Reclaiming the *E* word

By Debie Thomas | February 2023 | The Christian Century

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Evangelism has become a dirty word among progressive Christians. But don't we have good news to share?

It's hard to say the word without provoking nervous laughter. Or a sanctuary full of frowns and flinches. It's progressive Christianity's big, bad *E* word: *evangelism*.

Having grown up in a faith tradition that not only encouraged me to share the gospel but insisted that I do so (lest my nonbelieving friends end up in hell), I'm struck by the irony. Progressive churches tout beautiful, attractive values: inclusiveness, hospitality, diversity, openness. And yet we rarely invite. We cringe from invitation like cats from bathtubs.

I know that we have good reasons for doing so. We don't want to repeat the horrific sins of colonialist Christianity. We don't want to come across as judgmental or obtrusive. We don't want to be associated with fundamentalist Bible-thumpers. We don't believe that the gospel is about securing fire insurance from eternal damnation. We don't believe that we hold a monopoly on spiritual meaning, wisdom, and truth. We don't wish to come across as false in our relationships, feigning love and care in order to manipulate people into signing on a doctrinal dotted line.

I'm fully on board with these objections. But our earliest Christian ancestors lived and died in the hope of offering the whole world an invitation to radical, transformative, healing, empowering love. Love grounded in Jesus' death and resurrection, enlivened and manifested in sacred community. Love aimed at union and communion with God, compelled to do justice and love mercy so that God's dream of a peaceable kingdom could be realized for all of humanity.

The Good News Jesus embodied was *news*. Something to share, to proclaim. So at what point does our silence become offensive in its own right? Offensive as in withholding, ungenerous, inhospitable?

Perhaps we need to reexamine and rearticulate what exactly our Good News is. If our motivation to evangelize isn't hellfire, what is it? What have we come to cherish about Jesus? About the life of faith? About God's love fleshed out in community? Do we really believe that God as revealed in Jesus has something profound to offer when it comes to human flourishing and a healed creation?

We've become so adept at articulating who we are not and what we reject. But can we also articulate who we are? What we affirm?

Along with the "what" of the gospel, we might rethink the "how" of evangelism. I'm always fascinated by the fact that Jesus' way with people was to listen, to ask questions, to tell stories, and to let folks walk away with what they'd seen and heard. The invitation to "come and see" was always open. But so was the freedom to doubt, question, and disagree.

What would it be like to reclaim evangelism as an invitation to embody the questions that matter? To get curious? To tell stories? To believe that we have as much to learn from the sharing of the Good News as those we share it with? What if evangelism becomes a communal and reciprocal seeking after truth? A commitment to lifelong learning? A practice of deep calling to deep?

What if we share the Good News with a view to discerning how God is alive in all people and all things? What if we enter into evangelism not with the arrogant assumption that we are bringing God anywhere but with the awed realization that God is already out ahead of us, beyond us, in us, and between us?

When Jesus first announced his Good News, he was offering an oppressed people a subversive alternative to the logic of empire. What, I have to ask myself every time I shy away from evangelism, is so embarrassing and offensive about this kind of liberative news? About the possibility of justice, healing, and wholeness for people starving for hope?

It seems important to note here that my own faith, the faith of a South Asian American woman and a daughter of immigrants, is a product of 2,000 years of Christian evangelism—for good and for ill. As legend would have it, the apostle Thomas came to India in the first century and shared the story of Jesus with my distant ancestors, founding seven churches and serving them until his martyrdom. Over the centuries that followed, waves of missionaries, preachers, evangelists—and yes, colonizers—swept into my parents' home country, sharing the gospel, distorting the gospel, disgracing the gospel, and upholding the gospel. By turns.

There are aspects of this history that infuriate me, that break my heart, that cause me to question the whole enterprise of evangelism. Yet I still believe that somehow, across the years and despite human folly, God's Good News remained good. That even amidst the shadows, it brought healing, hope, and transformation to my ancestors.

In the church I attend now here in Northern California, we pray each Sunday for the global church. But before we do, we repent. We ask God to keep us ever mindful "of the sins of colonial conquest" that have accompanied the worldwide spread of Christianity.

We acknowledge the historic and catastrophic sins we Christians have committed. We ask forgiveness for the sins committed on our behalf.

But then we make a turn toward gratitude and hope. We ask "for the grace to receive the gifts our global Communion offers us."

We do this because it is possible, with God's help, to hold the paradox, the messy nuance. It is possible to look at the story of Christian evangelism and see both sin and gift, both pain and grace.

Evangelism for the Inadequate

By Craig Hoekema | April 21, 2026 | The Banner

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“So what’s the class about?” they asked me. I froze. I was talking with a couple of parents from my son’s little league team about what I was doing on my sabbatical. The truth is that I was putting together an adult education class on evangelism, but I didn’t mention specifics. Telling them it was about evangelism might make them want to start avoiding me in fear that they would otherwise become a project. But they asked anyway. “Oh,” I said hesitantly, “it’s just about encouraging people in our congregation to live as the Bible says.” I now remember that conversation as yet another moment when I let my own fears squander an evangelistic opportunity.

There are people far more qualified than I to write an article on evangelism. Many are far more courageous and intentional than I am about looking for opportunities to share their faith. So I have a growth area (an area in which I need to grow) in common with the Christian Reformed Church as a whole. In fact, I believe evangelism is one of the most important areas we need to grow as we think about God’s desired future for our denomination and for our local churches. Let me share a few things I’ve learned from others that have helped nudge me toward greater faithfulness in this area.

Seeking the Spirit in Prayer

Our theology has some very practical implications when it comes to evangelism. Since faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 65), our efforts will accomplish exactly nothing without him. Our prayer life must reflect this reality. One good practice is to have a prayer list of those you’d like to see converted and to keep that list somewhere you’ll see it daily. Regular prayer for non-Christians also encourages us to remain attentive to opportunities the Spirit might be opening for us in their lives.

And prayer should continue during every evangelistic encounter. With our ears tuned to the conversation, our hearts are tuned to the Spirit asking things like, "God, is this an open door? Should I speak? Be silent? Ask more questions? Lead me, please." Thankfully, it isn't up to us to manufacture conversions through our own wisdom. It's up to us to pray persistently for the work of the Holy Spirit and to discern and follow his lead.

Getting Closer to Non-Christians

For some of us, it takes intentionality to spend meaningful time with non-Christians. As a pastor, it's easy for me to spend most of my time within the Christian community. But we need to seek ways to have meaningful interactions with non-Christians. That could be as simple as taking walks with the intent to stop and talk with neighbors along the way, or it could be more involved like joining a community event or club. Our hobbies and interests might be one of our greatest evangelistic assets. A good question to ask is this: What's something I enjoy that would enable me to get to know people who don't know Jesus?

For others, interacting with non-Christians takes no effort at all. Some feel like spiritual minorities most of the week except on Sunday mornings. The question then becomes, with whom (and how) could I take the next step in building our relationship? Who could I invite for coffee or lunch or welcome into our home for a meal? Or is there a need I could meet or care I could extend? Many of our relationships with non-Christians could be significantly deepened with just some small initiative on our part. I can testify to rich experiences of neighbors becoming friends because—after years of pleasant driveway conversation—we finally invited them to join us around our table.

Asking Good Questions

If you're like me, the hardest part of evangelism isn't building relationships with non-Christians. Neither is the hardest part talking about my faith. The hardest part for me is what lies in-between—discerning when and how to

move a casual conversation into a spiritual conversation (and to do so in a way that doesn't make my neighbor want to avoid me).

In his book, *God Space*, Doug Pollock suggests we're often only a few good questions away from having a spiritual conversation. In other words, the key starting point is thinking less about what we might say to someone and more about the interest we show in them. Pollock offers several examples of questions that can begin to raise the spiritual temperature of a conversation—questions like, "What's the greatest piece of wisdom you've ever received?" or "If you could ask God anything, what would you ask?" You might be surprised by a person's willingness to talk about spiritual matters with someone who shows genuine interest.

What if, when asked about my evangelism course, I had told the whole truth and asked, "If you don't mind my asking, have you ever had someone try to share their faith with you? What was that like for you?"

Bearing Witness to Your Faith

For a long time, my understanding of evangelism was limited to the act of telling people what's true. And while that is crucial, there are many people who aren't ready for mere assertions or who aren't interested in being told what to believe. Can we still do meaningful evangelism?

I've been encouraged by those who've said that simply bearing witness to what you believe is evangelism. You might say that bearing witness is being willing to talk in front of a non-Christian the same way we might talk in the fellowship hall at church—confidently and freely including mentions of our faith simply because it's authentic to who we are and what matters most to us. A conversation with my neighbour about how grumpy the pandemic was making us turned evangelistic as soon as I shared a little bit more. I mentioned that my anger was confronting me with whether I find my contentment in Christ or in my circumstances. My neighbour didn't ask questions, but neither did she get uncomfortable or try to change the subject.

It's best if our witness includes some element of vulnerability or difficulty so that we don't sound 'holier-than-thou.' The goal isn't to impress or to get a reaction; it's to bear authentic witness to how important our faith is to us.

Knowing Your Own Story

Closely related to bearing witness is the value of knowing how to tell your own faith story clearly and quickly. If someone asks you why you're a Christian, or what Jesus means to you, could you tell them in under a minute? Can you tell what transformation Jesus Christ has brought into your life and how he's drawn you to himself? Is there a key turning point or "Aha!" moment that awakened you to who Jesus is or what only he could give you? Can you tell your story with one clear plotline in a way that avoids superiority and language that wouldn't be familiar to a non-Christian? If not, work on preparing your own testimony and have it ready whenever the opportunity arises.

A Chain of Many Links

A final observation that's been helpful to me is that most conversions to faith in Jesus Christ come only after many evangelistic encounters, which means that several people play important roles in a person's journey toward faith who don't see the result. Some evangelists have used the metaphor of links in a chain—we never know how many links there will be before a person finds themselves surrendered at the feet of Christ. Your role might be to help move a person from link four to five in a 50-link chain.

I recall the testimony of a friend who couldn't tell you when he became a Christian. All he knows is that he was raised without any faith, and today he's passionately surrendered to the Lord Jesus. What happened in between is a long, slow story without a lot of fireworks.

It can be easy to walk away from an evangelistic encounter feeling discouraged that the person didn't seem to respond. However, those are moments we entrust to the Holy Spirit, praying and trusting that he'll use our meager attempts at faithfulness however he wishes.