



Holy Conversation: The Lost Art of Witness

RICHARD V. PEACE

Spirituality is a topic of great interest in our society as we enter the twenty-first century. We are engaged in a vigorous conversation about God, about the nature and meaning of life, about spiritual practices, and about what it means to be a person open to both the natural and the supernatural sides of life.

A friend of mine, Barry Taylor, who is both a pastor and a professional musician, tells of a screening of the film *The Third Miracle* (1999), directed by the talented Polish filmmaker Agnieszka Holland. Barry was the musical supervisor on the film and wrote several of its songs. The purpose of this pre-release screening was to test out a version of the film before a live audience. At the end of the screening the producers tried to get feedback about the film, but all the audience wanted to do was talk about God. Despite the best efforts of the filmmakers they could only sit back and listen to the energetic conversation by this largely secular audience about spirituality.

Interestingly, the church may or may not be invited to be part of this conversation. Those of us who are active in the Christian church would, at first glance, appear to be ideal conversation partners. After all, we are already committed to a religious way and therefore, presumably, have valuable input on the topic of spirituality. But there is a problem: as committed Christians we are suspect—on two counts. First, we are aligned with a church, with organized religion, and while

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spirituality is “in,” religion is “out.” Institutions are understood to squash or limit exploration of spirituality by insisting that certain doctrines are true (and others are wrong) and by promoting certain ways of living (which limit personal freedom). Second, religious people bring an agenda to the conversation. We seek the conversion of others. While our concern may be well intentioned, it is manipulative (or so it is felt). Who wants to talk to someone who thinks you need to be converted?

“How do we talk about faith in ways that are honest, accurate, and genuine in the midst of a postmodern climate that is suspicious of truth claims?”

This is the challenge for concerned Christians who want to be part of this cultural conversation but who also want to be faithful to what we have come to know and experience in our Christian faith. How do we talk about faith in ways that are honest, accurate, and genuine in the midst of a postmodern climate that is suspicious of truth claims, hesitant to make commitments that seem to limit personal freedom, and dismissive of institutions that appear to be self-serving? There is another side to postmodern reality, however. Postmodern people are actively searching for truth that is experiential, for communities in which that truth is lived out, and for spiritual experiences that are real. So the challenge is to learn how to converse in ways that touch these longings, are faithful to core Christianity, and are noncoercive.

MANDATE

During the first century Christians sought to share their faith in Jesus with those in their community. To talk about Jesus to others was to be a “witness.” In Greek, “witness” is a legal term that means attesting to the facts or asserting the truth. In Luke 24:48 Jesus commissions his disciples to be his witnesses. They are to bear witness to “Jesus as Messiah, the fulfillment of all the Scriptures in him, his suffering and death, his resurrection and the proclamation of repentance and faith in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”¹ The Greek word witness (root μαρτυρέω) is the word from which the English word “martyr” is derived and as such points to the fact that at various times in history it was dangerous to attest to this particular set of truths.

This same call to be a witness is found in Col 4:5-6: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (NIV). This is the final exhortation in Colossians and it points out Paul and Timothy’s concern that this community of Christians be in conversation with

¹Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970) 71.

their non-Christian neighbors. They are called upon to be “wise” in how they conduct themselves towards others.² They are to seize the opportunity whenever it presents itself to proclaim the gospel. (This phrase is filled with the Pauline sense of the eschatological imperative: the time is short until Christ returns again so they must “redeem the time.”) Verse 6 “envisages a church in communication with those around it, not cut off in a ‘holy huddle’ speaking only ‘the language of Zion’ to insiders...but engaged in regular conversation with others, and in such a way as to allow plenty opportunity to bear testimony to their faith.”³ This conversation is to be gracious and attractive, one that “delights and charms.” It is to be interesting and never bland or insipid. And the Christians should be able to respond wisely to questions concerning the faith.

James D. G. Dunn captures well what is being envisioned by Paul and Timothy:

This picture is as far as we can imagine from that of the Christian who has no interest in affairs outside those of faith or church and so no “small talk,” no ability to maintain an interesting conversation. In contrast, it envisages opportunities for lively interchanges with non-Christians on topics and in a style which could be expected to find a positive resonance with the conversation partners. It would not be conversation which has “gone bad,” but conversation which reflects the attractiveness of character displayed above all by Christ. Moreover, such advice envisages a group of Christians in a sufficiently positive relation with the surrounding community for such conversations to be natural, a group not fearful or threatened, but open to and in positive relationship with its neighbors....Such conversations, however, would regularly and quite naturally throw up opportunities to bear more specific Christian witness—not as something artificially added on to a “secular” conversation, nor requiring a special language or manner of speaking, but as part of a typical exchange of opinions and ideas....[I]t should be noted how integrated their faith was expected to be with their workaday lives in the city and how rounded the religion that could both charm a conversation partner by its quality and give testimony of faith as part of the same conversation.⁴

This is our challenge today: to be these kinds of conversation partners in the midst of a culture that is fascinated by spirituality. Yet the reality is that we are seldom as wise, as engaged, as interesting, or as charming as those pictured by Paul and Timothy. Part of the problem is that we have not given much thought to how to express our faith to those who do not share that faith. Nor have we wrestled with what it means to listen to others who are exploring the spiritual way. The result is that when we venture into such areas the outcome is often a muddled conversation, filled with extensive use of a theological vocabulary that both mystifies and

²The exhortation to “walk in wisdom” summarizes one of the main emphases of the letter (see 1:9-10, 28; 2:3, 6-7, 23; and 3:16). See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 265.

³*Ibid.*, 266.

⁴*Ibid.*, 267-268.

confuses our conversation partners. The challenge, therefore, is to prepare ourselves to be fit and lively conversationalists. The church needs to become far more intentional about preparing people to be witnesses to Jesus Christ.

WITNESS

Nowadays, in the North American context, we are unlikely to be punished for being a witness. More likely, we are simply ignored, kept out of the conversation, or judged to be religious fanatics. What went wrong? How did witness gain such a notorious reputation? Part of the problem has to do with how we have come to conceive of “witness” since World War II. The process of witnessing, it seems, has been reduced to three main elements: personal testimony, a plan of salvation, and a call to commitment.

Personal testimony is the story of one’s conversion experience. Such a story follows a familiar format beginning with an account of one’s pre-Christian life (sometimes told in rather lurid detail), followed by the dual discovery that one is a sinner living apart from God and that Jesus is the way back to God (often a highly emotional discovery), and concluding with the decision to repent of one’s sins and accept Jesus by faith as Lord and Savior. Interestingly, this story is generally told in ways that echo St. Paul’s sudden conversion on the road to Damascus (a punctiliar event), even though the majority of committed Christians come to faith slowly over time (a process not an event).⁵ The aim of such testimony is to describe the wonderful change that has taken place in the life of the Christian since conversion and so generate interest from the other party.

The *plan of salvation* (a half-dozen popular options are now circulating) is intended to provide information about how to meet Jesus, motivation to do so, and a method by which to respond. Salvation has been reduced to “accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior.” The “sinner’s prayer” by which this is accomplished is often stated in almost contractual terms. If I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sins and if I ask him to forgive my sins and save me, I will receive eternal life.

Once a testimony is given and the plan of salvation outlined, the “witness” ends with an appeal to “decide now for Jesus.” Such a *call to commitment* is based on the assumption that the person with whom you are speaking is at the point in his or her spiritual journey that it is possible, then and there, to make such a commitment. The challenge is often presented in stark terms: “What if you were to die tonight, would you be sure that you would go to heaven?”⁶ At other times the emphasis is on the significance of the moment: “This may be the last chance you have to decide for Jesus.” At still other times, the challenge echoes Pascal’s wager: “What do you have to lose? Saying ‘Yes’ to Jesus will gain for you the free gift of eternal life.”

⁵See Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 286.

⁶See D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1970) 22.

It is necessary to critique this way of witness. On the positive side it has to be said that large numbers of people are now active Christians because of just such a challenge. Lives have been changed, people have been converted, and the church has grown because of this form of outreach. Also, while this approach seems formulaic, at least it gives people something to say, a place to start, and an understanding of the gospel. Furthermore, such evangelistic presentations stand in stark contrast to the bland conversations about “religion” in which some Christians have reluctantly engaged, during which banalities are expressed, generalities are the order of the day, and politeness is the inviolable atmosphere.

On the negative side, such forms of witness are mostly monological rather than dialogical. There is little opportunity for questions. In fact, training programs often discourage responding to questions or they provide brief answers to “typical questions.” Such “answers” are assumed to settle the matter so that people can get on to the real question which is deciding for Jesus. In fact, these “answers” seldom do more than touch superficially on what are often issues of deep concern. Fur-

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thermore, there is a kind of mechanical feel to such gospel presentations, which is not unexpected since people are encouraged to memorize a kind of script. In many cases the presentation is filled with theological language that is incomprehensible to anyone who has not grown up in a church. The result is that the “gospel” is half-understood (or grossly misunderstood) by the recipients of the witness. How can you respond when what you know is so distorted? And the challenge to respond assumes you are able to respond, even though most people first have to wrestle with a host of issues before they can come to the point at which they understand Jesus and his call in the context of their own lives.

Conventionalized witness has become counterproductive. In our current cultural context people simply switch off when the conversation moves in a stereotypical direction. And this kind of witness has become stereotypical. The very success of parachurch organizations that train their followers in these ways of witnessing means that most everyone has heard this plan of salvation. It is old news.

Furthermore, witness of this sort is all about explanation. In a postmodern world that has come to distrust meta-narratives and truth with a capital T, few are convinced by finely crafted presentations. The witness that convinces is a life rich in spiritual experience in the context of a loving community that is the bearer of this story. Demonstration must precede explanation.

CONVERSATION

In his study of the nature of conversation, Geoff Broughton concludes that genuine conversation is characterized by four factors: mutuality, reciprocity, open-

ness, and respect.⁷ Perhaps this gives us the clue we need as we look for new ways to share our faith with others. What might witness look like were it characterized by a mutuality that includes all partners in the conversation (over against monologue)? What might it look like if all the conversation partners were free to express their thoughts and experiences? What might it look like if there were an honesty that did not so much seek to present a party line as to share one's insights and experiences both positive and negative? What would witness be like if there were a profound respect for the uniqueness of each person's God-given life and experience?

What I am proposing is a much riskier proposition than simply laying a plan of salvation on an unsuspecting stranger. It will require deep trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. It has seemed in the past that we could not trust the Spirit. It was up to us to manipulate and maneuver the other person into the kingdom, even though we gave lip service to the proposition that it is the Spirit who brings conviction in the hearts and minds of men and women. However, in what I am suggesting we would have to believe deeply in the work of the Holy Spirit because our role would simply be that of a "witness" in the original sense of the word: one who attests to the facts and asserts the truth. Our task would be to tell *our* story in the context of *the* story and then let happen what the Spirit makes happen.

PARADIGM

Here is what I propose as a way to become genuine conversation partners with those who are exploring the nature of spirituality.

First, we need a *paradigm* that gives us the ability to talk with others about spiritual reality and remain true to ourselves even while we are fully open to the uniqueness of others. I would propose that the concept of spiritual pilgrimage provides us with the perspective we need. At the heart of such a perspective are several assertions:

- All people are on a spiritual pilgrimage. We cannot help it. This is how God made us: to be creatures in touch with both the natural and spiritual world. So everyone has a story to tell.
- Different people are at different points in their spiritual pilgrimages. Each person has his or her own issues and questions with which to wrestle. Each person needs to be challenged to face these issues and move through them to new commitments.
- Those who have spent more time in conscious spiritual pilgrimage will probably have useful insights for newer pilgrims. Sharing our struggles and discoveries aids others in their journey.⁸

⁷Geoff Broughton, "Authentic Dialogue: Toward a Practical Theology of Conversation" (Th.M. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1998) 86.

⁸"The life of faith, the liveliness and the vitality of religion in our day, depends very centrally upon the stories we tell one another about our immediate encounters with an incarnate God." Catherine M. Wallace, "Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation," *Anglican Theological Review* 81 (Winter 1999) 49.

- Those who are committed Christians must feel free to own the particularity of their experience without the need to find a common spiritual consensus that will satisfy everyone. They need to be themselves with forthrightness, warmth, knowledge, and vigor, even as they allow others that same option. The truth of Christianity is often experienced first and then understood.
- Those who are active Christians are not simply the senior partners in the conversation. They too have their own issues to face. Pilgrimage is never finished. No one has mastered the spiritual life. More experienced pilgrims often grow by facing issues raised in conversation by those who have had radically different experiences of God.
- Exploration of issues of pilgrimage is probably best done in a community context. The collective wisdom of many is better than the single vision of one, no matter how mature that person might be.

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Second, we need to consider the *content* of the conversations that might take place. Most of us are bad at the kind of dialogue that I have described. We know what we believe (sort of) and can talk about it in church with others who share our beliefs where we can use a kind of common code language. We may not have a precise understanding of the theological terms we bandy about, but we know roughly what the terms signify. But move that conversation out into the marketplace and we are at sea. We find it difficult to translate the theological terms we use in church into words that are comprehensible at work. What we need is a new faith vocabulary: one that captures the essence of biblical terms in secular vocabulary. But this raises another problem. We are often not at all sure what actually constitutes the gospel. Beyond affirming our commitment to Jesus we have little to say. So it is hard to have a conversation with much depth when we as Christian witnesses are so muddled about our own faith.

This is why, I think, we have reverted to reductionist formulas to present our faith. At least we can memorize these and so we have something to say. However, when pushed, we have a difficult time amplifying the formula, much less articulating its meaning.

The challenge to the church, of course, is to train its members in religious conversation. For the mainline church this means getting into a discussion of foundational doctrines. What do we mean when we repeat the Apostle’s Creed each week? What are we saying when we assert that Jesus “was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit” or that “on the third day he rose again”? This would be an enriching conversation for all involved, one that would pay rich dividends in terms of spiritual formation. For the conservative church this means getting beyond the as-

sersion that “God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life”⁹ or “we rebelled against God. Both actively and passively, we’ve all disobeyed Him. And our sins have separated us from Him, and broken off the relationship.”¹⁰ For all of us, we need to learn how to talk about Jesus in ways that are accurate. We also need to know how to discuss the human condition, the nature of commitment, and the dynamics of the spiritual life.

Third, there is the question of the *context* in which such conversations might take place. In this day and age, such conversation can best thrive in a small group. I have in mind a group of Christians and seekers sitting around the living room and talking about their faith pilgrimages. When the rules of conversation are maintained (mutuality, reciprocity, openness, and respect) the interaction will be rich and deep. In this context, the witness that takes place depends not on one person but flows from the whole group. Inputs of various sorts stimulate discussion, ranging from clips from contemporary films that display the human condition to study of the Bible with its wisdom about God. Over time the members of such a group will develop a deep trust and openness to one another and to God. In this context the aliveness of Jesus will become palpable.

CONVERSION

What about the outcome of such conversation? Would it not be conversion? Conversion of each dialogue partner?

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Conversion is a term that refers to change in which we leave behind one set of concepts, behaviors, and attitudes that we discover to be inadequate, ineffective, wrong, or wicked. In their place we reach out to embrace a new, better, fuller, richer reality. Conversion to Jesus involves turning from sin (repentance) and reaching out (by faith) to Jesus. But conversion does not end with a single turning. As Christian pilgrims will testify, the turning to Jesus is just the first (albeit crucial) turning in the Christian life. The process of sanctification involves multiple turnings as we seek to be ever better conformed to the image of Christ. And the dynamic by which we first embraced Jesus is the same dynamic by which we grow in the Christian life (repentance and faith).

But this is not the conversion of one conversation partner; it is the conversion

⁹From “The Four Spiritual Laws,” by Bill Bright, popularized by Campus Crusade for Christ.

¹⁰This is taken from the so-called “Bridge Illustration,” popularized by the Navigators, a parachurch organization. It is described in Mark Mittelberg and Bill Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994) 157.

of both. This is what gives richness to this kind of conversation. There is no dominant partner; there are two or more individuals seeking growth and change (conversion). The imperialism of so much evangelism is done away with and replaced by the openness of all to the reality, power, and transformation of God.

At first glance, conversion and conversation are an odd pair. Apart from their similar sound, they seem to have little connection.¹¹ But as it turns out they are a fine pair. By conversation we are given the chance for conversion; by conversion we become open to new conversation in an ever wider arena. Perhaps this is as it should be.¹² ⊕

RICHARD V. PEACE is the Robert Boyd Munger Professor of Evangelism and Spiritual Formation at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. His most recent book is entitled *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (1999).

¹¹In fact there is an etymological connection between the two terms as is seen in the history of the verb “converse.” In Latin, this term (*conversari*) means to “turn about with, hence to talk with,” and the adjective (*converse*) is taken directly from *convertere*, *conversus* meaning conversion. So the idea of turning around one’s life (as in conversion) has more than a superficial connection with turning around to talk to another (as in conversation). See Joseph T. Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945) 95. I am indebted to a student, Geoff Broughton, who points out this connection on page 5 in his Th.M. thesis cited above (note 7).

¹²Let me commend two books, each from a quite different vantage point, that wrestle with the question of Christian witness. Rick Richardson’s book *Evangelism Outside the Box: New Ways to Help People Experience the Good News* (InterVarsity, 2000) is written from the vantage point of a campus minister who understands well the post-modern mindset. In *How to Share Your Faith without Being Offensive* (New York: Seabury, 1979), Joyce Neville struggles with the question of how Episcopalians can talk about faith issues.