

Proselytism Yesterday, Today, And Tomorrow (Part Two)

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Forerunner, February 2006

Last month, we explored the definition of *proselytism*. We also reviewed the theory and practice of proselytism during the Old and New Testament periods. We concluded by turning our attention to the modern era, noting that reasonable proselytism is protected by international law, as it has developed over the past half-century or so. In Part Two, we will look at the actual *practice* of proselytism (or evangelism) in today's world.

Maybe the old adage is true after all: Laws are made to be broken. At least, man's laws! No better example of man's flagrant violation of the letter and spirit of his own law exists than in the area of proselytism. There exists an enormous disconnect between human rights *law* and *practice* when it comes to religious proselytism.

Proselytism in Practice Today

Three forces have come to work against proselytism in today's world.

1. Non-Western, non-Christian religious leaders often view Western religions, whether Protestant, Catholic, or cultish (Mormon, Jehovah Witness, etc.) as a threat to local and traditional religion. This nativist, even nationalist, response to Western missionary efforts mirrors the anti-globalization, anti-Western attitudes of many leaders in developing and Third World nations. These (often fundamentalist) leaders view Western religion in the same way they respond to Western-style clothing, entertainment, and music, all of which they perceive as destructive and corrupting influences on local, indigenous culture. So, the Taliban outlawed all types of proselytism, as has the Sudanese leadership. It is the "boil the missionary in the big black pot" mentality.

Lawrence Uzzell ("Don't Call It Proselytism," *First Things*, October 2004, p. 14) mentions a number of examples of this sort of anti-proselytism stance. The 1911 Turkish Constitution, for instance, outlaws proselytism, without even going to the trouble of defining it.

A more recent example is the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. In April 2004, a Moscow court banned all religious activities of this confession. The prosecutor alleged that Witnesses "incite inter-religious conflict," pointing out that "their publications claim that their religion is true and that others are false." (What would he expect their literature to say?) Further, he argued that their devotion to evangelism leaves them "no time . . . for fulfilling family obligations, useful labor, family communication, recreation together and self-improvement." The ban effectively stops them from any form of worship, even in private homes.

Here is an instance of religious persecution supposedly stemming from a group's perceived overemphasis on evangelism. Notice, incidentally, the state's insincere concern for the peoples' family life and "self-improvement"—as if we are gullible enough to believe any Russian court cared about such things! The real issue is the insecurity the

hide-bound Russian Orthodox Patriarchate feels over the fast-paced growth of a Western sect.

This kind of fear of outsiders has led some religionists to claim "canonical territory," which is but an extension of the notion of territorial imperative. Canonical territory theory holds that religions can come to *own* a particular geographical area because it is inhabited by people whose "faith has deep roots and historical legitimacy." The logical conclusion of the theory is that such territory should be "off-limits" to missionary activity by other religions. In reality, such "land grabs" typically have ethnic boundaries rather than geographic ones. If a person is Polish, *anywhere*, he should be Roman Catholic; if Egyptian, then Muslim; if Tibetan, then Buddhist; and so on.

Canonical territory theory is just another attempt of self-serving leaders to grant themselves protection in the marketplace of ideas. After all, if university professors enjoy the security of tenure, why should the established religious leadership not have its protected bailiwick? Old-line religious leaders do not like angst, and nothing is more angst-generating in them than successful proselytism by outside—and more vigorous—religious organizations, like the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia.

As protectionism, canonical territory is as dangerous as it is transparent. It would effectively lock a person into the religion of his parents, no matter how distasteful it might come to be to that individual. It is a bald-faced attempt to nullify Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

2. Uzzell cites another force that arrays itself against proselytism: the leaders of failed (or failing) Protestant churches in the Western world. Many of these "mainstream," and "old-line" groups have lost membership (measured in double-digit percentage points) to more vigorous Pentecostal faiths in the last two or three decades. It is no wonder that the World Council of Churches, a highly liberal organization that speaks for these dying denominations, has come to call proselytism a "corruption of Christian witness" that uses "cajolery, bribery, undue pressure, or intimidation, subtly or openly, to bring about seeming conversion." These people view proselytism as "sheep stealing."

3. The third force organized against proselytism is the secular (and atheist) elite in postmodern America and Europe. These dyed-in-the-wool relativists cannot admit that one value or belief system is superior to another. Uzzell notes their "need . . . for psychological defenses and social barriers against those who would vigorously advocate eternal truths." These elites, he continues,

are uncomfortable with ultimate questions and with theological answers to those questions. They wish to avoid not only answering such questions but even hearing them asked. If possible, they would like to do with the whole of society what they have already done to the public school systems: turn it into a "religion-free-zone" undisturbed by prophets and saints or even by the memory of them. Along with other new rules, this means a new etiquette, in which religious believers must scrupulously refrain from "offending" unbelievers.

One can at least appreciate—although certainly not defend—the motives of non-Western traditionalists on one end of the political spectrum and old-line Protestant liberals on its other end. Both groups, opposites in so many ways, really share the same motive: the defense of their turf. They are understandably insecure at losing ground economically and socially to more energetic, more motivated confessions.

None, however, can sympathize even slightly with the motives and doctrine of the secular elite in America today. *These are the ultimate hypocrites of our time.* While they claim to be "defenders of robust intellectual freedom," they in fact seek "selective protectionism in the market place of ideas." Hypocrites!

They do not care what religious individual they may offend with their blasphemous ideas, but they would deny to that same person the right to speak for absolute standards. Among these are those in Canada who criminalized as "hate speech" the use of Scripture condemning sexual perversion. Hypocrites!

They do not hesitate to proselytize others to "buy abortion" or "buy evolution," while at the same time ridiculing as superstitious and irrational those who would advocate that others "buy abstinence" (rather than condoms) in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Hypocrites!

They use their position as controllers of the media to organize the marketplace of ideas such that, to use the illustration from Part One, Jaguars® get big press, but Buicks® remain far from the traffic-generating popcorn machine, marginalized.

Who in God's church can have any involvement with their sort?

In sum, a gigantic gap exists between the international protections of proselytism and its current practice. This is true in postmodern cultures (limited to Japan, Germany, and the nations of Israel), modern cultures (as Brazil, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia), developing cultures (as China, India, and Mexico), and backwater/failing cultures (as Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, and the Sudan).

In all fairness, however, this failure to live up to the standards of international law is not only the fault of actors who have something to lose to proselytism. *Those who practice proselytism today bear part of the blame.* Many are not too scrupulous! Not a few are just plain charlatans. Some, for instance, offer food to the poor only after potential converts sit through a religious service. Some groups offer educational benefits only to those who convert, or to the children of those who convert. Others "bribe" folk into converting by promising better jobs or protection from government officials. In a few egregious cases, prospective converts are actually kidnapped and psychologically "programmed" to accept a new religion.

Conclusion: The Future of Proselytism

More than most, readers of the King James Version of God's Word know that language changes. How different is the meaning of the verb *prevent* today from its meaning in I Thessalonians 4:15! How the definition of the noun *conversation* has changed from its early seventeenth-century usage, as in I Peter 1:15!

Such is the case with the word *proselytism*. Originally, proselytism was a non-verbal—and almost automatic—activity. It was the natural spin-off of Joe Israelite's adherence to the principles of God's law. Proselytism was a result of living God's way of life, of being a good example. One became a light in a dark world. Gentiles would surely see the good fruits of obedience and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths" (Isaiah 2:3).

Isaiah speaks prophetically of "the latter days [when] the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains" (verse 2). Proselytism by example will be the norm in the Millennium, just as it was when God ruled the children of Israel. Non-verbal, example-driven proselytism will be a good thing then, just as it was in Moses' day.

Today, it is not seen as a good thing. Many in the world perceive proselytism as a murky activity connected with religious fraud, deception, and cultural corruption. Uzzell is surely correct in contending that "no missionary organization today" would self-describe its activities with the term "proselytism." For example, the Catholic Church officially describes *proselytism* as "the use of unworthy means to attract members of other churches or even unchurched persons to their fold." No wonder Uzzell concludes: "Its connotation is almost always negative, even sinister."

However, the Millennium will bring change again. The time is coming when the Gentiles will see the good works produced in Israel and will praise God. Cultural and moral relativism will become passé, as Gentiles observe the example of Israel, repent, and turn to the superior lifestyle of Israel's God.

It will take time. Yet, even with all the time in the Millennium, not all will repent, for *proselytism does have its limits*, as the prophet points out in Ezekiel 38. There, Gog and her allies see Israel's Millennial "unwalled villages," her "peaceful people, who dwell safely" (verse 11). However, they do not come to God's mountain with the intention of learning how to walk in His paths. Rather, they come against God's people "like a cloud, to cover the land" (verse 16), coveting with intention to plunder.

Israel's example, as outstanding as it will then be, will not faze Gog and his confederates. Seeing Israel will only make these people more insatiably lustful of her wealth. Ezekiel relates God's response in verses 22-23:

And I will bring him to judgment with pestilence and bloodshed; I will rain down on him, on his troops, and on the many peoples who are with him, flooding rain, great hailstones, fire, and brimstone. Thus I will magnify Myself and sanctify Myself, and I will be known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord.

Yes, even God's form of proselytism, the non-verbal proselytism of example, has its limits. When the example of His people fails, when men become so stubborn, so incorrigible, that they will not allow themselves to be swayed by the witness of His lifestyle, He Himself will intervene in judgment.

But that will happen only "after many days" (verse 8). For now, ours is the responsibility to follow the command of Christ as recorded in Matthew 5:16. Proselytize by example. This is an active proselytism that involves letting our light ever shine. Christ affirms that people *will* see our good works. And eventually, many will come to glorify God.

Inset: Proselytism's Code of Ethics

In today's world, where God's Word is no longer taken as *the* standard for proper behavior, man formulates his own rules of conduct. Codes of ethics are turning up everywhere—a byproduct of mankind's taking of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thus, it should not surprise us when we run across a code of ethics for missionary groups. Indeed, B. B. Beach, (see his articles at www.irla.org) has devised such a code.

The basic rule: When evangelizing, remain sensitive to "cultural customs" of the target audience. Does that mean "putting your best foot forward" when the target audience is made of up cannibals?

Specifically Beach warns missionaries that they should not:

- » Exploit or take advantage of poor, vulnerable segments of the population
- » Use pejorative terminology (such as "image worshippers," "the harlot of Babylon," "apostate religion," "sect," "cult")
- » Knowingly make false or questionable claims of miraculous healings or interventions
- » Pressure people unduly to abandon the religion of their fathers, risking injury to their religious feelings
- » Knowingly spread false information regarding the teachings of other religions or ridiculing their beliefs, practices, and/or origins
- » Offer financial or other material inducements or educational benefits in order to "convert" people
- » Accuse large majority churches of having no spiritual or missionary life
- » Incite hatred, internecine strife, and antagonistic competition
- » Use coercive or manipulative methods of evangelism to get church members, including certain advertising that preys on human gullibility