

Peter May looks at what is involved in changing someone's mind

HOW PERSUASION WORKS

Day by day, as doctors we try to persuade our patients about health matters, while patients and drug companies try to persuade us. As Christians, we try to persuade others...but what actually is involved in persuasion?

Firstly, it is a process rather than a moment. A decisive moment comes when the balance of doubt fundamentally shifts. But doubt remains even though new convictions take over. No amount of persuasion eradicates all doubt. But how do we tip that balance?

Aristotle wrote about the three modes of persuasion – *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*.¹ *Ethos* concerns the credibility of the speaker, his knowledge, expertise and moral competence. Is this person trustworthy? *Pathos*, on the other hand, concerns the disposition of the listeners. Are they sympathetic to the speaker and in a frame of mind to 'hear' what the speaker is saying? *Logos* concerns the substance of what the persuader has to say. It needs to be understandable and well-argued. However, the most compelling *logos* in the world is unpersuasive if the speaker lacks *ethos* and the audience lacks *pathos*.

These three modes of persuasion are very important. They explain a lot about our daily consultations, our political life, our reading of research evidence and our ineffectiveness in evangelism.

Consider a grossly obese patient, to whom you say: 'You really ought to lose weight'. Even when the logic of your argument is all too apparent, the patient is not well disposed to act on it. You will first need to gain their respect and then present a programme which they think is desirable and achievable.

Political realities

Consider the Gay Marriage debate. Even the best arguments against re-definition got nowhere. The traditionalists had very poor *ethos*. They were seen as intolerant, old-fashioned reactionaries. There was an overwhelming sympathy towards the innovators, who were seen as being compassionate. The soundness of the *logos* was lost in the wind.

In January, I learned that the submission by the Royal College of Psychiatrists to the Church of England Listening Process on Sexuality was seriously flawed. I therefore examined their submission to the Government's Equal Marriage Consultation. Both submissions referred to papers which did not actually support

the conclusions being drawn. It appears that science was being distorted to fit a pro-gay agenda.

Both analyses were quickly published² and were sent to the College on 11 April 2013. We asked whether, in the light of our findings, their submissions to Church and State should be withdrawn or revised or re-affirmed. We have had no answer.

Now, the *logos* of our case has so far not been called into question, even by the College. However, the *ethos* of the writers is unimpressive. Neither of us is a psychiatrist – one is a retired GP, and the other an engineer. One can well imagine the lack of *pathos* towards us, and the quiet hope that we would go away!

Persuasion in Christian Mission

The *logos* of the gospel, if the current state of New Testament research combined with scientific support for major philosophical arguments for God is considered, appears more compelling year on year.

While the *ethos* of the Church has looked weak on a number of fronts, the local church often earns respect.

But what about the *pathos* of the population? Currently, society as a whole is moving further away from Christian belief. There is, they believe, a brave new world out there.

However, that could change quite rapidly. There are dark currents in our society. As the brave new world increasingly becomes like the rude, violent, superstitious, anarchic corrupt and degenerate old pagan world that preceded the preaching of Christ, his light will shine again more brightly.

Pathos changes. We might see more and more people discovering that the gospel is actually very good news, as they did at the end of the 18th century, while France was busy destroying itself in violent revolution.

And Richard Dawkins and other vocal opponents of Christianity will have done us a great favour, if they force us to argue persuasively.

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references

1. Williams PS. *A faithful guide to philosophy*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013:7
2. O'Callaghan D, May P. *Beyond critique - the misuse of science by UK professional mental health bodies*. Core Issues Trust, 2nd Edition. 2013.