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Giving People Time and Space

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—EARL PALMER

A man who liked C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* went on to read *Mere Christianity*—and was infuriated. He wrote the author a scathing letter. Lewis's response, in longhand, shows a master evangelist at work:

Yes, I'm not surprised that a man who agreed with me in *Screwtape* . . . might disagree with me when I wrote about religion. We can hardly discuss the whole matter by post, can we? I'll only make one shot. When people object, as you do, that if Jesus was God as well as man, then he had an unfair advantage which deprives him for them of all value, it seems to me as if a man struggling in the water should refuse a rope thrown to him by another who had one foot on the bank, saying, 'Oh, but you have an unfair advantage.' It is because of that advantage that he can help. But all good wishes. We must just differ; in charity I hope. You must not be angry with me for believing, you know; I'm not angry with you.

What impresses me about that exchange is the light touch. Lewis acknowledges the man's complaint, gives him one thing to think about, and stops. He steps back as if to say, "Your move," which opens the way for the man to write again.

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Journey evangelism

When we relate to people, we must remind ourselves that we are on a long journey together. The idea that *this is my only chance to talk to this person* is a great detriment. Even on an airplane, we should speak as if we're going to know that seatmate for the rest of our lives. After all, to use another line from C. S. Lewis, "Christians never say good-bye."

When we share the gospel, it is part of a larger whole. Let me illustrate with small-group Bible studies, which our church has found to be our most authentic and exciting evangelistic event. What is fascinating is that we don't try to be evangelistic. Our goal is to let the text make its own point, and then enable group members to express their feelings about what is being read together. We consciously try not to cover everything the first week, but only what the text says. Our approach is: "Read this book as you read anything else. When you start Mark, don't give him an inch. Make him win every point. Don't worry about whether this is supposed to be the holy Word of God; just read it with the same seriousness you apply to your own thoughts."

The amazing thing is that the text inevitably reveals its living center. Some weeks Mark (or Paul or John) wins, some weeks he loses. But over time, the text comes out ahead, and the Christ of the text wins respect.

Too many of us preachers try to say too much all at once. Especially at the end of sermons—we throw in the kitchen sink trying to get somebody to make some sort of decision. We rattle off the most precious facts of our faith—the blood of Christ, the cross, God loves you—and reduce them to hasty, unexplained sentences. It is far better to let the text make its own point.

I've found the same tendency in counseling. Somebody

comes into my office and begins sharing his life. I listen very closely, trying to hear with my heart as well as my head. My mind is soon flooded with impressions, statements, Bible verses that I can hardly wait to unleash as soon as my turn comes. “Look at this . . . let me tell you this story . . . read this book . . . what you need to do is . . .”

As I’ve grown older, I’ve been asking God in such situations to help me say one or two things—not twenty-three. The poor person is already troubled and highly emotional. What is he supposed to do with a flood of input? He can only nod and say, “Oh, yes, thank you, pastor,” and before long he’s nodding just to get out of the room.

In evangelism, people do not need admonishments as much as they need to be carefully heard. Once I’m listening, I sort through their arguments to find out where I can agree. Very often the “god” they’re rejecting I would reject, too. Why not let them know that?

A Christian friend of mine was a high school principal in Los Angeles. One day a father came charging into his office, irate because of the F his son had received in a course. The man had dreams of his son’s going to an Ivy League school, and now this teacher was destroying the plan. He wanted the grade changed.

My friend listened to the threats and demands for a while, and finally when there was a pause he said quietly, “I can see that you care a great deal about your son.”

The man suddenly began to cry. The mask came off. He was strong but aloof, and the only way he knew to do anything for his son was by bullying. When the principal spoke about relationship, the point of deepest hurt was exposed. Now the father was ready to be helped.

My friend knew he wasn’t going to ask the teacher to change the grade. So why be defensive? Instead, he listened with his heart until he got in touch with the man’s underlying journey.

I remember going to a Navigators conference in Colorado Springs during my student days. As part of our training, we

were all going to go out and hit the city with a great witnessing blitz; Colorado Springs would never be the same. Jim Rayburn of Young Life had been invited to talk to us, and he said, "Well, I know what you're headed out to do. . . you're going to go out there and say to people, 'Brother, are you saved?' and you've got to say it real fast, because you may never see that person again. . . ." He paused a moment before continuing.

"And you won't. You won't."

Then he shared his philosophy of evangelism, which was to take the time it takes to share the good news of Jesus Christ with people.

I'm not saying we should not be zealous. But the gospel has its own urgent edge and does its own convicting of sin. Isn't it good that the Holy Spirit takes care of that as we simply witness to the truth?

A crusty engineering professor in our city was shattered when his Christian wife died unexpectedly of a heart attack just as they reached retirement age. After the funeral, he came to see me. I steered him toward the Gospel of Mark and some additional reading. After several weeks, I could see the New Testament was gradually making sense to him. My closing comment in our times together was usually, "Let me know when you're ready to become a Christian." (I rarely say, "Are you ready?" Instead, I ask people to let me know when they have enough information to trust Jesus Christ. I believe the most central evangelistic question is "Are you able, on the basis of what you've discovered about Jesus Christ, to trust your life to his faithfulness and love?" This combines repentance of sin and response to his love.)

One Sunday after church, with a lot of people milling around, the engineer stood in the back waiting for me. He's not the kind of man who likes standing around. Finally he got my attention so he could call out, "Hey, Earl . . . I'm letting you know." That was it; he became a Christian at age sixty-five.

We have to make room for people to struggle because the

stakes are so big. We should not be too pleased if someone comes to Christ with little struggle—it may mean this is simply a compliant person, and the same compliance that eases them into Christianity may also ease them toward the next thing that calls for their obedience.

The next-to-the-last word

The more sensitive we are to journey evangelism, the more we will recognize pre-evangelistic preparation. So many things in our culture are pre-evangelistic. I don't know whether Robert Frost was a Christian, but his "Mending Wall" is most definitely a pre-Christian poem. It raises all the right questions. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Francis Ford Coppola's movie *Apocalypse Now* both raise huge questions that the gospel addresses.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "You cannot hear the last word until you've heard the next-to-the-last word." The next-to-the-last word is the law; it makes us feel guilty, trapped, judged. Only then are we ready for the good news.

Evangelists who ignore the person's journey are missing something important. Or, we make the mistake of listening once, and then freezing people in that state of rebellion. They may have spoken more outrageously than they believe; they may have only been trying to shock us; or they may have moved on from their first rejection of Christ. We must keep hearing the clues and moving along as they move.

G. K. Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy* about five steps in his journey as a young man:

One, I felt in my bones; first that this world does not explain itself. It may be a miracle with a supernatural explanation, it may be a conjuring trick, with a natural explanation. But the explanation of the conjuring trick, if it is to satisfy me, will have to be better than the natural explanation I have heard. The thing is magic, true or false.

Second, I came to feel as if magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have someone to mean it . . .

Third, I thought this purpose beautiful in its old design, in spite of its defects, such as dragons.

Fourth, the proper form of thanks to it is some form of humility and restraint. We should thank God for beer and burgundy by not drinking too much of them.

And last, and strangest of all, there came into my mind a vague and vast impression that in some way all good was a remnant to be stored and held sacred out of some primordial ruin. Man had saved his good as Crusoe had saved his goods. He had saved them from a wreck, and all this I felt, and my age gave me no encouragement to feel it.

And all this time I had not even thought of Christian theology.

What a slow but elegant orbit he makes toward the living center.

Our part in the mystery

In the San Francisco Bay Area where I lived, I sometimes made jokes at the expense of a small town called Milpitas. Once while speaking on radio, I said, "You know, Beethoven is not on trial when the Milpitas Junior High Orchestra plays the *Ninth Symphony*. And Jesus Christ is not on trial when you or I or even C. S. Lewis tries to express the faith in a conversation or a sermon."

Then about a year later it occurred to me: *But were it not for the Milpitas Junior High Orchestra, who would hear Beethoven?* Playing badly is better than no playing at all. Who plays Beethoven perfectly?

Some people trudge from church to church looking for the perfect rendition. They'll never find it. W. H. Auden once observed that even though the line is smudged, we can read the line. That is the mystery of evangelism: Even though we smudge the line, it can still be read. You can whistle the tune of the *Ninth Symphony* even after listening in the Milpitas gymnasium.

Evangelism is far greater than any of us. That is why it takes time. But without us, it would take an eternity. And human beings do not have that long to make up their minds.