

Proselytism & faith

March 16, 2010

I don't agree with them. But I respect them.

You know who they are—young Mormons on mission. According to their beliefs, they're earning their salvation by spreading their faith.

Of course, I think they're wrong, because I believe what the Apostle Paul wrote regarding salvation in Jesus Christ: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Still, I respect their zeal to share their beliefs and their desire to see others join them. Set aside their misguided notion that a person can earn a space in heaven, and think about what would happen if all Christians evangelized as actively and consistently as Mormons. This world would be won to Christ.

Faith-sharing on the agenda

The image of young Mormon missionaries came to mind when I read a [Religion News Service](#) article about a recent [conference](#) on the political implications of sharing faith, particularly among Christians and Muslims. The discussion turned quickly to proselytism.

Simply put, [proselytism](#) is "the act of attempting to convert people to another opinion and, particularly, another religion." In its basic meaning, proselytism is a value-neutral term. But Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission was correct when he noted proselytism has gained a "negative connotation of inducement."

No to coercion; yes to sharing

That's not without reason. Throughout time, strong adherents of various faiths have used coercion to spread their faith. Think of Christian military might during the Crusades, as well as Muslim beheadings today.

Sometimes, the coercion is less subtle yet still troublesome. Church historians and missiologists talk about "rice Christians," starving people who professed faith in Jesus in order to receive food from Christian missionaries. I used to live in a city where every cabdriver surely made numerous professions of faith, since practically every big-name preacher who came to town told stories about leading his "cabbie" to the Lord on the way from the airport. Wonder if cabbie converts get bigger tips from proselytizing preachers?

Coercion and commerce aside, proselytism has received a bad reputation today because so many people think others don't have a right to "impose" their faith on others. In the strictest sense of the word, most Christians and especially all historic Baptists would agree with them. To be authentic, faith must be free. Imposition has no place in faith-sharing.

But testifying to one's faith is not an imposition on others. Everyone everywhere should have the right to express religious convictions freely. "For Christians, this is an act of love, not an act of hostility," Land correctly noted. People who believe Jesus is the way to eternal life and fulfillment in this life share their faith because they love and care for others and desire that all people would experience the best thing that could ever happen to them—a saving relationship with Jesus the Christ.

Religious freedom guaranteed

Fortunately, we live in a nation that guarantees religious liberty. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution mandates that, while government cannot establish religion or religious practices, it also cannot prohibit the free exercise of faith—any faith.

Even though it has come under fire by religious groups who yearn for government support for religion—or at least *their* religion—the First Amendment's religion clauses provide significant support for peace across our land. Roger Finke, a sociologist at Penn State, said countries with anti-proselytizing laws, which consequently favor one religion over all others, are generally less peaceful and civil than countries where religious freedom is guaranteed.

In our own country, people are free to share their faith, just as they are free to tune out others who share different faiths. Neither can and should be silenced. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Christians who want all people to become fellow believers to share their faith winsomely and lovingly, rather than arrogantly and judgmentally.

So, hooray for the First Amendment, and hooray for proselytism—in the best sense of the word.