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Proselytism or Evangelism?

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Those who seek to convert others are 'arrogant, ignorant, hypocritical, meddlesome'.¹ For many religious leaders any efforts of evangelism are nothing more than proselytism. Proselytism is for most religious leaders a derogatory term, depicting the image of coercion, force, abandonment, threats, manipulation, and cults. It is an act that is abhorred and detested by all religious bodies, both non-Christian and Christian—Catholic, Eastern or Greek Orthodox, Mainline or Evangelical Protestant. But is proselytism distinguishable from evangelism? Are there distinctive differences?

The focus in this work concerns

proselytism within Christianity. An attempt will be made to answer the above question by providing a biblical and historical overview of proselytism, the distinction between proselytism and evangelism, and the reason for true evangelism. In essence, proselytism is prohibitory but evangelism is to be pursued.

Proselytism is problematic

Concern for proselytism is on the agenda of many Christian religious bodies. At one time the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches in its publication *A Monthly Letter on Evangelism* invited its readers to send in comments, opinions, and remarks regarding this subject. It was overwhelmed by the response from Orthodox, Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist bodies as well as other

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1 Jay Newman, *Foundations of Religious Tolerance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), p. 89.

groups.² The same debate, discussion, frustrations, and hostilities continues today with little relief.

The charges of sheep-stealing arise. Within the World Council of Churches, proselytism is recognized 'as a scandal and counterwitness'.³ Accusers testify that these intruders are insensitive regarding theological and cultural issues. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and charismatic groups are especially accused of proselytism. Any religious group that even attempts to talk, discuss, and share their religious ideas, even the gospel, is often labelled a sect because of its so-called attempt to proselytise. As if the term 'sect' is not enough, some Christian groups have been likened to vicious wolves or crocodiles because of their attempts at contact with other Christian groups. In a private survey taken in Belgium among the general Catholic population regarding evangelical Protestantism, one Belgian responded: 'That's the religion where the people always visit you,' which, for this individual indicated some impure motive on the part of the visitor. Not only do churches fear that certain groups, especially evangelicals and Pentecostals, fish in their water but that they are taking the fish out of their own basket as well.

2 Originally published by the World Council of Churches, *A Monthly Letter on Evangelism*, 10-11 (March, 1988) to 12 (January, 1989). The publication by Raymond Fung, *Evangelistically Yours* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), pp. 188-223 contains many of these responses and commentaries.

3 'Towards Common Witness: A call to adopt responsible relationships in mission and to renounce proselytism,' *International Review of Missions*. LXXXVI (October 1997), p. 463.

Why these accusations and concerns? The reasons are varied. A primary concern by the World Council of Churches is that it is a destructive force in the ecumenical movement. For them, 'It does not build up but destroys. It brings about tensions, scandal and division, and is thus a destabilizing factor for the witness of the church of Christ in the world.'⁴ Yet, the core of the problem very much focuses on the theological and historical tenants of several of the Christian churches.

For historical reasons, certain Christian denominations, often the traditional and mainline churches, consider themselves as keepers of the basket of faith. Rightly so, they feel that they have an obligation to guard and protect their people from the enemy. These churches 'are like mothers who embrace all children born to them—that is, all those who were baptized'.⁵ Those practising certain religious rituals such as baptism are, without question, considered to be authentic Christians. The authenticity of the baptized is not to be questioned even though they may be considered to be nominal in their faith and have little or often nothing to do with the church.

In some countries where nominal Christianity appears to be the norm rather than the exception many of these baptized are even hostile towards 'the mother' and have little idea of the true gospel. Yet, they are

4 'Towards Common Witness', p. 468.

5 Miroslav Volf, 'Fishing in the Neighbor's Pond: Mission and Proselytism in Eastern Europe', *Missionary Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20 (January 1996), p. 27.

considered to be authentic in their commitment to Jesus Christ by their particular church denomination because of their religious upbringing and practice of particular religious rituals. However, some, in their own words admit to lacking any true relationship with Jesus Christ. In any case, the mother church desires that they not be approached by other Christian denominations or groups. Cecil Robeck clearly states the problem: 'one group's evangelization is still another group's proselytism'.⁶

Biblical and historical overview of proselytism

Initially, proselytism was an internal affair. In other words, proselytism occurred within the confines of Palestine. Yet, in time, proselytism outstretched its borders as well-meaning Jews would traverse the sea and land to make proselytes. Proselytism appears differently prior to and after the exile.

Pre-exilic proselytism

The concept of proselytism originates in the Old Testament and is tied to the Hebrew word, *ger*, meaning a foreigner or sojourner. In Ezekiel 14:7, the New American Standard Bible translates this word as 'immigrant'. Such immigrants would 'attach themselves to the house of Jacob' (Is. 14:1). This word '*ger*' is translated in the LXX as 'proselyte'.

In the book of Genesis the notion

of proselytism appears (Gen. 15:13; 23:4). Early on, the Lord God declared to Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved 'strangers' or proselytes in the foreign land of Egypt (Gen. 15:13). In fact, due to the Israelites' own personal experience as strangers, they were able to empathize with foreigners in their own land (Ex. 23:9). Here, the term applied initially to both Israelites and non-Israelites. In his intensive study of the proselyte Richard DeRidder Based explains: 'The rabbis taught that Abraham was the first proselyte, and that he made converts and brought them under the wings of the Shekinah',⁷ and that the 'persons whom Abraham and Sarah had gotten in Haran (Gen. 12:5) were said to be people whom they had converted from idolatry'.⁸

Biblically, Israel had specific obligations towards the *ger*. First, God had warned it several times to 'not wrong' or 'oppress' them (Ex. 22:21; Deut. 24:14; Jer. 7:6; 22:3; Zech. 7:10) nor to turn them aside (Mal. 3:5). Unfortunately, the rulers of Israel violated this at certain times (Ezek. 22:7, 29). On the contrary, they were to treat them according to Leviticus 19:34: (T)he 'stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself ' They were to provide for the proselytes by permitting them to glean from the fruits of their fields (Lev. 19:10), by giving them food and clothing (Deut.

6 Cecil Robeck, 'Mission and the Issue of Proselytism,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 20 (January 1996), p. 2.

7 Richard R. DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations* (n.p.: J.H. Kok Co., 1971; reprint: Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 26.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

10:18-19), and even part of their tithes (Deut. 26:12). Concerning worship, they were not to be hindered if they worshipped the true God of Israel (Num. 15:14). The *ger* were considered to be among the needy strata of society along with orphans and widows (Deut. 14:29).

Not only were there obligations on the part of Israel towards the proselyte, but stipulations were made for these converts as well. Regarding worship, they were obligated just as were the Israelites. For instance, they were to observe the Feast of the Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:19), the Feast of Weeks (Deut. 16: 10-11), the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14), and the day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-30). They were to stay clear of false worship by not offering sacrifices to pagan gods (Lev. 20:2) and were warned against blasphemy against Yahweh (Lev. 24:16; Num. 15:30). Because they had attached themselves to the house of Jacob (Is. 14:1), they were to fulfill their spiritual obligations to the Lord just as were the Jewish faithful.

The *ger* had many of the same rights as the native Israelites, including access to the cities of refuge (Num. 35:15) and to a just trial (Deut. 1:16; 24:17; 27:19). Most importantly, they were permitted to learn from and fear the Lord (Deut. 31:12) and to enter into the covenant with him just as were the naturally born Israelites (Deut. 29:11-12).

Beyond the period of the patriarchs and the exodus, the *ger* are seen participating in the worship of the true Lord with the nation of Israel

(Jos. 8:33-35; 2 Chr. 30:25). In referring to the building of the Temple, it is implied that foreigners were also engaged in its construction (1 Chr. 22:2).

In general, the expression *ger* in the Old Testament identifies those who did not actually have Jewish blood. They were outsiders who had come on their own initiative into the confines of Judaism and who had aligned themselves with Israel and its faith in the true living God. In other words, there was a type of internal proselytism taking place as outsiders were coming into the midst of Israel.

The expression 'proselyte' had both religious and sociological connotations. It was a term used to describe the assimilation of the foreigner into the Semitic community, that is, to identify a resident alien within the boundaries of Israel (Ex. 12:49; Deut. 5:14; 31:12). But because the foreigner had to worship the God of Israel, it is impossible to separate the political and cultural spheres from the religious.

Israelites were to be the people of God. In Exodus 19:15-16, God confirms to the nation the nature of the life he would have Israel live in these words: 'And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' This expression calls attention to the universal priestly status of Israel and refers to Israel, as being set apart for God's possession and service. 'It is here that Israel's missionary role became explicit . . . The whole nation was to function on behalf of the kingdom of God in a mediatorial

role in relation to the nations.⁹ Israel was to play a priestly role in the midst of the peoples of the world. Israel would become the recipient of God's mercy and justice, and in turn, would attempt to live as the people of God, demonstrating his grace, mercy, justice, and liberating power. 'As the priest is a mediator between God and man, so Israel was called to be the vehicle of the knowledge and salvation of God to the nations of the earth.'¹⁰ Thus, the reality of being 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' would also have its effect on the proselytes, those living within the nation of Israel.

At Sinai the Lord God had laid down basic legislation regarding the proselyte, which indeed related to the fulfilment of mission to the world. DeRidder states that 'when the *ger* assumed all the group obligations—ethnic, social, and religious—the proselyte became a full-fledged member of the congregation of Israel and the descendants were legally indistinguishable from other Israelites. In Joshua 8:33 the *ger* is described as being 'part of Israel'.¹¹

Some would say that the translation 'stranger' for the Hebrew *ger* is an unfortunate one because the proselyte 'was a guest, a resident alien, under the protection of the law

of the land'.¹² When foreigners fully accepted the true faith of Israel, they became in essence Israelites and had the same privileges, rights, and commitments as native Israelites. The proselyte was considered to be of the true faith, participating in the covenant promises of the Lord. The non-Israelites could share in salvation through obedience of faith in God just as the Israelites did. Becoming a proselyte was an act of conversion.

Although the term 'proselyte' does not occur in reference to the Moabite Ruth, it is evident that the notion of conversion occurs. Ruth returns to Judah with her mother-in-law Naomi and meets Boaz. Taking an interest in her work in the fields and her plight, he said to her: 'May the Lord reward your work, and your wages be full from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge' (Ruth 2:12). The latter part of the phrase is most likely a reference to Ruth when she committed herself to Yahweh, abandoning Chemosh, the god of the Moabites. She sought protection and comfort from God.¹³ Not only was she looking to the Lord as her protector but in seeking refuge she was identifying herself with Israel. In essence, she was converting to Judaism.

According to 2 Kgs. 5:15-19 Naaman, a foreigner, was a Syrian convert to the worship of Israel's true

9 Walter G. Kaiser, 'Israel's Missionary Call', in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library and Carlisle, United Kingdom: Paternoster, 1999, 3rd edition), p. 13.

10 Keil, C. F. and F. Delitzsch, 'The Pentateuch', in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 98.

11 DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, p. 44.

12 DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, p. 46.

13 Daniel I. Block, 'Judges, Ruth', in *The New American Commentary*, E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 6, (Nashville: TN: Broadman and Holman, 1999), p. 664.

God. The term *ger* is used also to express the pilgrimage of the faithful in 1 Chronicles 29:15 and Psalms 39:12; 119:19. These proselytes were not gathered by any missionary zeal on the part of Israel. Rather, they, themselves, approached Israel and were seeking the one true God.

Earlier in the history of Israel, thousands of foreigners came to Israel on their own initiative. Prior to the exile, great numbers of aliens joined their ranks. Later on, according to the census of Solomon, foreigners in Israel's midst numbered 153,600 (2 Chr. 2:17). The *ger* was looked upon as more or less a permanent resident of Israel and basically accepted in the society.

Examination of the lives of the prophets leads one to conclude that they did not go forth and make proselytes. The message of the prophet varied. Sometimes it was disciplinary in nature; at other times it concerned the future. In reality, 'the central concern of the prophets was to communicate to Israel what it meant to be Israel'.¹⁴ It was the ministry of the prophet to remind the nation of her election, an election that has a testimony among the other nations, for her choosing was not for personal privilege but for service.

When the nation did not heed her responsibilities the Lord God would raise up his prophetic messenger. The prophets attempted to call the nation back to her covenant, back to being a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. Why? Their ministry

was a witness to and emphasized the fact that Israel's mission in the world was to bring the nations to the knowledge of the true God. The prophets, for the most part, directed their ministries to the nation of Israel itself. However, a few of the primarily pre-exilic prophets, Obadiah, Jonah, and Nahum, headed toward the non-Israelite nations to proclaim God's message. But on the whole the prophet focused on the nation of Israel.

Israel was not, for the most part, called to cross national boundaries to make proselytes, but she was to be a blessing to the world of nations. Dr. George Peters states Israel's responsibility in the following manner: 'Israel, by living a life in the presence and fear of the Lord, was to experience the fullness of the blessings of God. In this way they were to startle the nations to attention, arouse their inquiry, and draw them like a magnet to Jerusalem and to the Lord.'¹⁵ Foreigners would come to Israel and conversion to the faith of Israel would occur, resulting in proselytes.

Proselytism was a natural consequence of Israel's being a light to the nations. The *ger* referred to the individual who would come voluntarily to Israel, adopt its religion, and become Yahweh's worshiper. They were in essence converts to Judaism, having joined themselves to the Lord God from other nations. To be completely incorporated into religious union with God's people and become a proselyte, they had to be circum-

14 W. Bruggemann, *Tradition for Crisis* (Richmond: John Knox, 1968), p. 25.

15 George Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 21.

cised. DeRidder comments: 'A careful reading of the Old Testament legislation concerning circumcision leads to the conclusion that this rite was intended to mean the incorporation of the person into a special relationship to God.'¹⁶ In essence this indicated entrance into the redemptive covenant of God. So, in a real sense, a religious meaning was attached to the Old Testament term 'proselyte.'

The fact that foreigners came into the fold of Israel is interesting because, with the major exception of a few minor prophets, Jonah being one, we do not find the mission of crossing geographical and cultural barriers to take the message of Yahweh to those who know nothing about the Lord God. However, the Old Testament does not ignore this issue. The concept of reaching out to other nations is inherent in its revelation for the concept of universality in reference to salvation pervades the entire Old Testament. God the Father manifests his missionary nature in the Old Testament.

Dr. George Peters very clearly states: 'The Old Testament does not contain missions; it is itself "missions" in the world. Like a lonely voice in the wilderness the Old Testament boldly proclaims revelational, ethical, monotheism in protest to Greek, Egyptian, and early Indian heathenism—the multitudinous systems of surrounding polytheism and incipient philosophical Eastern monism.'¹⁷ Johannes Blauw also

declares that 'long before the missionary movement as an act of witness of the Christian Church started, Israel itself was engaged in missionary work'.¹⁸

Post-exilic proselytism

The true sense of the word 'proselyte' took on the notion of convert later on, especially during the Babylonian exile. It was with the Exile that the attitude and outlook of Israel undertook a drastic change. Judaism began to take on a more centripetal sense, an aggressive missionary spirit during the post-exilic period.

With the deportations, Jews could be found scattered throughout the Persian empire. After the sixth century B.C. most of the Israelites lived outside of Palestine. Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt became homes to many of the Jews. As time passed, it has been estimated that one-third of the population of Alexandria was Jewish. All commercial centres in Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, or the Aegean area had Jewish residents.¹⁹ J. Klausner maintains that the major portion of the three million Jews living in the Diaspora were proselytes.²⁰ Wherever the Jews went they took with them their monotheistic faith. It was during this postexilic time that many non-Israelites were drawn to the Jewish

18 Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 54.

19 C. L. Feinberg, 'Proselyte', in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, vol. 4, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), p. 906.

20 Cited by Frederick W. Danker, 'Proselyte, Proselytism', in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1975), p. 426.

16 DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, p. 29.

17 Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, p. 129.

faith and assimilated into it. In other words, proselytism was taking place outside of Israel's geographical borders—an external proselytism was prominent.

It was really during the Inter-Testamental period that the term 'proselyte' took on a new meaning. An intensive missionary movement began in the Hellenistic Jewish Diaspora. In time proselytism became quite common. Many Jews aggressively propagated Judaism. The use of the Greek language in the LXX made it easier to proselytize the Greeks.

The desire to proselytize did not stop with the Greeks, but continued well into the Roman world. Before the birth of Christ, many of the Jews settled in Rome and were so intense in their zeal to proselytize that the Roman authorities expelled many of their leaders. Some showed their discontent with this proselytizing spirit. Horace wrote: 'If you won't come willingly, we shall act like the Jews and force you to.'²¹ Exposing some of the cruel side of proselytism, the Jewish historian, Josephus, maintains that Ituraeans were forced to convert to Judaism by Aristobulus²² and that a Roman centurion was forced to accept circumcision in order to live.²³ Prior to Christianity, Judaism had made abundant prose-

lytes. In almost every corner of the biblical world Jewish customs and moral virtues were adhered to by its followers, namely, Jewish proselytes. In summary, the activity of direct proselytism at this time is well attested. Some have summarized it in the following manner:

With the conquests of Alexander, the wars between Egypt and Syria, the struggle under the Maccabees, the expansion of the Roman empire, the Jews became more widely known, and their power to proselytize increased. They had suffered for their religion in the persecution of Antiochus, and the spirit of martyrdom was followed naturally by propagandism. Their monotheism was rigid and unbending. Scattered through the East and West, a marvel and a portent, wondered at and alternatively, attracting and repelling, they presented, in an age of shattered creeds and corroding doubts, the spectacle of faith, not least a dogma, which remained unshaken.²⁴

In the New Testament era, there is considerable evidence that the activity of proselytism was carried out among the Gentiles in the early part of the first century. For instance, the Jews prepared extensive literature to win over converts to Judaism.

The Greek New Testament uses the word for proselyte, *proselutos*, only four times (Mt. 23:15; Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). In three of the four occurrences it maintains a neutral or positive connotation.

In the Judaism of Palestine, the *ger* always referred to the pagan who made the conversion from paganism to Judaism. Male proselyte candidates were required to undergo circumcision, a purifying bath, and an offering of sacrifice in the Temple at

²¹ Quoted by DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, p. 94.

²² Flavius Josephus, *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans., William Whiston (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., n.d.), article XIII, pp. 9,3.

²³ Cited by John McIntock and James Strong, eds., 'Proselyte', *Cyclopedia Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1981), p. 659.

²⁴ McIntock and Strong, 'Proselyte,' p. 658.

Jerusalem. Female proselyte candidates submitted to the latter two requirements. Woman proselytes outnumbered men converts.²⁵

Referring to the one negative occurrence in Matthew 23, Jesus makes reference to Palestinian proselytism. He condemns the teachers of the law and the Pharisees by pronouncing seven curses or woes on them (vv. 13-33). The second woe concerns the subject of proselytism. The scribes and Pharisees were winning non-Israelites to their own position. The New Testament scholar D. A. Carson believes that the 'converts in view . . . are not converts to Judaism but to Pharisaism'.²⁶ In any case, they were scouring the empire to make converts. It is interesting to see that Jesus did not criticize nor condemn them for making proselytes but for making them 'sons of hell'. Carson adds that 'the Pharisees' teaching locked them into a theological frame that left no room for Jesus the Messiah and therefore no possibility of entering the messianic kingdom'.²⁷ Jesus did condemn the fact that their proselytizing efforts were leading people to eternal damnation. The word 'proselyte', and this is important, is never employed in reference to a convert to Christ.

Having dealt with the negative use in Matthew, let us look at its employment in the book of Acts as it reveals

some additional information regarding the proselyte. Acts 2:10 shows that proselytes who had come from geographical boundaries beyond Jerusalem made up part of the apostle Peter's audience at Pentecost. In using the expression 'Jews and proselytes' Luke is distinguishing between the national group of Jews and non-birth Jews. He called for them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Because they continued to go to the Temple and synagogue after their conversion (2:46; 3:1; 14:1; 21:26), Heideman, says that 'there is no indication that they are expected to change their community identity'.²⁸ However, this is understandable because the need for the true church to distinguish itself from Judaism had not yet arisen.

Acts 6:5 speaks of 'Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch'. He was not born a Jew but a pagan. He was appointed as one of the original deacons in the early church. Philip baptized an Ethiopian proselyte or God-fearer who was travelling to Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8:27-39). Many of the proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, committing their lives to the gospel (Acts 13:43). These devout Jewish converts left Judaism to follow the ways of Jesus Christ.

The term 'proselyte' does not occur in the writings of Paul. However, he does desire that his own Jewish brethren experience true salvation through the Messiah, Jesus

25 F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 147, 156.

26 D. A. Carson, 'Matthew', in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 478.

27 Carson, 'Matthew', p. 479.

28 Eugene P. Heideman, 'Proselytism, Mission, and the Bible,' *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 20 (January 1996) p. 11.

Christ. He states, 'My heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation' (Rom. 10:1). Although proselytism does not occur in the ministry of Paul, converts to Christ do occur. Multitudes of Jews converted to Christ during Paul's ministry.

In the New Testament, the term 'proselytism' never occurs in reference to Christianity. Neither Paul nor the other apostles viewed their ministry of evangelism and church planting as proselytism. Their activity in proclaiming the gospel was never done in order to build their own kingdom. They had no desire to enlarge their borders nor increase their numbers for their own sake. Paul says that his ministry did not come 'from error or impurity or by way of deceit' (I Thess. 2:3). Paul did want to proclaim the gospel and see the kingdom of God advance. His motive was to give to all the world the great redemptive truths of the gospel which is rooted in Jesus Christ. This was his passion and his plea, that East and West would be evangelized, not proselytized.

So the new followers of Christ *were not considered to be proselytized but evangelized*, even though they actually changed religious commitment from Judaism to Christ. Many of these individuals were actually Jewish proselytes who became followers of Christ. So, religious change was quite common in the New Testament era, from paganism to Judaism, and to Christianity.

In addition, the issue of people changing from one branch of Christianity to another was non-existent.

The call to conversion in the New Testament is, of course, a call to follow Jesus Christ. Some individuals would, therefore, say that it is not a call to change one's Christian community. However, it is also evident that other Christian communities did not exist at that period of time.

In Judaism, the proselytism of Gentiles continued late into the first century A.D. Some Jewish Christians still attended the Synagogues until as late as 80-90 A.D. when it became unbearable for them to do so. Jewish anti-Christian propaganda attempted to exclude Christian participation in worship at the synagogue.²⁹

Proselytism was looked upon positively by Judaism. Rabbis were often zealous for converts. The very large number of favourable references in the Talmud and Mishnah towards the true proselytes shows how eager the Jews were to acquire them.³⁰ In fact, some 'rabbis were provoked when they saw a country or province that had produced few proselytes.'³¹ It may be concluded that many rabbis approved of proselytizing and encouraged it. They even used the patriarchs and other great historical figures as examples to follow in their making of proselytes.³²

Some contend that the proselytizing efforts by the Jews continued

29 DeRidder, *Disciplining the Nations*, 73, citing the work of James W. Parks, *The Conflict of the Church and Synagogue* (London: The Socion Press, 1961 and Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 61-79.

30 DeRidder, *Disciplining the Nations*, p. 93.

31 William G. Braude, *Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries in the Common Era* (Providence: Brown University, 1940), pp. 18-19.

32 DeRidder, *Disciplining the Nations*, p. 101.

even after 478 A.D. when the Theodosian Code was published, which threatened those who were circumcised with the death penalty.³³ Eventually Roman laws were created to abort the proselytizing efforts of Jews towards Gentiles. Some Jews were even exiled from Rome for proselytizing activities.³⁴

Distinguishing proselytism from evangelism

Some would say that proselytism basically means the changing from one religion to another, like moving from Buddhism to Christianity. More related to this paper, the concern is for change of church affiliation, from one major Christian denomination to another, such as the change from Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism to a protestant denomination. Some church leaders even within Protestantism feel that 'proselytism' occurs when an individual moves from one Protestant denomination to another or even from one church to another within the same denomination. However, the major problem today regarding 'proselytes' concerns moving from one major religion to another or from one major Christian religion to another Christian religion.

Within Christian circles the label 'proselytism' generally arises when one group does not approve of the

mission activities of another, especially when this group is losing members or the potential exists for this to occur. What theologically conservative and evangelical movements consider to be legitimate evangelism, the traditional and established churches may consider proselytism. Some religious groups define proselytism in such a way that practically any legitimate religious activity assumed by another religious group is called proselytism, especially if this group 'puts their hands into the basket of another'.

Christian perspectives on proselytism

How do Christian groups and denominations view proselytism? A few examples will suffice in order to gain an understanding of feelings and attitudes towards those who proselytize.

- The World Council of Churches feels that proselytism is encouraging Christians who belong to one church to change to another denomination through means that are in opposition to Christian love, which are in violation of freedom and dignity, and which decrease trust in the Christian witness of the church.³⁵
- The Middle East Council of Churches which is made up of Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant say that proselytism occurs when an attempt is made to attract church members from a particular church, which alienates the individual from his or her church of origin.³⁶ The General Secretary of the Holy Synod,

33 Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel, Etude sur les relations entre Chrétiens et juifs dans l'empire romain (135-425 A.D.)*, (Paris: E. De Boccard, 1948), pp. 315-355; Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM press, 1967), pp. 11-12.

34 DeRidder, *Disciplining the Nations*, p. 120.

35 World Council of Churches, 'Towards Common Witness', p. 468.

36 'Proselytism, Sects, and Pastoral Challenges: A Study Document', Fifth General Assembly, July 1989. See paragraphs 6-11.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church, in a letter to the World Council of Churches complained of proselytism going on against his church. He made the accusation that there had been infiltration into his organization, especially through the Sunday School, that the proselyters had attempted to blur the distinction between the Orthodox Church and other Christian groups and that they had attempted to buy converts, giving material inducements through food assistance programs.³⁷

- Vatican II speaks of proselytism when it states, 'The Church strictly forbids that anyone should be forced to accept the faith, or be induced or enticed by unworthy devices; as it likewise strongly defends the right that no one should be frightened away from the faith by unjust persecution.'³⁸
- Evangelical and Roman Catholics together identified proselytism during their dialogue between 1977 and 1984 by stating that it occurs when the motive of the witness and the methods are unworthy as well as when there is an unloving image presented of the other's church community.³⁹

It is clear that proselytism is understood negatively by the above Christian groups and is condemned by almost everybody. To put it in simple terms, proselytism is sheep-stealing in which unethical methods are used to attempt to encourage religious people to change their Christian affiliation and possibly their religious convictions. Proselytism might be

labelled 'evangelistic malpractice.'⁴⁰ However, are proselytism and evangelism to be considered synonyms? Is proselytism the same as evangelism? Is there a distinction between the two?

The Distinction

Although the line of demarcation between the two may not be evident to some church leaders, there is a clear distinction between them. The table opposite attempts to distinguish between the two.

To explain briefly, the proselytizer boldly presents his religious institution or organization, whereas the evangelist faithfully presents the gospel as defined by the Word of God. Those who carry out activities of proselytism carry the message of the institutional church, and not necessarily of the gospel. Although the church is essential and is the body of Christ, it is not the gospel message. Faith is not to be placed in the church but in Christ. The proselytizer desires to build his own kingdom rather than the kingdom of God. It is his desire to expand the religious institution, rather than proclaim the message of the death and resurrection of Christ. He, himself is the builder of his church, whereas the true builder of the church is Jesus Christ. It is he who said to Peter, 'I will build my church' (Matt. 16:18) The church belongs to Christ, not to man. It is 'his' church not ours.

37 Fung, *Evangelistically Yours*, pp. 189-193.

38 Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II*, 'Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes Divinitis*', (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), chapter 2, section 13, p. 828.

39 'L'Eglise dans le Monde: Dialogue entre catholiques et évangélique sur la mission', *La Documentation Catholique*, 1932 (18 January 1987), p. 119. See also *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies*, 12 (1990), pp. 77-141.

40 This is a term employed by Natan Lerner, 'Proselytism, Change of Religion, and International Human Rights,' *Emory International Law Review* 12 (Winter 1998) p. 495.

DESCRIPTION	PROSELYTISM	EVANGELISM
Its authority	none	Scripture
Its message	the church, religious denomination or organization	the gospel
Its kingdom	human	divine
Its builder	man	Jesus Christ
Its power	human effort	Holy Spirit
Its method	manipulative, coercive	loving, caring, and concerned
Its motive	ego-centred motivation: institutional or personal	God-centred: honour and glory of God
Its result	larger religious institution	authentic followers of Jesus Christ
Its language	uncharitable	speaks the truth in love
Its love	false	authentic
Its invitation	to the institution	to follow Jesus Christ in discipleship

This notion is an important one. Pastor-teacher John MacArthur states that 'no leader in Christ's church should have the desire to build it himself. Christ declared that He alone builds the church, and no matter how well intentioned he may be, anyone else who attempts to build it is competing with, not serving, the Lord.'⁴¹ The power behind the building of the church is clearly the Holy Spirit. Man can, of course, build a church through his own cleverness, but will it be a divine entity? It is certainly possible through perseverance, persuasiveness, zeal and diligent effort to make converts and build a religious organization, even a church. However, this does not guarantee that the result is a divine entity. 'Human effort can produce only human results. God alone can produce divine results.'⁴²

In authentic evangelism the communication of the gospel is entirely void of any coercive methods. Mark Elliott, co-editor of the *East-West Church and Ministry Report*, testifies to having attended a church meeting in Moscow where the participants, who were elderly women, received meal tickets without cost upon their attendance at the meeting.⁴³ To avoid proselytism finding a good solution to meeting people's physical and spiritual needs without being manipulative is part of the challenge of effective and God-honouring gospel communication.

In proselytism, one's motive is institutional and in many ways, personal. Desire to expand a church or religious organization can be a glorious experience, but often it is done for one's own glory. The invitation must be for the glory of God. The

41 John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16-23* (Chicago: Moody, 1988), p. 30.

42 MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Matthew 16-23*, p. 30.

43 Mark Elliott, 'Evangelism and Proselytism in Russia: Synonyms or Antonyms?', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 25 (April 2001), p. 73.

goal is not to build a larger organization but to make disciples of Jesus Christ who will in turn become effective members of the local church. Personal motives have no place in true biblical evangelism. Proselytism, no. Evangelism, yes.

In proselytism, one's language is uncharitable. I Peter 3:15 exhorts us to sanctify the Lord in our hearts, always being ready to make a defence to every one who asks us to give an account for the hope that is in us, 'yet with gentleness and reverence'. In evangelism, our speech is to be God glorifying and immersed in love. But it is to be truth in love.

If the messenger of the gospel truly loves the hearer and they know it, he or she can tell them anything! Sensing a personal spiritual need on the part of a religiously minded friend, yet an unbeliever, I attempted to share the gospel with him, but suspicious of my motives—having in mind possible proselytizing motives on my part—he asked me in an irritated manner: 'Why are you telling me these things?' I responded: 'It is because I am concerned for you and your relationship with God.' Upon his request, we continued our conversation.

Proselytism prohibited but evangelism pursued

Biblically, all Christians have the right to evangelize, but not to proselytize. Proselytism is not to be identified with evangelistic activity. Neither Jesus, Paul, nor the apostles refer to their missionary efforts as proselytism. Yet, they aggressively evangelized by proclaiming the

gospel. Proselytism and evangelism are not the same. Of course, even evangelism is morally unacceptable to many people, especially in our theologically, pluralistic world. It will continue to be unacceptable as long as God's people are trying to be obedient to him. Whether accused of proselytism or not, the Christian is responsible for evangelizing those who do not follow Jesus Christ, even those who claim the name Christian, but who are truly non-authentic in their faith, which is the case for many nominal Christians—no matter what part of Christianity they call home. The former as well as the latter must be evangelized. Unfortunately, so many in our world today, even those professing the Christian faith, have little sense of what it means to be a true Christian.

Fortunately, many nominal Christians have become authentic in their faith through the witness of other sincere and faithful Christians. Although these marginal believers had believed they were true Christians, they discovered that they were merely nominal in their beliefs, having never grasped the implications of the gospel in reference to sin and the death and resurrection of Christ. Upon their discovery and total commitment to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, some left their own Christian church denomination to join another, while others returned to it with a new vigour and a transformed, yet authentic faith in Christ.

While modern-day proselytism is never encouraged in Scripture, evangelism is. Although proselytism

should be prohibited, evangelism should be pursued for several reasons.

To follow the Lord Jesus Christ in obedience

The Christian church cannot ignore the commands of the Lord to preach and make disciples of all the nations (Mt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15). The church is missionary by nature and is the agent of evangelism. It is imperative that all Christians and churches be in obedience to the Lord. Part of that obedience involves evangelism, the proclamation of the gospel. Vatican II is in accordance with this. *Lumen Gentium* states that 'the church has received the solemn command of Christ from the apostles, and she must fulfill it to the very ends of the earth'.⁴⁴ The active, verbal witness of the church is a ministry of love towards humanity because it has the potential to move people from eternal darkness to eternal light. This certainly also applies to nominal Christians who are not authentic in their faith.

To follow the ministry of the Holy Spirit

To neglect the evangelization of professing Christians who truly have no authentic faith in Christ would, in essence, deny the leading of the Spirit of God, as it is he who creates and energizes the church to evangelize. It was the Holy Spirit who directed the apostle Paul to do missionary work

(Acts 9:17; 16:6), who led Peter to evangelize the religious Cornelius (Acts 10:45ff), and the Antioch church to outreach (Acts 13:2). The book of Acts shows that it is the Holy Spirit who leads the church beyond its own barriers to reach the Samaritans (Acts 8), god-fearers (Acts 10), and Gentiles (Acts 13). Because the true believer is indwelt by the Spirit of God, who has in part a missionary nature, it is normal that Christians share their faith with others. The Holy Spirit produces an inner compulsion and desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ, regardless of religious or church affiliation.

To give full dignity to human beings

Because the true witness for Jesus Christ respects all of God's human creation, who are created in his image, it is only natural to give full dignity to fellow humans and to love them. Knowing that there is nothing more destructive to human dignity than sin what could be more important than sharing the gospel with them? Stephen Neill once said that 'No man is fully human unless he has come to know God and himself in the searchlight of Jesus Christ.' True humanization comes only through personal faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

For such a reason true evangelization should not be hindered. Additionally, to impede the evangelization of those non-committed to the faith, whether, mainline or Evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican, actually violates several international legal declarations;

⁴⁴ Flannery, *Documents of Vatican II, Lumen Gentium*, chapter 2, section 17, 368.

namely, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950); The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); and The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981).⁴⁵

In particular, article two of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly December 10, 1948, affirms that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms with respect to religion. Article eighteen states: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'⁴⁶ Freedom of expression is of extreme importance and is a human right. Of course, these protections require ethical procedures in gospel communications whereby all the hearer's rights and dignity are upheld. To share the gospel is the best thing that a believer can do for a non-follower of Jesus Christ.

45 Lerner, 'Proselytism, Change of Religion, and International Human Rights', pp. 497-498, 500, 519, 542.

46 A copy of the essential elements pertaining to religious freedom can be viewed in the work of James E. Wood, 'Religious Liberty in Ecumenical and International Perspective,' *A Journal of Church and State* 10 (Autumn 1968), p. 427.

To provide clear biblical truth

Evangelism is necessary for the sake of the truth. Although many people in our modern world tend to be pluralistic and postmodern in their thinking, denying absolute truth, Scripture clearly says that Jesus is the truth (Jn. 14:6); and Paul had the 'truth of the gospel' (Gal. 2:5). Humans can be truth seeking beings. Vatican II maintains that people are

impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth once they come to know it and direct their whole lives in accordance with the demands of the truth. . . . everybody has the duty and consequently the right to seek the truth in religious matters so that, through the use of appropriate means, he may prudently form judgments of conscience which are sincere and true.⁴⁷

In many cases, the seeker of the truth will never hear the truth if it were not for a gospel messenger. In fact, without God-honouring evangelism, individuals would be deprived of hearing the truth, of exchanging their errant thoughts for the truth. If personal religious ideas and thoughts are not explored and integrated into one's personal world-view and life, they often become nothing more than dead theology. Exchanging ideas renews and revitalizes the personal lives of people when based on the truth. Clear biblical truth, of course, stimulates thought and discussion, keeping professing Christian from an irrelevant spirituality. The benefits are for the hearer and

47 Flannery, *Documents of Vatican II, Dignitatis Humanae*, sections 2 and 3, 801.

not the messenger. Proselytizing is never advantageous for the hearer because it has its roots in egotism, represents deception and denies the truth principle. On the other hand, evangelism is rooted in the true and eternal gospel.

To purify and renew the church

Evangelism often has a purifying effect on the church. It is necessary if dead and unresponsive churches are going to be renewed and revitalized. The evangelism of nominal and indifferent Christians often causes these churches to re-examine themselves, doctrinally, structurally, and methodologically. The evangelistic zeal of committed Christians plays a prophetic role, often within their own particular Christian Church.

Summary and conclusion

In reference to nominal Christians, which exist in all Christian denominations, whether Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant—mainline and evangelical—heeding the challenge of evangelism is important. The evangelism of nominal Christians should be taken seriously by all Christian churches. They must be challenged and encouraged to fully commit themselves to Jesus Christ. The witness of the gospel is valid not only to non-Christians, but to professing Christians who have not really grasped the implications of the gospel message for themselves.

John Stott declares that 'evangelism must not be defined in terms of the recipients of the gospel'.⁴⁸ In oth-

er words, all who are non-authentic in the Christian faith, having failed to put their faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, for salvation are in need of evangelism and conversion. Whether one is non-religious or belongs to a Christian denomination is of little consequence.

Thus, evangelism is mandatory for the church to have any transformationary character. This is especially true if individuals are not hearing or have not heard the gospel message and its implications within their particular Christian denomination. Due to a message devoid of the true gospel, it is unfortunate that the evangelism of 'Christians' is sometimes necessary.

If evangelism is carried out, the accusation of proselytism will surely arise, but the command of Christ to make disciples of all nations must take precedence. Even if Jesus Christ were physically present today, it is quite probable that he too would also be accused of proselytism.

⁴⁸ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), p. 38.

Incarnation

*Incarnation was required,
By the utter inconceivability of
God.*

*And Jesus, the man who
brought God down to earth,
Spanned the conceptual chasm
In a baby's cry.*

by Garry Harris, South Australia
(used with permission)