

The Art of Biblical Persuasion – How to win people rather than arguments

1. How Persuasion Works

a. Entering Their Worldview

I can recall well when I had first read Bertrand Russell's book *Why I'm not a Christian* as a student in Cambridge. It had been recommended to me as one of the most powerful and important intellectual rebuttals of Christianity ever written; and I took it up wondering what effect it would have on my thinking. I was totally unprepared for what I found. I had expected a careful, incisive examination of the evidence that was readily available, a lot of which I had already been exposed to; yet I came away with the impression that Russell simply had not engaged at any depth with the substantial body of evidence that supports Christianity. The net effect of the book was to leave me very disappointed with Russell (after all, he was a mathematician), and to confirm my Christian faith, not undermine it. Much more recently I have had many similar experiences reading the New Atheists.¹

Alvin Plantinga wisely asserts that people avoid Christianity not because they have really examined its teachings and found them wanting, but because their culture gives huge plausibility (by the media, through art, through the expertise and impressive credentials of its spokespersons) to believe a series of defeater beliefs that they *know* are true, and since they are true, Christianity can't be. The leading defeaters must be dealt with clearly and quickly but convincingly. Defeaters are dealt with when the person feels you have presented the objection to Christianity in a clearer and stronger way than they could have done it.²

b. Challenging Their Worldview

We undertake a work of retrieval, that we identify and articulate the higher ideal behind the more or less debased practices, and then criticise these practices from the standpoint of their own motivating ideal. In other words, instead of just dismissing this culture altogether, or just endorsing it as it is, we ought to attempt to raise its practice by making more palpable to its participants what the ethic they subscribe to really involves. This means engaging in the work of persuasion.³

c. Completing Their Worldview

The doctrines of creation, sin, grace, and faith must be presented in connection with 'baseline cultural narratives' – Jesus must be the answer to the questions the culture is asking. Don't forget – *every* gospel presentation presents Jesus as the answer to *some* set of human-cultural questions, like 'how can I be forgiven?' (Western moral individualism) or 'how can I be free?' (post-modern expressive individualism) or 'how can *we* overcome evil forces in the world?' (contemporary Africans) etc. Every gospel presentation has to be culturally incarnated, it must assume *some* over-riding cultural concern, so we may as well be engaged with the ones that we face! Christianity must be presented as answers to the main questions and aspirations of our culture.²

No truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way – but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture.⁴

¹ John Lennox, *Gunning For God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford: Lion, 2011), 189-190.

² Tim Keller, 'Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ'. Online: http://www.case.edu.au/images/uploads/03_pdfs/keller-deconstructing-defeater.pdf

³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 72.

⁴ D.A. Carson, 'Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a Postmodern World', *Science & Christian Belief* 14:2 (October 2002): 107-122. Online: <http://www.scienceandchristianbelief.org/articles/carson.pdf>

2. The Biblical Basis

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Paul's Speeches in Acts

13 ³² What God promised our ancestors ³³ he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my son; today I have become your father.' (Psalm 2:7) ³⁴ God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. As God has said, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' (Isaiah 55:3) ³⁵ So it is also stated elsewhere: 'You will not let your holy one see decay.' (Psalm 16:10)

14 ¹⁵ Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. ¹⁶ In the past, he let all nations go their own way. ¹⁷ Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

17 ²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' (Epimenides) As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' (Aratus) 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 human design and skill.

We see that Paul, in his presentation to the Areopagus, initiated by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of Athens, employs convictions, arguments and formulations that these intellectual Athenians were familiar with and that they would have acknowledged as valid. Exegetes and missiologists often use the term *contextualisation* for this dimension of Paul's Areopagus speech.⁵

The speeches in Acts are framed in a way that suits their context, and each has distinctive elements that could be identified with the speaker concerned. The messianic kingship of Jesus and its implications remains the core of the message to pagan audiences, though the terminology and approach are very different from the preaching to Jews or Gentiles who were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures.⁶

John 1:1-3, 14

¹ In the beginning was the Word (λόγος), and the Word (λόγος) was with God, and the Word (λόγος) was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... ¹⁴ The Word (λόγος) became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Firstly, and most fundamentally: the Logos, which as we have seen for the Stoics merged with the impersonal, harmonious and divine structure of the cosmos as a whole, came to be identified for Christians with a single and unique personality, that of Christ. To the horror of the Greeks, the new believers maintained that the Logos – in other words the divine principle – was in no sense identical with the harmonious order of the world, but was incarnated in one outstanding individual, namely Christ... by resting its case upon a definition of the human person and an unprecedented idea of love, Christianity was to have an incalculable effect upon the history of ideas. To give one example, it is quite clear that, in this Christian re-evaluation of the human person, of the individual as such, the philosophy of human rights to which we subscribe today would never have established itself.⁷

⁵ Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008) 174.

⁶ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 44.

⁷ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (New York: Harper, 2010), 60.

3. Some Modern Day Examples

B-Doctrine	A-Doctrine	Completing the cultural narrative
God is a jealous God	God is love	The love we seek is personal and real, not just a positive disposition
God judges people	Violence and revenge are bad	Only the belief in God as judge can end the cycle of violence & revenge*
God's justice seems quite harsh	God can't ignore our cry for justice, and yet he longs to forgive everyone	This goes all the way to God's heart & takes him all the way to the cross
There's only one true religion	All truth claims can be divisive, but we need to be able to live in peace	The person and work of Christ leads us to lay down our life for the Other
God allows evil and suffering	We want to cry out to God when faced with evil and suffering	God isn't distant, he invites us to cry out to him, he came to suffer with us
Christianity/rules restrict freedom	True freedom isn't the removal of all constraints, but the right constraints	Christianity frees us from idols which don't satisfy us, but crush us
Sin makes people feel guilty	The context of God's love enables us to look into our hearts honestly	God loves us as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us as we are
Religion leads to self-righteousness	The line between good and evil goes through every single human heart	All justifications by works leads to superiority, grace leads to humility
Christianity requires faith	No worldview can be proved, that doesn't mean there's no evidence	Christianity uniquely puts its neck out on the chopping block of history
Religion is clustered around culture	Naturalism is very much clustered around white western culture	Christianity transcends culture in a way that no other worldview does
The Bible is authoritative in everything it says	We all desire relationship and personal intimacy with God	You can't be personally transformed if God can't contradict you
The Bible is socially conservative (on sex, marriage, gender etc.)	No one culture is superior to any other culture	The Bible doesn't pander to any one culture, but affirms & challenges all
Christians seem unloving to LGBT	Love doesn't mean pandering to a person's views, but talking to them	Indifference can skate over the truth; Christianity speaks the truth in love
Naturalism seems more scientific	No one worldview has the monopoly on science, science is for everyone	Science pursues how the world works, the deeper question is why
The Bible testifies to the supernatural	We should celebrate cultural diversity	Christianity connects with every nation, tribe, people and language**
The Bible can seem misogynistic	Jesus, the true man, is the antithesis of abusive powerful patriarchy	Christianity offers an end to the quest on which feminism launches
Grace can give people licence to sin	Christianity has a very high place for good works, caring for the poor etc.	Grace moves people to do good even when there's nothing in it for them
Buddhism offers an end to suffering	Buddhism rightly understands that suffering comes from our desires	The solution isn't to eliminate desire, but to re-order our desires
The trinity sounds ill-logical	God is the incomparable, the loving, and the self-sufficient	A unipersonal loving God needs to create, but then isn't self-sufficient
Jesus (the prophet) died on the cross	God is the just, and the merciful; but then what does he do with sinners?	The penalty for sin had to be paid by man, but could only be paid by God
Grace relaxes our submission to God	Islam is the submission of a servant to a king: your heart can be far away	Christianity is the submission of a child to their father: whole-hearted

* In a world of violence we are faced with an inescapable alternative: either God's violence or human violence. Imagine that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone. Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been plundered, burned, and levelled to the ground. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect non-coercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.⁸

** African people sensed in their hearts that Jesus did not mock their respect for the sacred or their clamour for an invincible Saviour, and so they beat their sacred drums for him until the stars skipped and danced in the skies. After that dance the stars weren't little anymore. Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not remade Europeans.⁹

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 303-304.

⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.

4. Further Reading

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