown at him. If you show concern and are always ready to lend a hand, to regularly visit, that says a lot more to him than a theological debate about a loving God in a cruel world. Especially, if you have been through suffering yourself, and you still trust and love God.

We need to ask God for the gift of discernment, to know when to act and when to speak. For we do need to speak. We do need to explain how Jesus has brought us hope. But we must ask whether the Holy Spirit has opened a door to a person's life. Because conversion is an act of the Spirit. No matter how brilliant a speaker you may be, you cannot give another person faith. So, we need to be sensitive to the Spirit. Has he opened a door? Or are we trying to crash through the wall of a person's life where the Spirit has made no opening? We need to be ready for genuine openings which the Spirit gives us through our everyday relationships. Openings made ready by the Spirit working in people's lives as they relate with us and see our attitudes and behaviour. Witnessing is not a matter of 'Bible bashing', which is coming to someone who is not ready. But it is a matter of being ready and willing to act decisively and speak when the time is write. As Paul writes in Colossians 4:5 *"Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity."* The Greek there comes from a term meaning 'bargain hunting'. You stumble across something you have wanted for a long time and there it is at half price with only a few left. What do you do? You snap it up and buy it. You make the most of the opportunity. For example, a neighbour has been struggling with her marriage and she asks how you cope. There is an opening. The people at work discuss a moral issue that's come up in the news over their coffee break. They ask you for your opinion. There is a natural opening. A girl meets up with one of the young men from church and asks what he is doing for the weekend. There's an opening. The Holy Spirit is providing many openings for us, many genuine, natural openings. And if we are alert to them we will probably have more opportunities to witness than we can handle.

What do we say when the Spirit provides the opening? Just a simple confession of who Christ is to you. Remember we must *"...confess his name"*. It's not necessarily about being theologically deep. It should simply be you confessing what is in your heart. It is

interesting to note that the Hebrew word for 'prophet', 'navi' means 'one who bubbles forth'. In other words, that which the prophet is full of 'bubbles' out. So, with us. Just simply admit, as simply as you can, in your own words what Christ has done for you. A witness is someone who shares what they have experienced. We share the hope and joy Jesus brings us. We confess the assurance of forgiveness we have and a personal relationship with God. Such a genuine and natural confession does far more than all the learned techniques. Because it is real. And people sense very quickly what is genuinely from you and what is a rehearsed speech. People want to be sure what we believe works for us and thus can work for them as ordinary people. Mattie Montgomery wrote 'Sharing the gospel is not a strategy or method for ministry. It is the manifestation of love in the lives of God's children.' We do not all have to be evangelists. But we do all have the gift to simply confess what we believe and cherish. So, no one can say 'I can't be a witness. I don't have the ability'. The only person who can't witness for Jesus is the one who has not experienced him. That may be the question you need to think about first. If you are of 'The Christ', then you are 'anointed' with the Holy Spirit. What your heart is full of should bubble forth and overflow. So be natural and genuine. Be a living witness. Be sensitive and prayerful in all situations. And when the Spirit provides an opening see it for what it is. And make the 'most of the opportunity'.