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CREATIVE PERSUASION

THE COLORFUL AND CONTROVERSIAL NOVELIST Norman Mailer was once invited to speak at the University of California Berkeley. It was at a time when he was notorious for his scathing dismissals of the women's movement and had bragged publicly that he was a "champion male chauvinist pig." Many women students were incensed at the brazen way he flaunted his bigotry and the fact that he had been invited in the first place, so a large group of feminists decided to come to the lecture and give him such a roasting that he would regret accepting the invitation. In their view Mailer was a rank and shameless misogynist, and he needed to be put in his place.

As several accounts of the incident go, the air was crackling as Mailer entered the lecture room. He had been warned in advance that the feminists would be hostile and were lying in wait for him. Mailer strode confidently through the crowd, stepped up to the podium and announced that he had important things to say, so those who wished to hiss and boo should get it out at once. He then threw down the gauntlet: "Everybody in this hall who regards me as a male chauvinist pig, hiss."

As if perfectly on cue, the feminists broke out at once in loud, derisive hissing and booing, which rose to a crescendo of long, sustained jeering and barracking, punctuated with derisive cat calls and wolf whistles from men in other parts of the lecture room. For a while there was pandemonium, but inevitably it had to die down. The feminists could not keep up the booing forever, and the hubbub subsided. Mailer stepped back to the microphone, looked over to them, paused just a second or two, and said, "Obedient little women, aren't you?" (To sanitize his words somewhat.)

For a second or so the outcome hung in the balance. The ploy could have bombed and set off chaos, but it worked. The hostile tension collapsed. Mailer had shown a canny mastery of his audience, and many laughed and applauded. By all accounts, even some of the hardcore feminists were so stunned at falling for his ploy that from then on they listened in a rueful silence.

Mailer, of course, was as scathing and dismissive of the Christian faith as he was of women and anyone else with whom he disagreed, and his misogyny was inexcusable. His arrogant chauvinism toward women, amplified by the stories of his six marriages, was light years away from the example and teaching of Jesus. Our Lord always treated women with a respect and dignity that stands out from his own age and shines across all ages. But we who are followers of Jesus should consider one thing: Mailer's bigotry and the substance of his argument was as far from Jesus as anyone could be, but the *style* in which he communicated was closer to Jesus than many of us who are followers of Jesus.

What Mailer did was what I call creative persuasion or subversion through surprise. *To people predisposed to reject what he had to say, he communicated in a way that made them see his point—despite themselves.*

Such creative persuasion, conducted according to the way of Jesus and the Scriptures, is critical for the church today because we who are Western Christians suffer from a glaring weakness that we need to face candidly. Let me state the problem again: *Almost all our witnessing and Christian communication assumes that people are open to what we have to say, or at least are interested, if not in need of what we are saying. Yet most people quite simply are not open, not interested and not needy, and in much of the advanced modern world fewer people are open today than even a generation ago. Indeed, many are more hostile, and their hostility is greater than the Western church has faced for centuries.* Through the explosion of pluralism in the last fifty years, our world has grown dramatically more diverse, and through the intensification of the culture warring in many Western countries, our world has grown far more dismissive of our faith. In short, the public squares in many of our nations are more secular and the private spheres are more diverse. We therefore have to speak many languages, and not just "Christian," and we have to be persuasive when we address minds and hearts that often listen to us with a

default position of prejudice, scorn, impatience and sometimes anger.

To be sure, every single human being on God's earth is open, interested and needy at some point in their lives—and when they are, we should always be ready, willing and able to speak and point them to the one who is the center and soul of all that makes life meaningful and worthwhile for us. But there are profound theological reasons why most people are not open and interested most of the time, and there are historical and cultural reasons why more people are more closed, hostile or indifferent in the West today than they were in the time of our grandparents. In the world of today we again and again have to face the fact that the world that earlier generations knew has gone, and gone for forever.

HOIST BY HIS OWN PETARD

Our guiding inspiration for Christian advocacy can hardly be Norman Mailer's prejudice, craftily defended though it was. So consider a biblical example of the same creative persuasion—the story of the prophet Micaiah, recounted in 1 Kings 22:1-28. At some unspecified year in the history of Israel after the division of the kingdom, King Jehoshaphat of Judah went up from Jerusalem to Samaria to confer with his royal cousin, King Ahab of Israel. They were forging an alliance to recapture some disputed territory taken by the Syrians. The questions before their Joint Council of War were simple. Should they forge an alliance and attack the Syrians with their combined forces? And would such a campaign have the backing of God and end in victory?

The natural step was to call out Samaria's court prophets and enlist God's backing for their plan. What else are clergy for, it seems, in times of conflict? Blessing the bombers is surely central to being a bishop. In this instance the court prophets were obliging, and they offered a unanimous opinion that just happened to be exactly what the two kings were hoping to hear. With one voice, all four hundred prophets declared that the two kings should "Attack and win!" To reinforce their message, some of the prophets—skilled communicators in a manner that would delight modern communication aficionados—created visual aids to illustrate their message. One prophet, a certain Zedekiah, brought ox horns that he brandished to show how the two noble kings would gore the enemy and drive everything before them.

Doubtless, it was an impressive performance and had its intended impact

on its royal listeners. Yet for some reason, King Jehoshaphat, who unlike Ahab was loyal to the God of Israel, was not satisfied by this unanimous vote from Ahab's court prophets. He therefore asked his royal ally if he had any other prophets from whom they might inquire.

"Yes," Ahab replied, "there is one other, but he always prophesies negatively about me."

Strike one against the prophet Micaiah: he was always negative about Ahab. But when King Ahab sent the royal servant to collect Micaiah, the strike count quickly got worse. "Everyone else has prophesied victory, so mind you say the same thing too," he was told in effect. In other words, Micaiah was brought to the war council and found himself hopelessly out of line with all the other prophets, but under strict orders to fall in line and say exactly what the others had said—in short, to prophesy falsely.

Stunningly, that is exactly what Micaiah did as he began. He prophesied falsely like the others. "As the LORD lives," he had told the king's servant, "what the LORD says to me, that I will I speak." But despite that, or perhaps even inspired directly by the Lord to prophesy falsely as other prophets had done earlier in Israel's history, he went along with the other prophets, and echoed what they had said precisely: "Attack and win!"

It was then Ahab's turn to be suspicious. Could Micaiah really be agreeing for once with his own court prophets? Was there a hint in the way Micaiah was speaking that he was being tongue-in-cheek? Was his answer on this occasion so out of line with what he normally said that the king was put on the alert? Or was there somehow the suggestion that Micaiah was telling the truth but leaving out a vital part of the answer that would change everything—that their forces would in fact win, for example, but that one of the kings would die in the battle, perhaps even Ahab himself?

Whatever it was that troubled Ahab, he broke into Micaiah's pronouncement before the prophet had finished. "How many times shall I make you swear," Ahab thundered with a hypocrisy that must have been comic to everyone present, "that you speak to me nothing but the truth in the name of the LORD?"

To which Micaiah answered simply, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountain as sheep that have no shepherd." In other words, "The truth is, your Majesty, that your people will be leaderless because you are about to die."

The effect must have been stunning. King Ahab had walked into Micaiah's knockout punch as unwittingly as the feminists had walked into Norman Mailer's. To be sure, the king was no more inclined to accept Micaiah's word than the feminists were to acquiesce to Mailer. But Ahab had been hoist by his own petard. He had asked for the word of the Lord and he had been given it, straight from the shoulder. At his own insistence, Ahab was confronted with a true prophecy that was now on public record as a counter to the false prophecies. Truth had spoken to power. Ahab could go forward and do what he wanted, presumably what he had intended to do all along. But from that moment on, he was without excuse, and it was his life that was at stake in the outcome of the prophet's word from God.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS, YOUR MAJESTY

Consider another example from the prophets (1 Kings 20:26-43), this time an acted parable—another story on an earlier occasion when King Ahab found himself on the receiving end of a devastating punch line (the term is apt). This time he had been attacked by a massive and arrogant campaign launched against Samaria by King Ben-hadad of Syria along with thirty-two allies (see 1 Kings 20:1). God had spared Israel mercifully, but with a rash complacency born of his own presumed brilliance in the victory, Ahab had spared his royal enemy after defeating his army. He was at once called to account by one of Israel's band of prophets in a curious but dramatic episode.

The unnamed prophet assigned to be God's messenger asked another prophet to strike him on the head and wound him. He then went to the road by which King Ahab was to return from the battle, and waited for him with a bloody bandage over his eyes, disguising who he was.

When the king passed by and inquired how he had been wounded, the prophet told him the following story. It was of course purely fictitious, but quite credible in the aftermath of the battle. In the heat of the fight, he said, someone had brought a prisoner to him and ordered him to guard the man with his life. If he were to let his captive escape, he would either forfeit his life or pay a steep ransom of a silver talent.

Unfortunately, the disguised prophet said, his captive did escape—to which Ahab broke in with his usual summary heartlessness: "So shall your judgment be. You yourself have decided it."

Whereupon the prophet dramatically tore the bandage from his eyes and let the king see who he was: one of his own prophets. "Thus says the LORD," the man of God declared, "Because you have let out of your hand the man I devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall be for his life and your people for his people."

"In your own words, your majesty." Ahab had judged himself. In full view of his noisily celebrating bodyguards and his sycophantic courtiers, he had once again been hoist by his own petard. The prophet's judgment was far more effective than a tongue-lashing. The word of God had been acted out in public, and the king himself had chosen to enter in and play the role of his own prosecutor and judge.

CROSS-CENTERED AND CROSS-SHAPED

These stories are only two of many such examples scattered throughout the Bible, and, as we shall see, this approach was demonstrated most brilliantly of all by Jesus. There are obviously wider considerations behind their telling, and these we shall explore. But at their heart is a brilliant style of creative persuasion—one might say "prophetic persuasion"—and behind them a rich understanding of why such persuasion is needed and how it works. Together they represent a model of Christian persuasion that revives a way of persuasion that was powerful in the Bible and persistent down the Christian centuries, but largely forgotten today. For no one who reads the Bible carefully or who reflects on their own experience of seeking to share the gospel of Jesus today can avoid a blunt conclusion: *There are all too many people who do not want to believe what we share or even to hear what we have to say, and our challenge is to help them to see it despite themselves.*

This lost art of Christian persuasion stands in stark contrast to many Christian ways of communicating in the West today, ways that are prosaic, one-dimensional and ineffectual to a fault. More importantly, recovering the art of Christian persuasion helps us in two practical ways. First, it shows us a way out of the tragic impasse in which much contemporary Christian communication has been caught. When people are not interested in what we have to say, whether they are hostile, prejudiced, indifferent or blasé, we often find ourselves mute and at a loss. But at such moments there is a better way, so that *there is no one anywhere and at any time to whom we cannot*

speak constructively. There is an important reason why such persuasion will not and should not always lead to success, but it is a style of raising issues that challenges people to be responsible to truth and to their own consciences, and therefore leaves them without excuse.

Second, this lost art challenges us to be more decisively Christian in our communication. Contrary to the impression many Christians give today, Christian communication is not a matter of communicating the Christian faith with whatever means we find handy and effective. “If it works, use it” is a naive contemporary approach that has already reduced much Christian speech to slick and smoothly delivered formulas or to garbled and mumbling impotence. By contrast, Christian communication is a communication of the gospel that is shaped by our understanding of God’s communication in Christ, just as God’s communication in Christ is shaped by God’s understanding of the condition of our hearts that God addresses in the gospel.

Put simply: *As God saw, so he sent, and as God sent, so we share*. As God saw our sin, so he sent his Son, and as God sent his Son, so we share our faith. To be truly Christ-centered, Christian persuasion is much more than just arguments about evidence or a battle over worldviews. There is an art to the advocacy of truth. It is an art that should be true to the truths of the Christian faith itself, and therefore shaped by both the Christian understanding of truth itself and by particular truths of the faith.

To say that does not mean, as some people argue today, that we simply preach the gospel and never seek to persuade. Proclamation and persuasion must never be separated. What it means is that Christian advocacy must always be independent. It must always be consistent to itself and shaped decisively by the great truths of the Scriptures, and in particular by five central truths of the faith—creation, the fall, the incarnation, the cross, and the Spirit of God.

True to the biblical understanding of creation, Christian persuasion must always take account of the human capacity for reason and the primacy of the human heart.

True to the understanding of the fall, Christian persuasion must always take account of the anatomy of an unbelieving mind in its denial of God.

True to the incarnation, Christian persuasion always has to be primarily person-to-person and face-to-face, and not argument to argument, formula to formula, media to media or methodology to methodology.