



PERSUADING IN A DIVIDED AGE: THE CHRISTIAN'S PRIVILEGE

This is the bedrock of our persuasion business: an approach based in discovering the reality of people's lives. Perhaps more than anyone, Christians should be all over this.

By Anne Snyder

By the time this reflection hits the press, some months will have dulled the passions surrounding Election 2012. As it is, this mid-November, Americans find themselves in belated agreement about the reality of a social landscape just validated by the voting majority, and the narrative is set: Democrats are the deft, adaptable realists, Republicans the recalcitrant fogies. At least in Washington, there's enough gloating and fretting to wonder if the middle's bottomed out.

"It's the end of the Republic," I heard a married southern white woman despair twelve hours after the outcome was called. Within minutes my phone vibrated with an invitation from a young and single Wendell Berry urbanite: "Last night got you in good spirits?" it sang. "Come dance it out this Saturday at Club Heaven & Hell with a nine-piece Funk Orchestra!" I couldn't help but laugh. One nation, indivisible?

In our splintered context, it seems as tiresome as it does critical to put a little time into cleaning up the aims and means of political persuasion. Tiresome because

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polarization seems too permanent a feature to overcome, critical because without a real effort to bridge our chasms, a country founded on ideas suffocates its own engine. If a democracy is to survive, we don't really have a choice but to think anew about the purpose of persuasion, about the good that is possible when people's minds are changed, about the even deeper good that can sprout in the overture process itself.

Reassessment carries special weight for Christians, who have tended toward a preaching model in their fraught history as advocates on the political stage. Not being equipped, somehow, to have their faith affect political expression other than to declare holy high ground and doggedly pound home the same arguments, those on the right and left have succumbed to didactic overreach as they've condemned and

glorified whatever or whoever speaks to conservative or progressive theo-political priorities. Trusting that repetition is somehow effective, Christian lapels have instead earned the scorn of self-respecting thinkers who won't stomach moralism beyond pulpit's pews.

The search for a corrective has found comfort in many a cosmopolitan panel discussion on civility, on the need to recover mutual respect in our debates. I don't disagree with the baseline motive, but the conversation has seen better days. It always seems to transform a two-sentence point into hours of self-congratulating fluff, and I can't say I've noticed a big improvement in disagreements on the stages that count. You can't *teach* civility, at least not to grown adults. It arises out of something else, something more substantive.

For the Christian, that substance is grounded in an appetite for truth once revealed yet still materializing. A truth that isn't ours to create but rather to discover and defer to and defend, and defend in different ways over time and place, discovery by sub-discovery. It's a truth embodied in a person, Jesus Christ, who came *at* a particular time and *to* a particular place for the sake of redeeming a world he loved to his father, who created that world in love. When we submit to this truth and its bearer, we carry within us both the call and the power to sprinkle manifestations of both wherever we go, in content and in spirit, even as our eyes are opened to learn from a world that, fallen and ever-changing as it is, can still deepen our

storehouses of understanding for the pleasure of its author, who loves to see us learn and rejoice en route.

This is the bedrock of our persuasion business. For Christians engaged in political arguments, it is this law that must govern our *modus operandi*, whether in the commentariat, on the Congressional floor, on the stump, or in *mano a mano* negotiations. Our abiding interest must be in the good of individuals created in the same image that we were, in improving the systems in which they live, in granting the tools for their navigation. This requires an insatiable curiosity about the human subjects at the mercy of any debate's winner, and the energy to keep that curiosity fed and updated. It requires empirical knowledge of the issues and the options, not just folksy winks sugarcoating ideologically driven generalizations. It requires savvy marketing, when marketing draws on beauty and empathy. And it requires a hospitable, humble posture, one that welcomes potentially uncomfortable revelations of counter-evidence and logic, one that is even willing, on some issues, to *be* persuaded.

THE CHALLENGE

Look at any U.S. map charted along measures of education, collar, and (increasingly) marriage and family wellbeing and we are officially polka-dotted. The achievers flock to the dense bubbles and everyone else floats around them, unable to penetrate their networks, their values, or their rewards. Poll after poll shows only a hardening of

political worldviews reinforced by the social topography of our routines. Information overload has given way to selective digital diets that drive us into tunnels of opinion, sequestering perspective if not knowledge itself. We self-select and we ignore, we open ourselves up to new voices and then funnel them through biases we already hold. Last year the Pew Research Center looked at the values shaping Republican versus Democratic loyalties from 1987-2012 and found the gap between them had doubled. How to project your perspective over such a space? It's no wonder there's so much shouting on the punditry circuit.

This gap strained by pluralism and a growing distrust in coherence-lending institutions sets up a great dam against any meaningful effort to persuade. So much is context-driven—how is any one policy capable of serving everyone, of meeting everyone's conception of the good? How can one voice appeal to all constituencies? None can, of course, and this is not democracy's founding conceit, but somehow we've come to operate under this more wishful paradigm.

One of the more disheartening (if fascinating) responsibilities of my day job is to moderate the online comments responding to the blogs of two deeply thoughtful, "conservative" columnists at a national newspaper. It is amazing how many commenters either don't read carefully or completely dismiss the columnists' arguments with rants about how idiotic and out of touch they are with "mainstream" will (most

of the readers hail from the coasts and the major cities). The tone is ruthless as it defends the righteousness of the commenters' own cultural sensibilities, hypersensitive to any public argument that might sting their moral rectitude. Questions like, "hey, how do you make a case for gun control without alienating a third of the population, some of whose values reflect as much pride in the second amendment as they do a textured heritage bequeathed from the frontier generations?" or, "hey, how do you characterize the rights of an illegal immigrant knowing that he's resented as a job-robber by legal residents?" aren't being asked by the vocal masses, although they involve the most basic dilemmas presented by all political choices. For all of our toleration and well-readness and talk of "global citizenry," there is an astounding lack of curiosity about the why's behind others' perspectives, on both sides of the political aisle. Everyone knows best and everyone knows all.

Some of the insular arrogance, I think, is a defensive mechanism triggered by feelings of victimization, though most factions would never admit this. Culturally conservative Christians, for instance, have lived for years feeling besieged by a social consensus that undercuts a moral framework that they by creed cannot dilute. Despite political recourse during the ascendancy of the religious right, the overarching sentiment among older Christians is one of abandonment and weary resignation. "The culture left us sometime in the last sixty

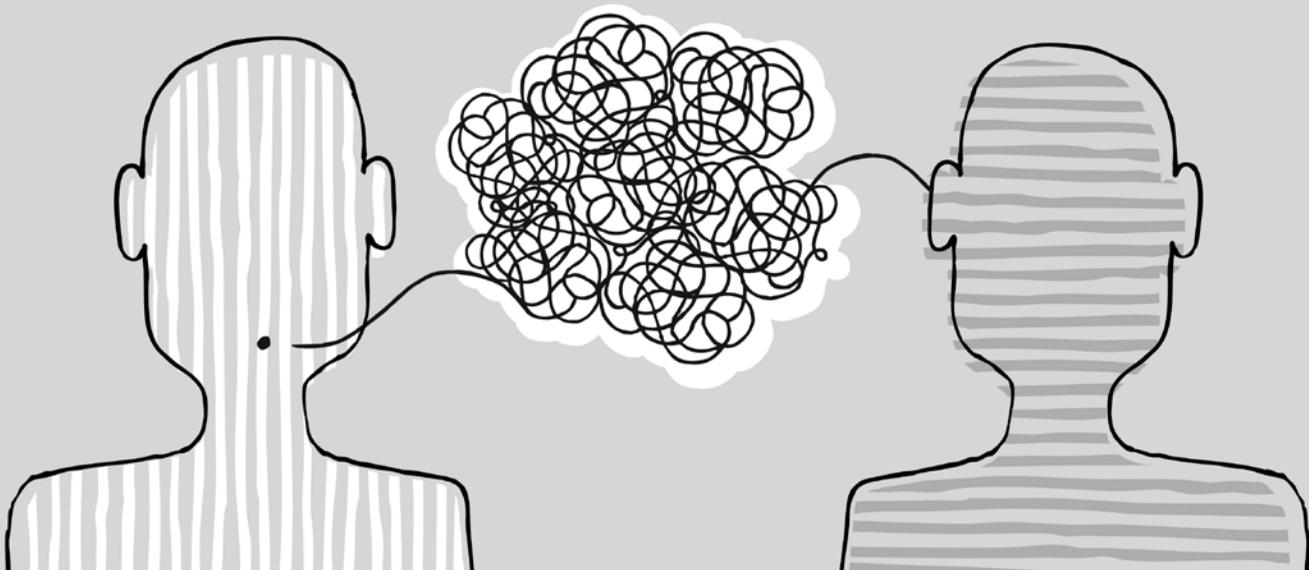
years and now shoves everything we oppose down our throats,” they all but say. “Why should we not retreat for some peace?”

I recently ran into a prominent Catholic public intellectual who harrumphed about “the insane asylum” that is my employer—this mainstream newspaper. He doesn’t read it anymore and criticized even my few conservative colleagues as too weak in their capitulation to an orthodox-allergic editorial board. I have profited greatly from this man’s work and admire his intellect, but found the confident dismissal disconcerting. How would his beautiful understanding of the Church and her place in the public square ever compel anyone beyond the choir if he’s not making an effort to understand their language, however distant the presuppositions? “Rise above your weary wounds,” I wanted to say. “Take up your cross again and *follow* me,” echoed, too.

THE WAY

While I have grown sturdier political wings since leaving the luxuries of college’s “third way!,” I am always eager to hear about the Christian contribution going on in both parties. It’s a good tonic to be reminded of the scope of Christian concerns in a binary system that would prefer to squeeze them. But the curiosity stems more fundamentally from a belief that Christians carry unique assets of mind and disposition that today’s City of Man desperately needs. I will highlight two traits here, foundational as they are to persuasion sincere and effective.

First, an appreciation for context. To be a Christian is to acknowledge the meaning embedded in particular places, particular cultures, particular eras, and particular relationships, and to be intrigued by every detail. We would be mere theists if we did not accept the choosier elements of a God



who favoured one People and brought about his salvific plan through their lineage, in a history that we can know, for a purpose that even we—so far removed—can still receive. The implications for this marriage of perfect transcendence and mewling specificity are many and profound,

“How did so many Catholics re-elect a man who attacked the Church’s freedoms?” one asked, completely perplexed. Another generalized: “Asian Americans are hard-working and family-oriented. Why didn’t they vote Republican?” “It’s our gay problem.” And on.

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but in the political arena it follows that Christian engagement should be distinguished by an intense interest in understanding those milieus that give meaning and coherence to the lives of ordinary voters, whoever they are.

There’s been a lot of speculation since the 2012 election about why Republicans lost, much of it swirling around the party’s apparent ignorance of the country’s changing face. While I think it’s a mistake to call only on demographics, post-mortem conversations with conservatives did reinforce the GOP’s tendency to subsist on abstractions with no real will to understand why the logic of x or y first principle didn’t compel x or y coalition. If we had just communicated better, the consensus swelled, or picked a more genuine candidate, most voters of sound mind would have come to see the truth of our underlying philosophy, even if the policies had some catching up to do.

I highlight the befuddled intransigence of one party’s mindset—the party that is historically less pragmatic than its counterpart—because Christians are prone to a similar temptation. Cherishing rich traditions or select Bible passages, believers lined with truths on one level can stay stuck on their stumps, resting their feet unappreciatively on the soil that supports the roots, not thinking also to imagine the possible twists and turns that branches stemming from these truths might traverse in a messier world. In other words, with the gift of one great, deep thing—knowledge of the Ten Commandments, a memorized Sermon on the Mount, a well-developed ecclesiology and love for Mother Church—Christians can tend to graft their transcendent assurances uncritically onto the vagaries of our public square, be it a policy blueprint or, more subtly (and insidiously, I would argue), a “Christian” political culture that grows too comfortable with itself at the expense of inclusion, humility, and worst of all, honesty.

Such a culture can find welcome in either party, each nurturing its own dispositional vices. I find it one of the ugliest, most uncomfortable things in Washington, and entirely unhelpful for persuasion's hopes.

Notre Dame's President, John I. Jenkins, recently wrote:

"If I am trying to persuade others, I first have to understand their position, which means I have to listen to them. I have to appeal to their values, which means I have to show them respect. I have to find the best arguments for my position, which means I have to think about my values in the context of their concerns. I have to answer their objections, which means I have to work honestly with their ideas. I have to ask them to listen to me, which means I can't insult them."

Inviting words, and they point to a political approach sorely lacking. One that involves journalists going out and spending time getting better acquainted with different communities and their values, their internal diversity, their aspirations, and their sociolinguistic map. One that involves party operatives who are less top-down presumptive and more grassroots-curious. One that asks public intellectuals to speak to policy wonks so that together they can connect the dots between the good of certain first principles and their protection within *various* policy alternatives, resonant language flooding. One that involves

politicians hooking arguments more from intelligent empathy with their constituents, and less from fear-mongering and pander.

It's an approach based in discovering the reality of real people's lives. Perhaps more than anyone, Christians should be all over this. In the fruit of the Spirit we have been given patience, gentleness, kindness, *love*, and therein find the directive to listen before prescribing, to receive before giving. So much of the culture-making, culture-changing desire amongst believers over the last decade seems to ignore this most basic posture, this acknowledgement that we have something to receive before we have something to give. We live in a western ethos that glorifies the side of the persuader, and so we rush into it, often attempting to force change when we don't even know where people are coming from. But over-intentionality doesn't work. Sermons don't actually change behaviour. The first step should involve a patient watching and learning, because perspective is changed when people sense respect and an open forum, not when they sense a team recruiting converts for battle. Behaviour changes when the underlying context is understood and jointly re-mapped. People in the persuasion business—especially in politics—need to revive this appreciation for context.

Second, hospitality. Since the election I've had a chance to interview more "normal" American voters outside the nation's capital who hail from all sorts of ethnic and

ideological backgrounds. A common thread among their reflections was that sometimes it's not the *what* that's so important in a party's platform, but rather the spirit, the welcome one feels—that unconscious resonance with a group's humour, colours, aspirational language. Especially in a country whose diversity is fuelled by a historic promise of welcome, hospitality is like our bread and butter. For the Christian, who in matters big and small can ultimately only cultivate and offer space for God to usher the heart changes, a political resurrection of this awareness might not be such a bad idea (awareness of human finitude, that is, not that God controls the levers of people's political allegiances). Welcome breeds mutual familiarity, which breeds trust, which breeds authority. Who persuades us that we don't already look up to? Very few successful arguments, however rational, can stand apart from tone or relationship.

THE HOPE

None of this is to suggest that Christians don't need to draw hard lines in the political arena. We have minds and spirits, and both should carefully guide our judgment toward policies prudent and just. It's just that in an age of intense cultural segregation, if we don't make the effort to respect people and the complexities shaping them, who, over the sustained haul, will? If persuasion is ultimately about our finite selves serving God and man through a very finite construct (the political arena), we all need to hear and re-appropriate our unique call to patience, to humility, to a discerning thirst for truth that reveals itself as much on the ground as in timeless tenets. These gifts are as needed as they ever were, and their power has not weakened. 



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