

Persuasion and the Gospel

by Gary Henry

On the occasion when the apostle Paul presented the gospel of Christ to King Herod Agrippa II, the memorable reply of Agrippa was: "You almost persuade me to become a Christian" (Ac. 26:28). It is difficult to know for sure whether the king was sincere when he made this statement. He may have been sarcastic. In either case, his remark about being almost persuaded to become a Christian suggests some interesting lines of thought.

To begin with, being a Christian does require becoming one. No one ever unconsciously (or even subconsciously) underwent the transformation involved in becoming a Christian, such that he awoke one day to the realization that he had evolved into a disciple of Christ. To the contrary, every person who has ever become a Christian has decided to become such — he has done some definite things that are required. The gospel is a message which must be obeyed (Ac. 6:7; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 5:9; 1 Pt. 4:17; etc.).

In some circles one gets the impression that becoming a Christian is thought of primarily as an emotional experience. The truth is, however, becoming a Christian results from a conversion of the intellect and the will, as well as the emotions. To move from the realm of not being a Christian to the realm of being one, one must learn particular truths and exercise his will to respond to those truths in ways that are specified in the gospel itself (Mk. 16:16; Ac. 3:19; Rom. 10:9,10). No one ever became a Christian without an act of the will.

"Persuasion" is the moving of the will by the giving of compelling reasons. And since becoming a Christian involves an act of the will, there can be no real conversion to Christ without this thing called "persuasion." A person has to be given sufficient reasons to do the things that have to be done, or else he will not do what he must to obey the gospel. Evidently, Agrippa supposed Paul had given reasons that were "almost" sufficient to move his will to obey Christ. Those who have chosen to become Christians would say Agrippa underestimated the weight of the reasons given him, but it seems that Agrippa understood, to some degree, that becoming a Christian requires being persuaded to act in that direction.

The Scriptures consistently emphasize that both belief in the gospel and obedience to it grow out of evidence that the gospel is true. John said, "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (Jn. 20:31). And Paul wrote that being saved requires coming "to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4; cf. 2 Tim. 2:25). One does not obey the gospel unless he has been persuaded to believe it is true and persuaded to act on the basis of his belief. Convictions about the gospel, and the conduct that grows out of those convictions, are always the result of persuasion (Rom. 10:14-17).

It is amazing, when one thinks about it, that God has chosen to depend on persuasion, rather than coercion, to bring men and women back to Himself. He reveals Himself to us through the medium of language, words that can be understood and acted upon (Eph.

3:3,4). And Paul spoke with gratitude for the willingness of some to be moved by the gospel: “We also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

The apostles of Christ were not just communicators and persuaders; they were the *authoritative* communicators of the words by which God seeks to persuade mankind. Paul wrote, “Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18,19).

Through the words of the apostles, then, God’s purpose is to persuade us to accept reconciliation to Him through Jesus Christ. Speaking of himself and his fellow apostles, Paul said, “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:19,20). God gives us reasons to choose to accept reconciliation in the gospel of His Son. But mark it well: heaven will be populated by the *altogether* persuaded — not the almost!