

Ethics and Cautions in Mission with Children **Dan Brewster, Compassion International**

The Great Commission applies to children as well as to adults. Children, more than any other people group, are receptive to the gospel. Nearly half of the population of every country within the 10/40 Window is also in the 4/14 Window. Where the churches are growing, most of the new converts are under the age of 18. Children are both objectives of, and resources for, Mission in the non-Western world. Thus, the evangelization of children is taking place all around us.¹

Evangelism or ‘proselytizing’² (most dictionaries define them interchangeably) is taking place all around us all the time, and for the most part we have no problem with it. As Elmer Thiessen points out in his fine book *The Ethics of Evangelism*,

We seem to feel no embarrassment about the proselytizing going on in the commercial domain. We accept the proselytizing inherent in advertising. We are not embarrassed with the huge billboards cluttering our freeways, whose purpose is to convert us in matters ranging from brushing our teeth with Colgate to putting our investments in banks that make huge profits by exploiting the ordinary citizen.... The average citizen in the United States is exposed to more than 3,000 [proselytizing] messages per day according to a number of sources cited by Seiter/Gass (2004, 6).³

Thus, the argument is not about evangelizing per se, but is about seeking to change people’s *faith* allegiance. But evangelism, or providing Christian training, even to children is neither exploitative nor unethical. It is common to all faiths. It is commanded in the Christian Scriptures. It is a central feature of our Christian faith commitment. In fact, as Dr. Bryant Myers points out, “everyone— Christian or non-Christian—is witnessing all the time anyway. The only question is to what or to whom are they witnessing. It is how we witness which raises a difficulty and a challenge”.⁴

A common argument against *child* evangelism is that children are not psychologically mature enough to make an informed decision or to choose their own religion. Hence, directing a child toward a particular religion, they say, is not ethically correct. Even some Christians suggest that it is unethical to evangelize children. Their view is that we should evangelize only parents and, in turn, parents will evangelize their own children.

However, this position is not scriptural. The biblical pattern of evangelism is to proclaim the gospel to everybody. No one is excluded. Indeed, it is neither ethical nor fair that one large section of the population only hears the gospel if another section responds favourably to it.

¹ Note: Some of the thoughts in this blog come from Chapter 11 of my book *Child, Church and Mission*, Penang: Compassion International, 2011.

² Note: Elmer Thiessen, in *The Ethics of Evangelism*, (London. Paternoster. 2011) helpfully defines proselytizing as “The deliberate attempt of a person or organization, through communication, to bring about the conversion of another person or a group of persons, where conversion is understood to involve a change of a person’s belief, behaviour, identity, and belonging.” 11.

³ Thiessen p. 141.

⁴ Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor*, (Maryknoll. Orbis. 1999.) 17.

Moreover, no one else is waiting for children to be able to make informed decisions. Lady Gaga is certainly not waiting until children can make 'mature' decisions to 'evangelize' them. MTV is not waiting. Richard Dawkins is not waiting. Why do we think that parents and concerned Christian adults should wait to lead children to make faith decisions?

We can and must stand unapologetically committed to spiritual as well as physical transformation. We must exercise a non-manipulative integrity and respect in our evangelism without softening the gospel and the truth of the children's need for it. Children need an authentic encounter with Christ to experience the fullness of life that God intended for them.

Key Issues in Evangelism with Children

It is true however, that evangelism with children, (and especially interfaith evangelism), has very significant issues and implications. Clearly, just because child evangelism is legitimate and because children tend to be very receptive to the gospel, does not mean that we can be careless in how we approach them or their parents. Indeed, that heightened receptivity should cause us to be *even more cautious and discerning*, for the possibility of exploitation is also heightened.

Vulnerable people, and especially children, may be especially susceptible to physical (e.g. think Crusades) monetary inducements, psychological coercion (fire and brimstone preaching, intense, repeated or haranguing appeals), use of fear, or other such psychological or emotional pressures. No responsible Christian would insist on a faith decision under such circumstances, nor believe that any declaration under such duress would truly reflect the change of heart that brings a person to faith.

However, extreme cautiousness to avoid this possibility has led some Christian relief and development agencies to separate totally their humanitarian activities from whatever Christian witness in which they might engage. Indeed, some organizations with sound Christian credentials at their international level may not even be known to be Christian at the local level in non-Christian environments. They may accommodate or water down the Christian message out of sensitivity to their non-Christian hearers.

And this is the danger. Christian holistic child development should exclude neither careful attention to the physical *nor* spiritual needs of the children and families. How can Christians provide material love and care for children and not share the Good News, which can transform the lives of children both now and forever?

Honest and transparent evangelism and Christian training with children is important and appropriate. Evangelism and Christian training with children of non-Christian parents is neither exploitative nor unethical provided there is understanding and acceptance on the part of the parents. In ethical ministry to children, we must always be *particularly* sensitive to the proper time, place, manner, and approach for evangelism. Inattentiveness to the situation and circumstances may make overt evangelism *in that time, place, and manner* insensitive or even unethical.

However, there are circumstances that may make overt evangelism improper or even unethical. Here are a few principles, probably obvious and well understood, but which I

believe are valid and important for those ministering to children in sensitive, especially in non-Christian environments.

First, let us be clear about a starting point. **No child should be subjected to religious teaching and training without the knowledge and consent of the parents.** Any parent, from whatever faith, would seethe over attempts to influence their children to accept another faith without their knowledge or permission. All parents would share this protective impulse. In many sensitive inter-faith situations, even parental permission is not sufficient authorization to baptize a child. In order to ensure that the child has support and encouragement in his or her new faith, I believe that a child should not be baptized *until the parents are also ready to be baptized.*

Christian workers should never be secretive or deceitful about their motives or intentions. God is not divisive, deceitful, or secretive. And neither should we be, *especially* in any dealings with children. There is no place for hidden agendas, hidden identities, deception, or failure to speak the truth. Moreover, if children and parents are not ready to hear or respond to the Gospel for whatever reason, we can wait. God will reward our patience and sensitivity.

As noted above, **children should never be pressured for conversion through physical, psychological, monetary or other coercion.**

Extreme caution is necessary in situations where the children and/or their parents are completely dependent on the financial and/or material support of Christians. This may occur in orphanages, children's homes, day care centres, refugee camps, social aid projects, and communities heavily sustained by Christian development efforts. Children are so conscious of their powerlessness that they are likely to accept any conditions attached to the support they are provided with.

We should never seek the conversion of children with a patronizing attitude that distances us from the painful realities that the children are experiencing. The sensitive caregiver should relate empathetically to suffering children, who are extremely vulnerable and have no control over their circumstances. The approach must be one of identification and compassion.

We must never present the gospel to children in a way that undermines, despises, or denies the validity of their culture. A common historical problem in missions is that Christian conversion sometimes becomes synonymous with cultural conversion. God created cultures. Just as every culture has aspects that must be rejected or redeemed, so every culture has aspects that can be affirmed and celebrated. We must be aware of cultural factors, while at the same time not allowing them to undermine the power of the gospel.

It is improper and may be unethical to guide children to become Christians in instances where they do not have a proper understanding of what it entails. Especially in circumstances where a commitment to Christ may involve ostracism, rejection, persecution, or suffering, the consequences of a commitment to follow Christ must be clearly presented in a manner commensurate with understanding and maturity level of the child.

Finally, Professor Elmer Theissen provides some other 'criteria' for ethical evangelism which I believe are helpful.⁵ Some which apply particularly to children include:

Protect Dignity. Ethical evangelism is always done in such a way as to protect the dignity and worth of the person or persons being proselytized. Proselytizing becomes unethical when it reduces the proselytizee to the status of an object or a pawn in the proselytizing program of any religious organization.

Care for the whole person. Ethical evangelism is always an expression of concern for the whole person and all of his or her needs—physical, social, economic, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. To care only for the salvation of the souls of persons is unethical. It involves an objectification of a part of the person and, as such, violates that person's dignity.

Humility. Ethical evangelism is characterized by humility. Proselytizing becomes unethical when it becomes arrogant, condescending, and dogmatic in the claims being made.

⁵ Theissen. Op cit. 234 – 237.