**Joining the Conversation**

Your friends are throwing a dinner party, but you’ll be late. The party starts at six, you can’t show up until nine, but you go because you know it’ll be great. When you show up, the conversation is on a topic you enjoy—let’s say travel—and you are eager to join in. About ten minutes into the conversation one of your friends smiles wryly, shrugs, and says, “Florence, Italy.” This remark seems mundane enough in a conversation about travel, but you are completely befuddled when the entire room—save you—erupts with boisterous, knowing laughter.

This, C.S. Lewis argues, is what happens when we join the historic Christian conversation. At nine o’clock (the 21st century) we enter the discourse about God, church, Scripture, sin, salvation, sexuality, worship, or otherwise, but we have barely a clue about what was said in the first three hours—or in this case, the first 2,000 years. Lewis says, “Remarks which seem to you very ordinary will produce laughter or irritation and you will not see why—the reason, of course, being that the earlier stages of the conversation have given them a special point.” In other words, when we don’t know what Christians have historically *said* we know far less about what we *say*.

Lewis’s remedy to this problem is, of course, for Christians to read more old books. I believe he’s mostly correct, but for those of us who haven’t taught medieval literature at Oxford and Cambridge, perhaps we should put it differently: *We must listen to old Christians and to ancient Christians*.

Old Christians are the elderly faithful in our midst. There are some amazing old Christians populating our church community at The Springs. These folks are giants in the faith, people who have walked with God and one another for many, many years. And just as each new generation has both special insight and blind spots, our elder sisters and brothers offer a unique vantage that helps us all see more clearly. Many of these older Christians have battle scars from past tragedies and triumphs, and their hard-won wisdom is invaluable for knowing what the conversation was like at eight o’clock.

For six o’clock, however, we need the ancient Christians. And by ancient I don’t mean *really old* Christians (though we have those too!); I mean our forebears in the faith who have passed from this life. I mean the great cloud of witnesses surrounding and cheering us on, the Christ-followers around the world whose witness has carried God’s good news down through the centuries. I mean indispensable voices like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Teresa, Bonhoeffer, and King. We’re bound to disagree with them on plenty, but we will hold our convictions with greater subtlety, humility, and depth when we know the history behind what we speak.

As Oliver O’Donovan writes, “No one who has not learned to be traditional can dare to innovate.” In carrying the faith forward, we must pay attention to the parts of the conversation we have missed. We must make room for the voices of old Christians in our midst, and, in the words of G.K. Chesterton, for the “democracy of the dead”—ancient Christians who followed the Spirit of Christ in their own time and place. It is only by listening that we can become a people worth listening to.