Why Evangelicals need a code of ethics for mission

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Abstract

The authors claim that now is the right time for the global evangelical movement to formulate a public code of ethics for Christian mission. Occasionally mission work has been marred by actions that do not demonstrate a proper level of respect for people. A code of ethics in mission would establish a standard of accountability and also become an evangelical contribution to the global effort to establish standards for the relations among religions which should help protect the freedom of religion. The complementary principles informing this code should be the need of all people for the gospel and the God-given dignity of all people created in his image.

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Some of this material was in Dr Schirrmacher's speech entitled *"But with gentleness and respect:" Why missions should be ruled by ethics – An Evangelical Perspective on a Code of Ethics for Christian Witness,* when he represented the World Evangelical Alliance at the international theological consultation "Towards an ethical approach to conversion: Christian witness in a multi-religious world" at the Institut de Science et de Théologie des Religions in Toulouse, France, 8-12 August 2007. The text of the speech, including an extensive bibliography, is available at www.worldevangelicalalliance.com/news/Conversion.pdf.

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1. Mission can be corrupted

"There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted," says the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (1549). This is even true of Christian mission, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, the "Prince of Peace." The *Lausanne Covenant* (1974), that most influential evangelical public statement, calls heartily for mission and then addresses the moral framework in articles 12 and 13 respectively:

> At other times, desirous to ensure a response to the gospel, we have compromised our message, manipulated our hearers through pressure techniques, and become unduly preoccupied with statistics or even dishonest in our use of them. All this is worldly. The Church must be in the world; the world must not be in the Church.
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> It is the God-appointed duty of every government to secure conditions of peace, justice and liberty in which the Church may obey God, serve the Lord Jesus Christ, and preach the gospel without interference.

There have been times when evangelical Christians have attempted to follow Jesus' command to evangelize the world but have done so in a worldly, sinful manner; there have been other times when a mistaken worry about peace or personal comfort has led evangelicals to neglect the mission Jesus gave. Some Christians have manipulated people, have been dishonest, and have taken actions that do not promote the peace, justice, and liberty of society because of a desire to lead people to faith in Christ, while others have neglected the spiritually lost condition of their neighbours. Evangelicals must not in any way pull back from evangelistic or mission activities. As Christians we must carry out our God-given mission in a God-fearing manner, trusting that the way we carry out our work will be used by God for his good purposes, including peace, justice, and liberty in society. Therefore, it would be very beneficial to have a written code of mission ethics, which would be globally endorsed and taught by evangelical organizations, to set a high standard toward which we should strive and by which evangelicals could hold each other accountable. Such a code of ethics could become an important part of the evangelical contribution to global political culture, part of an effort to "seek the peace and prosperity" (Jer 29:7) of the global village.[1]

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[1] All should note the leadership of the Evangelical Fellowship of India in this

2. The Bible teaches a demanding balance of witness and respect

> But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak badly against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil (1 Pet 3:15-17).

Here one sees complementarity: the necessity of witness, even apologetics (the Greek text says *apologia,* originally a defence in court), joined with the dignified treatment of the other human being in "gentleness and respect." The truth of the need for the gospel is complementary with the truth of the God-given dignity of the people who hear the gospel. People are alienated from God and in serious need of the gospel of reconciliation with God by faith in Jesus; people are created in God's image and therefore worthy of respect and able to both recognize and take many respectable actions.[2] Both sides of the truth must be obeyed. The complementary sides of the truth make an ethics of mission both necessary and possible.

Christians should always see other people as images of God, assuming that God sees their treatment of people as an indication of how they want to treat God, even if Christians totally disagree with others and believe them to need the gospel of Christ. According to Christian ethics, human rights are given by God to all people, regardless of their religion or their lost spiritual condition. (This stands in contrast with some religions which have said that only members of their religion have rights.) Christians should defend the basic human rights of all while also praying for them to come to faith in Christ. To repeat: these complementary truths could be expressed in a code of mission ethics which evangelicals teach and seek to follow. The influence of such a code could extend well beyond evangelical circles. One can hope that such a code, along with improving practice on the part of all Christians, may make the gospel more attractive, reduce religious persecution (of all religions), and also encourage followers of other religions to set public standards for the proper

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area. See their *Statement on Mission Language* (October 2000). Online: http://tinyurl.com/efi2001.

[2] Many of the contributions of Christians to political culture arise from their two-sided view of a human being, as created in the image of God but fallen into sin.

treatment of their neighbours; nevertheless, the Christian's motivation must focus on glorifying God.[3]

3. The Bible teaches self-criticism in light of God's forgiveness

In a time of religious violence, when Islamists pour violence on Christians, and Hindu or Buddhist nationalists oppose Christians in India and Sri Lanka, it would be too easy to criticize others. But the Christian faith is very self-critical: the Old and New Testaments especially criticize the people of God, not other people. One should not say with the Pharisee: "God, I thank you, that I am not like the others," but one should say with the tax collector: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:11-13). Because our hope is in God's mercy, not our goodness, Christians are free to be self-critical, more self-critical than are adherents of most other religions. If we have sinned, we should confess our sin, accept God's forgiveness, and move on with the mission he has given us. This sin can be either neglecting the God-given dignity of our neighbours or neglecting their need for the gospel. A Christian's first question should never be, "What do other religions do?" Rather, as Peter says, in the middle of false accusations, a Christian should ask, "Am I gentle and full of respect for my neighbours, to whom I am explaining the hope and faith which we all need?"

4. Different cultures emphasize opposite sides of the truth

Within the Christian movement some churches and cultures emphasize the opposite sides of these complementary truths, that people need the gospel and that the image of God is worthy of respect. Compare India and Germany, using over-generalized stereotypes: From the point of view of an Indian Catholic evangelist, any evangelical evangelist in Germany seems to be lacking vitality because of a weak awareness of people's need for the gospel. From the point of view of an evangelical

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[3] Missionaries in Africa and Europe report that some people become interested in Christ after they first hear of or experience the Christian conviction that people have a God-given dignity, which stands in sharp contrast with many other religions and philosophies.

evangelist in Germany, every Catholic evangelist in India seems to be putting too much pressure on people because of a weak awareness of the God-given dignity of those people. It is too simple to tell Christians from other cultures to change, if this is mostly a demand to be like one's own culture. We must temporarily accept some cultural diversity while Christians instruct each other about what it means to both respect the God-given dignity of their neighbours and also see their serious need for the gospel. A global code of mission ethics could be a tool for mutual exhortation.

5. Good and bad examples can be identified

In history and in the present, Christians recognize both problems and lessons in this realm. As a good example of respecting the dignity of others, modern evangelicals have been highly dedicated to religious freedom, including the religious freedom of non-evangelical churches. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when pastors of state and free churches in Europe began to meet across boundaries forming the earliest ecumenical movement, in a context in which formal church membership in national churches was often compulsory, religious freedom became a major goal. In 1852, for example, a high-ranking delegation of the Evangelical Alliance visited the Ottoman sultan on behalf of persecuted Orthodox churches; following this tradition today, well-equipped evangelical religious freedom lawyers have won cases in the European Court for Human Rights for several non-protestant churches, including the Bessarabian Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. Today the orthodox churches in Turkey and the dying old churches in Iraq find their greatest help in evangelical organizations, as evangelicals effectively use the media and speak to governments.

Religious freedom in its modern, peaceful form (not the anti-religious, violent form of the French Revolution) was invented by the Baptist Roger Williams at the end of the seventeenth century in Providence (now in the US). This version of freedom of religion contributed significantly to the modern practice of freedom of speech. Evangelical groups, often with an Anglo-Saxon background, have sometimes transported the American idea of total freedom of speech for the individual, joined with low levels of respect for traditional

structures and cultures.[4] Christians can be grateful for these roots of freedom of religion and speech, but not all countries are prepared for the versions of freedom of speech that the US, Canada, or Australia now practice. While we endorse a high level of legal freedom of speech, in a code of ethics Christians should commit to higher standards for truth and respect of their neighbours in public speech. Not all legal speech is morally acceptable. It can be legal but morally wrong to say things that are false or which deny the dignity of one's neighbours.[5]

A painful example: Consider the statement by US-evangelist Pat Robertson that all Muslims should leave the US, which was a headline in many major Indian newspapers the next day, arguing that if Christians want Muslims to leave 'their' country, Christians should not object if Hindus want Christians to leave India. One of us (TS) happened to be in India that day and was shocked. The legal freedom of speech does not lead to a moral right to say things that disrespect other people made in the image of God, in this case assuming they cannot be good citizens of the US.[6] This assumption is false, which makes such public statements an attack on the God-given dignity of our neighbours, a way of bearing false witness against our neighbours.[7] A written code would make it easier to identify good and bad examples and provide a basis for good teaching.

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[4] Since American evangelicals now make up only 8% of evangelicals in the world, this is rapidly changing.

[5] Evangelicals should defend human rights in general without neglecting other ways of describing our obligations to each other, such as honesty, loyalty, and mercy. Some of our obligations are not easily expressed in the language of human rights.

[6] See Reuters News reports from January 18, 2007, especially the report by Tom Heneghan.

[7] This criticism of Robertson must not be misunderstood to mean we think we must refrain from criticizing the actions or disagreeing with the beliefs of people of other religions. Some attempts to criminalize "defamation" of religion appear to be inappropriate attempts to restrict the freedoms of religion and speech. We should follow the example of Jesus and the biblical prophets who criticized sinful actions and beliefs, while we follow Peter's command to practice gentleness and respect.

6. The rapid numerical growth of evangelicals poses challenges

The number of evangelical Christians in the world is large, rapidly growing, and they often find themselves in the middle of confrontations between non-Christian religions and Christians, as well as conflicts among Christian traditions.[8] Evangelical groups overall have the highest percentage of Christians who come from a non-Christian background and became Christians by decision.[9] This rapid growth, especially in Africa and Asia, means many new Christians and new churches face situations of potential conflict and have not yet had good opportunities to appropriate the considerations of the rest of the Body of Christ on matters of the relation of the faith to force and conflict. In Turkey, for example, 95% of all evangelicals are converts from Islam. They (and other new evangelical believers in similar social situations) draw more attention and threats than the historic churches in Muslim countries, which have often paid the price of not preaching to their neighbours in order to gain a degree of tolerance. Evangelical groups seldom represent old churches which have established patterns for how they relate to their cultures and other religions. There are no 'evangelical' countries like there are Catholic, Orthodox, or Lutheran countries. Evangelicals should establish good patterns by means of a code of ethics.

In spite of this potential for conflict, evangelical groups are highly dedicated to defending religious liberty worldwide, are rarely involved as a party in civil wars, and are not connected with terror groups in any way. In general, evangelicals represent the Prince of Peace, despite the unrest and turmoil (on the personal, family, and political levels) that often accompany religious conversions. These principles can be taught in a code of ethics.

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[8] The estimates for the number of evangelicals range from 300 to 700 million; the World Evangelical Alliance seeks to serve a global constituency of 420 million.

[9] Only sects like the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses have higher percentages of first-generation adherents.

7. Evangelicals should publicly consolidate their spiritual growth in regard to the use of force in matters of faith

In the past, Christians demanded that people leave another religion and convert to Christianity but did not allow Christians to leave the faith (as some religions still do), punishing apostasy with civil penalties, including losing family, civil rights, reputation, jobs, or even one's life.[10] In that situation, in Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist societies, not changing one's religion was more often due to societal pressure than to conviction. In history, probably more people were forced to accept a religion than there were people free to choose their religion. We are still experiencing the end of this situation (called the Constantinian Era in Christian history), which includes the end of safeguarding Christianity by political means and forcing or manipulating people into the church by political, economic, or other external pressures. Most Christians consider this spiritual growth, not a catastrophe. The Christian faith can live by the Word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit; real faith does not come from worldly powers, whether armies, governments, or business.

Overall, Christianity and its churches have taken the right course in the last hundred years, increasingly abstaining from violence, from being involved in religious or civil wars, and from using political means or economic pressure for mission. One cannot deny some continuing problems, but if 2010 is compared with previous decades or centuries, the situation is much improved. Conflict situations, such as Northern Ireland or with the so-called Christian terrorist organisation 'National Liberation Front' (NLFT) in Northeast India or with the Nagaland rebels, come from the fringe of Christianity, and the Christians involved are criticised by other Christians around the globe. In contrast, during the First World War in Europe, many major churches fuelled the war from both sides and gave undue religious endorsement to both sides in that war. Praise God, there no longer is a broad acceptance of force in propagating one's own message in the Christian world, and no longer the automatic endorsement of the use of force by the nations in which Christians have public influence. (Note the contrast with Islam, where the Islamists' acceptance of

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[10] Probably the worst example would be the inquisitions in Europe in the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries.

violence to conquer the world has made inroads into the Muslim community, even though Muslims previously lived peacefully with other groups for centuries.)

The forced conversion of the Saxons by the German emperor (and other forced conversions to Christianity) is old history from which Christians have repented; such events belong to the darkest pages of church history. Today millions who do not come from a Christian cultural background are becoming Christians by pure conviction and persuasion. More people are converting to Christianity than at any time when Christians allowed external pressure to corrupt its mission. What the gun boats of Western colonial powers did not achieve in China is now being achieved by God's Word and Spirit alone.[11]

8. Everybody should separate religious persuasion from political force

Today the Christian community is suffering heavy persecution in several countries. The number of martyrs is distressing. It is noteworthy that almost all "Christian" or "post-Christian" countries grant religious freedom to all religions, while the number of "non-Christian countries" that do not grant the same rights to Christians is still high. If we want to oppose the persecution of Christians, if we want to promote the right to testify to our faith and practice it in public, we should be even more careful to ban any means of practicing our faith and witness in ways which violate the human rights of others! All must see that evangelicals genuinely affirm the human right of choosing one's religion.

In Islam, Hinduism, and partly in Judaism, religious law applies directly to government affairs. Such traditions make a separation between religious institutions and the state more difficult and thereby

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[11] We offer the following perspective on military force: "The State (and its army) has the duty to defend peaceful Christians if they become the victims of illegal violence, but it does not do it specifically because they are Christians; it should do so for any victim of violence. An army should never have the task to defend Christianity, propagate the gospel, or conquer land for Christianity. In history many Christian areas were conquered by armies, but this was wrong. Using an army to spread a religion is always a confusion of the different tasks of the Church and the State."

make freedom of religion more difficult. Christians have taken the lead and have declared that they will no longer use the state for church purposes. Christians would also encourage leaders of other religions to find suitable ways to make distinctions between religious institutions and the state, so that states are encouraged to allow freedom of religion for multiple religions.

9. We face challenging global changes

Globalization is making these questions urgent. There is a growing interaction among religions, from the private level to world politics, some peaceful and fruitful, some senseless and harmful. A higher percentage of the world population changes religious affiliation every year. Children today leave the profession and lifestyle of their parents, move to different countries, and feel less obliged to follow old traditions. What started in the West is expanding into other cultures. Religion will not be the exception to this trend (Taylor 2005). In the Western world it is now common that children change their religion and political orientation. In other regions of the world this phenomenon is rising and often shocks cultures.

Global communications (radio, TV, internet, and newspapers) can confront every adherent of each religion with all the other religions in the world, whereas 100 years ago the vast majority of the world's population had little contact with the message of another religion. Simultaneously, the number of cross-religious marriages is growing because young people meet more possible partners than they did a generation ago, including more possible partners from other religions.

This complex relationship among parents, children, and globalization is supplemented by the growth of democracy. In democracy there is religious freedom and religious pluralism. This normally helps small religious communities without political influence more than the majority religions, which previously relied on social pressure to keep people in the religion of their birth. Latin America is a typical inner-Christian example, as the longstanding Catholic dominance is giving way to growing Protestant churches, as well as to various sects. In democracies, young people often choose their religion as they choose their favourite music or cell phone

company, with no grasp of the impact this has for society, culture, and tradition.

When a country becomes democratic or extends religious liberty rights, people who had previously hidden their religion often surface. These "crypto-religionists" outwardly followed the official religion or ideology while hiding their true beliefs, frequently in totalitarian or authoritarian societies. When the emperor allowed Protestantism in Catholic Austria in the eighteenth century, thousands of crypto-protestants began to demand their own public worship. In Islamic countries like Egypt there are many secret Christians; in Shiite Iran there are many crypto-Sunnites. Even in India there may be many crypto-Christians among the officially Hindu Dalits.

Globalization, the human rights revolution, and the growth of democracy accompany a growing competition for souls which will not be restrained by anti-conversion laws or religious persecution. Christians must combine a clear *YES* to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and to prayer that the Holy Spirit convinces the hearts of people, with a clear *NO* to unethical ways of doing it, ways that go against the command and the spirit of their Saviour.

10. Evangelicals should contribute to the global moral discussion

At the inter-faith meeting "Conversion: Assessing the Reality," (Lariano, Italy, 12-16 May 2006), 27 people, representing Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and the Yoruba religion agreed that a code of conduct for propagating one's faith is needed. This event was held by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican and by the Office on Interreligious Relations and Dialogue of the World Council of Churches as a first step in a multi-phase process. At this meeting Christians listened to the complaints of non-Christian religions. The process envisioned at Lariano was that the various branches of Christianity would develop a code or codes of mission ethics, leading to a later inter-faith phase, to promote the idea of codes of conduct for all religious groups, so far as they are willing to participate.

The valuable results of Lariano are in two paragraphs:

> Freedom of religion is a fundamental, inviolable and non-negotiable right of every human being in every country in the world. Freedom of religion connotes the freedom, without any obstruction, to practice one's own faith, freedom to propagate the teachings of one's faith to people of one's own and other faiths, and also the freedom to embrace another faith out of one's own free choice. (Lariano Report 2006, no. 2)
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> 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 [sic] rights and religious sensibilities. (Lariano Report 2006, no. 3)

The theme of the second phase was agreed to be "Towards an ethical approach to conversion: Christian witness in a multi-religious world." Thus a significant task facing the World Evangelical Alliance would be to add details to thesis 6:

> A particular reform that we would commend to practitioners and establishments of all faiths is to ensure that conversion by 'unethical' means is discouraged and rejected by one and all. There should be transparency in the practice of inviting others to one's faith. (Lariano Report 2006, no. 6)

10.1 The current phase is an intra-Christian phase

The need is for Christians (Protestants, Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, and Orthodox) to first develop similar codes of conduct among themselves (relating to the other branches of the Christian tradition) to which they bind themselves and which they also apply in their relations with other religions. If Christians are unable to find peaceful ways of doing mission among themselves in a way that respects both the human dignity and the spiritual needs of others, how could it be found in relation to other religions? But if Christians *can* write good moral codes, this process should encourage other world religions to write similar codes, and these codes could contribute to global standards, which would promote the peaceful freedom of religion.

Christians should start with self-obligation, not to negotiate with other religions, but because they want to live honestly before God; the mistakes of others do not give them the right to act unethically. If Christians agree to codes of conduct, they can start to teach them to their members. Local Christian groups of any persuasion will not always listen to their representatives on a world level, and this may be especially true of evangelicals because of their flat hierarchy. But a biblical code is a good starting point for teaching, giving moral

guidance to Christians who could combine mission with unethical economic and political pressure, or who could combine mission with respect for people in a manner that contributes to peace, justice, and freedom in society.

10.2 This process has a moral goal, not a religious goal

Christians (Evangelicals, Orthodox, Protestants, and Catholics) can then ask other religions to agree on codes of conduct for themselves, without denying the distinctiveness of the biblical gospel. Codes of conduct to ban ways to urge conversion by unethical means only make sense if they are not oriented toward any one group. The Lariano Report is right when it states, "We acknowledge that errors have been perpetrated and injustice committed by the adherents of every faith. Therefore, it is incumbent on every community to conduct honest self-critical examination of its historical conduct as well as its doctrinal/theological precepts. Such self-criticism and repentance should lead to necessary reforms inter alia on the issue of conversion." (Lariano Report 2006, no. 5)

10.3 The global moral discussion relates to human rights

A code of conduct (even if formulated only by Christians) would be of great value in talking to *governments* that want to know how to permit religious freedom legally, including the right to do mission. It must also safeguard against the use of religion for suppressing human dignity or for promoting social unrest. Many governments fear that religious conversions will fuel strife or violence. Christians can help by speaking with one voice, offering practical, balanced codes (Guntau 2007). This is the political dimension of mission ethics. How can we preserve the human right of religious freedom, while also preserving the same rights for others and preserving all other fundamental rights?[12]

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[12] Such a code is being developed with the World Evangelical Alliance. Another good contribution to the global discussion is "Missionary Activity and Human Rights: A Code of Conduct for Missionary Activities," published by the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief (2009), (www.oslocoalition.org). To their code we would wish to add that truth telling about other religions is an important moral duty which is difficult to express in the language of human rights, while we note that evangelicals often see their entire lives as an act of gospel proclamation, making it difficult to separate any activity from the invitation to others to accept the evangelical faith.

Article 18.2 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says: "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice." We want this to be true for us, but we also want this to be true for all our neighbours (Lerner 1998:483). Christians may use the legal system of their states to defend their rights (Schirrmacher 2008). But equally they should not use laws and courts to hinder the rights of other religious groups when they practice their freedom of religion legally.

11. We should summarize our convictions in a short code

Christians need a code of conduct acceptable in mission, including what conduct needs to be banned. From the view of Christian ethics, these are universal moral principles; this code should not be intended for evangelicals only.[13]

To be sure this code of ethics is not opposed to evangelism, active missionaries must help write it; its purpose is to improve the quality of mission work and the evangelical contribution to society, not inhibit mission. The WEA must ask all churches and branches of Christianity to then stand together to publicly endorse similar principles.[14] One can seriously hope that such steps will, with time, reduce religious persecution and also give reason for governments to eliminate laws against religious conversion. Past mistakes by Christians comprise one reason why some governments try to legally restrain religious conversions.

All Christian confessions agree that a true conversion is a personal, well-considered move of the heart in dialogue with God. A forced conversion is not something Christians should want. If people want to convert, Christians should give them time for discernment and not baptize them prematurely. Pastors should be assured that converts know what they are doing. There should be transparency concerning

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[13] For the sake of completeness, we must add that violence and undue pressure cannot only be used to get people to leave a religion, but also to stay in it. To force young people to stay in a natural religion in a Brazilian tribe is as bad as to force them to become Christians.

[14] See earlier statements of the Roman Catholic Church Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, article 2, paragraph 13, and by the World Council of Churches in "The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling to Common Witness" (1995). Online http://tinyurl.com/wcc1995.

what Christianity is and what is expected of Christians after their conversion. Christianity is not a secret cult but is open to the public. We do not have anything to hide (Matt 10:26-27). Jesus said concerning those who want to become his followers: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?" (Luke 14:28; cf. 27-33). Christians should help people who are considering becoming Christians to calculate the costs, not rush them into churches at the risk that later, as new converts they will feel cheated.

When people today see on TV that some religious groups will use any means to further their cause, true Christians have to state what means they will never use; and if some Christians use inappropriate means, they should receive the disapproval of other Christians on the basis of a public code of ethics. The motto WWJD ("What would Jesus do?"), recently popular among some teenagers, has to guide us especially when we fulfil Jesus' Great Commission.

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