

The Forgotten Pedagogy of Imitation How Imitation in Ancient Rhetorical Pedagogy Informs Modern Homiletics

Abstract:

Imitation is shunned by our individualistic culture, yet the pedagogy of ancient rhetoricians relied heavily upon imitation. It is unfortunate that this valuable teaching tool has been abandoned. By examining how rhetoricians and preachers across the ages have taught through imitation and by drawing from current composition rhetoric pedagogy, general principles and specific teaching suggestions will be offered as to how imitation can be used to improve homiletical pedagogy.

How did I learn to read and write? I remember holding a pencil that was as big as my father's index finger. It fit my six-year-old hand and I struggled to copy properly formed letters from the banner displayed just above the blackboard and right below George Washington. I advanced to copying words from a book. I suppose that farther back than my memory goes, I learned to speak by copying sounds. As I advanced in my education, this pedagogy of imitation disappeared. In fact it became wrong to copy. I was instructed to do my own work. So why was it okay at the beginning to imitate and not at the end? In the elementary stages of learning, copying is not only allowed but it is an assigned activity. Could imitation be a pedagogical strategy that should not have been discarded? If so the can it be helpful to teach homiletics?

Though not always very popular, copying from the masters is a suggested lesson for freshman composition rhetoric because of its pedagogical value. In Glenn Goldthwaite and Connors' guide book they cite several authors who advocate various forms of imitation (270-272). One such pedagogue is Edward P.J. Corbett. In *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* he gives five guidelines for successful use of imitation:

(1) limit it to twenty minutes per session, (2) use pen or pencil, keyboards are too fast, (3) vary the authors, (4) read the context of the passage first, (5) copy slowly (454).

Variations of direct copying are also suggested such as copying the sentence structure rather than the actual sentence. Imitation can be used past the elementary stages of learning rhetoric even at the undergraduate college level.

In my years of graduate seminary education, imitation was used was in first year Greek and Hebrew classes. Though we didn't have the fat pencil and the banner above the white board, we did imitate the writing of letters and words, much like I did when I was six years old. But that was the only time imitation was used. When I learned to preach, I was cautioned against imitating favorite preachers. One professor said he purposely didn't have a favorite preacher, because he didn't want to inadvertently become a clone. Why was imitation proper pedagogy when learning to write, but not when learning to preach? Though not a part of my formal education, I found that my preaching and style of ministry mirrored the pastors under whom I served. Imitation it seems was inadvertently part of my education.

It was interesting to note that Corbett the above (mentioned above) based his use of imitation on the ancient rhetors. How did ancient teachers of rhetoric use imitation? Can imitation be used in other related fields of rhetoric and not just composition? Can the imitation pedagogy as practiced by ancient rhetorians¹ inform current pedagogy of homiletics?

Before we can begin to examine the pedagogy it would be helpful to establish a definition of rhetoric. If we are going to allow it to inform current homiletics, it is important to see that it is similar in its purpose. Aristotle defines rhetoric as finding the

¹ The time period will be from the Sophists to Augustine.

available means of persuasion (I. 1.14). Isocrates does not succinctly define it, but the sense is that he sees the purpose of rhetoric being persuasion. (*Against the Sophists*, 16) The power of language to persuade is the theme of Gorgias' encomium of Helen. Though not definitive, it will suffice for this paper to say that the ancients saw rhetoric as communicating with people in order to move their wills.

This communication was to a great part, oral rather than written. Socrates didn't write at all. Isocrates wrote with speaking in mind (*Against the Sophists*, 16). Aristotle says that the delivery of the speech is the most powerful element (III, 1:3). For the ancients, moving the will was for the most part done through oral communication. This is not too far from the purpose of preaching when examined as to what happens in a listener. Most definitions of preaching include some element of a life being changed. The aim of the ancient rhetoric and modern preaching has similarities. Certainly the ultimate purpose of preaching is to show the greatness of God, which distinguishes it from rhetoric. However, there are similarities. Because we are preaching to people about people from the Bible rather than just preaching about the Bible, the way in which God is glorified is through a life being changed. The Ancients sought to move the will; the modern preacher seeks the changing of a life.

Preaching is a unique kind of speaking. "It is a dialogue between God and the hearers, in which the preacher remains a hearer while speaking God's word. It is an interaction between God and the hearers, a recreative action, which the preacher must serve while being himself one of those acted upon" 199 (Davis). As rhetoric is studied as to how it can inform preaching, the differences must be remembered. We are not seeking to create great speeches about the Bible or even about God. From the perspective of the

preacher or the human side, we must use all the available means of communication and refine our skills as best as we can, but a great speech does not make a great sermon.

While important distinctions exist between oral rhetoric and preaching, there are enough similarities to warrant an examination of ancient rhetoric pedagogy methods as to how they can inform current homiletical pedagogy.

Clark states that in classical rhetorical education, three methods were used: (1) teaching accepted precepts of writing and speaking, (2) imitation, and (3) practice (viii). Modern homiletics certainly has plenty of precepts being taught. It seems that seldom does a year go by that a new homiletics textbook is not published. Along with precepts being thoroughly taught, practice is a major part of current homiletical education. It is used to varying degrees. Some Masters' curriculums have the student preach as many as seven times during their course of study, others only once.² Davis mentions that almost every seminary in the 1960's had some form of practice as part of the curriculum (200). Imitation however is never mentioned in the twenty or so textbooks that I am familiar with and in the standard bibliographies of Homiletics³, imitation is not mentioned. It seems that imitation was left for those using fat pencils and not for those using pulpits. Though much could be gleaned from the precepts and practices of ancient rhetorical education, the focus of this paper will be upon imitation.

How was imitation used? Marrou suggests that Gorgias gave his students principles to learn and models to imitate. Marrou goes on to say that the sophists gave model speeches to their students for them to copy (53). Clarke states that Isocrates mentions imitation in *Against the Sophists* as one of the earliest references to it (145).

² Based upon the curriculum of Dallas Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Seminary in the 1980's

³ *Recent Homiletic Thought*, 1967 and 1979

Clarke does not point out that Isocrates sees a limited role in imitation. Isocrates states that a student should learn all he can, as the teacher teaches all he can, but then the rest of what needs to be learned comes through modeling or imitation. Apparently precepts or principles are to be taught, but then there are aspects that cannot be taught in this way, that can only be learned through imitation (*Against the Sophists*, 17-18).

Clarke rightly cites Plato's mention of imitations as an accepted part of Greek education. In the dialogue by the same name, *Protagoras* uses a common life experience to attempt to prove to Socrates that virtue can be taught. This common life experience was the Greek use of imitation to teach the great poets. Protagoras uses the fact that imitation is used to teach the poets to prove that imitation can be used to teach virtue. The given part of that line of reasoning was the use of imitation (325-236). Another example of the normal use of imitation by Plato is in the *Ion*. Plato uses the recitation of a poem by Ion as the beginning point of a dialogue (Ion 530c). It was apparently a normal practice for a rhapsode to imitate a poet by reciting poems, for no attention is drawn to the practice.

Quintilian has much to say about imitation. Much of learning in life is based upon imitation. He generalizes to the point of saying that all of conduct is based upon this concept. *Indeed, the whole conduct of life is based upon the desire of doing ourselves that which we approve in others* (X, 2.2). He points out that imitation is common in many areas of study. This is easily verified by common observation, even in our own century, artists, actors, musicians all imitate the best in their field. While it is common, he does warn that it is not an end itself. The imitator must learn from the one he is imitating and seek to excel the very one being imitated. Quintilian warns, “. . . *for he who follows another must of necessity always be behind him*” (X,2.10).

He then gives a number of guidelines for imitation. First, one must be cautious in choosing the models. Even after good models are chosen, each must be evaluated, for no model is perfect. *I wish that our youth would improve in their oratory by imitating what is good, as much as they are deteriorated in it by copying what is bad* (X. 2.14).

Another guideline is to see that a strength in one can easily become a weakness. The imitator can become *weak instead of concise, rash instead of bold, licentious instead of exuberant and . . . careless instead of simple* (X, 2. 16). Quintilian goes on to point out that the teaching of precepts must precede imitation so that a student will know what to imitate and why it is excellent (X, 2. 18). Thus, it is important to teach precepts first, so that the student can discern strengths from weaknesses. Next the student must consider his own powers. Some models may be too lofty for a beginning student (X, 2. 19). It might be too hard to imitate someone who is completely different from a student.

Another important guideline is to distinguish between the words written to be read and words written to be spoken. This is the difference in oral communication and written. A good essay does not necessarily make a good speech (X, 2. 22). He suggests that more than one person be used as a model. He concludes these guidelines by exhorting the student to imitate not only the words but the whole presentation of a good speaker (X, 2.27).

Augustine writing from a Christian perspective advocates the study of rhetoric as necessary for those who want to communicate the gospel of Jesus to the world. He states that the study is necessary so that one can spot false persuasion and so that the Christian speaker can speak effectively (IV, 3.). While he doesn't spell out the use of imitation as a pedagogical strategy, he is not opposed to it. The advocating of imitation in the actual

delivery of a sermon is made to those who could not compose their own sermons.

Augustine justifies this with the concept that the sermon really belongs to God and thus another person would not be stealing it (IV, 62.).

Imitation, as an intentional pedagogical strategy was part of the rhetoric of the classical age. The early rhetors assumed it as a normal practice. Quintilian advocated it and articulated a method for using it. Since Augustine was trained in this era it is assumed he used imitation and there is indication in his writings that he advocated it.

Though not within the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that while writing this paper, a noted reformation scholar mentioned that Luther sent out copies of his sermons with the intention that like minded pastors, who lacked preaching abilities, could preach his sermons (Timothy George, Evangelical Homiletics Society, 2004). So even later in church history imitation was being practiced.

Historically, imitation was practiced and used to educate. During the last century oral rhetoric has declined, being replaced in part by composition rhetoric. Connors presents this development in *Composition Rhetoric*. Within this field, imitation is sparingly used, but it bears examining how the classic era has informed current composition rhetoric in the area of imitation.

Bartholomae in the often quoted article, *Inventing the University*, affirms that imitation is appropriate for some students to learn the kind of writing necessary for the academy. The mimicking of the style needed to happen before they were ready to legitimately write their own discourse (415). Though he doesn't elaborate as to how this mimicking is learned, he is advocating some form of imitation.

Mary Minock suggests that imitation is an appropriate application of postmodern theory as applied to the teaching of composition. Imitation allows one to truly identify with and appropriate in a personal way, a piece of literature. She shows from her teaching experiences that her students were able to imitate the genre of the spot commercial. This was not due to their study or admiration of spot commercials, but due to the repetition of these commercials in students' lives. In the world of academia hegemony, repetition is impossible: there are far too many writers to imitate. Thus, the brief exposure that students have to a multitude of various texts, produces alienation rather than identification. From the students' identification with the spot commercials, she seems to be advocating repetition of selected texts so that identification can take place with recognized literary texts. She shows how this is in line with the theories of Bakhtin, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida. She suggests an application of imitation: have the students read and re-read the same piece numerous times sprinkled with paraphrasing and even copying certain sections. She warns that at first the students resisted this practice, but in the end a magical transformation took place, as students began to imitate the writer they studied.

Boyd agrees that imitation is good, but the student must be taught to challenge the models. (12) My response is that a student cannot challenge something until they have understood it, and even used it. If repetition is used too much, then the student becomes an exact copy of the one being imitated, but this was not Minock's design. It seems that Minock's concepts are not only a proper extension of postmodern theory of relating to literature, but also good pedagogy of composition.

Corbett presents an informal yet convincing example of the effectiveness of imitation. A twenty year veteran of little league coaching noted changes in what he had to teach the beginning players. In the days when TV close-ups were unavailable to most children, he was required to show how to stand in the batters box and stand ready in the field. When the generation came along who had grown up watching the pros, he no longer had to teach them how to stand (244). He also pointed out that Malcolm X educated himself by laboriously copying the dictionary (247).

Robert Brooke takes imitation to a deeper level when he writes that a student must take on the identity of a writer to properly imitate (23-41). He bases this in the importance of ethos in persuasion. He suggests that, since ethos is important in persuasion, the character of the writer/speaker is important to imitate. As he presents the concept, it becomes clear that he is focusing on the attitude towards writing, rather than the character of the writer. He chronicles a teaching process of imitation of a writer's character and attitude. The teacher parallels writing assignments with discussion of an author's work. As the sequence of assignments develops, the teacher leads the students to see how their writing is an expression of themselves, just as the writing of the model author was an expression of herself. The point of imitation is not in form or style, but in identification of themselves as writers, and attitudes that come from those identities. In all cases the students developed their own attitudes towards writing; some adopted the identity of the selected author, others transformed it and some rejected it to form their own very different attitudes. Brooke suggests that this was successful teaching because each student through imitation of an attitude towards writing developed their own.

Can evangelical homileticians take these concepts and apply them to preaching? As evangelicals we would reject some of the concepts of postmodernism, but we must recognize that our students are born into and will minister in this culture. If we are going to teach them, we must not be afraid to use new concepts providing they that are not in conflict with Christian orthodoxy. The call for imitation is also set by the classic rhetoricians. Evangelicals would reject many views held by Aristotle and Plato, but our own Augustine calls us to embrace their teachings of rhetoric. There is much to be cautious of in postmodernism, but the pedagogy can be helpful, because it is based upon a healthy side of postmodernism, which encourages readers to identify with writers at a deeper level. The theological problem that evangelicals might have with postmodern literary pedagogy theory does lie in identifying with writers and speakers; it rather lies in the object of that identification. As long as the object of identification is sound, great benefit can result. Evangelicals can benefit from the classic rhetoricians' use of imitation and the postmodern use of that classical pedagogy.

How can it be used today in homiletics? St Martian's guidebook cautions us that some will resist this type of exercise (272). It will seem below them or a block to their creativity. Some could even cite a recent article warning against plagiarism in the pulpit.⁴ It is important to emphasize imitation as a pedagogical exercise, for the classroom only. I recall seeing advertisements for a leather binder that was offered to those who bought a subscription to a well known preacher's weekly sermons. The binder was to carry the sermons of this preacher into the pulpit. This was a temptation for pastors. They could avoid the hard work of preparing a good sermon every week, and in many cases two or three sermons per week. This was not imitation for quality sake, it was plagiarism. The

⁴ Associated Baptist Press, Grace Thorton, October 2004

imitation exercises are designed for the classroom. If imitation, on a limited basis, takes place in the parish setting, proper care should be given to acknowledge the sources.

With these cautions in mind the following are some suggested ways to use imitation in the pedagogy of homiletics.

General Principles

(1) Good models are essential. The evaluation criteria must include the three forms of persuasion that Aristotle mentions. The model must have **logos**. A preacher with good form and character that says little will not serve as a good model. So too, **h η qos** and **pa τ os** must be strong as well, because modeling is not always conscious. If a preacher with inaccurate **logos** is modeled for his style, the student may walk away from the exercise modeling his weaknesses rather than his strengths.

(2) The principles must be taught first. This will help the student know what to imitate and what to avoid. There is no perfect model. Thus, imitation should be used in upper level classes or at least toward the end of the elementary level.

(3) Use multiple models during the course of the teaching. Students will identify with certain preachers and reject others. The strengths of some preachers will help some students, while other students will find that they already have what a certain preacher could model.

(4) Only give one model at a time to a student. It would be confusing and less effective to use more than one model at a time. A final project might combine the

benefits of many models much as the ancient Greek painter drew on many women to form his ultimate beauty.

(5) The teacher should not avoid setting himself up as a model. Certainly the professor should not be the only or even the primary model, but his availability would make him a prime candidate for serving a model.

(6) Take advantage of modern technology to enhance imitation. The content of a sermon can be imitated and the delivery can be modeled as well. A student can observe and match the tone of voice, pitch, gesturing, and other aspects of delivery that were much more difficult to imitate in years past.

(7) Imitation is better accomplished if the character of the one being imitated is known and respected. A short biography of each of the models should be given in advance of using their work as a model.

Teaching Ideas

The seed bed of the following ideas came from articles and books mentioned in the bibliography. Due to the embryonic nature of the topic of using imitation in preaching, these suggestions are original, but no doubt, they were influenced by imitation in the field of composition rhetoric. These ideas are broad and would require much work before they are ready for the classroom

(1) Strength Imitation- Preachers excel in different areas. The professor should identify these areas and have the students imitate these areas of strength. For example, a preacher who has excellent use of language will be imitated by writing out a portion of a sermon, word for word. The student would then deliver the sermon using the same

words, but allowing the student to provide his own style of delivery. Another preacher whose storytelling ability is exemplary will be imitated by retelling one of his stories. Other strengths could be imitated, such as introducing the sermon, conclusions, applications, etc.

(2) Full Imitation- This is the recreation of a preacher. The sermon itself as well as the style of delivery would be imitated. This of course will rely upon a close study of a video tape. This perhaps could be most helpful if students were encouraged to model someone that was different from their normal style. A full sermon might be difficult to fully recreate, but a portion of a sermon could be used.

(3) Structure Imitation- Some pastors have an unusual ability to structure a sermon well. These structures will be used as models for the structure of students' sermons. An outline of the sermon will be reconstructed and the outline will serve as a model for the students' sermon. Another variant of this would be to imitate the major points of a sermon and let the illustrations and applications be the student's own creation.

(4) Imitation the Flow of Thought- In this exercise it is not the words or delivery but the overall flow of thought. Here the student would be asked to paraphrase a sermon giving attention to transitional statements and statements that provide for a clear flow of thought.

(5) Specific Preacher Imitation- This could be presented as a contest in impersonation, almost a Saturday Night Live feel to it: the Billy Graham impersonation contest. All the students would imitate the same preacher.

(6) Historical Imitation- A student will pick a sermon that he would recite word for word, striving to become as much like the original preacher as possible. They might

even use a costume to aid in the recreation. Even the context of the original preacher would be imagined. For example, a sermon by a patriarch of Christendom, such as Luther or Calvin or Wesley would be memorized and delivered as though the student stepped back in time and was preaching to the same audience as did the one he is modeling.

Imitation as a strategy in the pedagogy of homiletics will no doubt meet opposition and resistance. At this point, it will perhaps be sufficient that we at least think about the possibility of including one assignment in our advanced classes that uses this proven tool. Most of us imitate some preacher, so why not use what we do instinctively in the classroom. Once we start using imitation, our students who go on to teach homiletics will have something to imitate and go beyond.

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