

WHAT TO SAY & HOW TO SAY IT: EVANGELISM & THE ETHICS OF PERSUASION

INTRODUCTION

In our postmodern world, does **persuasion** still have a place in preaching, teaching, and sharing the gospel? Larry Overstreet cites a remarkable statistic from David Larsen: “People today are wary of persuasion, and well they might be, for we are drowned in it. It is estimated that two thousand persuasion messages come to us daily.”¹ Moreover, many of these persuasion messages are rude, crude, obnoxious, inconvenient, or downright unethical. Consider the following techniques:

- A. **Ingratiation** (enticement of others through flattery, gifts, rewards, etc., to gain compliance)
- B. **Manipulation** (subtle or overt emotional or authoritarian control of others to do one’s bidding)
- C. **Sophistry** (seduction, deceit, or trickery of another to win an argument or gain compliance)
- D. **Violence/Torture** (infliction of physical or psychological pain to elicit a desired response)

The importance of persuasion was recognized by the ancient Greeks as far back as the time of Homer. In fact, one of the Greek goddesses was Peitho, Persuasion. But Greek writers were acutely aware of the ethical questions that the art of persuasion raises. It could be used not only **to convince** with legitimate argumentation, but also **to seduce** (Homer, *Odyssey* 7.258; 23.337; *Iliad* 6.360; Lysias, *Fragments* 7.21) and **to deceive** (Sophocles, *Philoctetus* 102). Consequently, such writers as Plato, Aristotle, and Quintilian stressed the need for an ethical character to rhetorical persuasion.

Today, members of the persuasion professions (e.g., marketers, advertisers, lawyers, lobbyists, politicians, campaign consultants, community activists, pundits, clergy, etc.) frequently discuss the ethics of persuasion, although perhaps not to the extent that they should. The following persuasion textbooks do not contain *any* chapters on ethics:

- Reardon (1991), *Persuasion in Practice*
- O’Keefe (2002), *Persuasion: Theory and Research*
- Cooper & Williams (2002), *Power Persuasion: Moving an Ancient Art into the Media Age*
- Perloff (2003), *The Dynamics of Persuasion*
- Stiff & Mongeau (2003), *Persuasive Communication*
- Brock & Green (2005), *Persuasion: Psychological Insights and Perspectives*

One wonders if such an omission is driven by the *ends* of persuasion being regarded as more important than the *means*. Indeed, unethical persuasion sometimes works. As General George S. Patton said, “If you’ve got ’em by the [genitals], their hearts and minds will follow.” Whatever efficacy there might be to such a strategy, however, the ethic behind it is universally rejected.

¹ Larry R. Overstreet, “The Priority of Persuasive Preaching,” *Preaching*, July/August 2003: 50.

For the Christian teacher, preacher, or witness, then, **what are the ethics of persuasion?** When does gospel persuasion become inappropriate ingratiation, manipulation, sophistry, or even torture?

I. MEANS, MOTIVES, AND ENDS

All communication involves a sender, a receiver, and a message. Therefore, every interaction involves a **content** component and a **relationship** component, both of which entail ethical considerations. Since persuasion is goal-oriented, it involves a series of choices between **means and ends** on the part of the persuader. At a surface level, the possible combinations are as follows:

- A. Good Means and Good Ends (E.g., making true statements to raise funds for charity)
- B. Good Means and Bad Ends (E.g., making true statements to promote illegal drug use)
- C. Bad Means and Good Ends (E.g., making false statements to raise funds for charity)
- D. Bad Means and Bad Ends (E.g., making false statements to promote illegal drug use)

Clearly, the definition of “good” and “bad” will vary depending upon the worldview commitments of the persuader and the receiver. Moreover, **the motives** of the persuader are regarded as important in evaluating the ethics of the means. Consider the following examples:

Means	A Good Motive or End	A Bad Motive or End
Ingratiation	Trying to cheer up a friend who is depressed about a grade on a test (through kind words, token gifts, a meal, etc.)	Lavishing attention on a dying relative in order “get in good” with him or her and possibly receive an inheritance
Manipulation	Trying to convince a child (through fear tactics or horror scenarios) never to accept a ride from a stranger	Threatening to demote or fire an employee for refusing the sexual advances of a superior
Sophistry	Trying to conceal a birthday party (through schemes or deception) for the one in whose honor the party is given	Trying to swindle an elderly person out of his or her life savings by strongly advocating a certain investment strategy
Violence/Torture	Inflicting physical or psychological pain on a detainee for the acquisition of time-critical information that will save lives	Inflicting physical or psychological pain on a person as punishment because he or she holds a different worldview

Moreover, contemporary persuasion techniques are constantly on display in a consumer-driven, multimedia world. Research indicates that the top criticisms of advertisers and/or marketers include:

- Advertising sells us dreams by enticing us with romanticized images.
- Advertising makes us believe there is a quick fix for most of life’s problems.
- Advertising panders to our desires for things that may actually be bad for us.
- Advertisers manipulate us into wanting things we don’t really need.

Discuss:

1. Is **ingratiation** ever appropriate for sharing the gospel? Why or why not?
2. Is **manipulation** ever appropriate for sharing the gospel? Why or why not?
3. Is **sophistry** ever appropriate for sharing the gospel? Why or why not?
4. Is **violence/torture** ever appropriate for sharing the gospel? Why or why not?
5. Can sharing the gospel ever become like **bad or false advertising**? If so, how?
6. What ethical guidelines should be followed when seeking to persuade **vulnerable persons** (e.g., children, the elderly, the poor, the grieving, immigrants, the undereducated, etc.)?
7. Can “**gospel receptivity scales**” be used ethically? Unethically?

II. PERSUASION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

It is clear from the New Testament that Jesus and the early church sought to be persuasive in their defense and communication of the gospel (and its implications). Below is a brief sampling of their efforts. Can you find fault with any of their means, ends, or motives?

A. Luke’s Prologue (Luke 1:1-4)

Evaluation

¹ Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

B. Samaritan Opposition (Luke 9:52-56)

Evaluation

⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them, ⁵⁶ and they went to another village.

C. Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand (Mark 6:35-44)

Evaluation

³⁵ By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. ³⁶ Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

. . . ⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³ and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. ⁴⁴ The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

D. Jesus Arrested (John 18:10-11)

Evaluation

¹⁰ Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.)

¹¹ Jesus commanded Peter, "Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?"

E. Jesus Appears to Thomas (John 20:26-29)

Evaluation

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

F. John's Purpose in Writing (John 20:30-31)

Evaluation

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

G. Many Convincing Proofs (Acts 1:3)

Evaluation

³ After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

H. Peter's Pentecost Sermon (Acts 2:14-16)

Evaluation

¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel"

I. Peter Speaks to the Crowd after a Healing (Acts 3:13-15)

Evaluation

¹³ “The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.”

Note: Similar accusations are made elsewhere in Acts (2:23, 36; 4:10; 5:30; 7:51-52; 10:39; 13:27-29, 46; 18:6; and 28:25-28). For an evaluation of these hard sayings, see my article: Timothy R. Valentino, “The Homiletical Charge in the Book of Acts: Does Luke Reveal an Anti-Semitism?” *Evangelical Journal* 14/2 (1996): 62-76.

J. Paul in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4)

Evaluation

¹ When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. ² As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. “This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ,” he said. ⁴ Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.

K. Paul in Athens (Acts 17:22-34)

Evaluation

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.

²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

²⁶ From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. ²⁷ God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

²⁹ “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such

ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. ³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

³² When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” ³³ At that, Paul left the Council. ³⁴ A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

L. Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1-4)

Evaluation

¹ After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³ and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

M. Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10)

Evaluation

⁸ Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ⁹ But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

N. Paul’s Chains Advance the Gospel (Philippians 1:15-18a)

Evaluation

¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

O. Not Simply with Words (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6a)

Evaluation

. . . ⁵ because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. ⁶ You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

P. The Ministry of Reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11)

Evaluation

¹¹ Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.

Q. Demolishing Strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

Evaluation

³ For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

R. Paul’s Appeal for Onesimus (Philemon 1:8-19)

Evaluation

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. . . .

¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.

III. A GLARING CONTRADICTION?

- A. The above passages indicate that the apostles and the early Christians sought to be persuasive in their communication of the gospel and its implications. But this practice would seem to be undermined by Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2:4:

“And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”

- B. How can we reconcile this statement with the rest of the biblical data? Overstreet concludes that Paul is not speaking here against the “plain” (or Atticist) style of persuasion, which was characterized by clarity, simplicity, and restraint, but the “grand” (or Asiatic) style of persuasion, which was characterized by ornate, luxuriant, and bombastic rhetoric.
- C. Overstreet is likely correct. In Corinth during the time of Paul, it mattered little whether the speaker had a purpose in speaking. The glory of the speech was an end in itself. Thus, what

Paul seems to be rejecting in 1 Corinthians 2:4 is “not preaching, not even persuasive preaching; rather, it is the real danger in all preaching—self-reliance.” In other words, Paul’s burden in this passage is to recall his “continual determination to preach in a clear and cogent style, and to emphasize the message rather than the speaker.”

D. **Discuss:**

1. Where have you seen **gospel persuasion** done poorly?
2. Where have you seen **gospel persuasion** done well?

IV. IS RELIGIOUS PERSUASION INHERENTLY ARROGANT?

- A. Christians sometimes hear the objection, “**It is arrogant for you to insist that your religious truth is right and to try to convert me to it. Who do you think you are?**”
- B. As a simple matter of logic and fairness, it is not difficult to intellectually diffuse such an objection. One could simply boomerang the argument on those who use it and demonstrate how *they* are guilty of the same social “crime”:

“So, you’re trying to convert me away from *my* belief that evangelism is vitally important, and to *your* belief that Jesus is just like any other religious figure in history? Isn’t it arrogant of *you* to try to convert me to *your* view? You can only judge a religious claim on the basis of some external criteria, which, in the end, amounts to *your* religious beliefs. So, who are you to try to convert me to those beliefs? You’re condemning *me* for doing what you *yourself* are trying to do! Let’s face it—all claims are exclusivistic. And Christianity is the most universal of all exclusivistic claims.”

- C. However, as a matter of cultural expectation, there are other dynamics at work when it comes to religious persuasion, and pointing out a double standard is not likely to be effective. Strong-arming people with logic does not usually inspire a genuine interest in the gospel. In fact, evangelical Christians would be wise to **apply the Golden Rule** here, remembering what it feels like to be on the receiving end of rude or unsolicited religious presentations. How do you feel, for example, when:
1. Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses show up at your door to pay you a cold-call visit?
 2. Members of Westboro Baptist Church inject themselves into funerals to make a point?
 3. Boisterous street preachers engage in the mass condemnation of various “sinners”?
- D. In Western society today, some sort of “**permission**”—implicit or explicit—is often required to address another person’s religious and/or worldview commitments, which are usually regarded as personal and private matters. Without consent to come into someone else’s private “space,” the believer may generate feelings of alienation and consternation.
- E. In our day, evangelicals may need to “earn the right to be heard” in order to talk with others about spiritual things. To that end, “second mile living” is one way that such permission might be earned (cf. Matt 5:41).

V. THE CALL TO BE WINSOME

“Second-mile living” is essentially a call to be winsome for the gospel. As someone once said, “If Jesus is in your heart, notify your face!” We could add, “Notify your hands and feet, too. While you’re at it, love your neighbor as yourself. Practice the ‘one anothers’ in Scripture. Serve.”

The call to be winsome for the gospel is variously expressed (and modeled) throughout the New Testament:

A. Let Your Light Shine (Matthew 5:14-16)

Notes

¹⁴“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

B. What to Say and How to Say It (John 12:47-49)

Notes

⁴⁷“As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.” ⁴⁸There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. ⁴⁹For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.”

C. Renouncing Secret and Shameful Ways (2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

Notes

¹Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.

D. Shining Like Stars (Philippians 2:14-16a)

Notes

¹⁴Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe ¹⁶as you hold out the word of life.

E. Adorning the Gospel (Titus 2:9-10)

Notes

⁹Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, ¹⁰and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

F. Discuss:

1. What are some characteristics of ethical, winsome gospel persuasion?
2. How can a believer be winsome in person? Via social media or other correspondence?
3. What could be the “cost” of being winsome for the gospel? Are you willing to pay it?
4. What does it look like to be “boldly, broadly, and beautifully evangelical”?