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Doing Evangelism Ethically

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1

Why Does it Matter?

As a young man I used to buy cheap vegetables in Sheffield market, filling up my rucksack and wobbling home on my bike. One day as I came out of the market I was approached by a couple of guys who asked me if I was happy with my life. I was newly married so of course the answer was 'Yes,' but they persisted in talking to me about life and its meaning. Why did I not find out more from them? I would be very welcome to visit their house in the district next to where I lived. Having discovered they were part of the Unification Church (sometimes called Moonies), in the end I agreed to go a few days later with my wife and another Christian friend. We were met with friendly faces, given a meal and introduced to members of this community and other guests visiting like us. It was obvious to us that they were seeking to draw us into their group, but they were not reckoning that we would take our own evangelist with us. When our friend began to explain what Jesus meant to her we were quickly shown the door so as not to confuse other guests.

Looking back, I still remember the sense that I had been picked out at the market as a potentially vulnerable young man. Because I had a good support network I was more amused than disturbed by this, but nonetheless I was concerned by the incident. It was easy to castigate the Moonies as behaving in an underhand way in their attempts at evangelism. But now I also wonder about my own responses: going along to the house out of curiosity was fine, but was it fair or ethical to seek to evangelize other guests in the house? Was our own behaviour all that it should have been? How do we go about deciding?

Sadly, all too many people have had a bad experience of evangelism and not been able to receive the good news we claim to share. A significant factor in evangelism being seen as bad news is the way Christians have sometimes gone about it. Telling hungry people they will get food if they convert, only employing folk who attend the right church or chapel, even putting the choice, 'Be baptized or die'—all these have been tried. A swathe of bad examples makes it all too easy for people to dismiss evangelism as brainwashing, arrogance or coercion, a form of power games by the powerful against the powerless and vulnerable. No wonder it is easy to write off evangelism as a bad idea.

Of course, what we mean by evangelism and evangelizing may vary somewhat. There are literally hundreds of published definitions of evangelism, just in English.[1] I am taking as a working definition:

…sharing, proclaiming, witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit to the good news of God's love for the world, shown in Jesus Christ.

If evangelism is truly about the good news of God's love for the world then the practice must itself be good news (John 3.16).

Until recently there has not been much published reflection on doing evangelism ethically. For example, when John Stott wrote his groundbreaking book on ethical issues for evangelicals, evangelism was not included.[2] A major textbook on ethics by another author sympathetic to evangelism makes no mention of evangelism.[3] Even the more recent *Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* makes only a very brief reference to doing evangelism ethically.[4] More recently, writers encouraging the practice of evangelism have drawn attention to the importance of overcoming bad experiences of evangelism. Focusing on the example of Jesus has been key for some,[5] while others point to the value of building an evangelizing community, the church, to embody good or virtuous practice.[6]

In this booklet I want to make more widely known material that has been produced to enable evangelism to be done ethically. We begin by exploring some of the intellectual and ethical concerns raised by critics, and look at some responses to those concerns. From there we turn to twelve key principles which have gained widespread acceptance, and end by sketching out how some of this can be worked out in practice. In some ways the result of this reflection is not unexpected: much of what we seek to do in Christian discipleship will lead to doing evangelism ethically.

However, I believe it is important for all of us to think this through: if you have intellectual and ethical difficulties around evangelizing then I hope this offers you a way to articulate them. Naming our concerns and addressing them can be an important first step in feeling more confident about engaging in evangelism. If you are already positive about evangelizing, this approach will help you understand better the concerns of fellow Christians, as well as others in our society. My overarching proposal is that all of us seek to become *virtuous witnesses*, grounded in the love of God, and to become ever more Christlike, rejecting coercion and embracing respect of others. But first we need to listen to the critics with respect and consider our responses.

Questions for Discussion

- When have you seen poor practice in evangelism?
- How did you react? How did it make you feel?
- Thinking of my experience with the Unification Church, if you offer food as part of an evangelistic activity what ethical issues arise?

The Critics Speak: Ethical Objections to Evangelism

2

What objections to evangelism do the critics make? You may have other objections to add to the list that follows, but here, very briefly, are five areas of concern often raised, with the ethical dilemmas to the fore. At the heart of them all is the use of power: do we use the varieties of power we have to build up or to knock down? Who benefits from our use of power, whether it be the power of our influence, our money, our time or our position?

There is not space here to go into great detail in all these areas, but if you want to read more I recommend a book by the Canadian Mennonite educationalist and philosopher Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism*, especially chapters three to five. In the sections that follow I sketch out some of the dilemmas, adapting several of Thiessen's ideas.[7]

Thiessen seeks to make his case widely accessible by taking as the foundation the dignity and worth of persons.[8] The modern version of this idea begins with Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century: he emphasized that people are ends in themselves, not a means to an end. This means treating others with respect, and protecting their freedom and property. Though not without its critics—for example, might persecution be 'good' for the church?—it is easy to see how these ideas have become widespread today. Statements such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights make reference to religious freedom, including the right to change one's religion.[9]

The concept of human dignity has serious theological foundations

The concept of human dignity does have serious theological foundations, in both creation and redemption: first, human beings are made in the image of God (Gen 1.26–7), and the significance of this is underlined when all that God made on the sixth day is pronounced 'very good' (Gen 1.31). Secondly, the notion that God came in Christ to die for us is a major statement of human value (for instance, Mark 10.45; Rom 3.21–4). Furthermore, the Great Commandment, to love our neighbour as ourselves, only makes sense on the basis of the dignity and worth of human beings (Lev 19.18; Luke 10.27).

So in responding to the critics of evangelism we will start from the basis of the dignity and worth of persons and respect and love for others.

Persuasion

Persuasion was highlighted as a dirty word when Vince Packard wrote his critique of the advertising industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*, in 1957. None of us likes to be conned by an advert, and they have become considerably more sophisticated since the 1950s. Today the suspicion of advertising is carried over to other areas of persuasion, such as public relations, sales, politics, journalism and also evangelism. For those of us who are positive about evangelism, it is a wake-up call to see it in a list of activities often viewed negatively in our society.

The reality about persuasion is more complex: most of us engage in forms of persuasion every day. A parent says to the young child, 'It's good to eat your greens.' A teenager finds her father trying to persuade her to go to university. At work colleagues seek to persuade others that their course of action is the best one for the company. In the church, a vicar wants to persuade a church council to be outward looking. In Scripture, we hear of Paul seeking to persuade people in Ephesus of the truth of the kingdom of God (Acts 19.8–10).

Of course, there is a matter of degree here: the more serious the issue at hand, the more we will ask searching questions of persuasion. However, that does not take away the fact that persuasion of various kinds, and in matters large and small, is inescapable. We often want to convert other people to believe that what we say is right, or that our way is the best way to act in these circumstances. We live in a society where choice is desired and promoted—sometimes too much! (How many types of coffee can you choose between without losing the will to drink it?) Whether it is about the food for dinner, a decision about the kind of person to marry, or where to go on holiday, the existence of choices leads to debate, and debate leads to persuasion.

The existence of choices leads to debate, and debate leads to persuasion

Persuading others ethically is the key here. Let me give you a trivial example: if you tell me you do not like rice pudding I might want to persuade you of how tasty it is, particularly with jam. If you tell me that you are ignoring what I am saying about rice pudding and my continuing to argue is in fact an intrusion on your liberty, then out of respect I should stop.

So in matters of more significance, such as the examination of and even a challenge to our beliefs, we need to be especially careful to check whether or not we have the right or permission to put our point of view.[10] Within Western societies, particular criticism is often made of religious groups in universities and colleges. In part, this may be because academic writers notice what is going on around them, especially if they happen to dislike the views being promoted. After all, universities are places of intellectual challenge and

change, and many groups, not just Christian ones, seek to take advantage of this climate to win adherents to their point of view.

Careful reflection is needed if we are to be consistent in assessing what is ethical in different contexts: 'the use of authority figures to speak, backed up by sanctions and a strong bureaucracy' would be one way of describing the university teaching experience. However, this is not generally seen as an unethical approach to education even though schools, colleges and universities are filled with potentially vulnerable youngsters and influencing them significantly through intelligent, powerful and sometimes controversial adults whom we call teachers and professors. The use of authority can be helpful, provided it is done with respect for human dignity and the values of service and love.

Our criteria for ethical evangelism must make clear how we may engage in persuasion in moral ways. We may well be convinced that what we are saying is a matter of the deepest significance, a matter of life and death, but persuasion must be engaging and credible.

Arrogance

Some critics have argued that all evangelizing is wrong because evangelists are arrogant.[11] If you believe yourself to possess truth which others need to hear then it is easy to come across as arrogant. This can be as true of a scientist or politician as of an evangelist. The statement: 'The Richard Dawkins Foundation sees its job as nothing less than changing America's future' is found on the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation.[12] Christians are not immune from sweeping statements: calls to see 'the world converted in one generation' or highlighting 'unreached people' are easily heard as arrogant by those who do not share the same beliefs.

Whenever there is disagreement there is bound to be unease

Whenever there is disagreement there is bound to be unease. Disputes about the reality and causes of global warming make another interesting example in this regard: arrogance can be perceived on both sides of the debate. It is possible to try to persuade others in an arrogant manner through lack of awareness or out of a sense of superiority, but that is generally counter-productive.

However, we need to think carefully about what is meant by arrogance. Does any disagreement between people inherently mean they are being arrogant? If we have an attitude of respect for others, does that mean we have always to agree with them? Take the case of a doctor who has studied the effect of smoking on your lungs and has a patient who smokes heavily and does not believe it does any harm: does having respect for the patient mean they have

to agree with them or should they put forward their evidence? In this case it seems clear that respect for the patient will involve the doctor giving her evidence for her position.

In an analogous way, in an evangelistic conversation it is possible to have respect for the other person yet still disagree. Putting forward the evidence, whether experiential, factual or spiritual, is important, and so is being clear about our own limitations. We do not know everything about God; we are finite, sinful human beings. What we can do is to bear witness to what we believe God has done in our lives. We can tell our story ('give a testimony') because it is our story. We can do so respectfully, and theologically we have confidence that the outcome of telling our story is between God and that person.[13] In return we need to be ready to hear the stories of others, open to the possibility of learning more about God (*cf* the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, Acts 10). As has been said, 'The best evangelizers are the best listeners.'[14]

So I suggest that the response to the charge that evangelism is arrogance is not to give up on the possibility of debate with others, but to approach them with love and respect, an attitude of humility and a willingness to admit, 'I might be wrong,' which takes us to the next issue of truth.

Truth Claims

Why do we evangelize? In part, at least, because we believe we have some truths which other people would benefit from knowing and living by. As we read, 'The truth will set you free' (John 8.32). My friends from the Unification Church certainly thought they had the truth which I needed to hear. In a society which is less sure, even confused, about what to believe about 'truth,' criticism of those who think they have it is sure to arise. In the first place, the very existence of different religious claims in one society relativizes them all: it is easy to go from 'they can't *all* be true' to '*none* of them is true.' Not everyone thinks in this way, but it is sufficiently prevalent to be a problem, especially to a faith which has long seen itself as dealing in absolute truths.

The claim to absolute truth makes Christianity vulnerable to challenges from other worldviews

The claim to absolute truth makes Christianity vulnerable to the more direct challenges from other worldviews with strong claims. In 2012 *New Scientist* magazine ran a series of fascinating articles on 'the God issue.'[15] Various perspectives were given, including that of a so-called new atheist, Victor J Stenger, who argued, 'If God has revealed truths to humanity then these truths should be testable.' He went on to say, 'After

evaluating all the evidence, we can conclude that the universe and life look exactly as they would be expected to look if there were no God.'[16]

The ethical dilemma is that exclusive claims on behalf of one religion can lead to serious and violent attacks on other people who belong to other religions (or none). Christians are not alone in being implicated in this, as continuing sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims in several countries demonstrates. I am not seeking to answer the issues of truth claims here, nor of various approaches to other religions. The issue here is whether or not believing in the concept of absolute truth makes ethical evangelism impossible, since it always implies criticism of others and can lead to violence. Paraphrasing Thiessen leads to the question, 'Is there a moral way to disagree with other people, whether it is about religion or any other topic?'[17]

Here we touch on the complex questions of our attitudes and approaches to people committed to other religions. If we are evangelizing them it is in the conviction either that our faith is true and theirs is not, or at least that ours is better than theirs in some sense.

As a tutor in a theological college I was given the responsibility of helping the students understand something about other religions, and I had all of twenty hours in which to do so. Since I reckon I am still needing to learn much about my own Christian faith I knew I was not an expert in any other religions. So I decided to invite representatives of a few other faiths to come and talk with our students about what was important to them in their faith. This was far more interesting than reading about principles in a book or watching a video, as we had the opportunity to ask each other questions about what we really believed and how we lived.

This approach arose, I hope, from an attitude of respect which meant that we met to listen as much as to speak. In the first couple of years my guest speakers were rather nervous of coming into a Christian college, but gradually confidence grew and we got to know each other a little better. It was then that we were able to begin to acknowledge where we agreed and disagreed in our beliefs and worldviews. It remained tentative because of course the student group changed each year, but as I got to know several of these visitors who came repeatedly, it was possible to ask questions about truth and meaning without fighting one another.

This is a huge topic and all I am putting forward here is that we recognize the possibility of ethical disagreement between religious views. This is picked up in the next chapter on specific principles.

Coercion and Manipulation

Here we move onto questions related to the methods of evangelism which go beyond the persuasive use of words and into a wide range of concerns about the use of power and force. Coercion can take many forms, including physical threat and actual violence, and psychological and social pressures, which are always an abuse of power. Perhaps the most common criticism of evangelism is of Christians attempting to coerce or force people to convert. We might be asked about the violence of the Crusades, the perceived links between Western colonialism and missionary work, pressure on vulnerable and isolated individuals or offering inducements to convert. The World Council of Churches has rightly drawn attention to this in its 1997 statement, 'Towards Common Witness.'[18] Whilst this document was written in the context of concerns about pressure on people to change church, what it says also applies to conversion between other religions. So is it possible to consider how the church and her evangelists can make use of power and authority in ethical ways?

Sticking to the criterion of the dignity of persons, we agree that forcing a person to change religion is not acceptable. Theologically, the use of force does not fit with either the gracious and demanding call of Jesus, such as to the first disciples (Mark 1.16–20), or the boldness of the early Christian preachers, who accepted that coercion of some kind might come their way (such as Peter and John, Acts 4; Paul and Barnabas, Acts 13.50; 14.2–6).

In seeking to do evangelism ethically we do not defend the use of force. This is easy to state as a principle, but requires us to be alert to how what we do might be perceived by other people. The key question is, 'Is evangelism inherently coercive?' Putting it another way, is it possible to share one's faith without it coming across as an act of force?

Good self-awareness and thorough reflection on our motivations are essential. In our society we are rightly concerned about the vulnerability of children and some adults to psychological pressure. The answer is not to ignore vulnerability—all human beings are vulnerable in some way—but to be alert to the dangers of manipulating others.

An experienced Church Army evangelist put it this way:

> It is also worth including the word 'agenda' here. It is important when it comes to evangelism to acknowledge that we have an agenda—and to be clear in our own hearts and minds what that agenda is, and what the motivation is that lies behind it. As evangelists it is naturally our agenda to see people come to believe and trust that Jesus is Lord, but we must also ask, 'What is that person's agenda? What matters to them?' Our first agenda then, must be love—to value them and what they value.[19]

Inducements

The dilemma is easily stated: the gospel calls us to offer to those in need physical help as well as spiritual, but this help must not be used to entice people to convert (see, for example, Matt 25.31–46; Luke 4.18–19; Rom 15.25–27). In his classic book, *Christianity Rediscovered*, Vincent Donovan puts this very strongly in condemning 100 years of missionary work in East Africa as aid or material development but not true mission.[20] He is surely right to condemn the bringing of development in order that people become Christians, though he also overstates his case by seeming to rule out all aspects of mission not explicitly evangelistic!

Inducements are generally seen as a particular form of coercion, offering material help on condition of religious observance: 'If you come to our church you will get food aid.' 'If you are going to work for me you must attend my chapel.' We could see it as 'the carrot' of inducement, compared to 'the stick' of coercion. In the twentieth century so-called 'rice Christians' were found in some Asian countries, apparent converts who wanted food and other handouts from missionaries.

There is evidence that this has happened, but it is not always as clear-cut as critics make out: missionaries have often been approached for material help by those in need and, out of compassion, food or medicine or work is given. If done in a truly open-handed way the act of generosity may or may not lead to a religious commitment. You may recall the story of Jesus healing ten lepers, of whom just one returned to give him thanks. He was commended for his faith, but clearly Jesus is not using the healing to induce or coerce a response of faith (Luke 17.11–19).

With the hidden motive of sharing faith—this is a form of manipulation

A contemporary example might be the forming of friendships in order to be able to share the good news—so-called friendship evangelism, advocated by some Christians. It would seem inherently positive that we share good news in relationships of trust and in which people have come to know us. The difficulty arises when we form friends with the hidden motive of sharing faith—this is no longer respect but a form of manipulation. This becomes obvious in more extreme versions of friendship evangelism, such as 'love-bombing' or 'flirty-fishing,' but any form of hidden agenda fails the test of respect.

It is also worth remembering that for some people there are strong social pressures *not* to convert, inducements which might be said to prevent a choice that otherwise might be made. These can range from a vague sense that 'becoming religious' is not what 'people like me' do, to very powerful family and social forces—fear of rejection, isolation, loss of job opportunities, even disinherit-

ance or death. Evangelism in those circumstances is sensitive and needs to be aware of the whole range of pressures someone may face. Perhaps the firm and gentle words of Jesus when infants were prevented from coming to him are relevant: 'Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs' (see Luke 18.15–17).

So What?

So far we have examined some of the arguments used against the possibility of doing evangelism ethically and responded to those arguments. How do we move forward from a theoretical possibility of doing evangelism ethically, into how it might be practised? A number of possibilities have been proposed and in the next chapter we examine one proposal in some detail and look at another.

Questions for Discussion

- Which of these criticisms is most relevant to your practice of evangelism?
- Are there other criticisms of evangelistic practice you would add?
- To what extent do you find these responses convincing?
- Is an argument based on the dignity of persons sufficient for addressing the concerns of our wider society?
- What further biblical and theological ideas would you use in the church context?
- From the discussion so far, what principles would you draw out for doing evangelism ethically?

Doing Evangelism Ethically: The Key Principles

3

If we are truly to embed ethical standards we will also need to have some good principles to work with. Highly contested areas in life are not resolved simply by copying other people, but by understanding more deeply why they have acted the way they have. Think of the way in which South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission has inspired similar but not identical bodies in other places needing to find reconciliation. The arguments over evangelism are more like these complex human dilemmas than the technical issue of fixing a broken car or malfunctioning computer.

So here are two sets of principles to consider, with emphasis on the first one, as it comes from such a broad base; the other is mentioned for brief comparison. They are sets of principles to assist you in assessing to what extent what you are doing in evangelism is ethical. They are not technical manuals, leading to a fixed answer, but guidance, based on long reflection on both practice and ethical theory.

Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World (CWMW)

In 2011 a highly significant document was agreed on how evangelism can be done ethically.

It was produced by as wide an ecumenical group as possible: the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance all agreeing on something contentious. They specifically note 'participation from the largest Christian families of faith (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal).' These bodies, with long histories of hard-won and limited co-operation, agreed what they called *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*.[21] They begin by stating:

> Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world is essential for every Christian. At the same time, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.

Their focus is not to set out a theological statement on mission beyond this bold and limited statement, 'but to address practical issues associated with Christian witness in a multi-religious world.' Rather,

> …the purpose of this document is to encourage churches, church councils and mission agencies to reflect on their current practices and to use the recommendations in this document to prepare, where appropriate, their own guidelines for their witness and mission among those of different religions and among those who do not profess any particular religion.

It is good to note that because this is a document with a global perspective it is very aware of being written in what they call 'a multi-religious world.' It therefore faces head on the possibility of conversion from one faith to another and seeks to avoid triumphalism.

Given the significance of this agreement I want to use this opportunity to bring the document to our attention and commend its use in your local church, denominational bodies and mission agencies. *CWMW* is deliberately short, but provides an excellent basis for reflection on motivating and engaging in ethical evangelism. Because it is short I am quoting from the document quite extensively, both to give its flavour and because it is hard to summarize it much further.

Motivation for ethical evangelism is found in seven points, which form 'A basis for Christian witness.' These seven points are headline theological statements, with some scriptural referencing, setting out why we engage in witness at all and some of the main issues we face. What follows is a summary:

1 For Christians it is a privilege and joy to give an accounting for the hope that is within them and to do so with gentleness and respect (*cf* 1 Pet 3.15).

2 Jesus Christ is the supreme witness (*cf* John 18.37).

4 Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people of different religions and cultures (*cf* Acts 17.22–28).

6 If Christians engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others. Such departures call for repentance and remind us of our need for God's continuing grace (*cf* Rom 3.23).

7 Christians affirm that while it is their responsibility to witness to Christ, conversion is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit (*cf* John 16.7–9; Acts 10.44–47).

In the context of this booklet point 6 is of special relevance, reminding Christians that if 'exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others.' This is clearly stated as unacceptable and requiring repentance. Careful listening to those who have felt deceived or coerced is necessary: whatever we think of our own motives, if we have communicated something other than the love of God we have gone wrong somewhere.

Since repentance requires a change of life the document next sets out twelve principles, of which they say, 'Christians are called to adhere to the following principles as they seek to fulfil Christ's commission in an appropriate manner, particularly within interreligious contexts.' These twelve principles have been offered globally for further reflection and action in our own contexts and I have made a few comments of my own in describing them, conscious mainly of the British context. My hope is that you will see enough to realize how they might be useful to you in becoming a virtuous witness and encourage you to work them out more fully in your own circumstances.

Here are the headings used in *CWMW*—in the full document each one is followed by a sentence or two of explanation and scriptural references.

Twelve Principles for Christian Witness

1 Acting in God's love.
2 Imitating Jesus Christ.
3 Christian virtues.
4 Acts of service and justice.
5 Discernment in ministries of healing.
6 Rejection of violence.
7 Freedom of religion and belief.
8 Mutual respect and solidarity.
9 Respect for all people.
10 Renouncing false witness.
11 Ensuring personal discernment.
12 Building interreligious relationships.

We are not told how these principles were arrived at, so what follows is my own interpretation of them, especially in the light of the ethical critiques of evangelism we have already examined.

There seem to be three broad types of principle here:

1–3: Developing Christian character.

4–6: Rejecting coercion of any kind.

7–12: Mutual respect and interdependence.

Developing Christian Character

1 Acting in God's love.
2 Imitating Jesus Christ.
3 Christian virtues.

The first three principles assume that ethical people are more likely to engage in evangelism ethically. The emphasis on character (or disposition) is seen in practice in much current reflection on ministry and leadership and in the theoretical approach of virtue ethics. Thiessen refers to character only briefly, but starting with developing good character is an excellent basis in seeking to build respect for others.[22]

CWMW begins with God's love—they reference Matt 22.34–40, the greatest commandment, and John 14.15, 'If you love me, you keep my commandments.' This is followed by a call to be Christlike, recognizing the need of the power of the Holy Spirit (John 20.21–23), and growth in the virtues known as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5.22). In other words, a character which truly expresses the love of God in all its simplicity and complexity is the first requirement to engage in evangelism ethically. We are called to witness to the love of God in Christ, so there is no shortcut available: our own lifelong conversion to the way of Christ is fundamental.[23] A new convert may be full of enthusiasm but can all too easily hinder other people from encountering God's love through insensitivity and impatience. What I call a virtuous witness will have learned how to convey enthusiasm sensitively (at least much of the time!).

Rejecting Coercion of Any Kind

4 Acts of service and justice.
5 Discernment in ministries of healing.
6 Rejection of violence.

In his book Thiessen gives a lot of attention to coercion and inducements of various kinds, what they are and how to address the issues. *CWMW* also explicitly tackles coercion in principles 4–6, making it clear that both service and justice are integral to the gospel. (These principles are not a full statement

of a theology of mission, but they are working with a form of the *Missio Dei*, recognizing that mission is not identical with evangelism.)

So they say, 'Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel.' But they go on to warn that, 'The exploitation of situations of poverty and need has no place in Christian outreach. Christians should denounce and refrain from offering all forms of allurements, including financial incentives and rewards, in their acts of service' (Principle 4). This is extended in Principle 5 to cover sensitivity in the way healing ministry is exercised, 'fully respecting human dignity and ensuring that the vulnerability of people and their need for healing are not exploited.'

Finally, there is an unambiguous rejection of violence, covering physical, social and psychological forms, and the abuse of power. It is taken to include 'unjust discrimination or repression by any religious or secular authority, including the violation or destruction of places of worship, sacred symbols or texts' (Principle 6).

These principles cover the points made by Thiessen on coercion and inducements and make it clear that we must be alert to these pitfalls. In fact, they go further in some respects, including violence to places, symbols and texts, as well as to people. So a virtuous witness can seek to be more self-aware by making use of a checklist covering many possible forms of coercion: financial, exploiting the vulnerable, physical, social and psychological violence, discrimination and repression.

Such a witness may draw inspiration from the example of St Paul, in rejecting falsehood and deception and seeking to be open with the truth as he has received and understood it: 'We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God' (2 Cor 4.2, NRSV).

An example of this approach is described by Stephen Kuhrt in setting up a lunch club called Grapevine for needy people in the parish of Christ Church New Malden. The project itself is not unusual but Kuhrt offers helpful reflections on how the congregation approached the task, including developing confidence in the 'gospel nature of social mission,' and offering hospitality and 'love with no strings attached.'[24]

Mutual Respect and Interdependence

7 Freedom of religion and belief.
8 Mutual respect and solidarity.

9 Respect for all people.
10 Renouncing false witness.
11 Ensuring personal discernment.
12 Building interreligious relationships.

The second half of the dozen principles in *CWMW* is based on respect for others, a clear parallel with Thiessen's ethical basis of the dignity and worth of persons.[25] The overlap gives confidence that this is both a well-grounded approach intellectually and that it also commands widespread assent. Our virtuous witness here turns from the negative rejection of coercion to the positive embrace of respect.

Principle 7 picks up freedom of religion and belief. It is based theologically in this text on 'the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (*cf* Gen 1.26).' Starting with the creation narrative reminds us that the dignity of human beings theologically precedes any notion of sin or the Fall, and is to be seen as part of God's good purpose for all people. (We saw how Thiessen starts with its secular counterpart in the various Declarations of Human Rights.) The *CWMW* principle states that religious freedom includes the right to practise one's faith, to propagate it and to change it. We know that not every Christian group has always accepted individual rights, so it is significant that these varied Christian bodies are ready to state this so clearly. Of course it cuts both ways: if we wish to claim the right to proclaim our faith and see people become Christians we must respect the right of Christians to convert to other faiths or none.[26]

Principles 8 and 9 hold together co-operation and challenge, using terms such as solidarity, the common good, and the challenge of the gospel to elements in our own cultures. Working with others for 'justice, peace and the common good' (Principle 8) has become much more important across all theological traditions in the British context and an example will be given in the next chapter. It is good to remember that working with others in this way, including those of other faiths and none, is done out of respect and for its own sake. If done as a pretext for evangelism and seeking conversions it fails to show respect and can easily be seen as an attempt to deceive others.

Knowing how often we struggle in our relationships with people of other faiths, it is helpful that principles 10 and 12 draw attention to some of the issues. So we are called to renounce false witness, which in this context means understanding other people's deeply held beliefs and practices. Principle 10 says Christians 'are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them.' Similarly, in principle 12 we are urged to 'continue to build relationships of respect and trust with people of different religions so as to

facilitate deeper mutual understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good.' True respect for our fellow human beings, which includes a desire that they may know the love of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, requires good relationships across religious divides. That it may not be easy to achieve does not take away the challenge in becoming a virtuous witness.

The final principle to mention is 'Ensuring personal discernment' (Principle 11). It is concerned to remind us of the huge significance of changing one's religion for many people, given the family and social networks that are affected and possibly disrupted. Respect requires giving people 'sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.' This is the obverse of avoiding coercion, the positive giving of time and space in which an informed decision can be made. It respects the individual in their response to God and rightfully sits alongside other principles which have a more communal feel.

Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain

The polarization of views about Islam in Britain means that building understanding between our faiths is crucial. A significant contribution was made in 2009 by the Christian Muslim Foundation (a forum of leaders and scholars across the range of Christian and Muslim traditions). The Foundation set out ten ethical guidelines for good practice in Christian evangelism and *Da'wah* (invitation to Islam).[27] Those who wrote this describe themselves as 'deeply committed to our own faiths (Christianity and Islam) and wish to bear faithful witness to them.' Although written before the ecumenical document *CWMW,* they similarly commit themselves to the common good and 'acknowledge that all faiths have the same right to share their faith with others.'

Agreement between these Christians and Muslims in Britain does not solve all the issues but does give hope that respect is possible. They also give weblinks to other similar statements from 1993 to 2008. They have not here sought to justify their own guidelines from either tradition, but simply state their conclusions. Because they are so concise I have set them out in full:

1 We bear witness to, and proclaim our faith not only through words but through our attitudes, actions and lifestyles.

2 We cannot convert people; only God can do that. In our language and methods we should recognize that people's choice of faith is primarily a matter between themselves and God.

3 Sharing our faith should never be coercive; this is especially important when working with children, young people and vulnerable adults. Everyone should have the choice to accept or reject the message we proclaim and we will accept people's choices without resentment.

4 Whilst we might care for people in need or who are facing personal crises, we should never manipulate these situations in order to gain a convert.

5 An invitation to convert should never be linked with financial, material or other inducements. It should be a decision of the heart and mind alone.

6 We will speak of our faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faiths of others.

7 We will speak clearly and honestly about our faith, even when that is uncomfortable or controversial.

8 We will be honest about our motivations for activities and we will inform people when events will include the sharing of faith.

9 Whilst recognizing that either community will naturally rejoice with and support those who have chosen to join them, we will be sensitive to the loss that others may feel.

10 Whilst we may feel hurt when someone we know and love chooses to leave our faith, we will respect their decision and will not force them to stay or harass them afterwards.

There are substantial connections with the ideas in the principles we have explored already. So these recognize the whole-life nature of faith and witness (1), the work of God in conversion (2), not being coercive or manipulative in any way (3–5), respect for others by being open and honest (6–8), and respecting the right of individuals to make choices (9–10). None of this is intended to preclude witnessing and evangelizing; on the contrary it is an attempt to work out how it might be done honestly and respectfully. This provides a useful additional resource, especially if you are ministering in an area in which a significant number of Muslims are living.

Questions for Discussion

- How important is it to build character (becoming a virtuous witness)?
- Which of the principles do you find most challenging, and why?

- How can you make use of the principles set out to develop discipleship through your church, mission agency or network?

4 What Does this Look Like in Practice?

Picking up the way I grouped the Twelve Principles for Christian Witness from *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,* here are the two positive strands which help us work out how to put these ideas into practice:

> Developing character as a virtuous witness.
> Mutual respect and interdependence.

Developing Character as a Virtuous Witness

This is the key to doing evangelism ethically: the character of the messenger must be consistent with the message. We turn for inspiration to the witness of past Christians because we recognize the importance of living out the message. Whom we choose as exemplars will depend on our own priorities, where we live and whom we hear about, but we do it because we want to see how the gospel is lived out.

However, all Christians look first to Jesus as inspiration, as reflected in the titles of recent books on evangelism (*Jesus the Evangelist* and *Sharing Faith the Jesus Way*). If the message is about what God has done in Jesus, then we are called to share that message in his way so far as we possibly can. This means that cultivating the likeness of Jesus is essential in being his witnesses. There is a virtuous cycle at work here: those who are more Christlike will be better able to witness to others about the love of God, and in turn develop their growth in Christlikeness and witness (see Eph 4.11–16; 1 Thess 1.4–7).

Developing Christlike character is not done alone, and Bryan Stone has helpfully explored how evangelism is a practice of the church, not just the individual. He concludes his thorough examination of the theology and practice of evangelism with a section on evangelism as virtuous practice.[28] He reminds us that Christian virtues are developed as we participate in the future promised to us by God in Christ. To develop these virtues requires a community in which they are valued and practised. In other words, we need people around us who live from the same values and encourage us even when it is hard to maintain them. That is the kind of church or group which can engage in evangelism ethically.

Stone suggests four interweaving virtues as being of especial value for the church at the moment: presence, patience, courage and humility.[29]

Presence as virtue is based on the presence of God in Christ (incarnation) and leads to embodying our witness to the gospel. There is a challenge to be present in the hard places in the world, witnessing that the love of God is what motivates us. It is the way of faithfulness, even when 'results' are not apparent.

Patience is needed because 'evangelistic presence is often characterized by contradiction and rejection, it is costly and difficult to sustain across time.'[30] In a related comment Lesslie Newbigin wrote, 'Patience means suffering…This suffering is not the passive acceptance of evil; it is the primary form of witness against it.'[31] For, as St Paul says, 'Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope' (Rom 5.3–4). Patience seen in this way is not resignation, but 'an active confidence that we live in God's time and can therefore act without the need to control, manipulate, or predict the results of our acts.'[32] Ethical evangelism takes time: we witness to the love of God, and we wait patiently for the other to discover—or better, to be discovered by—that love for themselves.

Courage as a Christian virtue is not that of the soldier but of the martyr (witness), who focuses on self-giving for others or for God. Courage is needed in witnessing that the self-giving love of God is the most powerful force in the world. It is all too easy to feel that we need to be part of the power structures in society, that the church will benefit from protection or special status. It is not that we have nothing to do with the powerful, but the courage of Jesus witnesses to the extraordinary power of forgiveness and non-retaliation. Such a witness trusts in the love and truth of God, and hence also exhibits the virtue of humility.

Humility qualifies courage so it does not become glamorous or arrogant, just as courage qualifies humility so it does not become passive or submissive. In the resonant phrase of David Bosch, it is bold humility: humility, because we know we do not know all the answers; bold, because we are willing to risk all as we trust in the leading of God's Spirit.[33]

I would add a further virtue to Stone's list: *hospitality*. The call to care for the stranger runs through both Old and New Testament, from Abraham (Genesis 18) to the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt 25.35). It is a reflection of God's hospitality to the hungry, poor and naked (Isa 58.7) and is an essential approach in sharing faith as well as food. Archbishop Justin Welby summarized it in this way when addressing the 2014 National Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast: 'The call to discipleship is always offered without manipulation as hospitality, respecting the freedom of others to say no, without aggression, and always in love. But it is offered.'[34]

Developing these virtues, and those listed as fruit of the Spirit, in order to become a more virtuous witness is thus the responsibility of both the

individual and of the church community (Gal 5.22). At its heart is modelling our lives on Jesus in the loving power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.8). The facets of divine love set out as the fruit of the Spirit provide a helpful prism as we check that our evangelism is truly ethical: being motivated by *love* comes first, for without love we are nothing (1Cor 13.2). Do we exhibit *joy* in our witness? As Pope Francis has reminded us, 'The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.'[35] We come in *peace*—Bryan Stone is emphatic that evangelism is about announcing peace (Isa 52.7) and to be done without any form of force or violence.[36] *Patience* is mentioned above. *Kindness* and *generosity* are to be seen in love for one another, for neighbours and for enemies. *Faithfulness* is found in keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. *Gentleness* is seen in Christ (Matt 11.29) and claimed by St Paul as his approach to sharing the faith, without precluding straight talking when necessary (2 Cor 10.1). *Self-control* enables us to take godly decisions, shaped by the love of God (1 Cor 9.25).

Mutual Respect and Interdependence

Earning the right to speak is often mentioned in considerations of how to do evangelism ethically. A good example of this in practice is found in the report the Church Urban Fund has recently published on how churches help local communities flourish.[37] Churches across the country are running a wide range of bespoke community activities including a children's clothing exchange, English language courses, foodbanks, homelessness activities, debt counselling and access to credit unions, lunch clubs for older people, youth and children's work and work with schools, and employment support.[38]

One concern addressed by the research was whether or not churches were doing all this as a cover for recruitment, *ie* evangelism. While all the churches wanted to see participants flourish spiritually as well as materially, there was strong awareness of being authentic and open.

'I'm not going to coerce them in,' said one minister. 'If it happens, if it's a natural process, if it's about people sharing of themselves and of their faith, that's great. There's no trickery, there's no deceit about it, no ulterior motive. It's brilliant if they do, sad if they don't, but there's no coercion.'[39]

Elsewhere the report comments on the irony that 'the empathetic and relational approach of churches was favourably contrasted with the highly contractual / conditional approach of universal state services.' The church offers a relational approach. 'One foodbank client spoke of the moment when, after a series of benefit delays affecting her and her partner, she had lost her temper in a job centre and was barred from the centre for twelve months. The couple came to the church centre to access the internet, get a hot meal and some food to take

home, and had built a good relationship with the staff. "The church doesn't judge. You don't have to qualify."'[40]

We hear in the report of ministers and churches growing in self-awareness before God. Reflection on how we are witnessing is helpful: have I been in danger of forcing my faith in others? Have I slipped into using a possible form of coercion? (Financial, exploiting the vulnerable, physical, social and psychological violence, discrimination and repression have already been mentioned.)

The development of such awareness is a classic spiritual exercise and a good example of how what we do at our best in spiritual development will lead to virtuous witnesses. Although requiring personal commitment, communal practices of prayer, Bible study, worship and reflection are necessary for most of us to persevere.

Further, a church community or mission agency must be aware of its own corporate power over others. It can be difficult to realize how we are seen, but where we have prominent buildings, or are led by people well known in the community, or can call on more volunteers than almost any other local group, we look powerful to outsiders. Corporate self-awareness, by church councils, evangelism groups, and training institutions, is a necessary corrective in these circumstances. Inviting people outside the church to offer their perceptions could be a helpful exercise.

A church community or mission agency must be aware of its own corporate power over others

Practically, respect means treating others as we wish to be treated, being open and honest about what we are doing, careful listening of other people's stories and truthful speech about them. Giving testimony is done without manipulating the storyline and, if a public event, allowing the speaker to be true to themselves and their understanding of God.

So in conclusion, ethical evangelism will be done by virtuous witnesses, grounded in the love of God and seeking to become ever more Christlike disciples, by living out virtues such as presence, patience, courage, humility and hospitality. They will reject coercion and embrace respect of others in order that the love of God in Christ may be received by all.

Questions for Discussion

- What can you articulate better now about doing evangelism ethically?
- What challenges does this provoke for your practice, both personal and corporate?

- What encouragements does it provide?
- In looking at the fruit of the Spirit, what questions does this raise for the ways you go about evangelism (Gal 5.22)?
- What are your next steps in becoming and developing more virtuous witnesses?

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Evangelism is central to the great commission that Jesus gave to his followers, to make disciples of all nations. Yet in some circles it has become a dirty word, with objections of arrogance, coercion and manipulation levelled against some of its forms.

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