

Ethical Witness, Absolutely. Proselytising, Hopefully Not!

An Evangelical Response to Elmer J Thiessen's Paper 'Ethical Evangelism and Proselytising'

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Preliminary considerations

I would like to begin by thanking Dr. Thiessen and LOI for the opportunity and the privilege of engaging with a very solid paper and an extremely important topic, at a critical time for ecumenical engagement in our most troubled world.

Like Dr. Thiessen in his paper (and in his book on this topic), I have to start by clarifying the confines of my response. In my discussion here, I will limit myself to observations that I consider relevant for the ecumenical dialogue and cooperation between Evangelicals and the Orthodox, although some of them may also be relevant for other dimensions and areas of application on the issue of Christian witness. For the same reason I will generally ignore here the secularist objections to Christian witness.

However, unlike Dr. Thiessen, I will not limit my discussion to the ethics of evangelism, understood in terms of mere verbal witness – as legitimate as such an approach may be, merely because I strongly believe that a reductionist view of the witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as limited to verbal persuasion concerning the validity of the Christian message is, in my view, one of the causes of the blindness that Evangelicals often manifest towards the risk of falling into the error of unethical witnessing.

Nevertheless, being myself an Evangelical, even if of Anglican extraction, I am ready to openly affirm my conviction and personal commitment to the responsibility we have as Christians to share with others, in full integrity, the good news of the Kingdom of God. In the words of the Mission Statement of my organisation, World Vision International, to which I fully adhere, we are called to 'witness to Jesus Christ by life, deed, word and sign', which 'encourages people to respond to the Gospel'.

At this point I also want to add that I believe we are called to do this not only towards those who are not Christians, but also to those who are. What I mean by this is that I refuse to make a sharp distinction between evangelism and Christian discipleship, a perennial Evangelical tendency, which is responsible, in my understanding, for much of the immaturity we encounter in our own churches.

For me, and I have to confess that I have learned this through my interaction with Orthodox theology, the Gospel is not merely about having our sins forgiven, about escaping hell and about 'going to haven', whatever that means, but about the entire process of being transformed, individually and corporately, into the likeness of Christ, which we Evangelicals call sanctification (and, hopefully, also glorification) and the Orthodox, within a quite different theological paradigm, call *theosis*. In this sense, for me, basically, evangelism means 'disciplining' unbelievers, and discipleship means 'gospelizing' Christian believers, if I am allowed to borrow this term from Scot McKnight. This is so because, in biblical terms, the scope of the Gospel is not just about our incorporation into the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, but about our

transformation into the likeness of Christ, or as the Apostle Peter says, about our becoming 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), according to grace. Moreover, it is not just about the salvation of humanity, but about the transfiguration of the entire creation (Eph. 1:10).

At the same time, because the context of this discussion is the cooperation in missions between Evangelicals and the Orthodox, we need to give careful attention to the problem of 'sheep stealing', which has poisoned so often the relationships between our two communities. And, although in majority Orthodox countries the charge of 'sheep stealing', most often called 'proselytising', is in most cases levelled by Orthodox people against Evangelicals, we have to be fair and admit that such unfriendly and un-ecumenical behaviour can be observed, in various degrees, in both ecclesial communities. And, we have to add, this ethical risk is even greater in areas where Orthodoxy is historically a minority.

This being said as a matter of introduction, let me proceed by engaging with the substance of Dr. Thiessen's paper.

1. Affirming the absolute need for ethical witness in the Evangelical-Orthodox encounter

a. The problem

I lament, with Dr. Thiessen, the fact that, in our passion to share with the world the good news of salvation in Christ, we Evangelicals have often neglected the legitimate ethical concerns for the means we use in accomplishing this missionary task. I am afraid this dilemma is closely bound to our identity, because, to use David Bebbington's terminology, 'activism' and 'conversionism', alongside 'Biblicism', and 'Crucicentrism', are core characteristics of Evangelicalism. We believe passionately, and I hope we will continue to do so, that every believer is called not only to be continuously transformed by a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, but also to share the Gospel of salvation through faith in Christ with unbelievers. This passion for witnessing to Christ is something that we can offer as a gift to other ecclesial traditions. As my dear friend Fr. Stelian Tofana mentioned in the introduction we have written together for the second Romanian edition of the book *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, among other things, Orthodox believers could learn from the Evangelicals 'the passion for missions, as a personal and corporate objective'.

Certainly, what easily muddles the waters in this area of Christian ministry is the fact that sometimes, alongside people of other faiths, or of no faith, we also view as targets of our evangelistic activities adherents of other church traditions than our own. Sadly, in my own country, Romania, generally speaking, my fellow Evangelicals are describing Orthodox believers (and Catholics, alike) as 'non-Christians', while the Orthodox and also the Catholics, generally respond with the same degree of 'Christian love', by describing Evangelicals, together with adherents of various cults (like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, which for them are, as we say, merely 'the same Mary with a different hat') as 'sectarians', and 'schismatics'.

Besides the obvious sectarianism that inspires such negative attitudes, we have to admit that they are rooted in quite different ecclesial visions and theologies. These are even more difficult

to overcome without consistent theological and missiological dialogue, which bears witness to the importance of such encounters as our consultation here, under the auspices of LOI.

Nevertheless, we are glad to observe that, in the last decades there is growing interest among Evangelicals and Orthodox alike, but also among Catholics, for the ethics of missions in general and evangelism in particular. In many cases, a central role in such efforts has been played by institutions like the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID).

One remarkable and tangible result of this new effort is the recent document titled 'Christian Witness in A Multi-Religious World', which was signed by the entities mentioned above, following at least five years (2006-2011) of dialogue and growing common agreement. The document decries the use of 'inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means'. These 'betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others'. Further, the agreed document affirms that although every Christian has the 'responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit'. In the principles section of the document, Christians are called to 'renounce false witness', and to speak 'sincerely and respectfully' of adherents of other faiths and denominations, 'making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions'. I hope we can all fully agree with these statements.

One other important contributing factor to the growing awareness on the importance of ethical witness came from the increasing involvement of Evangelicals, but also of the Orthodox, in humanitarian action. Many such organisations, including World Vision, which I serve, have adopted the Red Cross Code of Conduct for humanitarian affairs, which condemns the exploitation of the vulnerabilities of people in emergency responses and in development activities.

b. The risks

As Dr. Thiessen rightly points out, when the ethical dimension of witnessing is overlooked, we face the grave risk that our best intentions are being derailed because of our potential use of means that do not fit the nature of the Gospel of grace, nor the biblical vision of human dignity rooted in our being created 'in the image and likeness of God' (Gen. 1:26). If we are called to be always ready 'to give an account of the hope that is in us' (1 Pt. 3:15), we are equally responsible to do so in such a manner that 'the way of truth does not come into disrepute' (2 Pet. 2:2).

The increasing pluralism and secularism of our time multiplies even more the risk that our good deeds done in the name of Christ and our well-intended words that try to explain to others the reason for our hope, may be interpreted by others around us as means of manipulation, for the purpose of merely increasing the number of adherents in our own religious communities. Here, again, possibly because of my thirty five years of experience as a target of communist propaganda, I am less tolerant than Dr. Thiessen, and I strongly doubt we can allow, even theoretically, for any positive meaning of terms like 'propaganda' and 'manipulation'. Too much damage has been done already by various ideologies, including religious ones, to allow for any

such possibility, particularly at a time when various religious fundamentalisms – Muslim, Christian and otherwise – are raising again their hideous head.

Because of the postmodern mind-set that dominates our times, and related to the considerations above, I want to also call our attention to a third major risk to our ethical witness, which is related to what I would call the ‘ambiguous nature of verbal and rational persuasion’. I agree with Dr. Thiessen that it is unfair to single out religious persuasion as being potentially a form of coercion, while, for instance, the risk of manipulative educational persuasion, let alone political or marketing persuasion, is most often left unheeded. However, as a true postmodern person, rather than asking for religious persuasion to be treated with the same tolerance, as our author seems to suggest, I would prefer, as a safer option, to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to any form of persuasion, including its religious versions.

There was a time when I admired the shrewdness of certain Christian apologists, who were able to silence or outdo their atheist proponents in public debates or in their writings. I must confess that, in time, I grew weary of this kind of rationalist competition (still used a lot in the ‘evidentialist apologetics’ of the Josh McDowell kind), that today sounds to me pathetically childish; kind of like saying ‘my (heavenly) father can beat your (not so heavenly) god’.

Personally, I do not know many people who have come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ because of somebody’s clever rational arguments. And, although I believe that reason has its legitimate place in the deliberations of faith, in response to sincere doubt, in our postmodern times people tend to meet Christ rather in a more relational and existential manner, as they see him ‘incarnated’ in the lives of others. Thus, I am quite convinced, Christianity is not so much ‘taught’, as a lesson, but rather ‘caught’, as you catch a cold, by coming in contact with people whose lives have been transformed and became fascinatingly attractive because they themselves ‘have been in Narnia’ (to use CS Lewis’s metaphor).

c. The solutions

‘What is to be done?’, was Lenin asking at the end of his ideological critique of Russian capitalist society. We too may legitimately ask the same question as we analyse the temptation of using unethical means in our Christian endeavours. To quote another communist classic, Marx once said: ‘Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the important thing, however, is to change it’ (in *Theses on Feuerbach*, (thesis XI). I guess this is one point where we can agree with Marx. And, even if it is not necessarily easy, I believe we can find viable and realistic solutions to the danger of unethical witness.

Let me give you just two examples, from my own work in World Vision.

During my regular visits in Israel/Palestine, I have become painfully aware of the serious rift that exists between Evangelicals and other Christian traditions present among Palestinians. A few years ago, World Vision Jerusalem invited me to participate in a youth ecumenical meeting in Taibeh, near Ramallah. When I arrived there I was surprised to find out that, although they were invited, no Evangelical youth were present. I have asked why and I was told that the leaders of the other Christian churches in Palestine, not only Catholics and the Orthodox, but

also Anglicans and Lutherans, refused to allow their youth to participate if Evangelical youth will be there, because they do not want them to become victims of Evangelical proselytism. As a result, although very disappointed, my colleagues had to decide to have a meeting without the Evangelicals, than to have no meeting, with only Evangelicals present.

What could we as Evangelicals do when there is so much bad blood between our communities, sometimes because of unethical things we have done in the past, and other times because the others are too hurt and prejudiced to observe and accept that, maybe, we have changed? I believe we can do something about it, if we are really willing to engage in the painful reconciliation work that is needed. For instance, the leaders of the various communities could come together and agree on a basic code of conduct for cases when a member of one community intends to move to another. In such instances, some kind of candid communication between the pastors/priests of the two communities involved could work miracles. This has been tried elsewhere, and it worked. It could work as well in Palestine, or in Romania, for that matter, if there is the will for it. If not, we will just find excuses.

A happier example is the so-called 'Orthodox Alpha'. About ten years ago a group of Orthodox leaders associated with the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies (IOCS) in Cambridge decided to work together for creating an Orthodox version of the well know adult catechism course called, *The Alpha Course*, an initiative of the Anglican (Evangelical/charismatic) community at Holy Trinity Brompton in London. After about seven years of work, they were almost ready, but the initial funding dried out and the programme risked to be abandoned. It just happened, by God's providence, that at approximately the same time we were doing at the University of Cluj, the launch of the Romanian translation of *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*, to which Bradley Nassif, one of the main authors of the book graciously accepted to participate. During that visit, Brad, who I know for many years, asked me if I could consider supporting, with my World Vision budget, the final stage of this project. To cut a long story short, I could, and less than two years later we had the official launch of the Orthodox adult catechism called *The Way*, which was realised under the spiritual supervision and with the blessing of Metropolitan Kallistos Ware in Oxford. Moreover, at the initiative of Patriarch Daniel in Romania, this programme was adapted into Romanian, even before it was launched officially in London, and it is now field tested in a number of dioceses in the Romanian Patriarchate.

2. The impossibility of redeeming the term 'proselytism'

Before anything else, I have to say that I am extremely grateful for the thorough work that Professor Elmer Thiessen has done in his book *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion*, which I have read with great interest and personal benefit. Yet, there is one important point in this book on which I graciously beg to differ. Unlike him, I believe that the positive meaning of the term 'proselytism', if it ever existed, and even its neutral meaning, which we find in the Bible and for which Dr. Thiessen tries to build a case for today, is gone for good, and it cannot be revived.

A friend of mine used to say: 'Don't ride on a dead horse. Kick it in the ditch and get another one'. I believe this fits very well the linguistic and theological career of the term 'proselytism'. Here are, succinctly, my reasons.

a. Linguistic reasons

Languages and the words that build them are not mechanical realities, as some structuralists believe, but they are rather like living 'organisms', realities in flux. Human decisions may influence them, to a certain extent, but the more participants are involved in the use of a certain language, the more difficult it is to influence the process and the more unpredictable the results of such efforts will be. If I am correct in this assessment, then our preferences for a meaning or another of a particular term are quite irrelevant for language itself, and for the communities that use it, as important as those preferences may be for ourselves personally. As such, the important matter is not so much what Danut Manastireanu or Elmer Thiessen would like the term 'proselytism' to mean, but what it actually means today, to the largest majority of people in our world.

We may try to revive a dead (or dying) meaning, as we are free to try reviving a dead metaphor, but, personally, as much as I would like it to be different, I believe the effort is not worth it, and I am convinced it will not work, anyway.

The negative meaning of the term 'proselytism' is well established, for many decades now in public consciousness; and this is not just an Anglo-Saxon phenomenon. Even the most well-meaning people of faith, let alone, 'mean secularists' have given up on the attempt to establish a potentially positive meaning for this word. They believe, and I agree, that there is no hope for it.

b. Do we really need this term?

I am not convinced at all that we really need another term, let alone a hopelessly ambiguous one, like that of 'proselytism', for describing the Christian responsibility for sharing the Gospel, when in fact, we already have at our disposal plenty of unambiguous ones, some of them also used in the Holy Scriptures.

Such a choice would only muddle even more the already complicated communication between us as people of faith, and the secular world. I would like to suggest that the principle of incarnation, that should guide our cultural and missional engagement, might guide us to take upon ourselves the task of learning the language of the unsaved world, rather than requiring them to learn ours.

If we want to talk about verbal presentation or defence of the Gospel, the biblical term 'evangelism' or 'evangelisation' is, I believe, more than suitable; as is the term 'proclamation'. Of course, this can take many forms, from public to private, from formal to informal, and we may be sometimes at loss of words for terms like the Greek 'laleo'. Should we translate it about 'gossiping' the Gospel in the marketplace? I don't know. But I am sure the term 'proselytism' would not help us in that either.

If we want to talk about holistic or integral mission, the biblical term 'witness' is, I believe, most suitable, as it includes both the verbal and non-verbal communication of the Gospel, as well as the 'martyria' dimension of this term, that is so dear to the Orthodox. And because the testimonies of witnesses can be either true or false (and sometimes, to add to the confusion, partly true and partly false, we may find it necessary and useful to use a qualifier and talk about 'ethical witness'. That would be by far my preference, as, I believe, this could help us in the best possible way to avoid unnecessary confusions in our dialogue with the outside world.

In conclusion

Together with other Christian traditions, both Evangelicalism and Orthodoxy have to reckon with the very troubling reality of the unethical means of witnessing used by some overly zealous Christians. There is no point in denying it. Our firm and consistent engagement with this troublesome state of affairs is required not only by the complexities of our pluralist world, and the multiplication of (more or less) religious conflicts around us, but also by the necessary respect for human dignity, as rooted in the our being created in the image of God.

We welcome the fact that not only various religious communities, but also non-religious entities (like secular humanitarian organisations) have been engaged in the last years in formulating various codes of conduct and principles for avoiding the damage done by unethical practices of witnessing. Certainly, the mere existence of such codes and principles does by itself solve the problem, if these are not taught consistently and if they are not internalised with conviction by the believers themselves. This is where people like us are called to play an essential role.

I am convinced that, by God's grace, if there is a will, there is a way. So help us God!

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Note: For any reactions, please write to danutm@gmail.com. I appreciate your help.