

## A timely discussion of the ethics of evangelism

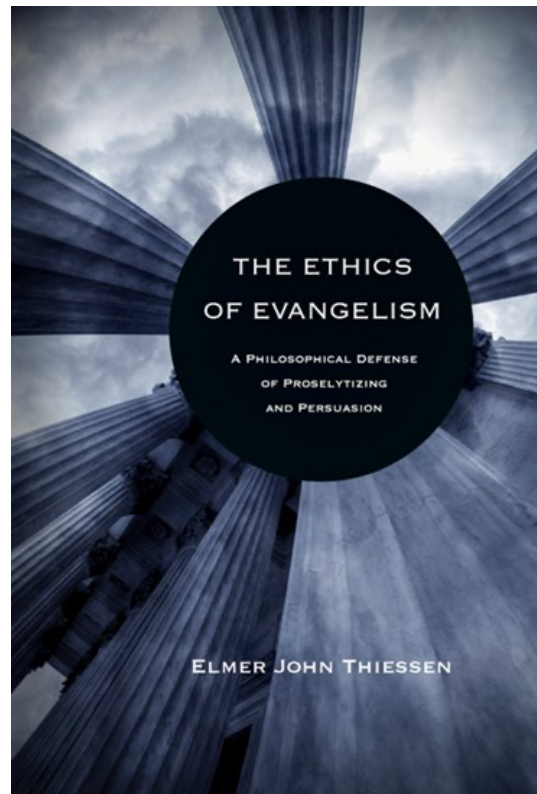
### A major contribution to the course of religious freedom

*Elmer Thiessen. The Ethics of Evangelism: A Philosophical Defence of Proselytizing and Persuasion. (Paternoster, UK; IV Academic, USA), 2011.*

In a multi-cultural world evangelism is often under attack, with those seeking to evangelise sometimes being branded arrogant, ignorant, hypocritical and meddlesome. Against such a backdrop this unique book asks what sort of evangelism is ethical in a liberal, post-Christian society. Thiessen discusses the immoral practices and attitudes that are sometimes associated with evangelism and then turns his insightful attention to a better way of approaching the subject. Should we try to bring people to Christ or not? He engages in a timely, relevant cultural debate about religion in public and social life. He examines cultural and intellectual objections to evangelism accurately and fairly and provides a thorough philosophical defence for public Christian practice. But the book is no lobbyism. It contains a lot of self criticism and takes it serious, that unethical evangelism is plain wrong.

Christian witness is not zone free of ethics. Mission needs an ethical framework, if Christians want really to do the will of Jesus. This is the goal of the book: Not to defend proselytizing as such, but only to defend ethical proselytizing:

“my overall aim is to provide a philosophical defence of proselytizing, showing that an ethical form of proselytizing is indeed possible.” (p. 21).



This is a timely study, as the first ecumenical code of ethics for Christian witness discussed between the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical alliance is on its way. Evangelism and ethics belong together and may not be separated, as do legal and human rights questions with any propagation of faith and values. Never before has this been studied so in depth as by Elmer Thiessen, who discusses the topic both as an inner-Christian theological question as well as a general legal question with regard to all religions. This most extensive ethical analysis of evangelism to date is an invaluable service to the church as well as to anybody interested in a peaceful society.

Elmer Thiessen from Canada gained a Ph.D. from University of Waterloo taught philosophy and religious studies at Medicine Hat College, in Alberta, for over 35 years and is now Research Professor of Education at Tyndale University College in Toronto. Thiessen has written two other books with a similar depths of arguments, “Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture” (1993) and “In Defence of Religious Schools and Colleges 2001”, in which he proves, that religious education is possible and should be without indoctrination.

He writes from a Christian perspective and defends Christian mission. But his arguments are directed to secular readers as well as adherents of other religions. And his general principles are valid for all kind of spreading a religion or worldview and thus the book is a major contribution the course of religious freedom.

I think it is vital to understand Thiessen’s argument, that proselytizing has a lot in common with many other kinds of advertising and marketing (p. 25). You cannot allow a free society to propagate more or less anything and than to single religions out. I would add: Proselytizing is very closely connected to the human rights of freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of press and others. As long as we insist, that Amnesty and Greenpeace, political parties of all kind, schools and universities, and many more, must be free to reach out to members of a free society, why in the world should religions or the Christian religion be an exception here?

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