

Reclaiming the *E* word

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

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue



(Photo by doidam10 / iStock / Getty)

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.

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[Jon Mathieu](#), the *Century's* community engagement editor, engages [Debie Thomas](#) in conversation about her article and the E word.