

HEALTHY PASTORAL PERSUASION

By David Christensen



Pastoral ministry may become an exercise in frustration as we seek to lead people to implement changes in their lives or persuade congregations to step out on faith and achieve new goals. President Harry Truman once wrote in a letter to his sister:

The people can never understand why the President does not use his supposedly great power to make 'em behave. Well, all the President is, is a glorified public relations man who spends his time flattering, kissing, and kicking people to get them to do what they are supposed to do anyway.¹

Many pastors could echo his sentiments from time to time! Most pastors function in a context where persuasion is their primary means of ministry. Congregational government insures that the pastor is seriously limited in the decisions which he can make, but he may be held accountable for the outcome of those decisions. Often the pastor has no formal authority such as vote, veto, or hiring/firing power. Power is the primary means of decision-making in the corporate world where authority resides in the power of the leader to hire and fire, to establish salaries, and to veto undesirable decisions. The pastor in a congregationally governed church does not exercise that same kind of power. The pastor exercises the power of persuasion.

We want to get things done, but all too often little happens. Conflict in the church stresses a pastor's persuasive skills perhaps more than any other aspect of ministry. The task of getting everyone in church to work together as a team is a major feat, and certainly, one of the most difficult tasks an effective pastor must accomplish. Motivating people in the church to change is a primary task of pastoral leadership. One yardstick of effective pastoral persuasion is changed churches.

SOPHISTRY

Unfortunately, the need to persuade others in the church can lead to sophistry. Ancient sophistry was results oriented; audience driven to the point where truth was manipulated to fit the needs of the people dependent on the skills of the leader; with a strong faith in the power of the spoken word to accomplish predetermined goals. Sophistry elevates method over message, technique over truth, clever arguments over honest reasoning, and the skill of the leader over the power of the Spirit. Ancient in origin, sophistry is modern in application. The sophistry of method over message has often invaded the church. The church growth movement has much to commend, and there are many good principles that pastors can learn to implement. The danger is that pastors develop what Bill Hull calls an "idolatry of method" over message which is ecclesiastical sophistry.²

One pastor, who had done his doctoral work on church growth principles and had written a manual for other pastors, told me in a private conversation, "I can tell you based upon extensive research that if you follow the right sociological principles in my manual, given the demographic information for this area that a church should grow to at least 2,000 in the near future. This would be true if Donald Duck were pastor. Of course, Donald Duck should be born again!" He was expressing evangelical sophistry. The persuasion may work for a time but for the wrong reasons. Idolatry of method leads to superficial faith.

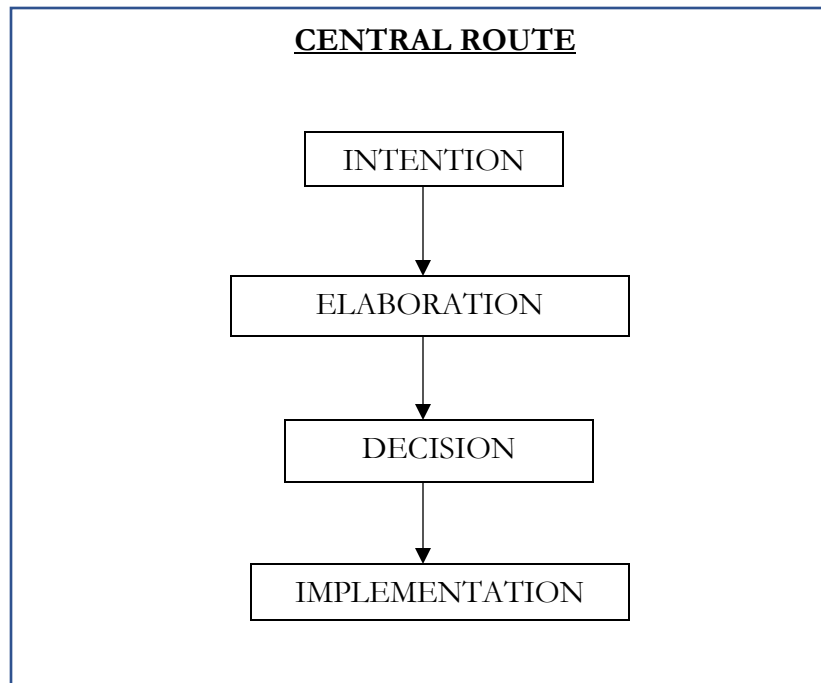
Healthy pastoral persuasion accomplishes a willing, long term change of attitude, belief or behavior on the part of the person being persuaded based on a serious examination of the core issues, not social cues. If the change of belief is against the person's will, such change will be short term at best. If the change is based on social methods, the change will last only as long as the social methods are popular. Short term change is not effective change. The only kind of change that is truly effective is change that is carried out over the long term with a willing spirit and a commitment to the message.

How do we persuade people in a healthy and ethical way?

THE ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD MODEL
E.L.M

The “Elaboration Likelihood Model” of persuasion proposes that there are two routes to changing attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of people. The central route seeks to persuade the audience to think seriously about the issue being discussed and give the matter a careful and thoughtful assessment. Peripheral routes use social and cultural “cues” or “triggers” to help people decide the issue according to the intended objective of the persuader. I became convinced that E.L.M. was an effective tool for evaluating pastoral persuasion when I did my doctoral project on the subject, and much of the content of this article came from my doctoral thesis.³ Two social scientists in the 1980s, Richard Petty and John Cacioppo, developed the model after extensive testing.⁴ I have found the model very helpful in church ministry. The principles of E.L.M. have application to preaching, evangelism and church leadership. As pastors, we desire to see lasting change and true commitment which only comes when people “elaborate” carefully the central elements of the message before deciding to change.

One of the best ways to change attitudes is to elaborate the information on which the attitude is based. When we examine the content of New Testament preaching, we can see the strong, repetitive emphasis on the message – the kerygma – of Christianity. The listener carefully examines information contained in the message before choosing to believe. Elaboration as a central route of persuasion is based on the well-established principle that repetitive exposure (modern terminology), or “amplification” (classical terminology), is basic to healthy persuasion. One of the basic principles of communication is that the speaker helps the listener “over learn” the main point of the speech through repetition. As pastors, we want our people to “amplify” the main point of the message in their minds so that whatever change takes place is grounded in the central message.



When elaboration likelihood is high, then cognitive resources are devoted to the issue. The person engages her mind in amplifying the process with questions. High elaboration likelihood may, perhaps often is, show itself in opposition. Opposition may be very healthy as long as the person stays engaged in thinking through the issues. I remember many years ago sharing the gospel with a co-worker. He opposed the Christian faith. He argued against Christianity. He often came back to me with a new argument or question trying to show that I was wrong. I patiently and honestly answered him, putting no pressure on him to make a choice. Our conversations went on for years until one day he was ready. He became a follower of Christ. He was elaborating all along but in an oppositional manner. Oppositional elaborating is still elaborating. We should encourage disagreement because it often leads to real change.

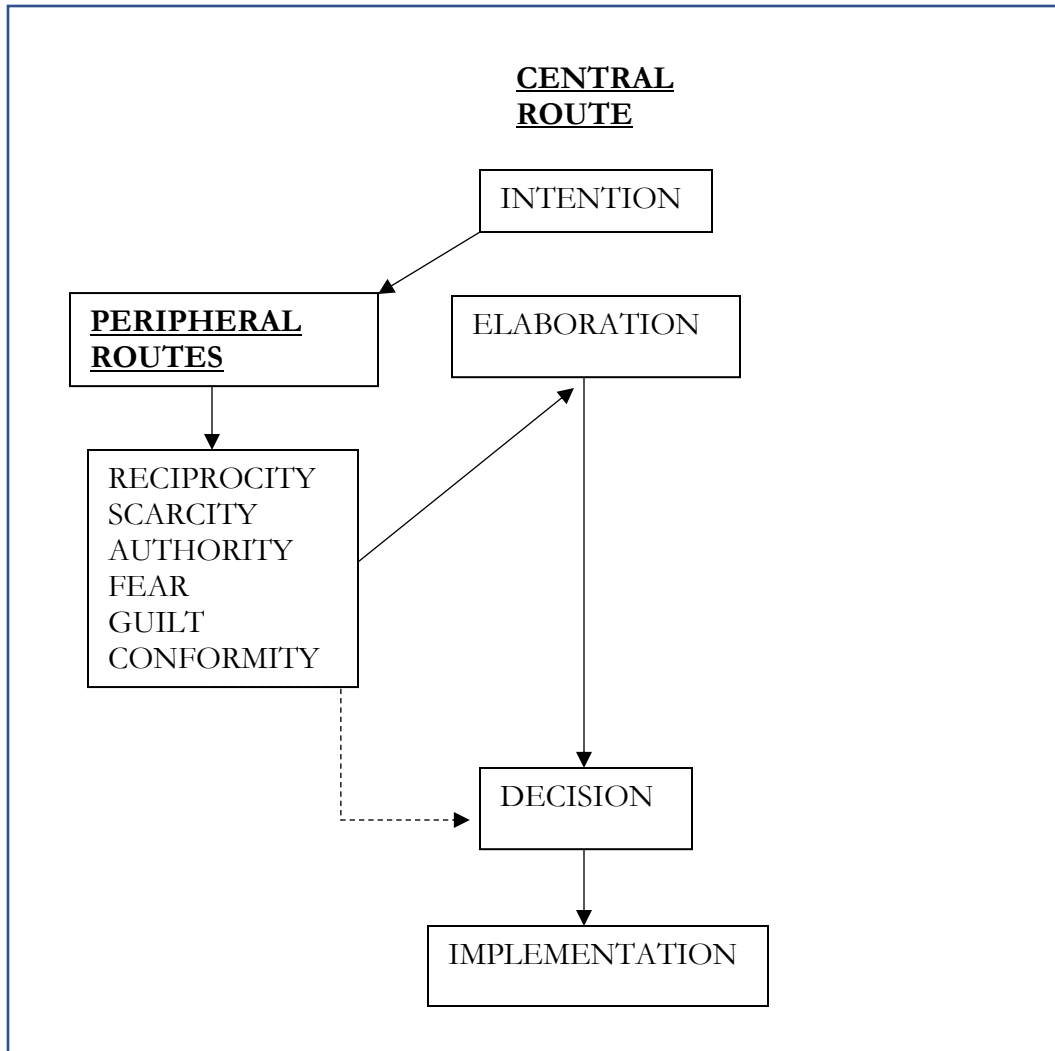
When elaboration likelihood is low, then the decision is based on various social cues and not an examination of the issues. The person will choose based on certain “short cut” techniques available in the setting. When people decide based on peripheral cues, the persuasion is often short lived. Initial resistance to a proposed idea is a necessary part of real, long term persuasion. Resistance increases the person’s attention to the matter. Casual agreement can be the enemy of true persuasion. Missiologists realized years ago that many were coming to Christ because the church provided rice to eat. They came to be called “rice Christians.” I remember years ago witnessing to a woman in her home. She welcomed the two of us into her home and listened eagerly to what we had to say. She did not offer any disagreement nor did she have any questions. She was quick to pray the prayer with us; I went away elated that she had been such ripe fruit only to find out later that she thought if she did what we asked her to do then we would give her financial help.

PERIPHERAL ROUTES SHORT CUTS

The issue of long term persuasion centers around the likelihood that the listener will elaborate on the information by processing it or internalizing it. If the person is motivated to process the information, then elaboration begins leading to a decision. If not, then peripheral methods must be used to stimulate the person to make a peripheral attitude change. The result of the peripheral attitude change is not yielding, but processing. The peripheral trigger draws the listener to elaborate on the information. The person is ready to process the message being presented. Peripheral routes of persuasion should not be used to lead directly to the decision since the decision would then be based on a short cut trigger. Using peripheral triggers to gain a decision is unethical because the choice is based on the wrong foundation. The change is temporary at best. It does not last. The commitment is transitory. The conversion is not real.

The goal of the pastor is to avoid using the peripheral routes to apply direct pressure on the will of the listener while retaining the use of peripheral routes to stimulate interest and provoke elaboration on the part of the listener. Such an approach is much more difficult, but the results over the long term are much more desirable. We can trust God the Holy Spirit to be at work in the elaboration process rather than use human techniques to coerce human responses. It should not be surprising if many pastors disregard the more difficult approach, preferring to “cut corners” to achieve results and grow churches. When that happens, we should be wary that manipulative or unethical persuasion may be taking place.

There are many peripheral routes to persuasion, but I have listed five of the most common (see diagram). Social science researchers argue that pastors use all of these methods in various ways in Christian ministry so let me summarize each one.



The **reciprocity** principle is embedded in human nature and reinforced by human culture. The rule of reciprocity says that we will try to repay what another has done for us. Reciprocity is applied in almost every avenue of life, from politics to religion, from sales to friendship. A powerful corollary to the principle is that we not only feel obligated to repay favors, but we feel obligated to repay a concession made to by granting a concession in return. We use the reciprocity principle in ministry whenever we offer help or gifts to someone with the goal of leading them to Christ. Pastors can subtly apply reciprocal pressure whenever we offer services and resources designed to get people to come to our church. The Café in the lobby, the free sports programs, the gift cards, childcare and support groups are all examples of the reciprocity principle at work. We do these things to reach people, but we should not use these methods to induce people to make a decision about Christ or our church. Reciprocity should be used to get people to elaborate on the message, and the decision should be based on the message, not the method.

The **scarcity** principle trades on another one of our human weaknesses for short cuts to persuasion. The rule of scarcity says that something or some opportunity is more valuable when its availability is might be lost. The possibility of loss creates pressure to choose. Fear of losing out stimulates an emotional reaction in us pushing us to decide even if we have not examined all the issues. Sales people use the scarcity principle frequently but so do Pastors. We use in evangelism when we

say that you only have this opportunity now. You might not have tomorrow! It is true, of course, but it also applies the pressure of scarcity. Pastors can also use the scarcity principle in church decisions about properties, buildings, and ministry opportunities that may not be available later. “We need to act now and trust God to provide because we may not have this opportunity next year!” If this argument is used to bypass elaboration of the central issue to put pressure on the will to make a choice, then we have become unethical in our persuasion.

The **authority** principle plays on established and valid foundations to produce obedience and respect for authority. Respect for authority is a core value of any ordered society – and any organized church – yet such respect can degenerate quickly into authoritarianism. Pastors can invoke positional authority to get people to follow them. We can establish authority through titles and clothing. We can use jargon or technical language as a way of “pulling rank” on others in the church because jargon intimidates others from challenging our authority. Insisting that we have the final say on any decision invokes the authority principle. We can use “God language” to gain compliance for a decision. Telling people that we have prayed and believe that this is God’s will for the church is playing the authority card on a congregation. Invoking the authority principle probably should be used under certain conditions where decisions need to be made efficiently by someone who is knowledgeable, but if authority is used as the normal means of influence for decision making in the church, the results will be temporary.

Fear is a legitimate and powerful motivator. It is also biblical. We use fear in ministry in various ways, and research demonstrates that fear does work to persuade people. However, research also demonstrates a curious and surprising side effect of fear motivation. Medium or low fear works well, but high or excessive fear is counterproductive. Up to a point, fear works to persuade, provided the listener is a voluntary participant. An overemphasis on fear works in the short term but drives people away in the end. Emory Griffin in his book, *The Mind Changers*, identifies three reasons for resistance to high fear motivation.⁵ First, high fear brings future avoidance because the person no longer wants to think about what makes him afraid. Second, high fear depends upon probability. The person thinks that it will never happen to him. Third, high fear demands a good solution. Fear boomerangs when fright outweighs the credibility of the solution.

Guilt is a powerful tool in persuasion and is probably the most common persuasive tactic used by pastors. Obviously, there is a legitimate use of guilt when it comes to behavior which violates God’s revealed standards in the Bible, but the problem develops when pastors use the language of “should,” “must,” and “ought” to their own opinions and objectives for the church. One of the characteristics of unethical guilt manipulation is a failure to differentiate between divine obligations and human desires. Guilt works – in the short term – producing immediate persuasive benefits. The person does what the pastor wants out of guilt. Results are the attraction of guilt as a peripheral route to persuasion. However, the long-term effects of guilt motivation are dangerous in three ways. First, guilt, like fear, brings avoidance. Research has demonstrated that guilt will cause us to avoid whatever makes us feel guilty. Second, guilt leads to antagonism. People who are manipulated by guilt tend to dislike the person who made them feel guilty. Third, guilt brings outward compliance to avoid the feeling, but there is limited internal commitment. The result is that the person returns to his old habits as soon as no one is monitoring his compliance.

The conformity principle, sometimes called the “social proof principle,”⁶ is a powerful, but peripheral, tool of pastoral persuasion. Conformity applies group pressure on an individual to conform to a group decision. The trigger for the conformity principle is uncertainty. The higher the level of uncertainty or ambiguity, then the more likely it is that the person will be persuaded by the group. Conformity is a peripheral method of persuasion because there is no internal commitment regarding the issue and the person is likely to return to his previous position as soon as the pressure is removed. Many years ago, I remember a board decision that was being discussed. All of the board members

agreed on the decision except one. The rule of the board was that all decisions had to be unanimous, so pressure was applied on the one to agree with the whole board. He did. He conformed, but within a year he resigned from the board and left the church. As the saying goes, “a person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.”

ETHICAL CONTROLS

The objective of elaboration is to encourage the listener to process the information thoroughly before arriving at the point of decision. Elaboration focuses on changing attitudes before changing behavior. There is a direct correlation between attitudes and conduct, beliefs and behavior. The ethical persuader focuses first on attitude change rather than behavior change, and the result is lasting change. Here is the critical difference between sales and persuasion. Sellers change a person’s behavior without changing their beliefs. Persuaders change a person’s behavior by changing their beliefs first.⁷

Pastors become abusive whenever we pressure people into doing what we want done without allowing people to think through the issues involved and freely come to a decision. If our ends are selfish, the persuasion is abusive. If the methods employed are “trigger” response techniques designed to gain compliance without understanding, the persuasion is abusive. If we keep elaboration as the goal, our persuasion will be more ethical. Abusive churches don’t allow questions. Abusive leaders don’t give people the freedom to disagree.⁸ Methods that eliminate elaboration are unethical. These techniques, no matter how effective, replace elaboration with some form of pressure designed to induce yielding without internalization.

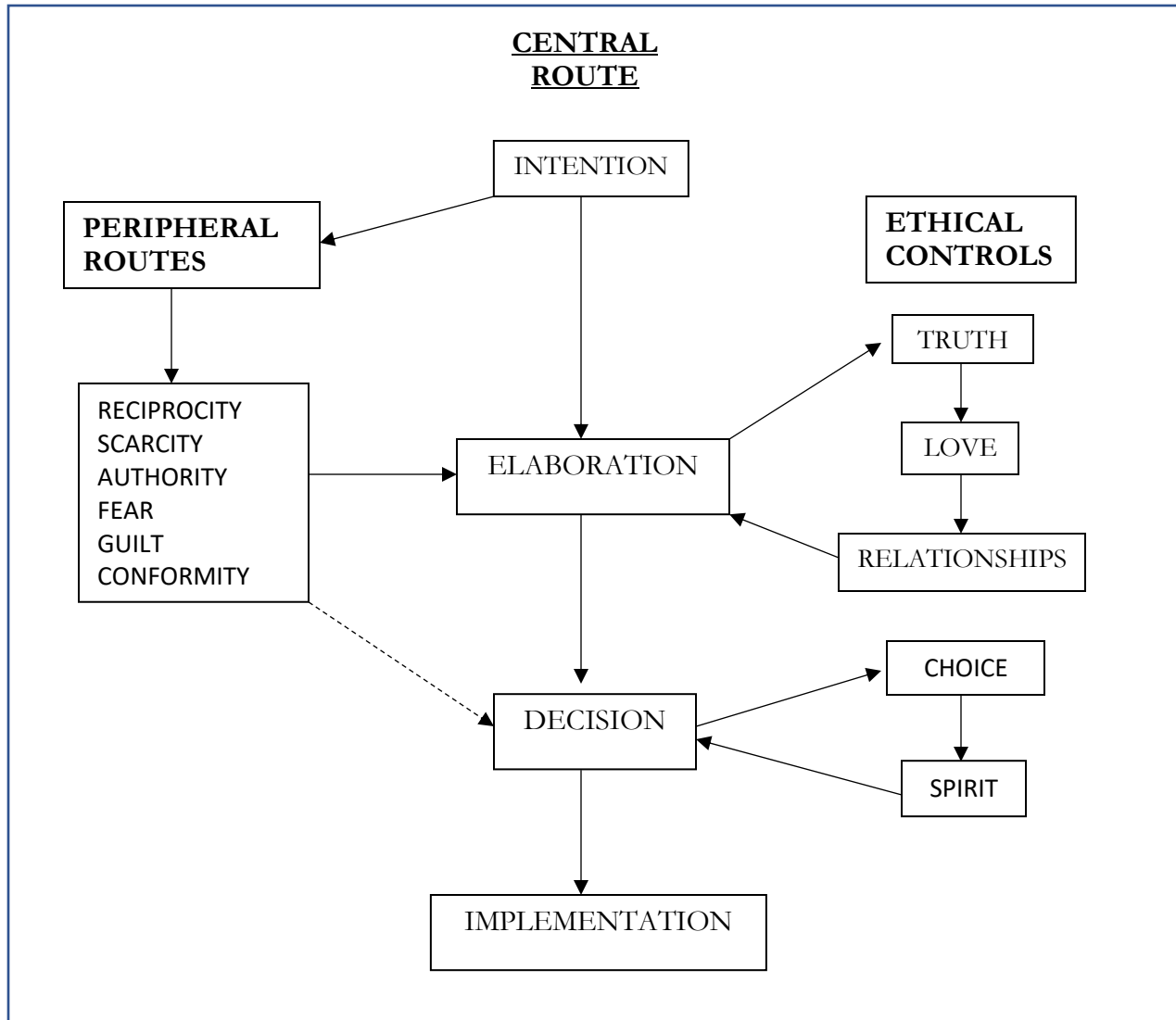
It is during the elaboration phase of persuasion that the pastor needs to run three ethical checks on the process. These ethical checks are (1) Truth, (2) Love, and (3) Relationships. These tests form the boundaries of ethical persuasion during the elaboration phase. The elaboration process should be evaluated before proceeding to the decision phase of the persuasion process.

THE ELABORATION PHASE

Truth is persuasion’s foundation. Truth has long been recognized as a critical component of ethical and effective persuasion. Dishonesty is a key element of manipulation. Any pastor who seeks to persuade people at the expense of biblical truth is manipulating people. Speaking to please does not determine the content of the message any more today than it did in the first century (2 Tim. 4:1-5). Paul’s example in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 places an ethical limitation on the preacher by insisting that he preacher cannot shape the message according to the results he wants to achieve. Paul was not free to enhance or adapt his message to make it more palatable to people. He focused on an open and transparent communication of truth.

The “Institute for Propaganda Analysis” begun in 1937, lists some techniques which are commonly considered unethical. Among these techniques are “name calling” (using labels to influence), “glittering generalities” (associating someone or something with a word or idea not open to verification), “card stacking” (selecting only evidence that supports an idea and avoiding evidence that does not), and “band wagon” pressure (using the group or the crowd to enforce conformity). A preacher who uses these methods seeks results without careful analysis of the truth.⁹

There seems to be general agreement that the following means of persuasion are unethical. 1) it is unethical for a preacher to distort or falsify information. 2) It is unethical for a preacher to make a piece of evidence communicate something it was not intended to communicate. 3) It is unethical for a preacher to conceal his intentions and to misrepresent himself and his objectives. 4) It is unethical for a preacher to distract the audience away from his weak arguments by the use of emotional appeals or specious attacks on his opposition.¹⁰



Love is persuasion's dynamic. Love cares more about the person than about our plans as pastors. Love thinks ahead to the consequences of the influence on the person and seeks to do what is best for the other person not just get what we want done.¹¹ Manipulation is self-serving influence. A manipulator may be defined as someone who uses other people as objects or tools to achieve his goals.¹² Manipulation in the pastorate is destructive because using people to do tasks without caring about them erodes respect and undermines our ministry in the long term.¹³ People will feel used and drift away from the church. Manipulating people is getting them to do something for our advantage or to achieve our vision. Persuading people is getting them to do something for mutual benefit. It is good for them, and it accomplishes our objectives.¹⁴ One of the simplest tests of manipulation is to ask the question, who gains the most from this objective? When we as pastors treat a person as a means to an end, we treat the person selfishly and without love. We may achieve what we want, but we will lose the person in the process. Loving persuasion provides the dynamic for lasting change.

Emory Griffin helpfully clarifies the ways in which we can love our people inappropriately. He summarizes his findings under six types of false love. The “non-lover” remains distant and aloof. The “legalistic lover” is passionate about his goals but has predetermined the standards by which he

measures people in highly personal ways. The “flirt” has no deep commitments to the group and moves on to new conquests when the opportunities arise. The “seducer” uses all methods to get his way. The “rapist” relies on force to make things happen. The “smother lover” never takes no for an answer but insists on inducing compliance through a persistent emphasis on incentives.¹⁵ Loving persuaders validate people by caring for them first as individuals, regardless of whether they perform the tasks the pastor wants performed. They invest time in the lives of people and refuse to exploit people as a means to an end.

Relationships form persuasion’s framework. Since persuasion involves the rearranging of people’s lives to some extent, one important test of ethical persuasion is how does the process affect the common good. We must always consider the importance of community with respect to ethical influence. Influence is set in the framework of relationships. Biblical leadership is not about imposing our dream on others. It’s about developing a shared dream and getting others to see that this shared dream is worth committing their energies and gifts toward achieving. Together, in community, we accomplish much more than a pastor can do with a solo vision.¹⁶

Power plays are the method of the “destructive achiever.”¹⁷ Power plays destroy trust and blow up community. The destructive achiever makes sure that it is unhealthy to disagree with him. He is an absolutist who sees things only in black and white and on those issues he accepts no disagreements. If we as pastors use our position, our expertise or our communication skills to force compliance with our goals, we become destructive achievers. We achieve our goals but destroy the community. Power can be used effectively and ethically when we use our position, expertise or communication skills to help people join us in a shared vision that transforms the community of faith. The relational framework for ethical influence is shared power in the service of the community which is why servant leadership is foundational to long-term effectiveness.

THE DECISION PHASE

Assuming that the pastor has stimulated elaboration on the part of the one being persuaded and that the pastor has put that elaboration process through the grid of truth, love, and relationships; the next stage is the decision stage. The person (or group) being persuaded is being asked to make a decision. He (or they) knows the information necessary to decide and has been lovingly brought to the point of decision. There are two critical controls which the pastor should think through before calling for a decision. They are the issues of “choice” and the “Holy Spirit.” Choice is an ethical control that the pastor places on himself. The Spirit is the pastor’s confidence no matter what the person (or group) decides. The pastor can confidently limit his influence because he is trusting in God to superintend the process. The result is freedom both for the persuader and the persuaded.

Choice is persuasion’s limitation. The major difference between persuasion and coercion is a choice. If the person sees no possible choice, then the process is coercive no matter what form the influence takes. As long as the person perceives a choice to accept or reject, then the influence is not coercive. Freedom to choose is a significant ethical limitation we place on our persuasion. At some point, we pull back and give the person space to decide. Healthy pastoral persuasion seeks voluntary change. Ethical influence gives the person the freedom to say “no.” Freedom to choose is the essence of healthy pastoral persuasion. Emory Griffin points out that this is true even in evangelism. Any attempt to persuade that restricts a person’s freedom to accept or reject Jesus Christ is manipulative.¹⁸ We invest much in the process of persuading others but the moment comes when we must release that person to decide for himself. We take the chance that the person will reject our efforts but pushing harder becomes manipulative.

One check we can use against manipulative methods is forewarning the person about the looming decision. Forewarning produces a level of resistance, but it helps avoid coercive influence.

When issues are particularly important, it is highly ethical to give forewarning so that the one being persuaded can truly elaborate on the issues. The forewarning will increase the difficulty of the persuasion process but will also increase the freedom of choice for the recipient. The net effect is that the influence will be more ethical and the choices will be more permanent. The danger of manipulative influence is greatest when the pastor seeks to influence the person without the person knowing about the intention or having the time to process the information. Choice risks rejection but our confidence is in God, not ourselves to accomplish lasting change.

The Spirit is persuasion's confidence. Paul's example in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 places an ethical boundary on persuasion by emphasizing our dependence on the power of the Spirit to produce results as we preach God's grace and truth. Ethically, Paul leaves the results up to the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ We can risk the choice because we trust in the Spirit. Such a theology does not mean the preacher refuses to seek results. Result oriented leadership is not sophistry. Such a theology means that the pastor refuses to put his confidence in methods or techniques. He may use those methods, but he will not put his confidence in methodology. It means that the pastor understands that he is limited and must allow the person the freedom to choose without threat or pressure.

Such a theology frees the pastor from the tyranny of results. The pastor's confidence rests in the work of God the Holy Spirit to produce lasting change. We can step back from the brink of manipulation, respect the process and love the person while remaining confident of the results. J. Oswald Sanders said it best:

The spiritual leader, however, influences others not by the power of his own personality alone but by that personality irradiated and interpenetrated and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Because he permits the Holy Spirit undisputed control of his life, the Spirit's power can flow through Him to others unbindered. Spiritual leadership is a matter of superior spiritual power, and that can never be self-generated. There is no such thing as a self-made spiritual leader. He is able to influence others spiritually only because the Spirit is able to work in and through him to a greater degree than in those whom he leads.²⁰

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS

1. Am I focused on stimulating people to elaborate the central issue to be decided? Does the person have sufficient time to think through the issues before making a decision?
2. Am I encouraging a decision based on peripheral cues? Have I given the person sufficient information to internalize the decision?
3. Am I misrepresenting the truth by life or by word? Have I given the person accurate information on which to make a decision? Am I genuine in my presentation?
4. Am I certain that the desired response is in the best interest of the other person, or does it serve my own interest more?
5. Am I treating the person as a project or a means to an end? Is the person more important than his/her decision?
6. Am I respecting the relationship structure in which we both exist? Are they free to seek answers outside my control?

7. Am I misrepresenting the choice? Are there hidden intentions or agendas behind my invitation?
8. Am I violating the person's freedom to decide? Will I accept a "no" answer without threat, recrimination, or abandonment?

¹ Harry Truman in a private letter to his sister in 1947 cited by Richard Haass, *The Power to Persuade*, p. 17.

² Bill Hull, "Is the Church Growth Movement Really Working?" In *Power Religion: The Selling out of the Evangelical Church?*, ed. Michael S. Horton, Moody Press, 1992, pp.141-142.

³ David A. Christensen, *Healthy Pastoral Persuasion: A Study of the Tension Between Ethical and Effective Pastoral Influence Within the Leadership Community of the Local Church*, submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Grace Theological Seminary, May, 2000.

⁴ Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, *Communication and Persuasion: Central and Peripheral Routes to Attitude Change*, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986.

⁵ Emory Griffin, *The Mind Changers: The Art of Christian Persuasion*, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1976, p.67-77.

⁶ Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The New Psychology of Modern Persuasion*, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984, p.118.

⁷ Ben Patterson, "The Preacher as Pitchman," *Leadership*, (Fall 1985), p.72-75.

⁸ Ronald Enroth, *Churches that Abuse*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, p.147.

⁹ Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Sage, 1986, p.136; Richard Johannesen, *Ethics and Persuasion*, Random House, Inc., 1967. p.8, 33-34; Winston Brembeck and William Howell, *Persuasion: A Means of Social Control*, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1952, p.448.

¹⁰ Johannesen, *Ethics and Persuasion*, p.9, 36.

¹¹ Griffin, *Mind Changers*, p. 31.

¹² Everett Shostrum, *Man the Manipulator: The Inner Journey from Manipulation to Actualization*, Abingdon Press, 1967, p. 15.

¹³ Joseph Stowell, *Shepherding the Church: Effective Spiritual Leadership in a Changing Culture*, Moody Press, 1994, p. 108-109.

¹⁴ Fred Smith, "Motivation Versus Manipulation," in *Leadership Handbooks of Practical Theology*, vol. 3, *Leadership and Administration*, ed. James D. Berkeley, Baker Book Co., 1994, p.20.

¹⁵ Emory Griffin, *Getting Together: A Guide for Good Groups*, InterVarsity Press, 1982, p.160-165.

¹⁶ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995, p.124.

¹⁷ Charles M. Kelley, *The Destructive Achiever: Power and Ethics in the American Corporation*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1988, p.24.

¹⁸ Griffin, *The Mind Changers*, p.28.

¹⁹ Duane Litfin, *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.207.

²⁰ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, Moody Press, 1967, p.20, cf. pp.70-74.