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Book Review: The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion by Elmer John Theissen

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Mormonism. Numerous statements are made in which further elaboration would assuage hasty generalizations. For example, the author argues, "Apologetics ministries focus more on proving Mormonism wrong than offering good news, as if the desired result is nothing more than for people to leave the LDS Church" (101). Though there are ministries focused on proving Mormonism wrong, many, if not most, of those ministries give equal attention to sharing the good news of Christ. Indeed, the desired result is for persons to leave the LDS Church, and many apologetics ministries offer Christianity as the only alternative.

A second limitation of the work is the continual use of the phrase "traditional Christian" when referring to a person who believes the doctrines of historic, orthodox Christianity. Admittedly, a person who holds those beliefs is a traditional Christian, but no explanation is offered as to why this particular phrase is used. When dealing with Mormons, some Christians hesitate to keep from making hard distinctions between the two groups, especially with the words "Christian" and "non-Christian." This does not seem to be the case explicitly with Anderson; however, there are certainly hints at this hesitation throughout. For example, he argues that we should be "sensitive about issues that offend Latter-day Saints" (107), and one of those issues is "when members of other churches deny that Mormons are Christians" (107). Likewise, one of the appendices deals with the question, "Are Mormons Christians?" and Anderson concludes this question "amounts to little more than a debate over labels" (119). Anderson does note the closer one is to a "Mormon worldview, the less likely he or she is to be right with God on those terms," however, there still seems to be a general hesitation in this area (119).

Though there are limitations to the work, they do not harm the overall helpfulness of the book in any serious way. Anderson's personal involvement both inside and outside Mormonism lend significant credibility to his ministry, and this work should be taken as a good, concise primer on the mentality of Mormons and Mormonism. The subtitle is indeed an excellent description of the work—a quick guide for relating to Latter-day Saints.

Elmer John Thiessen. *The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defense of Proselytizing and Persuasion.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011, 285 pp., $24.00.

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Elmer John Thiessen, in a captivating way, introduces and explains the fields of study which impact the topics of evangelism, proselytism, or religious persuasion

(terms that he uses interchangeably). He exegetes the *ad hominem* arguments against evangelism as found on blogs, and he also addresses the philosophical arguments of politically-correct academia against proselytism. Thiessen's engaging grasp on the field is indicative of years of research and teaching on this very topic.

Thiessen is research professor of education at Tyndale University College and Seminary in Toronto, Canada. Several factors seem to have uniquely prepared him to write this book. First, he authored a book on a parallel subject in 1993, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993). Second, Thiessen received a sabbatical year of study from Medicine Hat College, combined that same year with being a research reader at the University of Toronto and a research fellowship at the University of Victoria. Then, he taught his findings in the classroom. These factors provided him significant breadth and depth in this study.

From an ecclesio-religious perspective, Thiessen identifies himself as a "Christian of a fairly orthodox variety—Mennonite and evangelical" (22). However, he distances himself from those who are too far on either side of the evangelism spectrum:

> A few words about my own background might be in place here. In terms of religious commitment, I am a Christian of a fairly orthodox variety—Mennonite and evangelical. Evangelicals are by self-definition very much committed to evangelism. I share this commitment, though I would hasten to add I have some concerns about the evangelical understanding and emphasis on evangelism. My primary worry has to do with a lack of concern on the part of evangelicals to ensure that evangelism is done in an ethical manner. Indeed, evangelism is often carried out in immoral ways. Evangelicals sometimes seem to be so preoccupied with the end of "winning souls for Christ," that they have little concern about the means to achieve this end, and even succumb to the Machiavellian principle that the end justifies the means. So the argument of this book is as much addressed to those who are strongly committed to evangelism, as it is addressed to those who are opposed to the same. (22)

In order to achieve the end of finding a middle ground, in this book Thiessen seeks to develop a mutually acceptable philosophical framework based on common law to which all people can adhere in order to evangelize or proselytize ethically. For examples, he writes, "Human nature is roughly the same. . . . We are trying to understand the same reality . . . because God has established a moral order" (48).

He begins his argument by seeking to persuade his reader that proselytism is inevitable and a necessary part of life: "Persuasion is a natural part of being

human" (58) and "I am trying, in this book, to persuade the reader that ethical proselytizing is indeed possible" (57). Yet, Thiessen's end-game is more than a mere discussion of the topic; it is, in fact, the proposal of criteria by which ethically-acceptable forms of evangelism can be distinguished:

> This book is an exploration of the ethics of proselytizing. Is it ever morally right to engage in proselytizing? If so, what criteria can be used to distinguish between ethical and unethical forms of proselytizing? These are the central questions to be addressed in this monograph. (8)

Thiessen therefore presents his arguments in five sections, including two introductory chapters and a concluding paragraph. His three middle sections are: Part Two, Objections to Proselytizing; Part Three, Positive Approach to Proselytizing, and Part Four, Distinguishing Between Ethical and Unethical Evangelizing.

In Part Two, Thiessen adroitly addresses fifteen objections to proselytism, divided into three groups: Chapter 3, Epistemological/Ethical Objections; Chapter 4, Integrity/Freedom of Individuals; Chapter 5, Liberal Objections. Part Three includes one chapter titled, "A Defense of Proselytizing." Then in Part Four, Thiessen recommends "Criteria to Evaluate Proselytizing" in two chapters.

This book has a number of strengths. First, Thiessen offers an excellent survey of the literature in the field and appropriately weaves in the varying themes and voices throughout the book (see also his annotated bibliography found in Appendix Two). Second, he effectively organizes and counters the various critics of ethical evangelism, often using their own philosophical categories. Third, he explains the boundaries of unethical evangelism plainly, citing clear examples. These boundaries are summarized in ethical guidelines found in Appendix One and would provide a basis for excellent discussion of the issues involved.

However, several weaknesses also appear to be present in this book. First, on this highly charged topic of which the life and ministry of Jesus, His Great Commission, the Gospel, and New Testament evangelizing are at the forefront, Thiessen rarely refers to any of these. A sudden outpouring of eight biblical references on page 220 appears, which is refreshing in comparison with the rest of the philosophical nature of the book. While he followed the parameter set in his title, "A Philosophical Defense," his arguments are built upon an epistemological foundation for determining the ethical nature of valid evangelism from a rationalist point of view. Therefore, the reader must be made aware that Thiessen's arguments are not biblical in nature. They are derived from a more subjective basis of philosophical presuppositions and predeterminations. They seem to fall prey to

a moral philosophy, by which all religions and people are deemed to converge upon a postulated common ethical criteria.

Second, Thiessen recommends some negative reinforcement for unethical proselytizing. One of these is social reinforcement, "naming and shaming violators" (223) of ethical norms of proselytizing. Yet because evangelicals and cults do not usually have centralized ways of identifying and then "naming and shaming violators," there would be minimally-systematic ways for them to enforce them from inside their own groups. This negative social reinforcement would certainly necessitate an outside arbiter, such as a government, a state church, or a worldwide religious hierarchy, such as the Roman Catholic Church. Thiessen then put forward the need for legal reinforcement, while distancing himself from its feasibility. In this approach, legal means would be put into place to curb non-ethical methods of proselytism. He rightly cited the weaknesses of several Western governments that currently have anti-proselytism laws. However, the idea of legally reinforcing ethical guidelines for proper proselytism has huge ramifications worldwide.

Third, Thiessen stated that evangelicals "have paid little attention to the topic of the ethics of proselytizing or evangelism" (249). In this statement Thiessen may betray a lack of study in the field of missions history and theology. Further, Thiessen did appear to be aware of the 2006 "Inter-religious Consultation on 'Conversion—Assessing the Reality,'" affirmed by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Fellowship. For example, this agreement stated:

> 3. We affirm that while everyone has a right to invite others to an understanding of their faith, it should not be exercised by violating other's rights and religious sensibilities. At the same time, all should heal themselves from the obsession of converting others (Lariano/Velletri, Italy, 12–16 May 2006).

Fourth, because of his self-imposed philosophical limitations, Thiessen cannot account for the world's irrational hatred of Jesus and His followers (John 15:18–21), nor can he account for the supernatural power of the Gospel to transform the lives of those who believe (Rom 1:16) through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God (Eph 6:17). Therefore, it lacks foundational truths widely accepted among evangelicals.

However, that being said, Thiessen has clearly and concisely taught the philosophical side of the ethical nature of evangelism. This book would be very helpful in doctoral seminars on evangelism and/or proselytizing, as well as in advanced courses on persuasion, proselytism, evangelism, and perhaps even communication theory. I commend it as helpful when used with discernment.