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ACTUALLY SHARING OUR FAITH

A few years into our marriage, I purchased a book about marriage. It was a book that I should have read before we got married and certainly had needed earlier in our marriage. Yet when I first picked it up, I read the table of contents and turned to the chapter that most interested me.

That chapter started out something like this: "This chapter is the chapter that many of you have turned to first, before reading the previous chapters, but I want to encourage you to start from the beginning." He nailed me.

How did the author know I would turn to that chapter first? It was the chapter on sex.

Admittedly, that chapter about sex was a bigger draw than this chapter about actually sharing our faith, but I suspect that there are many who will turn to this chapter before reading the previous chapters. If you are one of them, well, good for you! I'm not going to tell you to go back and read the other chapters.

I appreciate that you want to get to it. I'm trusting that you can define evangelism, the gospel, and biblical conversion.

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You have rejected programmatic and pragmatic evangelism, and see the compelling call to a culture of evangelism. You see the church as God's great plan for evangelism and that developing a culture of evangelism in the context of the church is the best thing we can do for the proclamation of the gospel. I trust you've prepared yourself to be an intentional evangelist because you see the gospel as a way of life, you never assume the gospel, you treat evangelism as a spiritual discipline, and you are in prayer for your friends who don't know Jesus. Those of you in leadership lead in evangelism by teaching it and doing it.

Wonderful. Of course, if any of those points are new concepts for you or are a bit fuzzy in your mind, you might want to start at the beginning. Regardless, we come to this chapter—the chapter about actually speaking about Jesus.

TALKING LIKE AN AMBASSADOR

To me, there is no better instruction for how we speak about Jesus than Paul's illustration of ambassadorship in 2 Corinthians 5:20–21:

> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Paul calls us to remember the power behind the message: Christ himself. We are told of our astounding responsibility to be representatives of the kingdom of God. We are Christ's

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ambassadors. We are called to see people differently—to give up the human and worldly vision of others and to know and love them, understanding that they are lost sinners who need to be reconciled to God.

We must get the message right. After all, ambassadors don't have the freedom to change the message; their job is to deliver it accurately. Likewise, we must not add to or subtract from Christ's message. We must correctly deliver the message so that sinners can be reconciled with the holy God, the Creator of the universe, the one who owns us and all those around us. Despite the fact that our sin is evil before him, he made a way of salvation by making him who knew no sin *to be sin*—that is, taking on our sin—and to receive the just punishment of God on our behalf on the cross. This was so that in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God. We can be restored to a right relationship with God by simply believing Christ, repenting of sin, and turning to him in faith. This is the message we have been given to deliver.

We must deliver the message regardless of the discomfort produced, effort required, and shame endured. Ambassadors *exist* to deliver messages. So we shout out, "Be reconciled to God." We may not feel like representatives of the kingdom of God, but that is what we are. It is how we are seen in the spiritual realms, and it's an astounding truth.

Of course, we can be good or bad ambassadors. If you are reading this book, I'm assuming you want to do well in this role, so let's think through some ways that we can be better at what we are called to do.

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AMBASSADORS AND THEIR APPROACH: THINKING THROUGH CONVERSATIONS

Here is a letter I received that touched my heart. As you read it, think about how you might have responded:

Dear Mack,

I've been praying for Candice for a while now—for opportunities to share the gospel. A little background: Candice was raised Catholic but does not go to any church currently. She lives a homosexual lifestyle in the context of a family with four kids. The kids are biologically her partner's, but she is mostly their primary caregiver. Candice's mom has cancer, and lives over a thousand miles from her. I've known Candice for over twenty-five years and I've worked for her for the last two years. She knows I am serious about my faith and generally I would say she holds me in high regard. I've offered to pray for her, which she appreciates, and she's given financial support for me to go on short-term mission trips.

The other day, while she was telling me about visiting her mom, she broke down crying. I've never seen her cry. As I was sitting across from her, in my head I was trying to bring the gospel to bear on her situation and figure out a way to communicate something of eternal value that didn't sound like I lacked compassion. In the end, I didn't say anything of obvious eternal value. I merely tried to make her comfortable to cry in my presence and to affirm that I had empathy with her situation. I think I could have done better.

As I reflected on that situation later, I wished I had said something like: "This pain you are feeling is normal in a broken, sin-sick world. This world is broken and not like it will be when God reconciles all things to himself." I think I hesitated to say something like that because I didn't want her to assume, like most people do, that there is nothing required on their part

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to be included in God's reconciliation. Should I have said it anyway? Should I have said something else?

Kim

These are tough questions in a nitty-gritty world. Here's how I replied:

Dear Kim,

Well, first off, I think that allowing someone to feel comfortable to cry in your presence is worth quite a bit, but I know how you feel—it's that sense that we have something so precious to offer and of such consoling power that in the midst of heartache, if we could just break through all the defenses that are set up around people's hearts against Christ, they could know the one who will one day wipe away all tears. And to make matters worse, we know how close they are to the truth—"It's in my heart and I'm right next to you"—but they just can't see it.

But more to the point about Candice: maybe God is breaking down the barriers against Christ in her heart through your witness. Of course, I'm not sure what the Holy Spirit has in the works, but it may just be that consoling her was the best thing to do at the time in a long string of good things she has seen in you.

The thing to do now, in my mind, is to have a follow-up conversation. Would it be possible for you to take Candice for a coffee and conversation? I'd say something like, "Candice, I want to have a spiritual conversation with you over coffee; would that offend you?" In my experience, when we reassure people that we know that faith can be offensive, they tend to be more open.

Over coffee or a meal, I'd say what you said (I love the way you put it): "This pain you are feeling is normal in a broken,

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sin-sick world." I would certainly encourage you to say that, but then at that point, I would ask permission, again, to tell her how God reconciles a broken world to himself: "Candice, could I have your permission to tell you about how I think a loving God works in the world that's broken?" and then, "Candice, your tears really touched me, and as I've thought about it, I can't think of anything that would be more important to know in your situation than the message of Christ," or "I know that religion can be divisive, but Candice, for the last two thousand years people have found the message of Jesus to be the key to understanding life and death, and I want to tell you about it," or "Candice, you know that I believe in a God on a cross, that is, a God who has identified with our death. And it has such bearing on your situation that I just want to explain the message of Jesus to you"—something like that, or maybe a combination of all those. You would know better how to say it in your context and Candice's, but the goal is to give an honest presentation of the gospel that is full of eternal significance and helps her know her greatest need: to repent of sin and respond in faith.

In one sense, my concerns would be more for her mother to hear a clear gospel presentation if she hasn't before, but I'm getting beyond what you have told me. By the way, you might be helped to read the book *Is God Anti-Gay?* by Sam Allberry.

Your brother,
Mack

This exchange reveals some of the basic principles that I act on in conversations with people about faith. They include:

- Give yourself grace when you share your faith. I've noticed that I often fear evangelism because there are so many ways to go wrong. I can flub the message. I can keep silent when I need to speak. I can say things that later I think were stupid.

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But it's good to remind yourself that even your mistakes can help you become a better ambassador.

- Meet people where they are.
- Look for open doors. A culture of evangelism is really helpful here. When church members share about the open doors they have seen around them, other members might hear opportunities with which to get involved.
- Be compassionate and maintain a tender heart toward others. Be careful to remember that you are a sinner. Humility commends the gospel.
- Remember that we have the answers to life's biggest questions. That's something you can offer. When the reality of life pierces through the superficial barriers that keep people from God, that's where you can shine the light of the gospel. Don't hide it under a basket.
- Focus on people's separation from God, not on being morally upright.
- Be intentional in your conversation. Plan out what you will say. This helps you to say things that are helpful, and not say things that are awkward or offensive.
- Acknowledge what we know and what we don't. Kim's phrase, a "sin-sick world," acknowledges the truth we see around us. The Christian does well in that environment because he or she knows how it got that way. I also find it helpful to tell people that I don't always know the whys of what God does, but that I trust him as the one who makes sense in a broken world.
- It's good (though not required) to ask permission to share the message of the gospel.
- Ask lots of questions. Be a good listener.
- Finally, if you anticipate a certain issue in a person's life, it's good to be acquainted with it by reading a book or talking with someone who knows about the issue.

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AMBASSADORS MUST BE BOLD AND CLEAR

If I were in jail for evangelism, I'm pretty sure that I would be asking friends to pray that God would "get me out!" But the imprisoned Paul's prayer requests were for boldness and clarity with the gospel (Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3–4).

It's my sense that boldness is the most needed element for evangelism for the Christian community, at least in North America. This is a place where we can learn well from our brothers and sisters who live where there is no religious liberty.

I first got to know an Iranian named Farshid when he came to our house in Dubai for a student gathering. We sat together while Nisin gave a talk. There were perhaps thirty students in the room. As Nisin talked, I noticed that Farshid was uncomfortable. Finally, he leaned over to me and said, "Mack, he's a great speaker, but when is he going to get to the gospel?"

At last I understood why he was restless. Farshid wanted the gospel to be clear to the students. "Don't worry, brother," I said, "I have never known Nisin to leave out the message of life—it'll come." And it did: Nisin proclaimed the amazing story that Christ saves sinners. As he did, Farshid stopped fidgeting and his eyes filled with tears. I have found that those who come from a background where many hate the cross tend to love it all the more.

The following year, I had lunch with Farshid in Capetown, South Africa, during the Lausanne Congress. He said things were getting hard in Iran and that he sensed it was just a matter of time before he would be arrested—merely for being a bold

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and clear witness of the gospel. He left the safe fellowship in Capetown for Tehran; what a brave brother.

On Christmas Day, Farshid was arrested; the charge was "treason against the Islamic State of Iran," or, to put it another way, being a faithful witness to Christ. His sentence: six years. His wife and two small children fled over the Turkish mountains to a refugee camp. He's being held in the notorious Evin Prison in Iran. When he is able to slip a letter out of jail, Farshid asks his friends to pray that he would be bold and clear with the gospel, and that he would continue rejoicing in Christ.

Most of us don't face such hardships for being faithful. But Farshid loves Jesus and his gospel. Like Paul, he *counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus* (Phil. 3:8). So he bravely and clearly continues to tell the people around him about the salvation found in Christ.

Take courage from Farshid's story and be bold and clear with the gospel in your own setting. The Bible calls us to remember those who have been brave and faithful, and to follow their example.

AMBASSADORS MUST DELIVER THE MESSAGE AND TRUST CHRIST FOR THE RESPONSE

Four of us gathered at the baggage claim in O'Hare Airport. We had come to Chicago for an important business meeting. In fact, the meeting started long before we got to our hotel: we were deep in discussion as we jumped into the taxi driven by Ibrahim.

As the discussion of various policy implications raged, Ibrahim announced to me, "You know, this world is amazing!"

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I glanced at him, trying to keep up with what was being said behind me.

"Allah has created all this," he said with an expansive gesture toward downtown Chicago, a gesture that sent the car swerving into the other lane. I nodded dumbly while harboring a secret desire to be sitting in the back.

"But the amazing thing about Allah is that he keeps records of all that we do."

"Yes, I agree," I said, struggling to break out of my managerial fog. "I'm a Christian, and I believe that God does keep a complete record."

"You know the difference between you and me?" Ibrahim continued. I felt sure this was not a genuine question.

"You believe that Jesus was God," he continued, "and I believe that he was only a prophet." Ibrahim didn't lack for boldness as a Muslim evangelist.

"That's true, too, Ibrahim," I said. This seemed to encourage him, and he began a theological monologue that lasted until we were almost at the hotel.

But at our destination, Ibrahim grew quiet as I filled in the credit card form. Finally, I had a chance to speak: "You know something, Ibrahim? I agree that Muslims and Christians both believe that all sins are recorded, but the Muslim believes sins are weighed against good works, while the Christian believes Jesus offers forgiveness for sin through faith. That's what I think is the biggest difference. That's why I love Jesus: he doesn't weigh our sins against our good deeds; he forgives our sins because he paid for them."

Ibrahim glanced toward the roof of his cab. "Hmm," he

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said. Then he helped me get my bags. As he started to drive off, I wondered whether my words had gotten through. Should I have given him a bigger tip? Suddenly, I saw his brake lights go on, and he spun his cab around. "Maybe I did get through!" I thought. "I bet he wants to ask about Jesus—or maybe about forgiveness!" I prepared myself to lead this man to Christ.

But no, I had simply forgotten to get my credit card back. Ibrahim smiled at me as he handed it through the window. I'm glad he was a good, honest Muslim. But as I watched him leave a second time, I again felt that familiar sense of failure about sharing my faith. I wished I had said more about the gospel, or maybe said it in a better way.

But as I thought about it, I realized that what I could have said or should have said was not the issue. What I *did* say was true, and I would trust God to use that—and not just for Ibrahim, but for me, too. He loves me and loves that I took a stab at standing up for the faith. He really doesn't hold my sin—or my failures, or even my awkward attempts—against me. And if he should choose to call Ibrahim to faith, it won't be because I said everything just right, but because of his grace alone.

It took a while to get my mind back on track for the business meeting because I was rejoicing over God's forgiveness and love. The richness of Christ in my life seemed more real because I had shared my faith. I don't know whether speaking to Ibrahim changed him, but it certainly reminded me of what it is all about: life in Jesus is better than a policy meeting. And it reminded me of God's grace in my own life. Did I know I was forgiven before I told Ibrahim? Sure. But to speak of grace to someone who truly believes in righteousness by works drove

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that grace deeper into my heart. It's not something I know only intellectually. I pray that one day Ibrahim will know this same hope and joy.

It's good for us to remember salvation is a work of the Spirit. We try to be thoughtful, bold, and clear in the way we tell others about the gospel, but God brings the results. We can rest in that knowledge.

AMBASSADORS MUST NOT LOSE HEART

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:1, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." We need to remind ourselves of this when we are tempted to feel that our attempts to evangelize are useless.

While traveling, I ran into Craig in the Cincinnati airport. I knew Craig from church. He identified himself as a non-Christian who was exploring Christianity, but from my distant observation, he appeared to be more interested in the community at church than the faith. It seemed an unusual coincidence to meet up with him, and I invited him to have a seat with me.

Craig looked the part of a classical violinist: his long silver hair stuck out Einsteinlike from the sides of his head, and at that moment he was staring into the distance with a tired, melancholic expression. He told me he had recently lost his mother to a long illness. This confirmed my sense that our meeting wasn't an accident: God was at work in Craig's life, and I prepared myself to talk to him about Jesus. "Who knows," I thought, "maybe this is his time."

I did the things you're supposed to do. I expressed my con-

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cern about the death of his mother and inquired about how he was doing. I didn't force the conversation, and I prayed as I listened, sensing that our time had all the marks of a divine encounter. But as I began to probe about Craig's response to Jesus, his guard went up. He was fine, thanks. It was a polite and socially acceptable conversation, but seemingly fruitless on the spiritual level.

As I watched him walk away, I acknowledged to myself that I felt weary, too. I was tired of talking to tired people about a treasure they needed but seemed not to want. I was tired of my silly fears of rejection. But most of all, I was really tired of feeling that I shouldn't feel that way; a feeling that sometimes *made me want to give up sharing my faith.*

Before that tiredness totally overwhelmed me, God graciously guided me to a verse in Philemon that I hadn't noticed before: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ" (Philem. 6, NIV).

Paul has more than evangelism in mind here, but not less. Yet Paul's prayer is for us to be active in sharing our faith. But notice that the reason is neither the response nor our effectiveness. Paul is saying something I rarely hear: that sharing our faith is for our benefit, too, so that we might gain a full understanding of the good things we have in Christ. The Bible says that among all the good reasons to share our faith, one of them is what happens in us. I think this is important not just for us as individual Christians, but for the community as well.

Part of my weariness in evangelism is the constant focus on what is supposed to happen in *others.* When that is my

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focus and nothing seems to happen, I lose heart. But knowing that God works in me when I actively share my faith gives me hope even when no one responds positively to my efforts.

In fact, I'm convinced that sharing our faith, regardless of the response, is a key to spiritual health for the individual and for the community. Yes, of course we want to be effective in our witness. Yes, many Christians do dumb things that hinder the gospel message—okay, *I've* done dumb things that hinder the gospel—and we should take steps to change those things. But if we want to understand the riches of Jesus more deeply, we still need to share our faith actively.

Craig continued to come to our new church after our meeting in the airport. For months, he sat through God-glorifying testimonies and clear gospel presentations with no apparent response. But one day, the first Sunday I was back in church after a long trip, Craig shocked me by standing up and telling how he'd come to Christ. My heart soared to hear Craig share what God had done in his life.

Many months had gone by, Craig told us, before he'd realized that the testimonies he'd heard weren't dramas. He had actually thought of them as enactments of spiritual events by professional actors. For people to reveal how they had come to understand the gospel in such intimate and profound ways fell outside Craig's experience. But as time progressed, it dawned on Craig that these people were talking about *their* lives.

"Well, here I am," he said, "standing in front of you telling you what happened to bring me to faith. . . . I understand the gospel now." Maybe it's just my imagination, but Craig's voice

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seemed to have lost the weariness. He seemed different to me: full of life.

As Craig told our church that Sunday morning how he came to understand what Jesus had done for him, I felt my weariness lift, too. I didn't lead Craig to Jesus, but I was active in sharing my faith with him; I had a role. I was a part of a church that had a culture of evangelism. And this time, at least, God let me see how my tiny part played out.

Most of the time, we don't get to see that; we have to trust God. But that's a *good* thing. God is working through us as we share our faith—even if we don't see it this side of heaven. Maybe he works through a bit of time shared in a restaurant lobby; maybe through a brief conversation in which we share the gospel in a minute, or maybe through an important theological observation about forgiveness. Who knows, maybe it's something you will actually do today?

So take hope, even amid discouragement. Know that God is at work through and in you. You can depend on him. Don't be tempted to quit.

After Craig shared his faith story in church, a number of non-Christians went up to him to talk more about Jesus. Craig was shocked by their response. He expected people to think he was crazy. But what he really couldn't get over, he told us later, was the desire in their hearts that only Jesus could meet. "I don't know how you can stand it," he said, "to see that kind of need in people's souls."

I know what he means: sometimes I don't know if I can stand it. In fact, I saw that need in Craig and was tempted to give up. Maybe those tired people around you make you won-

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der if you can take it. Maybe fruitless attempts to share your faith with a neighbor you see day after day or a taxi driver you see once in a lifetime have made you wonder if it's worth it. Maybe you're secretly tempted to give up, too.

Take heart. Evangelism is bigger than what we see. Remember God's promise: he is giving you a fuller understanding of the good things we have in Christ. He's giving you his eyes to see people as he sees them. He's helping you know the rich meaning of the message we bear, and he's helping you depend upon him to work in people's lives.

Those are enough reasons to keep going, but it gets even better. Sometimes God lets us see tired people transformed into people filled with light. That's a glorious thing, filled with wonder and hope.

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