THE ETHICS OF EVANGELISM

Posted on September 18, 2015 by Eddie

Thinking through some of the ethical issues involved in evangelism and conversion,
Category: Bible & Mission

What gives us the right to share our Christian faith with other people? As good people, soaked in the 'Great Commission', we might say that all authority has been given to Jesus and that gives us the authority to witness. That's true; but the problem is that not everyone shares our view of Jesus' words and in our multi-cultural, multi-religious world, we can't automatically assume that we have the legal right to openly share the Christian faith and to encourage people to change their religious views.

To take things a step further, even if we have complete freedom to share our faith, there are some approaches to evangelism that should be off-limits. For example, it's perfectly fine to share food as part of Christian witness, but the promise of food to induce hungry or vulnerable people to make a confession of faith is clearly wrong in a variety of ways.

Don't get me wrong, I believe that Christians should share their faith and should encourage people to follow Christ; however, there are ethical considerations that have to be borne in mind as we do so.

This week I attended a fascinating symposium at Leeds Trinity University on the Ethics of Evangelization and Conversion, which gave me a good dealÂ to think about. Here are a few quotes from my notes:

> *"We have to convey enthusiasm sensitively."*
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> *"Freedom of religion involves the freedom not to be aggressively coerced to change your religion."*
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> *"How can you dialogue with people who attack you all the time."*

The last comment, somewhat to my chagrin, was referring to encounters with evangelicals.

However, the most important thing about the meeting, for me, was to introduce me to a document on "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World" drawn together by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches and World Evangelical Alliance. Here is one section from the document.

> ***A basis for Christian witness***
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> 1. *For Christians it is a privilege and joy to give an accounting for the hope thatÂ is within them and to do so with gentleness and respect (cf. 1 Peter 3:15).*
> 2. *Jesus Christ is the supreme witness (cf. John 18:37). Christian witness is alwaysÂ a sharing in his witness, which takes the form of proclamation of the kingdom,Â service to neighbour and the total gift of self even if that act of giving leads to theÂ cross. Just as the Father sent the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit, so believersÂ are sent in mission to witness in word and action to the love of the triune God.*

> 3. *The example and teaching of Jesus Christ and of the early church must be theÂ guides for Christian mission. For two millennia Christians have sought to followÂ Christâ€™s way by sharing the good news of Godâ€™s kingdom (cf. Luke 4:16-20).*
> 4. *Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with peopleÂ of different religions and cultures (cf. Acts 17:22-28).*
> 5. *In some contexts, living and proclaiming the gospel is difficult, hindered or evenÂ prohibited, yet Christians are commissioned by Christ to continue faithfully inÂ solidarity with one another in their witness to him (cf. Matthew 28:19-20; MarkÂ 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).*
> 6. *If Christians engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resortingÂ to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause sufferingÂ to others. Such departures call for repentance and remind us of our need forÂ Godâ€™s continuing grace (cf. Romans 3:23).*
> 7. *Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ,Â conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 16:7-9; Acts 10:44-47). They recognize that the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills in ways overÂ which no human being has control (cf. John 3:8).*

There is a good deal of food for thought and not a little wisdom in this document. I'd encourage anyone who is involved in evangelism, church planting or mission to get a hold of it and give it a read. The suggestion is that churches and agencies should use this as the basis for developing their own code of conduct to suit their particular situation. That's not a bad idea.

This is where I discover that the rest of you have known about this document for years, even though I've just come across it.