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The Ethics of Evangelistic Persuasion    Perry C. Cotham  
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# THE ETHICS OF EVANGELISTIC PERSUASION

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Since man has received and developed the marvelous gift of human speech, he has employed it consciously and unconsciously in influencing the behavior of fellow human beings and adapting more perfectly to his social environment. Communication is possible wherever there are objects and symbols to which people can attach meanings. Persuasion takes place when one party takes these symbols—whether linguistic, vocal, visible-bodily, or a combination of the three—and employs them to achieve a desired effect. For many centuries, the act and art of persuasion was called *rhetoric*. Rhetoric or persuasion, as viewed by one leading authority in that field, Donald C. Bryant, is “the art of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

The Christian has more than an ordinary interest in the art of persuasion. “Christianity raises the function of persuasive communication to its highest level,” asserts Walter Burch. “Every Christian lives under the solemn and glorious charge to win new believers to the faith. Jesus calls upon his disciples to unite their words, their deeds of

love, and the force of their personalities in a lifelong effort to convert the world’s billions to Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> The conscientious disciple will not take lightly his responsibility to communicate God’s message to those outside the visible community of believers or his need to mutually admonish and encourage his own brothers and sisters in Christ.

The process of persuasion demands of the communicator certain choices with regard to the method and content to be employed in influencing his audience to accept the choices (belief, attitude, action, etc.) which he advocates. Such choices involve ethical dimensions and the ethics of persuasion is perhaps of greater concern today than ever before. Our word *ethics* comes from a Greek word referring to character and custom, and, as an area of philosophical inquiry, ethics is the systematic study of value concepts: “good,” “bad,” “right,” “wrong,” “should,” “improper,” and the basis upon which such terms are applied.

Since communication is a social art, involving attempts to control the behavior of others, the Christian persuader cannot es-

cape ethical responsibilities. Someone could counter, “As long as the evangelist (whether personal or public) is capable of securing the desired overt response—baptism or public confession—does it really matter what techniques are employed? Isn’t the result the only important consideration?” But if we are truly concerned about our personal integrity and with what develops and enhances the total spiritual welfare of those we attempt to persuade, it is imperative that we concern ourselves not only with the goals of evangelism but also with the methods used in achieving these goals. Are all the available means of persuasion fit for Christian communicators to employ? How may honorable but fallible men be assured that their methods of discourse are ethical? Our purpose here is to raise questions related to the ethics of long-established practices in evangelistic persuasion and to suggest guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas. Our chief concern is with pulpit persuasion, but we will make applications to the private or “cottage meeting” occasion for evangelistic pursuits.

Any determination of an evangelist’s ethical responsibilities should issue from the following premises: First, despite mistrust of persuaders (which may be traced back to ancient Greece and the days of the Sophists and Plato), persuasion is an honorable and apostolically approved (2 Cor. 5:11) method of fulfilling the Great Commission. Second, the individual has dignity and worth as a human being. Third, the individual is capable of at least a minimal understanding of God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures and this knowledge can be assimilated to form

opinions and make decisions. And finally, each individual is capable of, and ultimately responsible for, decisions he makes in response to God’s will.

Before looking at the areas of practices in which considerations about ethics are most likely to emerge, let us note that there are some means of persuasion which are accepted as intrinsically sound and others that are generally agreed to be unethical. In the case of the former, persuasion which emerges from honest motivation, reflective thought, systematic investigation, and integrity in handling ideas and people will lead most often to the greatest probability of truth and the wisest choices by persuadees. Contrariwise, the following techniques are generally considered to be unethical:

1. Intentional deception regarding motive for proclamation.
2. Fabricating any kind of evidence, scriptural or otherwise.
3. Distorting the available evidence.
4. Coercion of listeners to accept the source’s goals.

## TECHNIQUES

Now we turn to certain methods and techniques, commonly used by evangelicals throughout the course of the American experience of revivalism, that deserve to be subjected to the closest scrutiny and philosophical inquiry. These techniques are used, in varying degrees, by propagandists.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the persuasive evangelist is necessarily a propagandist or that these devices, used carefully by a skilled communicator, must be categorically rejected as un-

<sup>1</sup> This point of definition is fully explained in Donald C. Bryant, “Rhetoric: Its Function and Scope,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, XXXIX (December, 1953), 401-24.

<sup>2</sup> Walter E. Burch, “Ethics in Communication,” *Mission*, February, 1968, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> In modern times, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis has publicized a number of allegedly spurious methods of persuasion which they refer to as “propaganda devices.” The terminology used in naming these devices is employed in this article.



ethical in his attempt to persuade. It is to suggest that *these techniques are questionable and when not judiciously and sparingly employed, may lead an evangelistic persuader into the role of a pulpit propagandist.* The rightness or wrongness resides more in the situation and manner in which they are used.

**1. Suggestion.** Because many people are quite indiscriminating about what they can learn to believe, tending to believe and to act as they are told, "suggestion," says one social psychologist, "is the key to the operation of propaganda."<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Auer defines suggestion as "a social stimulus designed to elicit an uncritical and more or less automatic response. That it can do so results from the fact that humans tend to prefer being in a passive rather than an active state. . . . To doubt . . . is more difficult; it demands active and critical analysis."<sup>5</sup> When a speaker is able to achieve a response favorable to his communication goals and when this is attained by statements which arouse an uncritical change in attitude and action—i.e., when the statements and goals are accepted independently of any logically sufficient grounds for its acceptance—he has used suggestion.

Suggestions may be phrased either positively or negatively; they may be direct or indirect. The technique may be obvious to the audience or the suggestion may be so subtle that none of the receivers is aware of its use. An evangelist using verbal suggestion seeks to create an audience atmosphere in which tendencies opposed to his goal of overt response are inhibited and then he takes advantage of it. The attention of the

audience is sharply focused on the speaker and his message. Then the speaker presents a direct, straightforward plea: "Won't you come to Jesus today? Just forget everything else and simply walk down this aisle and give your heart and your life to God." This is direct suggestion. An oft-sung invitation song, "O Why Not Tonight?" is replete with direct suggestion. A preacher is using suggestion more indirectly when he closes his sermon with this exhortation: "The angels in heaven would rejoice over one coming tonight. Just remember that any one of us could very well be fatally injured in an automobile accident going home from this building tonight and in eternal torment tomorrow morning." (This statement is also an example of "arousing the emotions" to be discussed below.)

Since the basic process of education entails leading individuals to delay their responses to any stimulus while they have had time to weigh its significance for them, then suggestion is anti-educational. This is not to say that an informed person who understands the significance of the message and has decided to act should further delay. It means that a person who acts *primarily* under the influence of suggestion and has not canvassed all the possibilities of action, but rapidly seizes upon the dominant one in the emotion-packed moment created by the speaker for that occasion, may be rendered a tremendous disservice.

The use of suggestion has always been and will continue to be integrated with the other processes of persuasion. In fact, a persuasive communicator cannot, even if he desires, construct effective message-stimuli and

entirely avoid its use. But to a large degree suggestions can be consciously controlled and manipulated to secure acceptance of the speaker's proposition. And to what degree it should be used is a question every evangelist needs to consider.

**2. Card-stacking device.** Card-stacking is the deliberate selection and use of only those pieces of evidence and other materials that lend support for the speaker's major contentions. In my opinion, some of the materials employed in cottage meeting type settings, such as film strips, charts, etc., use this device. The use of proof-texts can degenerate to "card-stacking" of evidence and the Biblically-illiterate may not be aware of this. Personal work handbooks that supply a quick Bible verse for almost every conceivable objection to an overt response should be subjected to careful analysis of the ethics involved. Does it harm a person to exploit his ignorance and misunderstanding if we believe the end result will do him good? This is another application of the age-old question of whether the end justifies the means.

In the past twenty years, students of communication theory have been uncommonly interested in determining the major facets of source credibility, traditionally called "ethos." Quantitative research on this subject has established that two special

facets of source credibility are fairness and trustworthiness. Studies conclude that when the weight of evidence supported the main thesis it was more persuasive to introduce the arguments of those who opposed it, rather than to present only the arguments and evidence supporting the thesis, "at least for the better educated men and for those who are already opposed to the stand."<sup>6</sup> Does this research bear any relevance for the pulpit speaker? When one considers that many important passages of Scripture can be interpreted in more than one way and when one seeks to apply Biblical principles to a modern context, we must answer in the affirmative.

**3. The testimonial device.** There can be no doubt that the nature and extent of audience response is determined in great measure by the personality and character of the source of the message.<sup>7</sup> As we noted, this dynamic factor operative in all communication has been called "source credibility" or "ethos." Aristotle considered ethos to be "the most effective means of persuasion," the other two modes being *logos* (logic) and *pathos* (emotion).<sup>8</sup> A popular term today is *charisma*, that quality of magnetism and grace that attracts the masses of people.

God has always used human personalities to communicate his message. In one of the

<sup>6</sup> See C.I. Hovland, A.A. Lumsdaine, and F.D. Sheffield, *Experiments in Mass Communication* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), pp. 201-27.

<sup>7</sup> In rhetorical studies—whether theoretical, descriptive, or experimental—few concepts have been studied as exhaustively as that of "ethos" or "source credibility." See "The Credibility of the Communicator" in Carl I. Hovland, Irving Janis, and Harold Kelley, *Communication and Persuasion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), pp. 19-55; also see Kenneth Anderson and Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "A Summary of Experimental Research in Ethos," *Speech Monographs*, XXX (June, 1963), 59-78. In recent years a number of studies have been reported in such journals as the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, and *Speech Monographs*.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1954), Book I, chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> K. Young, *Social Psychology*, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1958), p. 461.

<sup>5</sup> J. Eisenson, J.J. Auer, and John V. Irwin, *The Psychology of Communication* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 249.



truly noted definitions of preaching, Phillips Brooks said:

Preaching is the communication of truth by man to men. It has in it two essential elements, truth and personality. Neither of these can it spare and still be preaching. The truest truth, the most authoritative statement of God's will, communicated in any other way than through the personality of brother man to men is not preached truth.<sup>9</sup>

The ethical issue that must be raised here is how much of a role should personality and magnetism of the speaker play in leading listeners to overt response. Upon what bases would a congregation planning a meeting select the visiting evangelist—because of his certain knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures or because of a powerful pulpit personality, reputation, and record? Perhaps ideally it should be both. But which is most important? What role should his customs of dress and grooming, his general appearance, his vocal and bodily manner (characteristic speech delivery) play in the selection? After all, these will affect the response of the audience to his message. Should the gospel be promoted like a bill of goods much like Arthur Godfrey campaigns for Chrysler Corporation automobiles or beautiful Catherine Deneuve sells Chanel perfume? And how about an evangelist who is overpowering, whose tactics border on intimidation?

When the visiting speaker who, generally unknown to most people in the audience, is introduced as “a great scholar of the Bible and perhaps the greatest preacher of his gen-

eration,” this will enhance the possibility of favorable responses to his message more than if he were introduced merely as “a conscientious student and minister of the gospel” (unless the audience perceives exaggeration). How much should we build up and capitalize upon a favorable image of the preacher? If the evangelist happens to have a doctorate in some field other than religion, should he be promoted publicly as “Doctor So-and-So”?<sup>10</sup> How many personal anecdotes and stories about himself, especially the ones that reveal him to be an expert observer and authority on any number of pertinent topics, should the preacher inject into his message to build that ethos? Undoubtedly, this whole area should be subjected to more open and honest inquiry.

**4. Rousing the emotions.** It is a long accepted axiom of rhetorical theory that if a speaker is going to persuade he must link his propositions with the emotions and values of his listeners. He must show that by accepting and acting upon the speaker's goal, a basic drive or need can be satisfied or a value furthered. There is nothing unethical about using emotional appeal; indeed, it is impossible to avoid such appeals in most argumentative discourse. In his exhortation to Felix, the apostle Paul apparently appealed to the motive of fear; Jesus appealed to fear of the judgment in warning the self-righteous Pharisees. But the ethical consideration comes in when one considers how much and when

should emotional appeals be used. Is it possible for too many “tear-jerking” stories to be told, too much affective language used, that individuals act with little if any rational conception of why at that moment?

The invitation song is one of the emotional climaxes of many evangelistic efforts. Is it possible that we can overuse the invitation song to the extent that individual awareness is diminished? For that matter, is it always necessary to end every formal period of public worship with the invitation song? After all, there is no scriptural command or precedent for it.<sup>11</sup>

In sum, a born-again person must in some way, depending on his personality and culture, become emotionally involved with his “religious” decisions and exercises. But his commitment to a new master and a new lifestyle of discipleship and service to God and humanity can never rest exclusively upon a momentary emotional reaction — it must rather be initiated and continually nourished by a profound act of the will.

**5. Use of crowd psychology.** Controlling an audience in order to establish an atmosphere conducive to the speaker's purpose has long been practiced in both totalitarian and free governments. In American history there have been a number of noted evangelists—men like George Whitefield, Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and now, Billy Graham—who adapted their techniques to large audiences and so controlled the situation as to secure numerous favorable reactions. Thoughtful observers sometimes questioned the techniques of these evangelists.

The power of the revivalistic method lies in the situation it organizes, not in the individual soul's perception of vital truth.

<sup>11</sup> See a summary of reader response to a *Mission* survey on the question “Should the Invitation Hymn Be Eliminated?” *Mission*, November, 1971, p. 27.

What distinguishes the revivalist from the pastor? Is he superior to the pastor in the culture and grasp of his mind? Not at all. Is the revivalist a more spiritually minded man than the pastor? Certainly no one will claim for him any such pre-eminence.

Is he, then, a more lucid interpreter of the truth than the pastor? Is he a better teacher? No.

Does he hold up a more inspiring ideal of life than the pastor is accustomed to present? By no means.

What is it, then, that distinguishes the revivalist from the pastor?

This: the successful revivalist has learned the art of controlling a congregation as a whole. The unit with which he deals is the crowd, not the individual soul.

Such concern over the ethics involved is not new. The above statement is excerpted from an editorial in the *Christian Century*, July 1, 1909.

From their observations of the behavior of audiences, social psychologists have used the term *polarization* to represent the concept of a structured or conditioned audience, brought about by inducing a high degree of emotional unity among audience-members. An audience is polarized when it is established as one entity, carefully attending to the public speaker who is another entity, and linked with him by communication in such a manner that interaction is possible. If a speaker expects to achieve his goal with a particular audience, he must effect some degree of polarization. The question is—how much? How much should an audience be manipulated to enhance the speaker's effectiveness? Let us look specifically at some of the ways in which an audience is polarized.

The place of the meeting contributes to the polarization of a crowd. In recent years,

<sup>9</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1898), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> This problem is treated editorially by Roy Bowen Ward in *Mission*, July, 1969, pp. 3-4. Ward argues that since possession of the doctorate is no guarantee of effective preaching and because most doctoral programs are not designed for the ministry but for academic teaching and scholarly research, “we would like to think a man who has earned a doctoral degree would have enough sense not to throw the weight of his degree around in the pulpit.” Ward warns against well-intentioned brethren using the degree in a promotional sense, feeling that it may foster a backlash of anti-intellectualism and an emphasis on the sermon at the expense of other aspects of public worship.



most evangelistic efforts are conducted in auditoriums. Temperature, acoustics, and lighting may be controlled to provide a comfortable and reverent setting. The seating arrangement compels the listeners to face the speaker directly. The pulpit will likely be elevated to provide the speaker with a position of social priority and command. Some auditoriums have the seats in a semicircular arrangement, sometimes sloping toward a speaker's "well." When the cornerstone of the New Plymouth Church of Brooklyn was laid on May 29, 1849, Henry Ward Beecher, who was to spend forty years in that pulpit, had already given instructions to the architect: "I want the audience to surround me, so that they will come up on every side, and behind me, so that I shall be in the centre of the crowd, and have the people surge all about me."<sup>12</sup> In addition, audience geography (density, proximity, and distribution of listeners) may be an important factor in determining audience response. A number of social psychologists and rhetorical theorists perpetuate the concepts that it is better to have a surplus of listeners than a surplus of seats, that if there are seats that must remain empty they should be the ones on the back rows, and that "touching elbows" enhance the degree of psychological unity. Most preachers and song directors could testify that these notions help create a better atmosphere for them to lead in public worship.

*Institutional ritual* is a term used by psychologists for the various exercises, visual stimuli, and other atmosphere-creating factors which may alter significantly the nature and degree of listeners' expectations and anticipatory responses. For example, at a po-

litical rally, the politician's rhetorical success is enhanced by the presence of campaign buttons, posters, slogans of victory shouted by enthusiasts, presence and participation of local dignitaries, and music by a lively band. In worship, the song service itself (sometimes, but unhappily not enough, integrated with the speaker's theme), the evangelist holding a Bible, the presence of a baptistry, often with a mural of a pleasant scene of clear, running water in a peaceful, pastoral setting, the minister standing earnestly before the congregation during the invitation song, stained glass windows, symbolic figures and other decorative devices (more prominent in some churches than others), all contribute to psychological unity and desired responses.

*Social facilitation* is a term used to describe the reinforcement effect of the responses of one individual upon the reactions of others in the same audience. We tend to be influenced by what others in the audience are doing. Have you ever laughed at a joke that you did not catch because everybody else was laughing heartily? Situation comedies that are filmed for television have "canned" audience laughter that is dubbed in to influence our responses viewing the show at home. An ancient theatre and opera practice was to hire a *claque*, a group of paid applauders, to sit scattered throughout the audience and stimulate applause by their own simulated enthusiasm. Would cries of "Amen!" during a sermon cause us to listen more carefully and think more highly of the message? Ask any preacher how it affects him. *Circular response* is similar to social facilitation. It represents the effect on the speaker of the responses of his audience

members, the consequent reinforcement or modification of his own communicative activity, and its subsequent effect upon the listeners; the audience reaction to the source is *feedback*.

How do these two concepts operate in evangelism? First, we know when the invitation is extended and there is a good number walking forward to accept it, this tends to influence other observers to come forward who have been thinking of doing the same thing but who would not have been the first to respond. Some people, especially pre-teen and early teenage young people, seem particularly susceptible to the effects of social facilitation. There have been stories of evangelists who assigned certain members of the campaign team to strategically locate themselves among the audience and then be the first ones to walk forward when the invitation is extended. I have seen no documentation to substantiate this ever happening, but if it did it is a clear example of capitalizing on social facilitation. As for circular response, the more an evangelist perceives the visible responses the more he may ask the congregation to remain standing and continue singing the song of exhortation in hopes of still more success. How often have you heard, "We'll sing this last stanza of 'There's a Great Day Coming' only one more time unless someone responds"—implying it will be sung again if someone walks down the aisle?

I well remember about five or six years ago I was a minister participating in a city-wide evangelistic effort held in Detroit's Cobo Hall. Another assisting minister informed me that it was privately announced, either from the evangelist or someone in charge of the services, that we were making a run for a record night in the number of responses. And a record night it was! The

audience remained standing and sang interchangeably two invitation songs ("Just as I Am" and "Almost Persuaded") for about forty-five minutes to an hour. Standing close to the front, I observed many people walking forward, young and old, that I had seen often in regular worship and other church activities; some of these were considered to be among the most faithful. Though it was not for me to judge, I wondered how necessary, meaningful, and long lasting would be all those public commitments to renewed dedication. As dramatic and exciting as these traditional methods are in producing some swift results, we must ask if the large crowd which affords much anonymity, the lengthy chanting of songs of exhortation, the emotional stories and pleadings of the evangelist, the social facilitation wrought by the response of so many others, cause an individual to respond differently from what he would if he were confronted privately and personally with the gospel message? And if the response would not be the same, does the difference make a difference?

In mentioning these techniques used in evangelism, I have attempted to raise questions about long-established practices rather than to inject too bluntly my own opinion. All of these practices fall into the realm of ethical considerations because they involve techniques of controlling other human beings along pre-designed lines. We must ask ourselves which of the above, and under what circumstances, are good and justifiable and which must be discarded as unacceptable.

### SOME GUIDELINES

It should be evident that not every communication situation will have a neat, dogmatic formula which can be confidently ap-

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Lionel Crocker, "Henry Ward Beecher," in *A History and Criticism of American Public Address*, ed. William N. Bragance, 2 Vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1943), I, 274.



plied to every choice and slavishly followed. All that may be done here is to establish some guiding principles for responsible private and public evangelism which communicators must apply in varying situations and, in that spirit, the following five guidelines are proffered.

(1) **The communicator should be primarily motivated by nothing less than a simple, unaffected love for others.** Undoubtedly, some evangelism is conducted with the wrong motivation. A personal worker may be led by some persuasive minister to feel guilty for not becoming involved and so his sense of guilt begrudgingly leads him to talk to others about Christ. Or, the personal worker or public evangelist may be motivated by competition—who can secure the largest number of responses in a given period of time. Sadly, some may enjoy evangelism because it affords an opportunity to exhibit knowledge or sales technique and the gospel message is reduced to the same level as any other product to be peddled. Certainly, some good may result from efforts with less than noble motivation, but the harm can be much greater. Those we attempt to reach will eventually see through the facade and our effectiveness can be totally devastated. When our audience—whatever the size—perceives our words as emanating from a heart of love and genuine compassion, many of our weaknesses and mistakes in communication are overlooked. Our audience will not care how much we know, unless they know how much we care.

(2) **The communicator must have respect for the views and opinions of his listeners.** They are not ordinary creatures to be manipulated and exploited; as men made in the image of their Creator, their attitudes and feelings are worthy of respect.

Sometimes, under compulsion to secure

an overt response, the speaker feels he cannot win the response without ignoring competing views of his listeners. But not only is respect for the views of another a matter of Christian decency, it is also a most persuasive technique with intelligent listeners. Those opinions which are important and relevant to interpreting the Scriptures should be acknowledged, either explicitly or implicitly. Views at variance with the communicator's understanding of the Bible must be met openly and honestly; even if one cannot counter them in a convincing manner, he should freely admit their force rather than ignore them.

(3) **The Biblical message should be the major determinant of response.** As we have noted, there are many factors, often subliminal or unknown and unintended to both source and receiver, that command the listener's favorable attention and influence decision-making, but we must remember that God's basic power to change men is in the gospel (Rom. 1:16). Indeed, if the message is not the major determinant of action, manipulation or propaganda has occurred, not persuasion. Listeners must be encouraged to perceive and exercise the power of choice if the evangelistic experience is to be meaningful. The evangelist should not seek to win response on the basis of a conscious use of such "hidden persuaders" as a glamorous and magnetic personality, high-pressure sales tactics, incessant nagging which borders on coercion, and/or excessive suggestion and emotive appeals. Such is clearly sophistry and the overt response which is secured on this basis may be far short of true conversion. Glamor, emotionalism, and coercion do not wear long. The evangelist does not want his audience to accept his propositions uncritically; rather, he gives more than ordinary weight to the logic of his arguments,

their truth and validity, and the Biblical evidence supporting these contentions.

(4) **The communicator must use the Bible in an honest and intelligent manner.** He will be well prepared by prayer and study to guide others in understanding universal truths. Whenever he uses study aids prepared by others, such as charts and film strips, he is responsible for the validity of the content. He attempts to avoid fallacies, specious reasoning, and improper use of proof texts, realizing that it is wrong to distort the Scripture so that it does not convey its true intent, no matter if such can lead to a faster response. The more we engage our prospective converts in rational and honest use of the Bible, the more we give them valuable training for future study and application of the Scriptures.

A problem related to this guideline is unconscious misrepresentation—the unintentional withholding or distortion of the truth because of ignorance. The result may be insignificant. Then again, the result may be most unfortunate. Naturally, if the minister does not possess the requisite knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures which he is expounding, his act may be merely that of a finite man. But right reason dictates that he assume full responsibility for his exposition and application, so he must exercise prudence to extricate ignorance. Ignorance must not be a convenient weapon by which the preacher dispatches imputability. Vincible ignorance is that kind which is unethical—the minister should have known the facts and used the proper tools to understand and apply the meaning, according to the general standard of what a prudent and conscientious man would do to prepare himself for the public ministry and for the particular sermon at hand. The ethical consideration is, did the preacher use preparation

and caution proportionate to the importance of the passages expounded and the gravity of the communication situation? His ignorance is invincible if, in his total lack of awareness or misrepresentation and distortion, he had proceeded as a prudent and sincere man would have done under the same circumstances.

(5) **The evangelist will not seek to win a convert without communicating as effectively as possible the meaning of Christian living.** Prospects will not need to know how much Solomon paid for his horses, what priests wore linen shorts, who cut his hair once a year, or be able to identify Magog and Tryphena or name the disciples who were mistaken for Jupiter and Mercury. But prospects do need a clear perception of the meaning of Christian commitment. Some personal workers and preachers have made baptism and regularity in worship attendance appear to be the only important aspect of Christianity, but it is unethical to minimize the cost of discipleship and the extent of Christian commitment that God expects after initiation by baptism into the body of believers.

Man's greatest gift for adjustment to his social environment is the capacity for speech communication and, by this medium, he can control the thought, attitudes, and behavior of others. Such power renders ethical considerations imperative. And of all communicators, the evangelist must maintain a continuing awareness of this aspect of his persuasion activity. The guidelines suggested here, if followed more faithfully, may not increase the number of people we baptize or "restore," but they should greatly enhance the probability that our prospects will retain respect for us as Christian communicators and, more important, of remaining faithful to the commitment of their lives to God. □



## The House Church

The recent epidemic of house churches has provoked a variety of reactions. Some point to them with pride, seeing their development as a belated recognition of a means by which the early church enhanced the fellowship which gave it such vitality. Others, however, including some church leaders who have taken decisive steps to eliminate them, view with alarm any regular group meetings smaller than the whole congregation. The latter reaction reflects a fear that the house church will become a breeding ground for heresy, that its communicants will develop too broad a view of fellowship, or that the organized church and/or its leaders will somehow be undermined. Still others do not appreciate the intimate fellowship usually found in house meetings and are merely indifferent to them.

No matter how we feel about it, the house church is too much a part of the modern religious scene to be ignored. We need to take a good look at it from scriptural and pragmatic points of view.

### THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS

It is well known that the original Christians broke bread and taught in meetings in private homes (Acts 2:46; 5:42), which meetings may well have been the objects of Paul's attacks (8:2). Mary was hostess at one of these meetings, from which James and the brethren were absent (12:12, 17).

It would be a mistake to assume that all such meetings were held in private homes because larger facilities were not available. Paul taught the Ephesians "publicly and in various private homes" (Acts 20:20). Undoubtedly private homes were often the only place the saints could meet, which seems to have been the case when Paul had to leave the Corinthian synagogue and go next door to the home of Titius Justus (18:7). But the situation was different at Ephesus, since he and his disciples had daily access to the hall of Tyrannus (19:9).

That this public facility did not eliminate the home meetings indicates they had a value in addition to the public gatherings.

Hosting one of the Ephesian house churches were Prisca and Aquila (1 Cor. 16:19), who also used their home in Rome for the same purpose (Rom. 16:3-5). In addition to this church family, there were at least two other identifiable groups at Rome, who evidently went from one house to another for their meetings (Rom. 16:14-15).

Nympha and the church in her house were distinguished from the other brethren in Laodicea (Col. 4:15), while at nearby Colossae there was a church in the house of Philemon (Phm. 2). We may assume that not all the Christians in that city met in the same home.

Later on some of these house churches were apparently vulnerable to seductive teachers who would "creep into houses and captivate weak women" (2 Tim. 3:6) and "upset whole families [lit. houses]" (Tit. 1:11). We should probably understand 2 John 10 in the light of the house church: "If any one comes to you [plural] and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house [where the group met, or the group itself], and do not give him a greeting." The idea that "the chosen lady" to whom this epistle was addressed was a hostess for a house church (like Nympha at Laodicea) is very attractive.

The foregoing references increase the probability that the houses of Onesiphorus (2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19) and Stephanas (1 Cor. 16:15) were house churches.

The house of Stephanas is interesting because of the independent ministry it illustrates: they "devoted [lit. appointed, as in Rom. 13:1] themselves to the ministry [*diakonia*, the work of deacons] to the saints." Note that neither Paul nor the church appointed them; they appointed themselves. All they needed to undertake this work

was their own willingness and God's equipment. It only remained for the church to "be in subjection to such men" and to "acknowledge" them (1 Cor. 16:15-18). One may venture to guess that in our generation, which is so beset with suspicions and jealousies, they would be accused of insubordination and self-assertiveness, whereas the only insubordination Paul feared was that of the church.

### PRAGMATIC POINTS

As we move from scriptural to pragmatic considerations we must not neglect Hebrews 10:24-25: "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." There has been much discussion about what "assembling together" means. It translates the Greek *episunagoge*, *episynagogue*; but how is *episynagogue* different from *synagogue*? Perhaps not at all, but it is possible that the prefix *epi* has the meaning "in addition"; hence a reference to an "in-addition-synagogue." But in addition to what? My own view is that if *epi* has any particular force at all, it refers to special fellowship meetings in addition to other assemblies of the church. In other words, it is possible that this passage alludes to meetings in private homes (as distinct from public gatherings) in which there would be especially good opportunities for the saints to stimulate and encourage one another.

Brethren who neglected such meetings, whatever they were, were guilty of "forsaking" those who attended. "Forsaking" (from Greek *egkataleipo*) is better rendered "leaving in the lurch." It is used of Demas and others who deserted Paul in his distress in Rome (2 Tim. 4:10, 16). Hence, those who fail to use their opportunities to stimulate and encourage their brothers are said to desert them, to leave them in the lurch.

This passage makes it clear that the assembly is a place where brothers should be able to stimulate and encourage (or exhort) one another to manifest love and engage in good deeds. There may be some doubt about the exact nature of this assembly in its relation to other meetings of the church, but there is no doubt about its purpose. And that brings us to a very practical reason for the house church.

In my opinion, it would be virtually impossible for the average Christian today to fulfil this passage in the average church meeting. Even if we can

successfully argue that in our large gatherings we all receive the stimulation and exhortation we need, how can we impart such to others? Except for his presence, some singing, and perhaps a few "Amen's," the typical person in a large church gathering has no chance at all to offer his brothers stimulation and encouragement.

This is not to say that the services of the whole church are unprofitable, or that some are not more successful than others in providing opportunities for *mutual* edification, but it is to say that, generally speaking, they are one way streets.

Another advantage of the house church is that it affords an opportunity for confession of sins and prayer therefor, which James enjoins upon us all but which is seldom practiced in our assemblies. In the close fellowship of the house church, people will share their weaknesses and sins in a way they would never dream of in the larger meetings. And they are able to find help for problems that would not even be revealed in most other gatherings.

The freedom and informality of the house church affords exchange of ideas in a neutral atmosphere. People will attend such gatherings who would never agree to enter our church buildings. The freedom to express dissent and to raise questions and to express doubts is much more obvious in the smaller groups.

The house churches get people more involved in the ministry. The common struggle with sin and the common quest for truth result in more intense study and more fervent prayer, a deeper interest in others, and consequently greater love and patience.

Instead of bemoaning and fearing the house churches, we might well ask ourselves why they have multiplied. T.H. Robinson has said, "Christianity is essentially a social religion, and its spirit can only be kept alive in a community." The attraction of the house church lies in the community it provides. If it is a reaction against the organized church, it is such only because the church does not provide sufficient community. If we are really concerned with preserving the vitality of the body of Christ, we will either make our congregations into house churches, or else try to see that our people become involved in house churches.

The only thing we have to fear about them is that those who find their stimulation in them will be satisfied with a mission that falls short of becoming involved in and ministering to the whole church. If that happens, the house church will have failed its mission.

—HGL



# Letters

## NO ENDORSEMENT

A few months ago I wrote requesting Dr. John McRay's articles on the Holy Spirit. I did not understand from his bulletin that they would be published in your magazine but only distributed by you.

I also stated in passing that "I enjoyed *Integrity*." Some have taken this to mean that I endorse or have endorsed *Integrity*. I wish to make it clear that I do not endorse *Integrity* nor any other magazine published by fallible man. My only commitment is to Christ and His Word.

I would appreciate your printing this statement as promptly as you printed the other statement which I made too casually.

DOUGLAS F. PARSONS

Overland Park, Kansas

## PRAISE THE LORD!

I think your magazine is just great! Articles such as L.V. Houtz's "The Streams Are Being Put Together" really build me up spiritually. I just know the Lord will keep you guys going.

SUSAN SWENSEN

West Lafayette, Indiana

## HUNGERING AND THIRSTING

I am very glad to know of other brethren like myself who seek to know truth and not some man's opinion of what truth is. I find your paper to be intellectual in content and not some ignorant preacher trying to tell others what he does not know for sure himself.

I was raised in the church of Christ, but it was not till I had gained some knowledge of the restoration movement at Abilene Christian College that my mind was opened. I questioned most everything, but not entirely being critical, but seeking a closer walk with God.

In fact as a result I more or less became a part of the Jesus movement until the Lord saw something different for me, that I should not mark people out of my own religious body. So I did His will and I am now preaching and serving in the capacity of minister. But sometimes it really gets me down, I have a hard time in not reacting against all organized religion. I pray for patience and more presence of the spiritual fruits.

NAME WITHHELD

## SOME EXTRAPOLATIONS

I have just finished reading several back issues of *Integrity*. I find them most enjoyable. Although we disagree on several things, I respect your right to dissent.

However, in your editorial in the November issue, I wish to question you about several things. I agree that there is a place for non-conformity in the church, as long as it is guided by God through His Word. I disagree with your "label" of "antipneumatics." It indicates that some, perhaps all, who do not agree with your view are "anti" or against the Holy Spirit. Could not this term be "pressure to conform" to your view on the Holy Spirit, which is the very thing your article opposes?

By the very nature of your paper, I assume that you are a "non-conformist." I hope, then, that you do not assume the opposite of the qualities of those who are "conformists," i.e., more intelligent, richness of ideas, greater ability to cope with stress, spontaneous, less anxious. According to the study you refer to, the non-conformists are confident, feel superior, and adequate. They do not depend on others, they are aggressive, and do not possess suggestibility. They trust other people, and lack rigidity and authority. Seemingly the only trait they lack is humility.

I do not accuse you of possessing these traits, just that such a comparison is unworthy of a paper that claims to seek peace and unity.

NAME WITHHELD

Alabama

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *In the October issue I commented on our use of the word antipneumatic: "I used the prefix anti in antipneumatic to denote merely difference rather than antagonism. It was used in reference to all those who do not claim to have spiritual gifts—not merely those who are dia-*

*metrically opposed to the view that they are available today."*

*In the article on conformity I merely cited the facts as recognized by social psychologists regarding the conformity personality and stressed the troubles which a group heavily weighted with such personalities must expect to encounter. The self-perception of either the conformist or the nonconformist is another question. And the assumption that the independent person lacks humility is not justified.*

## DISCIPLINARY DATA DESIRED

*Joe Hale recently began a study of disciplinary actions involving churches and individuals. He has already received a surprising number of responses from all over the country, and would like to hear from more who have been involved in such actions. He writes as follows:*

The purpose of my study is to determine the number, extent, purposes, reasons and effects of modern-day actions to disfellowship members of the churches of Christ. Name-calling, mud-slinging or ax-grinding will not be done; however, articles, reports and talks will be prepared to attempt to objectively, unemotionally and comprehensively report the facts. I am interested in hearing from church leaders as well as persons who have been disciplined. A copy of the report produced will be made available to each respondent.

CDR JOE M. HALE, SC, USN

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Springfield, Virginia 22150

## ON THE CONTRARY

Lila Newsom's essay on church-related schools requires some further comment. I have not read the article by Elizabeth Mansur, to which Mrs. Newsom was responding, but I found her response inadequate, and, at some points, disturbing.

I was graduated from a Church of Christ parochial high school and attended two Church of Christ colleges. In these situations I formed many lasting friendships and encountered many good Christian people. But I also encountered evils far more fundamental than those which Mrs. Newsom pins on the public schools: an atmosphere of racial and religious prejudice; an evangelical pursuit of

right-wing politics to the exclusion of all other views; repression of all utterances and actions which did not strictly conform to the party line; a pervasive tendency to approach all academic questions with a *a priori* party-line conclusions; an attitude toward sex which distorted and pathologically repressed the natural drives of young people "during their most formative years." An education in the parochial high school I attended was also academically inferior to the public high school in the same city, if only because my school did not have sufficient funds for equipment and qualified personnel.

Mrs. Newsom seems to favour a hot-house environment with a carefully programmed and regulated set of experiences for young children. What happens to these children when they are later confronted with the vagaries and vicissitudes of the real world, Mrs. Newsom does not say. I would suggest that, from my observation, the confrontation with the world is often traumatic and sometimes disastrous.

Mrs. Newsom does not deal with use of the church-related private school as an escape from court-ordered racial integration of public schools. This is the most vile and anti-Christian characteristic of many such schools. One Church of Christ school in a major southern city was formed by a well-known Church of Christ family especially for this purpose. Its charter forbids a Negro to set foot on the premises except in the capacity of kitchen or custodial help.

Finally, Mrs. Newsom's libel, in passing, of Eldridge Cleaver deserves some response. I would suggest that Mr. Cleaver's writings are no more sick and hate-filled than the utterances of Richard Nixon, George Wallace, or many Church of Christ preachers, but Mr. Cleaver is certainly more eloquent! Mr. Cleaver is undoubtedly less obscene than prime-time television programs and "PG" films which depict murder and savage violence in gory detail, or the war our country is inflicting on Indochina. In *Soul on Ice* Mr. Cleaver describes how it feels to be a black man in a racist society; he discusses the problem in the terms of the problem, and he should be read by every thoughtful American. Mrs. Newsom's simplistic condemnation should not prevent an open and fair consideration of Mr. Cleaver's writings on their obvious merits.

DON HAYMES

Dover, New Jersey