



## Persuasion – the centre piece of effective evangelism

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on my shelves do not have entries under the 'P' word. Yet, if you take persuasion out of evangelism, you are left with unpersuasive evangelism.

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“The chief priests and the scribes persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.” (Matthew 27:20)

“(the people) were persuaded that John (the Baptist) was a prophet.” (Luke 20:6)

“(Gamaliel’s) speech persuaded them.” (Acts 5:40)

“Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas.” (Acts 17:4)

“Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.” (Acts 18:4)

“This man is persuading the people to worship God.” (Acts 18:13)

“(Paul was) arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” (Acts 19:8)

“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to become a Christian?” (Acts 26:28)

“Since then we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men.” (2 Corinthians 5:11)

So often in contemporary evangelism the

emphasis is given to proclaiming and explaining the gospel to the complete neglect of trying to persuade people that it is true.

### Why has Persuasion been ignored?

I wasn't quick witted enough to point out that a person won by an experience is at the mercy of a better experience! However, his viewpoint was widely shared and highlighted a subjective and relative approach to truth. It was very post-modern. Interestingly, this popular preacher often used cultural references and quotations from famous people in his sermons. His talks had a veneer of intellectualism about them but he never presented sustained intellectual arguments. A quote from Nietzsche may decorate a talk, but an exploration of Nietzsche's meaning did not follow.

as Paul put it (1 Corinthians 10:4,5).

This style of preaching usually assumed the existence of God and the reliability of the Scriptures. There was no encouragement to ask questions. So it became increasingly irrelevant as people were seriously unpersuaded about God and believed little or nothing about the gospel Christ.

The law of diminishing returns set in where only those on the fringes of the church were responding to evangelism. And even for them, simply telling the story and explaining the gospel was not enough. Others had lost interest. Evangelism was addressed to subjective needs, to the neglect of objective truthfulness. People felt that 'Religion was for the religious' and those of a temperament to crave after such things.

Now Europe has largely forgotten its Christian heritage and many Christians look on in despair. However, we need to encourage ourselves that there was a time when the name of Christ was unheard of in Europe, yet the early Christians took paganism by storm. If we are going to have a similar impact today, we must look closely at what they actually did and how they described their evangelism. 'Persuasion' sparkles from the pages of the New Testament as a forgotten jewel.

## What then is Persuasion?

as follows:

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, that is, he was held in high regard. They knew he was worth listening to. The man was credible.

Secondly, he put the Christians, who had caused the disturbance, out of the room. Then, presumably when tempers had quietened down, he addressed them.

His was the cooling voice of sweet reason – and his speech persuaded them.

He wasn't dogmatic and cock-sure of himself. He did not rant. But his case was reasonable enough and it won the day. So there was much more going on here than relentless intellectual logic. He won their trust.

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) . We need to note also his very different approach to non-Jews in Acts 14:15-17, Acts 17: 22-31, where he argued from their culture, not Scripture.

## How then should we do it?

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I have to say that I cringe from raucous preachers, people who shout at their audiences, wave their arms about and try to whip up their emotions, instead of talking to them like normal human beings, with reason, gentleness and respect. Such preachers are in my view an appalling model for good evangelism.

Persuasion is not a matter of battering people into submission.

. This reminds us that the message itself appeals to the conscience, bringing conviction about its intrinsic goodness and I take it that the character

of the messenger must be consistent with it in the way he delivers it.

(2 Corinthians 4:2)

, so it must be possible to argue unpersuasively! In fact, I know it is. I have heard lots of unpersuasive arguments. It clearly is not enough to be nice and kind, if we are not also convincing.

Neither is it enough for our message to appear plausible but ultimately be found to be unsubstantial. There is nothing to be gained by making out that our case for belief is better than it is. Exaggeration is a form of deception. Better to understate our arguments – and let the enquirer discover later that they are better than he first realised – than to overstate them.

(1 Corinthians 2:4). Doesn't this refute my argument? Many have suggested that Paul regretted his approach to the Athenians and adopted a non-intellectual approach subsequently. I call this the Corinthian Heresy. There is absolutely nothing in the text to suggest he changed his approach as any comparison with Luke's description of Paul at work in Athens, Corinth and Ephesus will show (see Acts 17-19).

There is some important background information here to help us understand the particular difficulties Paul encountered. Greek oratory continued to flourish in the Roman world and Corinth was noted for its visiting orators (no television in those days!). They were generally young men of athletic build and enormous self-confidence, who could speak, it seems, on any subject requested of them and entertain their audiences with flowing words, dramatic gestures and empty rhetoric.

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When Corinthians heard Paul, they expected him to be another visiting orator but he could not compete. Far from bravado and athleticism, he was anxious and weak. Furthermore, he only had one message that he had come to speak about and he was not prepared to entertain audiences according to their requests. And he was not relying on an impressive flow of powerful rhetoric but on the power of God himself (1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

For those expecting to hear a visiting orator, Paul was a big disappointment. That does not mean that he did not try to present his message convincingly. In fact, it is clear that he did (Acts 18:4, 8; 2 Corinthians 5:11).

This raises another important matter. Should we worry about the words we use? Do we need to be careful about language? Well, I think Luke thought so. His Greek was eloquent. It surely is important that people find us easy and interesting to listen to. Think of good broadcasters that people love to hear. Or journalists whose columns are widely read and discussed. They all have worked hard on their communication skills. We should not throw up unnecessary obstacles of poor diction, limited vocabulary, unimaginative phrases or monotonous voices.

– biography about him<sup>[2]</sup> reveals that that he learned to use precision in his speech from his pedantic father.

Words are our tools. We don't want blunt instruments to bludgeon people with but precision instruments to cut through to the heart of the matter. (Stott's father was a doctor – he knew about scalpels!) We need to sharpen our word skills, increase our vocabularies, consider our sentence constructions and feel the force of poetry to find the words that connect with and stir the imagination.

And why should we learn to love words? Because God loves the Word and the Word became flesh and the Word said exactly what God wanted to say to us. The word came in a highly accessible format! He took great care over the Word he sent us, and we should take great care over the words we send out. Paul denounced empty words, vacuous rhetoric and human wisdom but was at great pains to make sure his message from God was clear and on target.

## Is Persuasion enough?

Where does the work of the Holy Spirit come in, to bring about conversion? Certainly persuasion is not the same as conversion. Our task is to persuade people that God has revealed himself in

Christ. The Spirit of Holiness convicts people of sin, righteousness and judgement. The Spirit of Truth exposes falsehood, convicting people that the Gospel is true and that Christ can be trusted. Our tasks are both to pray and to persuade. It is God's task to transform.

The gospel then appeals to the heart, will, emotions, conscience, intellect and the imagination. And we need to keep all these matters in mind if we are to be effective Christian Persuaders.

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. (IVP, 2009).

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