



Evangelism and Tsunami Relief

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Abstract: *Responding to press coverage about overseas Christian groups exploiting the Tsunami, Ajith Fernando, Country Director of Youth for Christ in Sri Lanka challenges the Sri Lankan Christians of the need for integrity. It will challenge us on the ethics of the issue too.*

A new challenge is facing the church in Sri Lanka while she responds (magnificently, I believe) to the needs of our people after the tsunami. That challenge is on how we can fulfil our evangelistic mandate at this time. Some Christians, especially some who are here from other nations and are not familiar with the ground situation here, are doing some things which may be unwise. These actions are causing anger in the minds of government authorities and residents. Here are some theological and practical reflections on the issue of doing evangelism while doing disaster relief.

The government and local authorities give permission to some Christian groups to do relief work in areas under their jurisdiction with the understanding that they do not do overt evangelism like tract distribution, open air meetings, street drama and what we usually describe as public evangelism. We must not break that trust. While our primary responsibility is to God we are also citizens of this world and respect the authority of the leaders of this world. Unless obeying them means disobeying God we will continue to obey these authorities (Rom. 13).

One of the most important commands of Christ is to share the gospel. There is still freedom to do that in Sri Lanka. But it is getting to be increasingly difficult to do so along with strong social relief programmes as we are being accused of using the social relief as bait. We are in danger of losing the right to proclaim the gospel at all because opponents of evangelism are using the “bait” argument to agitate for the prohibition of conversion. Knowing this, it would be wise to stay away from overt forms of evangelism during activities that come under the tsunami relief programmes.

The book of Acts shows that Paul and Luke were eager to ensure that Christianity was accepted as a legitimate and good movement by the authorities. Paul suffered because he preached the gospel. And we too must be ready to suffer for this reason. However, the Bible also tells us that Christians should not suffer because of misbehaviour or tactless behaviour (1 Pet. 4:15). Sometimes Christians are unnecessarily persecuted because they did not act wisely. The Bible says, “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way” (Prov. 19:2). The Bible often recommends that we seek counsel from others so that we can act wisely in hostile situations, especially situations of conflict (Prov. 15:22; 20:18; 24:3-7). This is one of those times where wisdom is so needed by the church. We need to be discussing among each other about the wisest way to fulfil the call of God to us.

Because of the constraints placed upon us by those who have invited us to do these tsunami relief programmes we have to restrict ourselves to what is permitted. We can show the love of Christ by our actions and wait for other opportunities to explain fully the supreme way in which that love was expressed in Christ. The authorities who opened the doors for us to come in would see it as a betrayal of the trust they had in us if we do overt evangelism during the relief operations. That would compromise the long term witness to Christ's gospel and cause the nation to question our integrity. One of the supreme results of the work of the gospel in people's lives is that it makes us people of integrity. In a nation crippled by corruption, our integrity is part of the light that shines so that people see our good works and give glory to God (Matt. 5:16).

Many Christians are on the brink of exhaustion serving affected people in Sri Lanka. At the moment they cannot share the gospel too much verbally, apart from saying a few things about their Christian background and convictions. An occasional prayer may be prayed. They have shown the love of Christ by their servanthood and by their identification with hurting people through listening to their pain. The people whom they serve know they are Christians and are impressed by the example of sacrificial love that Christians have demonstrated at this time. Sometimes in strictly personal and private settings there would be further explanations regarding God and Christ.

We are in it for the long haul. Once the relief stage is over, we will give the place of importance that evangelism deserves in our agenda. Evangelism has always been an urgent call in our thinking. But the situation in the country being what it is, we will need to avoid tying up overt evangelism too closely with social relief. That may work in other countries. But at this time, in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, it would be unwise to combine the two. True it may seem as if we are losing good opportunities to witness for Christ, but we can trust the sovereign God to honour our decision to guard our integrity. He works through different segments of his body at different times to bring a comprehensive witness of his saving acts to the world.

Missionaries to Nepal have had to live with these constraints over several decades. They had no permission to preach or do any overt type of evangelism. But the nationals did that and there has been a huge harvest of people who have come to Christ over the past 10 years or so. I am certain that the silent witness of the foreign social workers had an important part to play in that (though it may not be recognised by many today). This is the long haul perspective.

What happened in Nepal is a scenario that happens often. One group of Christians had shown people the love of Christ through good works. Some time after that another group of Christians will share the gospel with them, and they are receptive to the message because they are already favourably disposed to Christianity through the kindness of the earlier group.

I realise that some critics of evangelism are including this scenario under what they call unethical conversion. We deny that this is unethical. This is a situation where people are exposed to the value of Christianity through seeing it demonstrated by word and deed. There is no manipulation involved. We must ensure that no one gets the impression that our aid is a bait to win them to Christianity. Our aid must come out of genuine love for the people who have been created by God and out of a desire to meet their physical and material needs. We must ensure that those who profess to accept the gospel do so only because they realise that this gospel is the truth.

Such practices are in keeping with the principles of persuasion which are accepted in society and also used in the Bible to share the Christian message (e.g. in Acts). Marketing takes place through people being persuaded of the desirability of the object being marketed. Politicians seek to win support for themselves and their causes through persuasion. This is an accepted method of communication which respects the people's right to choose the things they will accept. Even when God calls people to himself he does not force his way into their lives. He says, "Come now, let us reason together..." (Isa. 1:18).

Paul says, "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). It would be cunning for us to enter with the express purpose of doing relief and not evangelism and then use that opening to do overt evangelism. We will wait for the appropriate time to share the gospel with our people. I must say, however, that I believe the indiscretions of most of those who have shared the gospel unwisely do not arise out of cunning motives. I think these arise more from a defective understanding of the theological issues and the ground situation. Many of these people are sincere Christians with a deep passion to do what is right.

We realise that far greater than all the needs that the tsunami has generated is the unchanging need for the large masses of our people to know the Saviour and the eternal salvation he gives. But in keeping with the exalted principles of the God we worship we will not stoop to any unworthy ways to get that message across.

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