

# Ethical Evangelisation (Principles)

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Thursday Consultation Session

## Introduction

Evangelism is often under attack, and would seem to be increasingly so today. Indeed, very often evangelism is associated with proselytising which is assumed to be unethical. Evangelism/proselytising is typically thought to be coercive, arrogant, intolerant, and meddlesome. Other critiques highlight the negative consequences of evangelism/proselytising - social disunity, hatred, and even holy wars. Missionaries are thought to be guilty of cultural genocide. Sadly, many Christians, including some evangelicals, share these negative perceptions about evangelism/proselytising. I argue that evangelism is not inherently unethical, and that generalizations about its negative consequences are much weaker than is typically assumed. Instead of wholesale condemnations of evangelism/proselytising, we need to put more emphasis on distinguishing between ethical and unethical evangelism and defining criteria to make this distinction.

I have three objectives for this consultation session. (a) I want to review the argument summarized in the previous paragraph, and as found in my recently published book, The Ethics of Evangelism (Paternoster & IVP Academic, 2011). (b) I then want to explore, more specifically, the ethics of the interface between evangelism and Christian aid/development. (c) I want to provide ample time for discussion, and some initial work on formulating a statement for the Micah Network, that provides some ethical guidelines for the interface between evangelism and Christian aid/development. See below, especially # D. For those interested, work on refining this statement will continue at a workshop later this afternoon.

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## A. Context of Christian Aid and Development

Christian aid and development organisations are frequently accused of exploiting people's vulnerability in order to entice them to change their religion, or of hiding their true intentions from the authorities. The Tearfund U.K. Proselytism Policy Statement has for quite some time served as a resource on this topic for Micah Network members. A number of factors are prompting an update on the Tearfund statement. There is a need to move beyond the problem of manipulative or coercive proselytism, which is the central focus of the Tearfund statement. Various members have also noted some ambiguities in the Micah Declaration concerning the relation between aid/development and evangelism. This paper seeks to provide some guidelines to Micah Network members for the ethics of evangelism within the context of aid and development.

## B. Definitions

There are a variety of definitions surrounding the central terms to be discussed in this paper. The meaning of 'evangelism' can vary from "evangelism is social action," to evangelism is "announcing the gospel to non-Christians with a view to faith and conversion and their eventual incorporation into the Church by baptism." The dictionary definition of 'proselytism' refers only to conversion from one opinion, creed or party to another. However, proselytism has come to be associated with "evangelistic malpractice," or the unjustified manipulation or use of coercive techniques or force to achieve conversion. In ecumenical circles 'proselytism' has also come to mean "sheep-stealing." Because of

the confusions surrounding the meaning of 'proselytism' this policy statement will from now on refer only to 'evangelism,' and the contrast between ethical and unethical evangelism. Evangelism will be understood in its narrower sense as giving verbal witness to the gospel with a view to conversion. The term 'proclamation' similarly can be used to refer both to verbal proclamation, and to living out the Lordship of Jesus Christ in everything that Christians do, including relief, rehabilitation, development, working for justice, and environmental care. This policy statement focuses on verbal proclamation and evangelism within the context of providing aid and relief.

### C. Integral Mission and Evangelism

There has been some discussion among Micah Network members as to the relation between evangelism (understood as preaching the good news) and social aid/development. The oft-quoted definition of 'integral mission' from the 2001 "Micah Network Declaration on Integral Mission" tries to integrate evangelism and social action. *"It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ."* But does this mean that Christian social action and verbal proclamation of the gospel, always occur "at the same time?" Some members of the Network have argued that this is a misinterpretation of integral mission, and have called for further nuancing of the declaration so as to avoid such misinterpretation. So there would seem to be some confusion with regard to the relation between evangelism and social action. Further, there are repeated demands by governments and government agencies that evangelism and social involvement be separated. In fact FBNGDOs have accommodated such a separation by calling on workers in the field to abstain from explicit evangelism.

Clearly, it is possible to separate aid/relief/development and verbal evangelism/proclamation, both at a *conceptual* and at a *practical* level. At the same time, each must be seen as a legitimate expression of the mission of God. Jesus called his disciples both to preach the good news *and* to heal the sick (Luke 9 & 10). Paul in his description of the "cosmic Christ" talks both about "reconciling" to himself "all things," *and* about reconciling individuals to Jesus Christ (Col. 1:19, 22). As followers of Jesus Christ, we are therefore bound to say that **in some sense**, the ideal is that Christians and the church are engaged in both aid/relief/development *and* verbal evangelism/proclamation. While each penetrates the other, yet in their core meaning, they can be separated, and thus there is a need to ensure that *overall* and *in the long run*, the church maintains a balance between these two aspects of Christian mission.

1. Sometimes circumstances are such that we as Christians will find ourselves preoccupied with social action. This should be seen as a perfectly legitimate expression of the mission of the church. We boldly engage in this somewhat one-sided approach to Christian mission because Christ calls the church to be involved in feeding the hungry, and overcoming poverty and exploitation. We also realize that even while we are engaged primarily in social action, our work cannot help but further the cause of evangelism, because the two can't be entirely separated. Recipients of our aid will realize (over time) that we are doing this for the sake of Christ. Indeed, when asked why we are engaged in the same we will be honest in explaining our motivation.

2. At the same time, we must allow for the possibility that we as Christians will sometimes find ourselves focusing primarily on evangelism or verbal proclamation, because this too is an expression of obedience to God and the imitation of Jesus Christ. Again we realize that even while we are engaged primarily in verbal proclamation of the gospel, we will still be calling people to love and repentance in all areas of life, and thus our verbal proclamation will have social consequences.

3. Christian aid workers therefore need to acknowledge the legitimacy of those Christians who are engaged primarily in evangelism/verbal proclamation of the gospel, and Christians committed to evangelism/verbal proclamation need to acknowledge the legitimacy of those Christians who are engaged primarily in aid and development. At the same time, both groups will recognize that it is impossible to entirely separate aid from evangelism. Hence, the notion of integral mission.

4. Christian aid organizations are not involved in giving relief to the needy so that they can evangelize but because it is their Christian calling to give relief to the needy. Where there is freedom to evangelize, our calling to help the needy is not affected. At the same time, where Christians are engaged in giving relief to the needy, our calling to engage in evangelism/verbal proclamation is not affected, though such engagement must be done in an ethical manner (see #D below), and must take into account government restrictions on explicit evangelism (see #F below).

#### **D. Some Guidelines for Ethical Evangelism and Aid/relief**

(Note: In the following, evangelism/proclamation and aid/development are treated as separable notions in accordance with their core meaning.)

Sadly, the history of the Christian church is littered with evangelistic malpractice, including the use of coercive techniques or force to achieve conversion. We believe such malpractice is inconsistent with New Testament teaching on conversion. Jesus decisively rejected the use of all types of coercion in establishing his kingdom when he was tempted at the beginning of his public ministry (Matt. 4:1-11). He instructed his disciples to respect the freedom of individuals to reject the gospel message they preached (Luke 9:5). Paul too advocated sincerity of motive and truthfulness when spreading the good news (II Cor. 2:17; 4:1-2). Ethical concerns can also surface with regard to the giving of aid and relief. So the following questions are being addressed in what follows: What are the principles governing ethical evangelism and aid? How does ethical evangelism work itself out in the context of Christian aid and development?

##### **1. The Principle of Dignity of Persons:**

a. Ethical evangelism or aid is always done in such a way as to protect the dignity and worth of the recipients. Evangelism or aid becomes unethical when it reduces the recipients to the status of an object or a pawn in the evangelism or aid program of any church or church organization.

b. Ethical evangelism and aid will also take into account and show respect for the communal identity of the recipients. Evangelism or aid which completely disregards the dignity of the individual as rooted in his or her social attachments is unethical and contrary to the Christian call to love the stranger.

##### **2. The Principle of Care for the Whole Person and the Whole of Creation:**

Ethical evangelism should always be an expression of care for the whole person (physical, social, economic, political, intellectual, emotional and spiritual).

a. To care only for the soul undermines the totality of the Gospel and does not demonstrate God's love for people, their dignity and well-being, nor His care of creation.

b. To care only for the provision of aid again fails to care for the whole person, and reinforces the world's belief that it can be self-sufficient and solve its own problems (rebellion against God).

##### **3. The Principle of Protecting the Freedom and Dignity of Persons:**

The freedom to make choices is central to the dignity of persons created in God's image.

Ethical evangelism will therefore allow persons to make a genuinely free and uncoerced choice with

regard to conversion. While recognizing the vagueness inherent in the notion of coercion, the following are some guidelines to ensuring that the freedom and dignity of persons is respected when doing evangelism or giving aid.

- a. Evangelism involving the use of physical force or threats is unethical.
- b. Ethical evangelism avoids psychological manipulation. There are various ways in which evangelism can be psychologically manipulative.
  - (i) Christians engaged in evangelism should avoid intense, repeated and extremely programmatic approaches to bringing about conversions.
  - (ii) Care must be taken to avoid exploiting vulnerability. This becomes especially important when dealing with children, vulnerable individuals or groups, and individuals or groups facing any kind of crisis. Conversions gained by exploiting vulnerability are often superficial and bring no credit to the converts or to the Christian faith in general.
  - (iii) Evangelism involves persuasion to convert. Excessive appeals to emotion and fear in order to persuade must be avoided. Ethical persuasion must include the providing of information in order to make a decision to convert. It also includes giving reasons for the proposed change of heart and mind. Evangelism that attempts to sidestep human reason entirely is unethical.
- c. In evangelism and the giving of aid, we need to acknowledge that some degree of power and control is inescapable. Every effort must be made not to exploit power-imbalances when evangelising or giving aid. Humility should characterize the evangelist or aid giver. Ways should be found to equalize power-imbalances, e.g. working through local agencies or the church.
- d. Evangelism should not be combined with material enticement such as money, gifts, or privileges. In situations where providing medical care, humanitarian aid, or education is in some way linked with evangelism, the greater the need, the more sensitive the evangelist must be to the danger of exploiting that need, and thus inducing to convert. In situations where physical needs are overwhelming, evangelism should be postponed and kept entirely separate from the activity of responding to these physical needs.
- e. A further requirement is a high standard of transparency. When evangelism and aid are combined, recipients must be given a clear sense that it is perfectly acceptable for them to accept aid and yet refuse any persuasive appeals to convert

#### **4. The Principle of Integrity and Truthfulness:**

Integrity and truthfulness should characterize ethical evangelism and aid.

- a. Ethical evangelism is careful always to speak the truth about the Christian gospel and the history of the Christian church. It is truthful also with regard to what it says about other religions.
- b. Integrity and authenticity characterize the ethical evangelist and aid worker.
- c. Evangelism accompanied by hidden agendas, hidden identities, lying, deception, and failure to speak the truth should be condemned as unethical.
- d. Christian aid organizations need to be transparent about their Christian identity when communicating with government authorities or when engaged in fundraising.
- e. Where there are government restrictions on evangelism, Christian aid workers will be honest about the inevitability of implicit evangelism. (see also #F)
- f. See also #3e.

#### **5. The Principle of Humility:**

Ethical evangelism and aid are characterized by humility. Evangelism or aid becomes unethical when it becomes arrogant, condescending, and dogmatic in the claims being made. (see also #3c)

## **6. The Principle of Tolerance:**

a. Ethical evangelism or aid treats persons holding beliefs differing from that of the evangelist or aid giver with love and respect. While it does not preclude fair criticism of other religious or irreligious beliefs, it treats the same with respect, and avoids hostile attitudes or the use of insulting and abusive language against other religions and worldviews.

b. Ethical evangelism or aid is sensitive to the culture of the recipients. It values the uniqueness of each culture, and attempts to retain what is good or neutral within each culture, while at the same time seeking to convey the transformative message that is part of any attempt at evangelism or aid. To impose a particular cultural expression of Christianity on another culture is unethical.

## **7. The Principle of Motivation:**

The primary motivation for ethical evangelism and aid is faithfulness to Jesus Christ, love for and obedience to God, and love for humanity. Ethical evangelism and aid is other-centred. It grows out of genuine concern for the other person's well-being.

a. It is incumbent on evangelists and aid workers to examine their motives, and to ensure that their work is not done out of ego-centric motives such as personal benefit and reward, personal domination over another person, and personal satisfaction about growth of their own church.

b. Ethical evangelism and aid is also not pre-occupied with results, success, numbers of converts, or church growth. These should be seen as a by-product of ethical evangelism and aid, not a motivating force.

## **8. Golden Rule:**

Ethical evangelism or aid operates under the assumption that other religious groups have the right to evangelize and offer aid as well. It is unethical to assume or to work towards a monopoly of evangelism or the giving of aid.

## **E. International Codes:**

1. We affirm, with one qualification, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGO's in Disaster Relief, which says that "aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint" (Section #3). The qualification is this – the giving of aid cannot help but make the recipient sympathetic to the religious or political standpoint of the aid-giver. The real issue therefore is one of exploiting aid in order to bring about political or religious conversion. The additional sentences of the relevant part of the Code of Conduct being referred to spells this out: "Humanitarian aid will be given according to the need of individuals, families and communities. Notwithstanding the right of Non Governmental Humanitarian Agencies to espouse particular political or religious opinions, we affirm that assistance will not be dependent on the adherence of the recipients to those opinions. We will not tie the promise, delivery or distribution of assistance to embracing or acceptance of a particular political or religious creed." The Micah Network heartily endorses this added commentary.

2. We endorse Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which states that, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his(her) choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his(her) religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."

## **F. Government Restrictions regarding Evangelism:**

We do not believe that it is possible to dissociate what we are as Christians from what we do.

1. In seeking official entry to serve the needy in countries that restrict Christian activity we will be very open about our Christian identity and motivation.

2. While seeking transparency in our official relationship with any government we appreciate that it is often difficult for local organizations to operate in the same way.

3. We are prepared to accept the restrictions placed upon us by certain governments that hinder us from taking the initiative in sharing our faith with those we serve.

4. However, we believe that governments have no authority to stop us from truthfully explaining our faith when we are asked to do so. If someone asks why we are serving, then we claim the right to say that it is out of obedience to Jesus Christ and in response to his love. Religious traditions other than Christianity value truthfulness and honesty and, therefore, we can expect these virtues to be respected even in Christians.

5. If the government regulations of a country are such that they do not allow us to explain our faith when we are asked to do so, then we will not engage in aid in this country.

6. We believe that it is unreasonable of governments to expect us not to behave as Christians when serving the poor in their country. Praying and reading the Bible privately and with other Christians are activities that are fundamental to our lives as Christians. Therefore, we should be allowed to have Bibles and a reasonable amount of other Christian literature. We should also be free to associate with other Christian workers, as is appropriate for the purpose of fellowship and worship.

7. Where there is a Christian community, however small, we believe that it is reasonable that Christian aid workers from outside that community should be allowed to associate with them. However, we recognize the crucial importance of being sensitive to the position of a local church and of doing everything possible to avoid doing anything that will make their position more difficult than it is.

## **G. Conclusion**

Believing that God the Father has called us to evangelize and serve the poor and needy in the name of Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are prepared to go anywhere to fulfill our calling. We do not hide the fact that we go as servants of Jesus Christ. However, we recognize that we all inevitably carry with us the burden of those aspects of our own culture that are profoundly godless. Our prayer is that as we serve we will be able to see and reject what is bad in our culture and that those we serve will be able to distinguish between the cultural godlessness of our own culture and the Christian values that inform and shape our lives and practice.