

## Why We Need Dead Pagans In Our Homiletic Classrooms

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**Abstract:** This paper argues for the inclusion of classical rhetorical theory in the homiletic classroom. Samplings from Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian demonstrate the unique capacity of the golden age of oratory to speak to today's post-modern controversies over truth and its expression. Special attention is given to classical rhetoric's potential to produce preachers that are grounded, original, passionate, and sensitive to the room and the moment.

“What is truth?” Besides being a hotly contested question today, it is also Pilate's irritated reply to Jesus' seeming preoccupation with the word. At first glance, it seems to be simply the nervous maneuvering of a scared tyrant. But perhaps there could be a little more to his conversation-ending question. Pilate was a well-educated Roman procurator, grounded in the grammar and rhetoric of both classic Greece and Hellenized Rome (Enos, 1995, p. 69). Just a generation before him, the politician and orator Cicero had demonstrated and documented the training in rhetoric that Pilate had no doubt studied back in Rome.

Pilate, then, would have had more than just cursory knowledge of Aristotelian, Platonic, and Ciceronian rhetoric. When he asks, “What is truth?” he's not just stalling. He's opening the can of worms that had been brewing for centuries in the ancient world. On the one side he was familiar with Plato's Philosopher-King who loves the truth and only the truth, despising all efforts to massage or distort it. On the other hand, he knows the arguments of Plato's detractors, the Sophists, who point out the difficulty in ascertaining a universal truth. The Sophists recognized that “truth” is articulated from a particular point-of-view, and those with varying points-of-view both claim to have “truth” on their side. For the Sophist, it's pointless to seek universal truth since all truth is situational and based in perception rather than reality.

So when Jesus tries to challenge him to “The Truth,” Pilate knows his escape. Adopting a sophistic outlook, he squirms his way out. “Is the truth really so simple, Jesus? Is there only one truth? Wouldn't your accusers also have their ‘truth?’ Doesn't truth depend on where you're standing at any given moment? You quiz me as if there's some obvious Truth when in actuality, the world is a lot messier than that.”

His tactic is to paint Jesus as simplistic and stuck in Plato's bygone era. “Any educated man knows,” he tells himself, “that an appeal to universal truth is impossible, delusional, and dangerous. It's no wonder that he's gotten himself into such trouble. This is how

you get yourself killed. You take an absolutist minority position against an absolutist majority. I can't help a man who won't help himself."

Pilate rarely gets credit for thinking on a philosophical level. We have a truncated version of him pulled from the scriptural text, but uninformed by any broader context. So Pilate becomes a caricature of himself, opening the door for hermeneutic/homiletic Darwinism where we assume we're smarter because we're newer, and that our situation is unprecedented. Pilate's question to Jesus is a marvelous bridging of the ancient world with the worlds of modernity and post-modernity. But to catch it, you have to have some sense of first century rhetoric. Then we see that some things never change and our so-called "new" issues are really quite old. It's a healthy antidote for our addiction to novelty.

But study of the ancient world also reveals some differences. Because they utilized different technologies, they processed information differently. While reading and writing were certainly not rare skills in the first century AD, they were implemented more for the preservation, and not the production of knowledge. Communication was primarily oral with literacy serving in a back-up role. As long as we picture the first century church assembled, like us, with their individual study bibles, reading the word quietly, or a second century pastor writing out his weekly sermon, we risk imposing ourselves back onto that world, and failing to hear how and what the revealed word originally spoke.

On the contrary, bringing ancient rhetorical theory into the seminary classroom has both hermeneutic and homiletic benefits. Pagan rhetoricians flesh out the world of communication in the biblical milieu. Just as we study Greek and Roman history to understand the historical context for the New Testament, so we can study Greek and Roman rhetoric to understand the communicative context. Yet in a survey of recent homiletic textbooks, only 1 in 9 made any reference at all to classical rhetoric and that reference was scant indeed, limited, for the most part, to the "Further Reading" section at the end. Zondervan's massive and recently released anthology of preaching, The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching, has no reference to the age of oratory. To get any sense of the overlap between pagan thinkers and preaching, we must go all the way back to Broadus' 1870 classic, On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons (where he actually addresses Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian). Remaining textbooks give the distinct impression that passionate, grounded oratory was invented just 10 minutes ago.

Some might object that history is "factual" whereas communication theory is laden with pagan values, right? Why care what pagans think about communication? Well whether or not we agree with classical rhetoric, is, at this point, beside the point. Approve or disapprove, pagan theorists demonstrate explicitly how communication actually worked in the ancient world. It is precisely that communicative context, and no other, that produced the speech, preserved by writing, that became scripture. Peeling back our exclusively literate orientation, we can see the oral foundations to the written word of God and perhaps "hear" and "speak" from it as we might not otherwise.

Tracing the oral under-girding of the scriptural text is beyond the scope of this paper. But more and more scholars are calling attention to this under-developed side of hermeneutics. Bruce Shields in From the Housetops: Preaching in the Early Church and Today demonstrates oral roots in the gospels, epistles, and book of Acts, roots that affect how a passage is understood. Susan Niditch in Oral World and Written Word performs a similar task for the Old Testament, underscoring the interplay of orality and literacy in the production of scripture.

Once we have an understanding of the world of primary orality, we can appreciate the strengths of both orality and literacy. Both were used to produce and reproduce the word of God for successive generations. The prophet or the apostle, or Jesus himself, delivered the message to an original audience via speech. Jesus wrote no sermons. That speech was then subsequently recorded and preserved with the precision and durability of text. But it would seem that to fully “hear” the word of God, it needs to become speech again.

### **Water/Ice/Water**

Perhaps we could conceive a water/ice/water metaphor. Water is best ingested in liquid form. But if we must transport water a great distance and we have no waterproof container, we must find a way to freeze the water into ice for transport in a refrigerated freight system. Yet when the ice arrives at the new destination, it needs to be melted again to be efficiently and satisfyingly consumed. In a similar way, the ice of text preserves the word of God for transport through the centuries. Perhaps the preacher in this scenario becomes warming agent to melt the ice back into digestible (oral/aural) form. Such a preacher has great appreciation for the ice and a different sort of appreciation for the water.

### **The World of Water**

Classical rhetoric, while familiar with ice, depicts mainly a world of water; a world where speech was king. So then, what is this world of water like? What insights from the world of classical rhetoric might apply to homiletic task of “melting the ice?” The remainder of this paper will sample rhetorical theory from four classic rhetorical theorists, two Greek and two Roman. To avoid an impossibly exhausting task, we will limit our observations to theory that has direct relevance to homiletics i.e. the task of converting ice to water, text to tongue. The observations noted are not intended to accurately summarize the particular author’s theory, but hopefully will not violate the larger context of the author’s work. We will proceed chronologically from Plato up through Quintilian.

### **Plato- Good Preaching Starts With Truth Held Authentically**

In about 370 B.C, Plato composed a dialogical examination of the art of speaking named after Phaedrus, Socrates’ partner in the discussion. We must remember that Socrates, consistent with his critique of literacy, left no writings behind. Without the transcriptions of his student Plato, his philosophy would have terminated in the minds (and graves) of

his disciples. The dialogue is far too long to summarize here, but toward the end Socrates makes some observations about speaking that have direct application to preaching today.

Like today, Socrates was confronted with a popular and very influential school of thought previously referred to in this paper as Sophism. Sophists rejected transcendent truth, reducing everything to probable knowledge. Since nothing can be known for sure, persuasion is key to constructing reality. What people come to believe, or are persuaded to believe, is the only truth there is. Listen to Socrates' irritation with this turn from transcendent truth.

For in the courts, they say, nobody cares for truth about these matters, but that which is for convincing; and that is probability, so that he who is to be an artist in speech must fix his attention upon probability. For sometimes one must not tell what was actually done, if it was likely to be done, but what was probable, whether in accusation or defense; and in brief, a speaker must always aim at probability, paying no attention to truth. (*Phaedrus*, p. 164)

The irritation is driven by the sense that it doesn't really matter what's true, just what sounds plausible or persuasive. This, in turn, leads to a shallow sort of speaker who has no patience to discover ultimate realities, but has a sense for "what will preach." Socrates, on the other hand, places knowledge of the truth before the speech. A good speaker must be, first of all, a good thinker. Not one who simply admits to truth or parrots truth, but one who understands truth at foundational and synthetic levels. Listen to his summary.

Unless a man take account of the characters of his hearers and is able to divide things by classes and to comprehend particulars under a general idea, he will never attain the highest human perfection in the art of speech. (*Phaedrus*, p. 165)

Or again:

A man must know the truth about all the particular things of which he speaks or writes, and must be able to define everything separately; then when he has defined them, he must know how to divide them by classes until further division is impossible; and in the same way he must understand that nature of the soul, must find the class of speech adapted to each nature, and must adorn his discourse accordingly, offering the complex soul elaborate and harmonious discourses, and simple talks to the simple soul. (*Phaedrus*, p. 167)

Socrates would listen to a shallow preacher and pinpoint the problem as a shallow thinker. He would doubt that a person can be taught to preach without teaching them first to think. And with sound thinking, in good theology, a wellspring of preaching builds quietly, looking for the right time, the *kairos*, to be spoken. And when the time is right,

the speaker, the true orator, the gifted preacher is not limited to this week's scratchings on a legal pad, but has a reservoir of thought that is synthesized with and activated by speech that fits the occasion and the audience. In this sense, homiletic preparation goes on all the time, unstoppably and unconsciously.

Socrates would say that theology precedes and fuels homiletics. If we ever get to the point where we simply coach shallow speakers to tweak their ramblings toward a more hospitable reception without addressing what that speaker really believes, then we have inherited the worst form of sophistry and called it preaching. A good preacher must have a cogent and well-developed anthropology, a soteriology that is owned and more than pat phrases, and an ecclesiology that is honed and tested.

Socrates makes much of breaking things down to first principles so that we know what we believe partly by what we don't believe. This is the kind of dialectic that used to be fostered by the great confessions of the church, but has largely fallen by the wayside. Certainly good preaching doesn't stop with good thinking, but it starts there. As it continues, it produces what Socrates calls "the word within himself."

Only in words about justice and beauty and goodness spoken by teachers for the sake of instruction, and really written in a soul, is clearness and perfection and serious value, that such words should be considered the speakers own legitimate offspring, first the word within himself.  
(*Phaedrus*, p. 167)

The truth becomes written in the soul, and when spoken becomes a sort of procreation or legitimate offspring. Socrates is concerned about legitimacy because the increasing use of writing during his time was a threat to legitimate speech. The new technology of writing made words easy to borrow and parrot so that speech could become illegitimate and shallow.

For they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise. (*Phaedrus*, p. 165)

Literacy offers the preacher a plethora of literate resources. Commentaries, interpretive notes, downloadable sermons, and books of sermon outlines and illustrations can all be the crutch that robs a sermon of its first person, original power. It is easy to appear wise and well-read without having much true understanding. One of the tests of true wisdom, of "the word within himself" is the ability of a speaker to defend his speech when challenged. Likening a written, disembodied speech to a helpless child, Socrates bemoans the weakness of the literate word.

And every word, when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak; when ill-treated or unjustly reviled it

always needs its father to help it; for it has no power to protect or help itself. (*Phaedrus*, p. 166)

For Socrates, wisdom and an understanding of the truth comes through oral exchange of ideas in the refinery of dialogue. The Platonic dialogues themselves illustrate this. For though they are written, the literacy is merely the preservation of oral combat. The ideas are turned over and inside-out in the world of interlocution, not in silent and private meditation.

One could wonder how many sermons are like Socrates' helpless children. If challenged or questioned, they could not defend themselves inasmuch as they lack the requisite original thinking, reflecting instead a certain second or third-hand regurgitation. Professors of homiletic would do well to foster Plato's standard of "the word within himself" that is the legitimate offspring of the speaker, sensitive to the occasion. About 700 years later, Augustine, also suspicious of manipulative rhetorical technique that diluted authentic speech, advocated the interiorization of scripture to provide infinitely flexible fodder for unfolding sermons. "If the preacher is to rhapsodize on a topic, drawing from a copia informed by the reading of scripture, then scripture and its wisdom are obviously not outside the speaker, but interiorized" (Schaeffer, p. 1139).

### **Aristotle- Good Preaching Depends on Credibility That Persuades**

In contrast to the idealism of his mentor, Aristotle seems to take a slightly more pragmatic approach to persuasion. He doesn't deny transcendent truth, referring to it quite freely. "Things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites." (*The Rhetoric*, 1355a: 22). But he seems to evidence less confidence in our ability to access it accurately. Indeed, he categorizes persuasion in the field of art, not science. (*The Rhetoric*, 1359b: 12). For Aristotle, most of the things we discuss and dispute cannot be held with scientific precision. They have a debatable, or contingent nature.

Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity. (*The Rhetoric*, 1357a: 24).

This seems to be where we find ourselves in preaching too. Our sermons are about transcendent, universal truths. Truths that are bigger than us and truths we cannot control or create. Truths that go on, with or without our consent. Yet our access to those truths is not with scientific precision, and that by divine design. What Aristotle calls contingency, we could call faith. God intentionally leaves things muddy enough that it requires some stepping beyond empirical knowledge to participate. Faith and rhetoric go

hand in glove, for rhetoric is most at home in the world of probability, the world of contingency.

This is where Plato and Aristotle help us in our transition from modernity to post-modernity. Being pre-modern themselves, they have no stake in either view of truth. But between the two, we can see something very old which has currency today. With Plato, we concur that truth is transcendent and not merely socially constructed. But with Aristotle we concede that our limited access to transcendent truth will always force us back to world of probability and faith. Borrowing from these pre-moderns equips us to handle challenges from both relativists who say there is no big-T truth, and hip-pocket apologists who try to prove the unprovable.

With Aristotle we say, that since theology cannot be demonstrated empirically, it falls into the realm of art more than science, and can benefit by being openly rhetorical. It's a subtle but significant shift. Notice the difference between a sermon entitled "Tithing: God's Mandate For Giving" and "Why We Should Be More Generous Than We Are." The first treats the audience as a pupil. The second frames them as a volitional being faced with real and confusing choices. The first assumes the audience needs instruction. The second assumes the audience needs persuasion.

Persuasion is central for Aristotle's rhetoric since he defines rhetoric as "observing in any given case the available means of persuasion." (*The Rhetoric*, 1355b: 26). Those means are summarized in three categories (logos, pathos, ethos) and for three different communicative contexts (forensic/legal, deliberative/legislative, and epideictic/ceremonial). If we attempt to appropriate Aristotle in the homiletic realm, it makes sense to focus on ethos and the ceremonial realm; the ceremonial because it most closely approximates a congregation gathered on Sunday, and ethos because it is more closely linked to the preacher than the other two.

It is only a few pages into Book I of *The Rhetoric* that we encounter Aristotle's first mention of ethos. Predictably, it is listed along with its two counterparts: pathos and logos, but listed first among the three: "The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker, the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind, the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself" (*The Rhetoric*, 1356a: 2).

He then elaborates with two notable sub-points. First he stresses that ethos is working while the speech is so spoken as to "make us think him credible." Strictly speaking, it matters not whether the speaker is actually credible (from the perspective of factually verifiable standards). The crucial dynamic that builds Aristotelian ethos is what the audience perceives coming from the actual words of the speaker.

The second clarification distinguishes Aristotle's definition from later depictions (most notably, Quintilian) of ethos that flows from the moral character of the person, outside the speech. In contrast, Aristotle makes it clear that, at least for the point under discussion, he is only referring to the persuasive ethos that is "achieved by what the

speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak” (*The Rhetoric*, 1356a: 9). But how would credibility emerge from the speech event itself? How does a preacher build credibility in the midst of the sermon? Aristotle has some interesting observations.

Aristotle talks far less about the epideictic environment than he does the other two. So as we examine ethos the epideictic, we are looking at the least-discussed mode of proof operating in the least-discussed rhetorical environment. Sullivan finds, in this peculiar matching, some natural aptness. “Since epideictic is about character and ethos is the portrayal of character, there is a natural link between the two” (118).

Sullivan delineates this “constellation of purposes” as “preservation, education, celebration, and aesthetic creation.” Sullivan concludes, “Epideictic rhetoric creates a situation that magnifies the importance of ethos over logos primarily because it does not argue to win a particular debate” (117). Epideictic is not seeking to win the argument. Rather, since its audience is the already converted, the epideictic orator seeks to buttress the community with a reaffirmation of its shared values; what would be popularly described as a pep rally, with ethos providing the “pep.”

### **Homiletic Ethos**

Armed with the definition of ethos as the by-product of an audience’s positive intuition, we have to conclude that the only ethos a speaker ever has, is that granted to him by the situation of the audience in their shared space. From an Aristotelian perspective, there is no speaker who carries that ethos around as resident within, or portable. Now, we must take that kind of ethos into the epideictic sermon environment and ask what it looks like there, and what, if anything, can be done to foster it. Sullivan offers some help here, distilling epideictic ethos down to five factors: reputation, vision, authority, good reasons, and consubstantiality. All five have some bearing upon the preacher.

#### Reputation

Although Sullivan includes the idea of a portable reputation that exists outside the speech, we will confine our questions to Aristotle’s unfolding sense of reputation that is only sensed during the speech act. Pertinent questions might include: What kind of reputation flows from my words? What do my words say about who I am? How do my words establish me as a competent spokesperson for the community of faith? Do my words demonstrate shared values and goodwill toward the audience?

#### Vision

Here Sullivan elaborates, “On a purely naturalistic level, this vision might be called insight, but the epideictic tradition has roots in the religious ceremonies and sacred poetry of ancient Greece. And there is a sense in which the epideictic rhetor is perceived as a seer, a prophet with supernatural vision” (126). So the logical questions that follow might be: Do I have anything to say that is sourced in something other than myself? Do I

evidence any connection to divine wisdom and direction? Do I have any authentic message from God? Am I putting my own words in God's mouth?

### Authority

It is broadly acknowledged that epideictic speakers, in addressing the "converted," are not required to demonstrate exacting detail. Sullivan, quoting Weaver, calls this a sense of "spaciousness" that is granted to an epideictic speaker. "The audience brings to the discourse a willingness to accept the speaker's assertions because of the speaker's generally perceived ethos. This openness allows the speaker to draw upon his or her own authority, rather than the authority derived through citing others or evidence" (123).

This brings up an interesting complication to homiletic ethos. Does the role of the preacher as mediator of God's message through scripture bring with it automatic ethos? To what extent can the preacher's credibility simply ride the coattails of scriptural authority? Here the preacher is walking a tightrope between self-generated authority and secondary "borrowed" authority. On the one hand there is the ethos flowing from the "word as being spoken" (Schrag 161), and on the other hand there is the scriptural ethos of the "spoken word." This is the blend of prior language with present speech. Schrag contends that all communication has this element of past and present going on simultaneously. "Although distinguishable, they are interwoven. Whenever I am engaged in speaking I make use of words which have already undergone institutionalization, either explicitly or implicitly. The spoken word is present in the word as spoken" (161).

In the case of the preacher, the ethos of scripture becomes inseparably bound up with his or her own, in a sobering blend of the human and divine. While the preacher's authority is of a different nature than that of the text, it's difficult to substantiate where one stops and the other begins.

Pertinent Questions: How much personal authority do I claim? How do I honor the authority of Scripture? Is it legitimate for people to believe things just because I say them? How should I honor that kind of trust? How could I betray it? Should I distinguish, when preaching, where God's word stops and my own opinions start?

### Good Reasons

The ethos of the speaker is energized by the ethical arguments of the discourse. The passion demonstrated for moral purpose seems to transfer, in the audience's mind, from the argument to the speaker himself, with the assumption that only a highly moral person would argue so strongly for morality.

Sullivan, referring to George Yoos and his four ethical qualities (A- seeking agreement, R- rational autonomy of audience, E- equality with audience, and V- shared values), takes good reasons a step further. "Thus, rhetors displaying these qualities are like teachers who, though they have the authority simply to tell students the way things are— may choose to [...] support generalizations with good reasons out of respect for the students'

rationality” (125). Do I show respect for the audience’s thoughts? Do I present myself as “above” them in any way? Would I be persuaded by my own arguments?

#### Creation of Consubstantiality

This last point is Sullivan’s foremost and favorite. For it speaks of a shared timelessness between audience and speaker. “Things that are consubstantial share substance, and if in some metaphysical sense, we can say that those who share a common mental or spiritual space also share a common substance, we begin to experience ethos as consubstantiality” (127).

This is not too far a departure from Aristotle’s own description of the epideictic as concerned with the present (as opposed to the past or the future). Indeed, in epideictic, part of the fodder for discourse is the room itself. This is not so with forensic or deliberative which are always concerned with issues “out there.” The unique capacity of the epideictic moment is that the audience and the speaker, and their very present “in here, right now,” experience can become part of the celebration or contemplation. This is the synthetic realm unique to epideictic ethos.

Pertinent questions for preachers include: Do I address the present tense? Do I make the audience part of the sermon? Is there a timelessness in the room, or are people glancing at their watches? Have we, in any sense, lost track of time?

In conclusion, Sullivan’s description of epideictic ethos takes us right to the doorway of the church. His outline almost gives the impression he’s dressed up the experience of a good sermon in rhetorical terms. Consider his summary: “One can almost call such a place sacred, for it is the place where the educative and celebratory functions of epideictic take place, the place where the continuing ideology of an orthodoxy is given birth in a new generation and rebirth in those who already dwell within the tradition” (130).

#### **Cicero- Good Preaching is Fueled by Authentic Emotion**

Moving forward several hundred years to the first century BC, Cicero opens the field of Roman rhetoric with his adaptation and extension of the Aristotelian model. Cicero’s work on the subject includes seven volumes and in general carries forward the idea that the ideal orator must be widely grounded in all fields and disciplines, able to thoroughly understand the subjects in dispute. Like Plato, he believed that good speaking starts with good thinking that is also expansive and exhaustive. Though admittedly a daunting challenge, Cicero refused to confine oratory to simple rhetorical handbooks that emphasized technique over originality. Cicero depicts a flexible and well-grounded oratory that can adapt on the fly to new circumstances or twists in the debate.

Like Aristotle, he also granted emotion a sweeping role in persuasion. But ever the moralist, he decried false or trumped up emotion that is merely theatrical. The following excerpt from Book II of *De Oratore* captures it well.

In fact it is impossible for the hearer to grieve, to hate, to envy, to become frightened at anything, to be driven to tears and pity, unless the self-same emotions the orator wants to apply to the juror seem to be imprinted and branded on the orator himself. Now if, for instance, the grief that we must assume would somehow be unreal and pretended, and if this mode of speaking would involve nothing but deception and imitation and feigning, then we would probably require some quite powerful art... I swear to you that every time I have ever wanted to arouse grief or pity or envy or hate in the hearts of jurors through my oratory, I was invariably, while working to stir the jurors, thoroughly stirred myself by the same feelings to which I was trying to lead them... For oratory that aims at stirring the hearts of others, will, by its very nature, stir the orator himself even more strongly than it will any member of his audience... For this reason, Sulpicius, I am teaching you two this (being of course a good and learned teacher): to be able to get angry when you are speaking, and to grieve, and to weep. (Book II 185-196).

The homiletic application is so obvious here, no additional comment is needed. Though this fails to even scratch the surface of Cicero's expansive thought, just this citation gives us a taste of the kind of speech modeled by classical orators; the kind of speech that is both authentic and emotional. Classical rhetors understood the role of passion in speech and were unapologetic about unleashing it upon an audience. In an earlier section one of the interlocutors is summarizing the passionate display he saw exuded from a friend.

But I swear, Crassus, that on my part, I always shudder when you handle these matters in your cases: such mental vigor, such energy, such passion always show from your eyes, your face your gestures, even from your finger; so overwhelming is the flow of the best and most impressive words; and so sincere are your thoughts, so true, so novel and so devoid of immature frills, that it seems to me that you are not just setting the jurors on fire, but are ablaze yourself. (Book II, 188).

It's sad to say that not many preachers could live up to that description. We can get a sense of it in Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, in the early sermons of Peter after Pentecost, and in Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. But where today? And why so rare? If Crassus could be so caught up in a court case, cannot we, entrusted as we are, with the oracles of God?

### **Quintilian- Great Preaching Looks Simultaneously Backward and Forward**

Marcus Fabius Quintilianus was born in Spain about two years after the start of the Christian church and lived and taught all during that crucial first century of the church's existence. In that light, it's intriguing to think what was happening in the background behind the lives of the apostles, the writing of the New Testament, and the steady expansion of the church toward Greece and eventually Rome. While that was happening,

Quintilian was hammering out the educational philosophy and praxis that would, before too long, be absorbed into the emerging Christian culture of the west.

As with Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, we can only manage here a sample of the kind of contribution classical rhetoric makes to homiletics. We will focus on one citation from Book 10, Chapter 6 of his *Institutes of Oratory*. His topic is premeditation, which, for Quintilian, means a stage of preparation that is halfway between written precision on one hand, and total extemporaneous speech on the other hand. Premeditation, he says, borrows power from both other forms, and serves to fix the speech in the mind in such a way as to facilitate its unencumbered release.

We cannot write everywhere and at all times; but there is abundance of time and room for thought. Meditation may, in a very few hours, embrace all points of the most important causes. When our sleep is broken at night, meditation is aided by the very darkness. Between the different stages in the pleading of a cause it finds some room to exercise itself, and never allows itself to be idle. Nor does it only arrange within its circle the order of things, (which would itself be a great assistance to us), but forms an array of words, and connects together the whole texture of a speech, with such effect, that nothing is wanting but to write it down. (10, 6, 1-2).

Here we have form of sermon preparation which has more flexibility than writing, yet more precision than a purely extemporaneous delivery. With premeditation, the natural flow of a speech or sermon is fixed mentally in a sensible sequence that can be recalled without the assistance of notes or literate aids. Even though Quintilian argues repeatedly for the value of writing a speech, the writing is a part of a stage of invention that produces the premeditation that culminates in extemporaneous delivery. Writing is a tool that is left behind as one approaches the oral event. In its place is a loosely fixed outline or sequence that is covertly rehearsed by the rhetor to the point of easy fluency. How does one attain this level of mental preparedness?

A habit of thinking must then be gradually gained by embracing in our minds a few particulars at first, in such a way that they may be faithfully repeated; next, by additions so moderate that our task may scarcely feel itself increased, our power of conception must be enlarged, and sustained by plenty of exercise; power which is a great degree depends on memory. (10,6,3)

Quintilian recommends the kind of mental exercise not unlike a workout in the physical realm. That the memory can be trained and expanded until it can keep, in proper relation, a vast amount of information. Memory was huge part of preparation for the oral event, firmly ensconced in the classical canon of rhetoric to which Cicero and Quintilian both subscribed. Today our memory muscles are weak and underdeveloped, victims of the debilitating omnipresence of literate prompts. Even though literacy was included as part of preparation in Roman rhetoric, by the time the orator assumed the podium, literacy

was left behind and an extemporaneous style, fueled and guided by premeditation, took over.

That premeditation was not intended to lock the speech in a finished state is clear by the disclaimer added next.

But if by chance, while we are speaking, some glowing thought, suggested on the instant, should spring up in our minds, we must certainly not adhere too superstitiously to what we have studied; for what we meditate is not to be settled with nicety so that room is not allowed for a happy conception of the moment, when thoughts that suddenly arise in our minds are often inserted, even in our written compositions. Hence the whole of this kind of exercise must be so ordered that we may easily depart from what we have arranged and easily return to it; since, though it is of the first importance to bring with us from home a prepared and precise array of language, yet it would be the greatest folly to reject the offerings of the moment. (10,6,5)

Quintilian finishes the section by describing a mental process that is constantly unfolding during a speech, a balance of what he calls looking backward and looking forward. The backward look is toward what has been prepared and what is already familiar. He says we are mistaken if we focus there exclusively. The forward look is to the room and the audience, and a portion of our mental capacity must be allocated there so as not to miss something in the moment. This kind of simultaneous duality in thinking exploits the best of preparation and the best from spontaneity, producing a speaker both grounded and yet very much alive to the room.

### **Conclusion:**

Clearly these classical theorists have thought through oratory at a level deeper than most homiletic textbooks today. Just these samplings demonstrate their commitment and comfort in thoroughly oral speech forms; the kind of forms where the best sermons thrive. For just because all sermons are oral, does not mean they were prepared orally. Indeed most sermons today are oral literature, prepared and delivered from the presuppositions of the literate world. Classical authors give us, if nothing else, an older and yet still relevant methodology for homiletics.

So why study the classics? What pertinence do they have in contemporary homiletics?

- 1) The Greek and Roman rhetoricians are the foundations for our craft. Ignorance of classical rhetoric is ignorance of our history, comparable to a psychologist ignorant of Freud, or a physicist ignorant of Newton.
- 2) Awareness of the communicative context of the New Testament assists us hermeneutically as we interpret passages which have oral under-girding.

- 3) Classical rhetorical theory was penned while speech was still king. As preachers we are disproportionately committed to the spoken word. Those today who love oratory should have a special kinship with, and respect for, the world of primary orality.
- 4) As our culture transitions from modernity to post-modernity, these pre-modern scholars help us navigate in the new (actually old) waters of contingency and probability.
- 5) Classical rhetoric frees us from the misguided notion that ancients were inferior or primitive in thought. In fact, they raise the standards for communicative effectiveness and display a level of mental agility and extemporaneous flexibility that should be the envy of all good preachers today. As technology goes forward, mental competence regresses, just as Socrates predicted.

Augustine faced this same issue in the transition between the classical world and the emerging Christian culture. To what extent can insights from classical rhetoric be appropriated by the church? Augustine answers that question in *On Christian Doctrine*. “As a rhetor himself, he knew the advantages that his training conferred, but he also rejected the applause-seeking artificiality that he thought characterized many of his contemporaries.” (Schaeffer, p. 1136) Though not slavishly bound to rhetoric and well aware of its propensity for manipulation and deceit (he taught rhetoric for a living before his conversion), he nonetheless recognizes its value in defending and propagating the faith as well, quoting as easily from Cicero and Virgil as from scripture. Here his famous classification of all truth as divine provides a particularly fitting conclusion.

But we should not think that we ought not to learn literature because Mercury is said to be its inventor, nor that because the pagans dedicated temples to Justice and Virtue, and adored in stones what should be performed in the heart, we should therefore avoid justice and virtue. Rather, every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's. (2.18.28)

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