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Kissing Evangelism Goodbye

I went to the mecca of Evangelicalism for college, where I received a scholarship from none other than the Evangelical Pope, Billy Graham, for my work in street evangelism—speaking to strangers on the street to convert them to Christianity. Post graduation, I became a missionary, the Protestant equivalent of sainthood.

I recall that girl on fire, and marvel at her earnest faith. If I could, I'd reach back and massage the knots out of her high strung shoulders, weary from the weight of her neighbors' eternal destinies. I would wistfully explain that the first person she witnessed to, that gentle, drunken, homeless woman named Kathy, needed more than my rehearsed Roman Road to salvation. Then I would break the Temporal Prime Directive and reveal that one day, she would be more interested in being evangelized than evangelizing.

The truth is, I'm just better at being evangelized. It's probably why I was so easily converted at the tender age of twelve. Young Christians are expected to share their *testimony* of how God changes their life. By my twenties, I'd given my testimony a gazillion times.

But my own story bored me—because I didn't know how to tell it right. I had been given a script to impose onto my story. The arc goes like this: I was a sinner, met Jesus, then my life was transformed. I tried to squeeze my life into that script, conjuring up forced evils for my young life (*before the age of 12 the worst thing I'd done was eat a piece of chocolate during a 30-hour famine fundraiser*).

I have always been far more interested in other people's stories, perhaps because I've been exposed to many cultures. The diversity of our human experiences is truly incredible, and I am genuinely drawn into the lives of those around me. What I came to discover is how much the world craves a listening ear. The biggest problem with evangelizing is that we enter relationships with a prescribed intention, and that stands in the way of listening well. You can't listen well when you

are carrying an agenda or looking to fortify your own position.

But if you want to be evangelized, you learn to listen deeper, trying to uncover truth. You search for the beauty in your neighbor to find points of connection—you are seeking to be saved by them. You become the student, longing to learn from, instead of preach at. You voluntarily place yourself in the inferior position of need and find that your own vulnerability compels others to shed their masks. Your courage to admit uncertainty disarms, until all that is left is raw honesty and frailty of our common human condition.

I'm not dismissing the Great Commission mandate to go and make disciples. But that mission will differ between remote Tibetan tribes and pluralistic Western cities. Increasingly, our mission must distance itself from colonial proselytizing. As the Pope recently said, "*The church grows by attraction, not proselytizing.*"

Proselytizing limits the wildly beautiful story of God and God's people into a sample script. The world needs more conversions, but *at least as many need to take place within the Church as outside of it*. Are we willing to offer and receive a plethora of stories that diverge from a single narrative? Can we make space for stories from minority groups, the global south, the Left and the Right, rich and poor, mega churches and struggling congregations?

Our best hope for connectedness lies in having our stories heard. We earn our right to speak when we have spent hours listening to their truths and being changed by their beauty. *People join us and believe in our God when we thread the Great Commandment into the Great Commission: love your neighbor as yourself*. In these days of soul-crushing social media noise, there is no greater love than disciplined, focused listening. People hunger to be heard, understood and connected. Our stories are waiting to be heard.

Listen to other people's stories as if your salvation depended on it, because I think it might. Therefore go, and be evangelized. □