

## **Persuasion Post-Christendom: Insights from Psychology, Antiquity, and Scripture**

Interacting with both recent and ancient accounts of rhetoric, this session will attempt to set the theme of Christian persuasion on a strong biblical foundation. Specifically, Aristotle's influential work on the topic will be brought into conversation with Scripture to provide a positive framework for Christian engagement in a sceptical world.

**John Dickson's** story is eclectic. Starting out as a professional singer-songwriter, he now works as an author, speaker, historian, and media presenter. He was the Founding Director of the Centre for Public Christianity (2007-17). He has published over 20 books, two of which became television documentaries, with a third, *For the Love of God: How the Church is Better and Worse Than You Ever Imagined*, released in Australian cinemas in June 2018. John has held a variety of teaching and research positions before moving to Wheaton College, including in the Ancient History Department at Macquarie University (2002-2015), the Hebrew, Jewish, and Biblical Studies Department at Sydney University (2011-2021), Ridley College Melbourne (2019-2022), and the Faculty of Classics at the University of Oxford (2015-2023). A busy public speaker, he lives in Wheaton, Illinois, with his wife Elizabeth and the youngest of their three children.

### **INTRODUCTION: Should we even be talking about 'persuasion'?**

Rom 8:6-8 – the fallen mind

Acts 16:14 – the Lord opens the heart

But saving faith is not the same thing as thinking something is true

Persuasion plays an important role in (a) dismantling poor reasons not to consider the content of Christianity and (b) offering good reasons to consider the content of Christianity, so that, by God's grace, (c) doubters might hear and believe the gospel.

Paul critiques some forms of persuasion: 1 Cor 2:4-5 – My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words [κήρυγμά μου οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖς] σοφίας λόγοις], but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power ...

Yet, "persuasion" remains a gospel activity: 2 Cor 5:11; Acts 17:4, 18:4, 26:28; 28:23-24 (twice)

## **1. JONATHAN HAIDT AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSUASION**

### **1.1. Intuition, emotion, and rationality**

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*. New York: Penguin Books, 2012.

"Reasoning can take us to almost any conclusion we want to reach, because we ask "Can I believe it?" when we want to believe something, but "Must I believe it?" when we don't

want to believe. The answer is almost always yes to the first question and no to the second.” (107)

“Therefore, if you want to change someone’s mind about a moral or political issue, talk to the elephant first. If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch—a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed.” (59)

## 1.2. The problem of intelligence

“The findings get more disturbing. Perkins found that IQ was by far the biggest predictor of how well people argued, but it predicted only the number of my-side arguments. Smart people make really good lawyers and press secretaries, but they are no better than others at finding reasons on the other side. Perkins concluded that “people invest their IQ in buttressing their own case rather than in exploring the entire issue more fully and evenhandedly.” (94-95)

Perkins, D. N., M. Farady, and B. Bushey. 1991. “Everyday Reasoning and the Roots of Intelligence.” In *Informal Reasoning and Education*, ed. J. F. Voss, D. N. Perkins, and J. W. Segal, 83–105. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Helmuth Nyborg, “The intelligence–religiosity nexus”, (*Intelligence* 37.1, 2009)

## 2. ANCIENT PERSUASION AND THE WORK OF ARISTOTLE

### 2.1. Persuasion before Aristotle

Protagoras (481-411 BC); Isocrates (436-338 BC)

### 2.2. Aristotle (384-322 BC), *On Rhetoric*

#### 2.2.1. Pathos: the emotional/aesthetic dimension

“There is persuasion among our hearers when they are led to feel emotion (pathos) by the speech; for we humans do not give the same judgment about things when grieved and rejoicing, or when friendly and hostile. To this and only this, as we said, the contemporary technical writers on rhetoric try to give their attention. The details on this subject will be made clear when we speak about the emotions.” (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, book 1)

#### 2.2.2. Logos: the intellectual/rational dimension

“Persuasion occurs through arguments (*logoi*) when we show the truth or the apparent truth from whatever is persuasive in each case.” (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, book 1)

#### 2.2.3. Ethos: the ethical/social dimension

“There is persuasion through character (*ethos*); for we believe good-hearted (*epieikeia*) people to a greater extent and more quickly than we do others on all subjects in general and completely so in cases where there is not exact knowledge but

room for doubt. It is not the case, as some of the technical writers propose in their treatment of the art, that good-heartedness on the part of the speaker makes no contribution to persuasiveness; rather, character is almost, so to speak, the controlling factor in persuasion.” (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, book 1)

*Epieikeia*: from the verb εἰκω, 'to yield'. Hence: ‘good-heartedness’, ‘gentleness’, ‘reasonableness’, ‘patience’, ‘forbearance’, ‘generosity’.

Paul to the Philippians: “Let your *epieikeia* be evident to all people.” (Phil 4:5)

### 3. THE NEW TESTAMENT ON PERSUASION

#### 3.1. *Pathos* in Christian persuasion

Matt 23:24; Acts 20:19, 31; Phil 3:18

#### 3.2. *Logos* in Christian persuasion

Acts 17:17; 24-29; Acts 18:28; 1 Pet 3:15

#### 3.3. *Ethos* in Christian persuasion

“Let your reasonableness/gentleness be evident to all people.” Phil 4:5.

"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." Col 4:6.

"Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called." 1 Pet 3:9.

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." 1 Pet 3:15.

*Whenever the apostles urge us to persuade the skeptical public about the content of Christianity, they consistently demand that our speech is characterized by a Christian ethos.*

#### 3.4. Counterexamples?

The prophets castigating Israel?

Jesus insulting the Pharisees and overturning the tables in the temple?

Paul mocking false teachers?

Martin Luther, “Open Letter to Pope Leo X” (Preface to “The Freedom of the Christian”), 6 Sept, 1520: “I have, to be sure, sharply attacked ungodly doctrines in general, and I have snapped at my opponents, not because of their bad morals, but because of their ungodliness. Rather than repent this in the least, I have determined to persist in that fervent zeal and to despise the judgment of men, following the example of Christ who in his zeal called his opponents "a brood of vipers," "blind fools," "hypo-crites," "children of the devil" [Matt. 23:13, 17, 33; John 8:44]. Paul branded Magus [Elymas, the magician]

as the "son of the devil, ... full of all deceit and villainy" [Acts 13:10], and he calls others "dogs," "deceivers," and "adul-terers" [Phil 3:2; II Cor. 11:13; 2:17]. If you will allow people with sensitive feelings to judge, they would consider no person more stinging and unrestrained in his denunciations than Paul. Who is more stinging than the prophets? Nowadays, it is true, we are made so sensitive by the raving crowd of flatterers that we cry out that we are stung as soon as we meet with disapproval. When we cannot ward off the truth with any other pretext, we flee from it by ascribing it to a fierce temper, impatience, and immodesty. What is the good of salt if it does not bite?"

## **CONCLUSION**

Scripture never encourages us to speak to an antagonistic world with anything other than the ethos of gentleness, grace, respect, blessing, and generosity.

Guests at a neighbour's dinner party