

“Ecumenical Charity as Christian Witness”

Mission Worldwide
Edinburgh 2010 Conference
Edinburgh, Scotland
June 2 – 6, 2010

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As I begin, I wish to thank the organizers of this centenary commemoration of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference. And let me also express my appreciation for being on this panel with these valued colleagues.

When I was a teenager, I belonged to a very active youth group in my local church. The group was led by the father of one my friends, a life-long member of the Greek Orthodox community whose religious experience included a kind of conversion of the heart that led to what I’d call an evangelical zeal, for both Christ and for Orthodoxy. His goal in our group was to help young people keep their faith at the center of their lives.

One time in a private conversation, he told me that, in evangelizing, if necessary to seal the deal with a potential convert, he would not hesitate to lie, say about a particular biblical claim or an Orthodox doctrine, in order to win the person over to Christian faith. At the time, I was equally shocked and I must admit quite amused. I knew he was sincere in his concern for the spiritual life of his hypothetical interlocutor, but even at that time, when I was still a long way off from a theological vocation, I wondered if such a contradictory approach could lead to a genuine conversion.

Thinking about my remarks here today, I remembered this conversation from my past. And I believe it has significant relevance as we talk about mission. And I suggest that it begs questions about what makes for authentic mission, about the complex mix of sincerity of witness and church growth goals, and even about the genuineness of conversion. These questions are made that much more urgent when we contemplate the extent to which churches favorably or unfavorably regard one another. This regard can be called “ecumenical charity.”

“Ecumenical charity” is here defined as care, concern, and affection of one church for another, a kind of relationship that is characterized by respect between the churches. These kinds of relations reveal an appreciation for the gifts of the other churches involved, and a willingness to share their respective burdens. In the presence of such relations, genuine evangelization and authentic conversion can take place. In the absence of such relations, missionary efforts can clash rather than complement each other, they can introduce a denominational Jesus instead of the universal Christ, and they can lead to a diseased proclamation of the Gospel in place of the healing touch of the Good News.

It was the Roman Catholic – World Council of Churches working group that addressed some of these issues. Particularly helpful was the delineation between what I like to call good (or appropriate) evangelism and bad (or inappropriate) proselytism. Proselytism gets a lot of attention these days when used in the context of missionary efforts in Muslim countries. But its most harmful use is when Christians, while ostensibly seeking to make Christians from among people of other faiths, instead strive to make Christians from among people that are already Christians. What kind of evangelism is that?

I have been asked to illustrate two cases studies that illustrate how various degrees of ecumenical charity impact mission. I will describe one negative example, and one positive example. I will also use examples of mission activity that stem from my own country, the United States. One example will illustrate mission understood in traditional terms, in which Christians go from one context to another in order to preach the Gospel; the other example will illustrate an expanded definition of mission, that of standing with the oppressed as a witness of the Gospel’s message of justice that is inherently part of its message of salvation.

On the negative side, I could cite, of course, numerous examples of this kind of dubious behavior. We’re all familiar with the experience in Russia and other countries of Eastern Europe immediately after the fall of the Soviet system, when missionaries, generally but not only from evangelical or fundamentalist Protestant communities in the US, took advantage of the weak situation of the people, seeing them as “heathens” who needed to be converted rather than as brothers and sisters whose Orthodox Christian self-understanding was just beginning to resurrect after some seven decades in a virtual tomb. Likewise, I could lift up the example of Sri Lanka after the tsunami of 2004, when some apparently fringe missionary groups reportedly exploited the people’s suffering in order to attract them to the Christ of certain material blessings, to their brand of Christ at the expense of the local Christians who were certainly suffering and in need of consolation from fellow Christians.

But I would like to focus in on one particularly egregious missionary effort, this one in Iraq. We all know the terrible suffering that has gone on in Iraq since the beginning of this current war of choice begun by the United States, and how much of this suffering has been borne by the Christian communities that have lived in that country since time immemorial. At the National Council of Churches USA, we have had visits from two of these communities, the Armenian Orthodox and the Chaldean Catholic.

One evening a few years ago, I was winding down in a hotel room after a long day at one of our annual general assemblies, and I was flipping channels on the television when I happened upon a religious program about Christians in Iraq. I was pleasantly surprised – at first – because this was a channel owned by the ministry of one of the most famous, or infamous, televangelists on the religious right, and here was the announcer talking about the suffering, and even martyrdom, of Christians in these ancient communities. There was film of liturgical celebrations and social ministries being shown, and the speaker offered complimentary comments about these men, women and children, about their bravery, and he lamented the fact that so many of them nevertheless felt compelled to flee their country to escape the ravages of war.

So far, so good. But these charitable sentiments were not to last. The announcer immediately began to contrast these Christians with converts to the televangelist's mission community. He praised the latter for not leaving, for sticking it out through the difficulties of war, basically characterizing them as true Christians thus giving a robust witness to Christ and by implication not wavering in their faith like their apparently feckless neighbors. I don't doubt the sincerity of the Iraqis who made up this mission community; but it was dismaying to see these Christians set up as the faithful over and against other Christians as the faithless.

I don't know if the Iraqis in that particular mission community were converts from Islam – a logical conclusion, one would think, if watching this broadcast – or converts from one of the local Christian communities – a common phenomenon across the last couple hundred years in every mission field, such as in the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries or Eastern Europe even until today. Nevertheless, in a land of other faiths, the focus of this story was on how one brand of Christianity was witnessing better than another brand of Christianity, even at the expense of the latter.

And yet, how much more powerful would the witness to Christ have been if the missionaries sent to Iraq were there to support the local Christians, to work with the local Christian churches to foster reconciliation in their communities torn apart by war? In other words, where, my friends, was the notion that, instead of fragmenting the Iraqi Christian community by such

divisiveness, it might have been a good idea to mount a missionary effort precisely to build up the Christians who were there already, as we are exhorted to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:11? And the sad thing is, I'll bet this particular televangelist's community will be amply represented at another global missionary conference to be held later this year.

Conversely, on the positive side, I could cite numerous examples of good behavior in the mission field. For example, there is an American Jesuit engaged in building projects at a local Catholic parish in Ghana, who side-by-side with his Orthodox and Protestant counterparts works to alleviate the suffering of the poor. I could also point to the example of the partnership of the Orthodox Christian Mission Center (an American pan-Orthodox initiative) for the Orthodox Church in Albania, whose leader His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos is familiar to us all and whose Christian vocation has nurtured the rebirth of the Church in Albania even as it has led to the betterment of the situation of all people, Christians and Muslims alike, after years of totalitarian oppression.

You will note in these two examples that, in proclaiming the Word of Christ, central to the proclamation is ministering to the needs of the people. In the Ghanaian example, digging water wells is as much a part of Christian mission as preaching in the church. In the Albanian example, Archbishop Yannoulatos, when asked once what he needed most to help in his ministry, is famously quoted in the US (and probably elsewhere) for answering, "a tractor."

But here I want to focus on a different type of mission, one that expresses itself in solidarity with the oppressed. And this is the work of the Friends community. Like, and along with, many mainline Protestant communities – and through ecumenical ties the Orthodox and Catholic communities – the Friends have a long history of advocating for peace in the Middle East. Today its work centers on development, primarily through the American Friends Service Committee. I need to pause here and compare this witness to the competitive missionary efforts among Protestants in the midst of Catholics and Orthodox in the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, this Protestant witness is collaborative among the Protestant – and Catholic and Orthodox – churches in the region.

AFSC's work in the Middle East is primarily in development and peace-building. This takes the form of developing youth as bridge-builders in Palestine, of fostering dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Iran, and advocating (based on indigenous input from the region) for constructive US policy with regard to its peacemaking role throughout the region. This latter witness is generally done in partnership with other Christian communities. Their folks engaged in mission – certainly in mission more broadly defined than usually understood – seek to proclaim Christ through living out the Gospel they preach.

What does this type of witness say to the people of other faiths that live in the region? That being a Christian compels a believer, no matter their tradition or denomination, to seek peace and justice on behalf of the poor and oppressed. It may “win” converts from other faiths, it may not. God is the director of all hearts. And this is the attitude that leads to genuine proclamation, and if God ordains, to genuine conversion.

These are just two examples, set within the context of many. These stories can be complemented by scores of others that are rooted in your own homelands. I offer them here today as fodder for discussion.

Again, I thank the organizers of this conference for giving us the opportunity to indeed converse about what it means to be engaged in “Mission Worldwide.” I thank my colleagues up here on the dais with me for their important contributions. And I thank you for what I know will be a good discussion to follow.