

Creating Space

Some thoughts about reaching out, relating to,
and redeeming the lives around you

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Dr. Bob Fisher, President of Belmont University, who offers me creative space each day to develop effective faith leaders.

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Introduction



Consider the following scenario: You, along with three friends, agree to meet for lunch at a local restaurant. The hostess asks, “Table for how many?” Because there are four of you, you instinctively ask for a table around which four people can sit. There are four chairs, four sets of silver, and four glasses of water. It’s a quaint, personal moment that engages the four of you in good conversation, deepening dialogue, and enduring friendship.

And then it happens. A fifth friend walks into the same restaurant. He is seemingly alone, probably there to grab a quick bite. But as soon as you see him, you wave him over and ask him to join the group. In a quick moment, another chair is pulled from a distant table; another set of silver is obtained; glasses, plates, and chairs are all shifted in order to make room for the newcomer. Within seconds, space has been created—and not just physical space. By welcoming your friend to the table, you have invited him to join the conversation. By including him in the conversation, you have also invited him into a relationship. The physical space leads to relational space, and perhaps even into a deeper redemptive space.

To push the scenario a bit further, let’s pretend the newcomer seems “a little off his game.” You notice that he hasn’t shaved in a day or two, his clothes are ruffled and wrinkled, and there are dark rings under his eyes. You don’t want to blurt out, “Man, what’s

wrong with you?,” but you and all the others are thinking that very thought. As the meal lingers and the conversation progresses a little longer, he begins to tell his story. What begins as a normal and matter-of-fact conversation soon erupts into an emotional outburst. He has suffered a job loss. He’s been out of work for almost two weeks but leaves the house each morning, pretending nothing is wrong. He doesn’t know how to tell his wife. He doesn’t know where the money will come from to pay the mortgage. He’s afraid of losing everything. He needs help.

Later, once the meal has been consumed and everyone has gone their separate ways, you sit alone in your car and try to process what you have heard from your friend. In your reflection, you wonder how best to help, who needs to be in the loop, and what kind of prayers should you offer on his behalf. Hopefully, due in part to the shared conversation, your friend will find his way through the difficult chapter in his life. With time and intentionality, maybe you can act as a redemptive resource in his story. You can’t shake the moment you have just experienced from your mind—and you really don’t want to. Compassion, friendship, and human decency will not allow you to let your friend languish without your help.

Step back and think about the power of created space. Because physical space was created, conversational space was allowed to grow. And then with the conversation, the relationship deepened, and the protective walls around your friend’s heart began to tumble by the power of kinship, warmth, and concern. A friend who was struggling to the point of desperation left the restaurant with a little more hope and the promise of redeeming friendship. It’s what happens when we create space.

Go back to the beginning of all things. I mean the beginning of *all* things—those initial moments of creation when God called the world into being. The book of Genesis records it this way:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.” And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day. Then God said, “Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth.” And that is what happened. God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. God called the space “sky.” And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day. Then God said, “Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear.” And that is what happened. God called the dry ground “land” and the waters “seas.” And God saw that it was good. (Gen 1:1–10 NLT)

There is certainly more to the story, but you get the point. God created space from chaos. He chose to carve out space for all living things. He created space for the sun, moon, and stars. He created space for the oceans to form and for the dry land to appear. He created space for plants to flourish, for animals to roam, and yes, even for man to dwell. And in his image we are gifted with the ability to create space for all living things, including people who may not always feel included in our space or in God’s. We have the ability to make space for things to happen, for lives to thrive, for relationships to bloom, and for people to find wholeness.

Whether or not we realize it, we have all participated in the creation of space. Years ago, my wife and I made the decision to finish our basement. We added walls, then paint, then carpet, then bookshelves, and finally furniture. We took unused square footage and created space for friends to stay over, for kids to hang out, and for the family to grow. Or consider this, an old chapel at a former church, characterized by moldy carpet, hard pews, and a failing air-conditioning system, saw little use—maybe fewer than five occasions each year. The decision was made to reclaim and renovate the space. Flexible seating was added. New carpet covered the floor. A stage was added, along with special lighting. A projector and screen were installed. Suddenly, the space came to life and quickly became one of the most frequently used rooms in the church. The creation of space can happen anywhere. Several years ago, I remember riding in the back of a rickety pickup truck along the side of a mountain in Haiti. Our team was providing medical relief to some impoverished areas. As we traveled, we passed a couple weary men. We stopped. They hopped in. We created space. We learned that one of them had a sick wife who needed care. Our team stopped and provided a little triage in their small house.

You have done the same thing. You have created room in your home to meet changing family needs. You have carved out space from the chaos of a cluttered garage or an overstuffed closet. You have trimmed back the hedges and added a new deck. You have built a porch or bought a bigger car to accommodate the growing family. But more importantly than simple physical space, you have also created relational space in your life for others to inhabit. You have welcomed others into your conversations. You have included them in your circle of friends. You have invited them over for dinner. At least, I hope you have. Creating space is a creative act that God ordains and authorizes us to do. It doesn't happen by accident. It

doesn't happen without cost or time or intentionality. But when we dare to create space, the world changes, and God's kingdom moves forward.

This book is all about the kinds of space every God-follower is called to create. At the heart of this narrative is the description of five spaces we have the ability to create, which become inclusive, significant, and transformative in the lives of others and in our lives as well.

1. *Physical space* is actual space for people to engage and enter our lives. Like pulling up another chair to the table, we must look for ways to make sure there is plenty of room for others to gather in close proximity to us.
2. *Conversational space* is the result of physical space. We live in a cloistered world where people have forgotten the importance of talking with others—even those with differing opinions, viewpoints, and perspectives. There is a vast need for conversational space that is sane, rational, and civil. Rarely do such adjectives describe interactions on social media. And rarely do such conversations occur without intentionality. Conversations develop into relationships.
3. *Relational space* is where things get a little deeper. In relationships, trust is established, emotions are validated, opinions are valued, pain is poured out, and longings are given expression. Such “relational equity” leads to the fourth space.
4. *Redemptive space* is healing space. It allows for the creation of wholeness, for the restoration of that which is broken, for the acceptance of those who have been marginalized, and for the forgiveness that heals. Redemptive space welcomes the wayward, forgives the sinner, and proclaims the self-worth of every person.

5. *Reflective space* is the private space that we need to carve out for ourselves. Each of us needs time to meditate, reflect, ponder, wonder, and rest. We need time for our thoughts to meander a little. We need the space to ask ourselves, “What does this mean? How does this impact my life? What is God seeking to do in this place? What does he want me to do with this moment?”

I once read about a nomadic African tribe that continually traveled in search of shelter, water, and vegetation for their livestock. After a week of walking endlessly, they would stop for a day to, as they stated, “allow their spirits to catch up with them.” The same thought is reflected in David’s heart when he writes, “He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul” (Ps 23:2–3 NASB). Reflective space is all about introspection, growth, and wisdom. It’s the quiet space where we learn, reflect, and mature.

I invite you to join me in this God-ordained quest to create space in our world. Let’s create space for the outsider, the marginalized, the left out, the left over, the lonely neighbor, the frightened co-worker, the political adversary, the non-believer, the skeptic, the bruised, the broken, the seeker, the stranger, the isolated, the curious youth, the set-in-her-ways senior adult, the former churchgoer, the abused, the forgotten, the foreigner, the gruff old man, the gun-rights guy, the pro-choice crusader, the Democrat, the Republican, and anyone one else you can get to come along. Let’s create space and watch the ways in which the spirit of the living Lord brings transformation, conversation, communication, understanding, and, yes, even love to the table.