

The changes brought by postmodernism pose great challenges for communication design, but the traditional categories of ethos, pathos, and logos can continue to provide an excellent framework within which preachers can analyze the social changes and design appropriate strategies. This paper offers a model of how to use Aristotle's categories to evaluate the postmodern rhetorical context so that the modern preacher can develop clear strategies when approaching this new audience.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism remains a developing social phenomena encompassing a number of movements which have been variously classified (Farrell, 2005, p.85-99). Johnson identifies a spectrum within postmodernism based on their treatment of truth: at one end truth is viewed quite skeptically while at the other truth's existence is affirmed, but only in a specific communal context (Johnson, 2002, p.118). Scott and Brock divide postmodernism into two major branches, labeled Experiential Perspective and New Rhetorics Perspective, both of which assume a constant state of change and affirm that words affect one's perception of reality just circumstances affects one's choice of words. The Experiential Perspective, however, treats 'words' with greater skepticism as being perhaps quite arbitrary, while the New Rhetorics Perspective treats words with greater attention within the context of stable relationships (Scott and Brock, 1972, p.262-3).

Because of the large diversity within the postmodern audience and the absence of standard nomenclature to describe the differences, current discussion of rhetorical method within a postmodern context is often characterized by broad generalizations about the audience and the dismissal of older paradigms for rhetorical analysis and strategy. Perhaps a more radical approach will be necessary where the existence of truth that applies more broadly than the immediate individual (as espoused by the most radical postmodern thought) is denied. The traditional categories espoused by Aristotle can provide a road map for preaching as a rhetorical act in a postmodern context.

Ethos

Ethos describes the speaker's credibility in the mind of the listener as a function of perceived competency and character (Sunukjian, 1982, p.256), characterized by Aristotle as "the most effective means of proof" (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.2.4). In the modern era, however, truth was construed largely as verifiable knowledge (Lose, 2003, p.20) and this translated into the speaker's competency – the ability to provide rationalistic proof for the message – as a primary element of ethos (Brockreide, 1972, p.180). If the speaker had considerable knowledge, a good faculty for reason, and substantial education, the audience would consider him credible and influential (Okholm and Phillips, 1995, p.12). In the postmodern context, however, the speaker's credibility has shifted in two areas.

In the postmodern context knowledge no longer carries the same weight of influence (Okholm and Phillips, 1995, p.10) for the postmodern mindset defines knowledge as historical, relational and personal (Grenz, 2001, p.80) and views the world as "relative, indeterminate, and participatory" (Grenz, 2001, p.80; Brock,

1972, p.121, 259). Departing from the idea of universality, postmodern audiences distrust the assumption of authority based on knowledge alone and are more interested in personal experience that corresponds to their experience (Sweet, 2000, p.45) The speaker who has comparable life experience and can speak out of that experience – knowledge tested in experience, in other words the perception of wisdom – will exceed the credibility of a speaker whose argument depends primarily upon the selection and arrangement of evidence.

Experience alone, however, is insufficient. If the postmodern view of knowledge is relative and participatory then the speaker's credibility develops in direct relationship to the degree of correspondence between the experiences of speaker and audience. To be truly effective, the speaker must not be a removed agent but a co-pilgrim with the audience, an authoritative participant (Stoddard, 2004, p.39). Postmodern listeners consider truth to be contextual and communal (Johnson, 2002, p.118) and it is best for the speaker to exist within that community so that his experience corresponds closely to that audience. Through life involvement with a community the speaker will gain the pre-requisite trust and credibility (cf. Hebrews 4:15). Since speaker-audience distance plays a role in rhetorical impact, the speaker's effectiveness grows as a function of personal relationships with audience (Brockreide, 1972, p.182).

This shift has already appeared in educational literature where the pedagogical model has shifted from the teacher as intellectual master of the discipline toward the model of coach who facilitates learning through student experience (Sacks, 1996, p.180). The teacher is now an involved co-learner and not one who has already understood or arrived at the learning destination. The credible teacher-coach displays humility toward the process and the student displaying the value of pop-culture. No longer can a speaker sit smugly as he delivers his body of knowledge.

The second casualty of traditional ethos is positional authority. Postmodern listeners generally distrust authority structures and those holding positional power. Reasons for their attitude include the moral failure of recent authority figures throughout society (politics, business and religion), the apparent potential by those in power for misuse or manipulation, and the genuine lack of consideration for universal relevance by those in authority.

A loss of authority, however, does not mean the loss of power. Brockreide identifies and develops the category of power through one's influence created out of one's likeability (Brockreide, 1972, p.180). In the modern context credibility might have been enhanced through greater 'distance' of speaker with the audience (i.e. the speaker as the outside expert on the subject). Conversely, the postmodern listener's suspicion of positional authority and high value for common experience with the speaker, implies the postmodern rhetorician would do better to lessen the distance through relate-ability, friendship, or some other means for 'fit' with the particular audience.

In summary, after considering two major traditional sources of credibility, a consideration of the postmodern mindset has revealed two major shifts. The first shift is

away from knowledge as the exclusive basis of credibility to a credibility based on one's experience which overlap or even exist within the life and relationships of the audience community. This implies that the speaker has transitioned to a more helpful role of a coach further requiring the characteristics of humility within the speaker. The second major shift is one away from power of positional authority towards a power gained more subtly and held more loosely through the likeability of the speaker. The significance of the speaker's ethos has expanded. Not only must the speaker possess considerable knowledge, the speaker must also have applied that knowledge within the context of the community.

Pathos

Pathos describes the audience perception of conviction with which the speaker argues the case and with which the listener can identify. Audiences often measure the degree of conviction by the emotion displayed by the speaker (and similarly aroused in the listener by the speaker) and may conclude that a speaker without sufficient emotion (or who do not arouse in them sufficient conviction) does not believe in the message. Pathos is only one component of an effective argument since a listener usually remains skeptical of a speaker who exudes emotion without appropriate credentials or a reasonable argument. Pathos alone is unsubstantiated opinion.

For a typical postmodern listener, however, emotional considerations have grown and come to hold more ability to convince and motivate (Henry, 2001, p.50), because "feelings and relationships supersede logic and reason" (Ford, 1995, p.115). On the other hand postmodern culture, suspicious of institutions and fearful of manipulation, will not tolerate emotional excess (Beaudoin, 1998, p.177-78). Therefore, effective communication within the postmodern context must learn to place a high value upon keeping the audience emotionally engaged (and not just intellectually challenged) while avoiding superficial emotionalism or sentimental appeals.

Obviously emotion continues to serve an important role within the postmodern rhetorical context and an appropriate use of emotion within persuasive oration can be done through effective illustrations through which the audience can connect emotionally with the speaker's argument. The best illustrations will involve human interest stories built around people and situations with which the audience can easily identify. The most significant source will be their own experience, for within the mind of the postmodern listener "Under some conditions, subjective experience can supersede objective measurements" (Ford, 1995, p.114) and shared emotional experiences become extremely powerful. One common source of shared emotional experience may be through movies, especially where the audience feels the share the experience of the hero or heroine. Another broader emotional connection source can be found in broad themes that tap into deeper values, such as suffering or justice, as exhibited through popular reference in pop culture (Beaudoin, 1998, p.100, 102). Instead of manipulating the mindset of the audience, the wise postmodern rhetorician taps into the existing mindset of the audience and makes a connection.

In the postmodern context, however, a speaker should avoid stories in which sentiment is the primary emotional appeal. Similarly allusions to persons or events drawn from situations other than those of the audience (for example, civil war stories) will struggle to connect unless the central point of the story involves a concrete element with which the audience can immediately identify. The modern preacher's storytelling skills must be carefully developed so that he can detect and develop the requisite emotional connections in such illustrations. To reduce the distance between the experiences of preacher and audience, some propose an interactive component for sermon preparation where preachers interact with their hearers beforehand and invite them to influence the direction of the sermon or an interactive component within the sermon delivery itself (McCLure, 2001, p.59, 61). Similarly the New Rhetoric implies some sort of feedback loop so that the best words are used, leaving the minimal amount of room for error (Brock, 1972, p.263).

Perhaps the most significant context for pathos is the new emphasis upon a holistic view of truth within community where the postmodern listeners see themselves as a member of an ongoing community of which the speaker is also a committed member. While Scott and Brock argue that within the Experiential Perspective people see experiences as unique and see life as individualistic, Carroll notes that postmoderns are "fearful of both commitment and abandonment" yet also on a "quest for authentic intimate communities" (Brock, 1972, p.89).

Since meaning can only be determined within an interpretive community, preachers must learn to emphasize the church as their interpretive community (Veith, 1994, p.221-222) where the naturally critical postmodern audience is welcomed to function as a collection of critics who self analyze the community in which they are a part, so that they can improve their community (Wichelns, 1972, p.142). In this sense, the audience must become more active and involved and the leader must foster an active, involved and participatory frame of mind. The preacher must have the ideal of community as a primary mental framework within which to address a postmodern listener.

The postmodern preacher nurtures a communal identity through a theological emphasis in teaching, including the communal aspects of Christianity (including the communal nature of salvation and redemption), the historical nature of the redemptive meta-narrative, and perhaps most significantly the corporate aspects of the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism, besides an individual act, delivers from excessive individuality by reminding participants that they join a community with local and cosmic dimensions (Crouch, 2003, p.81-81). The Eucharist as a statement of "covenant renewal" reminds one through the act of remembrance of both individual and corporate obligations and ties one to the historic Christian community of the past. By affirming and enabling continual involvement in the sacraments, the leader/speaker creates a communal frame of mind which is most effective pathos in the postmodern context, decreasing skepticism and building trust.

In summary, it has been shown that pathos exists as an increasingly important rhetorical category in the postmodern context. The appropriate use of emotion is increasingly

important. More important, however, is the audience's communal frame of mind which can be fostered by simple strategies (such as a speaker reviewing his material beforehand with selected members of the target audience in order to decrease miscommunication) or by larger changes in audience self-understanding, the speaker's involvement within the community and development of a communal sense within the audience so that the speech has implications for the community at large and the relationships within it.

Logos

Postmodern listeners have a general aversion to the concept of ultimate or absolute truth, that is, any principle that claims to transcend and thereby exercise authority over the individual (Dockery, 2001, p.40-41), preferring definitions of truth that confine it to a specific context or individual (which in the most extreme case leads to the doubt or denial of its very existence) (Dockery, 2001, p.13). Pop-culture affirms this value by ridiculing a monolithic perspective (*Finger Eleven, 2003*). Postmodern thinkers avoid inherent meaning in words and so detach them from all specificity and the New Rhetoric Perspective allows individuals to create their own definitions. Simultaneously the postmodern audience affirms both a holistic perspective on life and the existence of multiple, even contradictory spheres of "truth" within which one functions effectively on a daily basis. Observers attribute these to the mass inundation of information producing an aversion to knowledge or an attempt to suspend processing the unmanageable volume of incoming data and educators observe the outcome as a lack of coherent critical thinking among postmodern students (Sacks, 1996, p.136-139).

Aristotle's concept of logos denotes the internal strength of the speaker's argument and the ability of its reasoning to influence the audience. It is not dependent on an assumption of absolute truth but on the presence of reasoned development appropriate to the audience that leads to a conclusion. The postmodern struggle with the definition of truth, therefore, does not create a problem. On the other hand, a coherent thinking deficit raises new issues. A postmodern listener may value the Bible but only as one truth source among many but a preacher who builds an argument based on the assumption of the Bible's authority risks being ignored or the message debunked as circular reasoning.

A postmodern paradigm for truth can be addressed through one of two categories. First, the speaker can offer a holistic apologetic, reasoning based on broad foundations with which most listeners will agree, for example: the benefits of morality, the positive aspects of self-sacrifice and service, and the virtue of brotherly love. While this option provides some help it is doubtful whether such broad generalizations are of much help for the articulation of the unique teachings of the orthodox Christian faith, nor that they will impact the unregenerate listener. (Such truths have been sermon fodder for decades with no enduring positive impact upon the modern listener willing to affirm absolute truth.)

A second response to the loss of biblical authority is a confessional approach. This approach is not new. The apostle Paul used a confessional approach (Bailey, 1991, p.111). Augustine articulated it with his classic phrase "Faith seeking understanding." The confessional approach is a means of reasoning based on a living confession of faith in Christ leading to conviction, not reasoning based on empirical proof leading to

certainty (Lose, 2003, p.3). This is a rebuttal against the modernistic approach of reason as the means to faith. The confessional approach is based on the assertive articulation of the essentials of the Christian tradition, rather than on coercing the audience (Lose, 2003, p.3).

A confessional approach calls ultimately for the definite, though not necessarily immediate, response of faith as the goal of the preacher's rhetoric. Secondly, a confessional approach implies an increase in physical distance (different than the relational distance discussed earlier), the "psychological or spiritual space" (Childers, 1998, p.45) given by the audience during which listeners can "safely suspend its disbelief and make themselves vulnerable to the [preaching]" (Lose, 2003, p.136). This effectively removes the hard sell approach which effectively burned over much of the American northeast and gives time for the Word of God to produce faith (Matthew 13:8). Thirdly, it implies the clear re-articulation of faith which gives definition and specificity to Christian doctrine (Lose, 2003, p.45-46), reclaims language from ambiguity by giving it a communally understood meaning (and thereby responding to those in the New Rhetorics Perspective who wish to separate language from meaning).

The concept of historical connection in an argument can be extended to a broader construct for logos. Since the postmodern listener determines a preacher's credibility in shared experience, evaluates truth within a common emotional matrix and is attracted to arguments formed within a meta-narrative framework, then the nature of the sermonic argument can be restructured to accommodate these values. The modern homiletic known as "narrative preaching" attempts to do this (Lowry, 1989, p.23-28), although its more radical advocates' assumption of non-direction with the intended audience undermines any illusion of sermonic purpose as persuasion. Unlike some "deductive" sermons in which propositional logic arranged in parallel points supports a conclusion but without any significant emotional variation or development, a postmodern sermon will assume a so-called narrative design: opening with conflict, the tension escalates until dramatic reversal occurs and the solution appears, followed by a proleptic closure that resolves any unfinished business accumulated along the way (Lowry, 1989, p.25). This "inductive" development assumes an organic structure where each point leads naturally into the next and the listener flows effortlessly with the thought (and the associated emotions arising in the course of the narrative) to the conclusion. The preacher becomes the consummate "storyteller" for the community and the sermon assumes the role of the story, each Sunday adding one more episode to the meta-narrative of faith.

In summary, the most appropriate basis for logos within the postmodern context is a confessional approach where the essential aspects of Christian tradition are articulated. A confessional framework does not assume the listener's theological knowledge or agreement. It allows time for faith to grow and understanding to develop. It disarms those in the New Rhetorics Perspective who deconstruct language which unravels reasoning. More importantly, the sermon argument should assume the form of a narrative in which the listener encounters and experiences the truth within a community who are sharers of the preaching event itself.

Conclusion

Obviously the classic Aristotelian categories of ethos, pathos and logos continue to serve as a valuable paradigm for the analysis of the postmodern rhetorical context, yielding insights into appropriate approaches to persuasion. The speaker's ethos remains important, but the basis of credibility has shifted (a) from knowledge mastery towards the perception of the speaker's wisdom and experience in the life and relationships of the listening community and (b) from the speaker's positional power to the audience perception of the speaker's likeability and authenticity. The preacher attitude must reflect the humility of a helpful coach, who comes alongside the listener rather than give direction from a distant position of authority.

In an effective use of pathos, the speaker persuades through a positive emotional environment and sustains a safe communal frame of mind fostered by an attitude of relational trust within the audience. The effective preacher must be personally involved with the listening community and develop within them a communal self-understanding so that the message has implications for the both the community as a whole and the individual relationships within it.

The speaker's logos looks less to the nature of facts or formal logic of the argument but derives strength from a confessional approach where the essential aspects of the historic Christian theological tradition. The preacher must draw the community into a connection with the broader meta-narrative of church history without assuming their prior knowledge or agreement and allowing time for the listener's faith to grow and understanding to develop.

In the struggle to communicate effectively with a postmodern audience, preachers have certainly experienced some frustration created by the cultural shifts and by the failure of cultural observers to frame their observations in known categories of communication. This frustration need not continue. Rhetorical principles for argument analysis should follow the map of Aristotle's categories as a framework to understand the matrix of postmodern listeners and to design effective strategies of persuasion for them. As in every journey, there's something to be said for following the same map – even if we don't all fold it quite the same way..

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