

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Evangelism is a long word that tells of a simple Christian mandate. It is a good mandate (literally “good message”) because the very word itself points to the source of the mandate—the love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ. This good news has become ours to share with other people; but before it is ours to share, it is ours to experience. First, we discover in our own lives the forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. Then, the power at the core of this love motivates and enables us for every sharing ministry that we have in the world. As disciples of the Lord of the good news, therefore, we are at the core evangelical. And we are evangelists when we invite other people to trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Opposites Attract

When I think of the ministry of evangelism, four sets of opposites come to my mind. First evangelism is natural, yet unnatural. Second, evangelism is personal, yet public. Third, evangelism is a thoughtful event that fully occupies the mind, yet is profoundly mysterious and beyond our intellectual capability. Finally, evangelism takes time because it is a journey, yet is instantaneous because it is a journey that is both in progress, and completed, simultaneously.

Natural and Unnatural

How can something be natural and unnatural at the same time? Actually, we are accustomed to such contrasts in the physical world. It is unnatural for human beings to exist at an elevation of 40,000 feet; yet by creating an artificial environment within a 747 jet, we can not only exist at that elevation, but enjoy a meal at the same time.

The coexistence of the natural and the unnatural is also evident in the spiritual realm. On the one hand, we want to share something as personally transforming as our discovery of God’s grace with others. On the other hand, precisely because it is so personal, it can be difficult to disclose.

We must remember this fact when we do share our faith. It is unnatural for one human being to stand too close to the private core of another human being’s personhood, where the most important decisions are made. While it is natural to share the joy we have discovered in Christ and to invite our neighbor to discover it too, we must also know how to lovingly step back before our evangelism becomes a forced entry. One of the chief marks of our Lord’s encounters with people was the profound respect with which He treated them. Jesus never negated a person’s integrity; He always respected their right to make the critical choices for themselves, as He did with the rich young ruler in Mark 10.

Personal and Public

Each of us makes our own private choices. But these choices have inevitable public consequences. Even a

secret disciple of Jesus, like Nicodemus, could not keep the secret permanently.

Since our private commitment to Jesus Christ will have public consequences, therefore, our evangelism must never sidestep the public results of conversion. When I trusted Christ, my values changed, my goals changed and my interpersonal relationships changed. While some of this was hard, I was also the recipient of one of the most beneficial public consequences of conversion: the linking of myself with other men and women who had also decided for Christ. While the journey of discipleship contains elements that are only done alone, God has given us a community of believers with whom we walk together as we live out our faith.

Our evangelism, therefore, invites a person into both the profoundly personal and unique experience of individual relationship with Jesus Christ and the communal relationship of the believing community. As E. Stanley Jones put it: “You belong to Christ; I belong to Christ; we belong to each other.” It is very personal, and very public, at the same time.

Hearts and Minds

Evangelism is the event of the mind that invites a person to think through the claims of Jesus of Nazareth. Since Jesus Christ is in fact the truth, it is only to our advantage to encourage intellectual openness as people search for truth. We should never fear honest

questions of the mind; our Gospel is the good news of truth for the mind as much as it is the good news of love for the heart.

The wonder of becoming a Christian, however, can never be fully explained on the basis of reason. There is a mystery at the core of all Christian faith. The Holy Spirit is ultimately the One who confirms the truth of the Gospel into our hearts. No amount of intellectual argument alone can generate this wondrous discovery. As we strive to persuade, then, we must never forget the mystery of the Gospel, even as we do our best to make a sensible case for Christianity. We are witnesses; the Holy Spirit is the evangelist.

The Instant Lifetime

Evangelism takes time. This is why the best evangelism is thoughtful, time-consuming, and based on friendship. In my experience, the best outreach has never contained that desperate urgency that often generates more uncertainty than it does confidence in the credibility of the Gospel. It is instead a faithful, ongoing witness to my neighbor/friend at each incremental step in their spiritual journey.

When we trust in this seemingly lengthy process, the surprises of the suddenness of faith will confront us at

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every turn. Friends we thought were far from a resolution with God will suddenly trust in Christ. We will be astounded at the ways God proves Himself that are completely out of the realm of timelines. Faith is indeed the lifelong journey that is also instantaneous.

The Contradiction that Saves

Evangelism, then, is an amazing blend of apparent contradictions: natural yet unnatural, personal yet public,

intellectual yet transrational, lengthy yet instant. But of course, this is how it should be. Doesn't evangelism mirror the ultimate, saving contradiction: That a holy, sovereign Lord would choose to humble Himself and take on the penalty for our terminal sinfulness? It does; and He did; and we do well to fall before Him in thankfulness for His contradictions. ♦



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