

Book review: The ethics of evangelism

REVIEW

“The Ethics of Evangelism: a philosophical defence of ethical proselytizing and persuasion”.

Elmer Thiessen. Paternoster, 2011, 304 pp., £10.99.

ISBN: 978-1-84227-724-9.

Many years ago some members of my church went out door-knocking around the neighbourhood. Armed with copies of a simple “Survey on Religion”, our real aim was to speak to unsuspecting householders about Jesus. Later I was part of a missionary society which ran a clinic in West Africa. Here the waiting patients had to listen to a simple Gospel address before being treated. Were these approaches to evangelism ethical? This is the question which Elmer Thiessen addresses in this thoughtful book.

Evangelism (or proselytisation, a word which Thiessen is eager to rehabilitate) lies at the heart of our faith. Yet there are many today who would say that it is always wrong for a person to try and persuade another to change their religious stance. While sympathetic to this view, Thiessen points out that persuasion is a major theme in contemporary society, whether it be in the form of parents trying to get their children to bed or doctors seeking to change their patients’ lifestyle. In particular, advertisers attempt to make us sample their products; their methods are often far more underhand than any used in Christian outreach, yet we accept them uncritically.

The author argues that evangelism and persuasion are not intrinsically immoral – in fact he sees the freedom to evangelise as one mark of a civilised and liberal society. Furthermore, he believes that people have an inbuilt need to persuade their companions; denying this is to deny part of what makes us human. If something is truly important to us, we will wish to convince our friends of its worth and be delighted if they agree. However, we sometimes forget that we must be equally ready to listen to their views.

Christians must carefully examine their motivation for spreading the Good News. Commendable reasons for doing so will always be mixed with others which are less worthy. We must be aware of the danger of treating potential converts as mere commodities rather than whole people, and we must never be guilty of undue coercion, financial inducement or deceit. Thiessen is particularly critical of the modern trend for “Friendship Evangelism”, if we only befriend another person in order to share our faith.

This book is not perfect. It uneasily straddles the line between being “academic” and “popular”, and it has a tendency to be repetitive and verbose. Thiessen is guilty of wishful thinking when he hopes that it will be read by evangelism’s critics as well as by members of the Christian community. And, although it does include some carefully-chosen examples from Britain, it remains rooted in an American context. (For instance, there is no critique of the Alpha Course’s “strapline”: “an opportunity to explore the meaning of life”).

Nevertheless, this is a useful book which should be read by every Minister and Evangelist. For should Christians be silent about spreading our message? Definitely not. But we must always be ethical and open in doing it. Nothing less will bring glory to the Jesus of whom we speak.

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EVALUATION

Please try to answer these questions for yourself and for others who will use this material:

1. What was the most helpful thing?
2. What was the least helpful thing?
3. What would you like to try now?

THE NEXT STEP

Take a look at the website for new materials appearing

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to John Hall for contributing this material. John chairs the Vision4Life Evangelism Year committee. He has a doctorate in Missiology and youth congregations were the subject of his thesis.

How to feedback to Vision4Life?

If you wish to offer any feedback – brickbats and bouquets are equally welcome! – you can do so in various ways.

You can email the Vision4Life steering group and the coordinator about general issues via the website or at admin@vision4life.org.uk

Website issues can be dealt with through web@vision4life.org.uk

If you have comments and particularly contributions to the evangelism year, you can email the V4L evangelism year coordinator via evangelism@vision4life.org.uk

If you want to make contributions or ask questions about other V4L years you can email:

Year 1 – Transformed by the Bible: bible@vision4life.org.uk

Year 2 – Transformed through Prayer: prayer@vision4life.org.uk