

RIGHT or WRONG? Ethical evangelism

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In a recent sermon, our pastor said, “Our evangelism must be ethical.” What does that mean?

Your pastor’s sermon made two important observations. First, Christians must realize we face a culture that is wary and unresponsive to slick salesmanship and manipulation of any kind.

Second, Jesus’ last command to his followers was to take the Good News to the entire world (Matthew 28:19-20). That means evangelism must be a priority. Our goal must be for everyone, everywhere to hear the gospel of Christ and have an opportunity to respond. Unfortunately, Christians have not always carried out the Great Commission in ways consistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The Crusades of the Middle Ages were based on the misguided idea that people could and should be coerced into accepting the Christian faith or face death. Few Christians today would advocate conversion at the point of a sword, but many see nothing wrong with manipulating people’s emotions to get them to “pray the sinner’s prayer.” Do the “ends” of eternal salvation justify any “means” of conversion? The answer is clearly, “No,” not if our means manipulate, coerce or deceive those who are created in the image of God.

Unfortunately, we continue some practices and methods of evangelism without asking if they meet the highest Christian standards. What about decisions made at youth retreats or children’s camps, or even among adults, after days of emotional bombardment, high-pressure preaching and a lot of peer pressure? Jesus was careful never to entice or coerce anyone

into following him. In fact, he watched the rich young ruler and others walk away after he had clearly explained the sacrifices that were involved in becoming his disciple. Jesus was concerned about producing committed disciples, not shallow converts.

Jesus must be our example and our standard in all things. As Christians, we are called by God to honor him and his ethical standards in everything we do, including our public and private evangelism. We cannot use coercive or manipulative techniques or appeals that play on psychological weaknesses. We cannot utilize overly emotional appeals that bypass an individual's critical cognitive processes. And we must not mask the true requirements of Christian conversion by suggesting salvation is a one-time decision rather than a radical life commitment to follow the teachings of Jesus. Respect for human integrity requires intellectual honesty and always revealing our Christian identity and purpose.

Ethical evangelism not only is biblical and ethically correct; it is the only type of evangelism that produces long-term, effective Christian disciples.

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