

Tapeinic Argumentation
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ABSTRACT

The growing hostility of the secular world toward the proclamation of the absolutes of Scripture calls for a new form of argumentation. Various theories of argumentation already exist: the Toulmin model, the Rogerian model, the classic syllogism and even Aristotle's enthymemic form of persuasion. This paper is an attempt to shape a new form of argumentation called *Tapeinic** argumentation, which is built upon theories of argumentation, and governed by Biblical principles of other-centeredness and servanthood.

*The word *Tapeinic* is based upon the Greek word for humility, *tapeinovs*.

TAPEINIC ARGUMENTATION

I found the idea for this article in a lecture regarding the use of argumentation in academic writing. As I contemplated what argumentation theorist said, it struck me that their suggestions were good specific applications of the Biblical commands concerning humility. They supplied many concrete suggestions which needed to be wed to Biblical attitudes. Normally, we do not think of preachers as those who argue, certainly not in the sense of an angry firing-off words and gestures to push an opponent to adopt our view. Though we may slip into this self-centered form of communication when our insecurities get the best of us, arguing is not normally what we Evangelical homiletics practice. It must be noted, however, that arguing is different from argument and argumentation.

Simply and summarily stated, argument or argumentation is the act of presenting material in such a way to facilitate a listener to action. Argument shows up in many areas of life and in a variety of forms. Argument is a student persuading his teacher to let an assignment be turned in late because of broken cars, ministry opportunities and unforeseen computer problems. Argument is a lawyer persuading a jury to rule not guilty because the evidence submitted was collected in an illegal manner. Argument is a well crafted commercial which combines words and music with a 30 second tear-invoking plot that persuade the audience to buy a greeting card. Because argument is so ubiquitous in life it has made frequent appearances throughout the history of Rhetoric. From Aristotle in the fourth century BC to Deborah Tannen who popularized the topic twenty-four centuries later, argumentation has been discussed. By bringing a summary of these studies into a beneficial relationship with Biblical guidelines, this article seeks to suggest a more effective form of argumentation for those who strive to "Preach the Word."

Preachers are to Persuade

At first it seems that one appointed to proclaim the Logos of God would not be concerned with argumentation. We preachers are commanded to proclaim, not persuade, so why craft a method to promote acceptance? Is that not the role of the Spirit? In response to this perception two well respected Evangelical homiletics make a strong case that persuasion is the role of the preacher. Larry Overstreet in his article, “The Priority of Persuasive Preaching” shows that the New Testament teaches that the preacher is to preach persuasively—that is, we should desire to see people take action, not merely comprehend (Overstreet, 2003, 55). Sunukjian in his article “The Preacher as Persuader” which appeared in a festschrift honoring John Walvoord makes the point that “Every preacher intuitively acts as a persuader, that the Scriptures teach persuasion as a goal of preaching, and that God has sovereignly chosen to accomplish His purposes through the combination of human skill and divine power” (Sunukjian, 1982, p. 290). This use of persuasion by preachers was advocated as far back as Augustine’s *Teaching Christianity* when he teaches us that we as preachers are to teach delight and move our listeners. Abailard, during the Middle Ages says, “The intention of all divine Scripture is to teach or to move in the manner of a rhetorical speech” (McKeon, 1987, 149).¹ Overstreet, Sunukjian, and many others make the point that preachers should seek to persuade.² This article will seek to describe *how* we are to engage in this practice. A current cultural trend, articulated by pollsters such as George Barna and theologians like David Wells, highlights that we preach in a difficult context. We must be skilled in argumentation so that our increasingly hostile listeners will have every opportunity to hear what God is saying and will take action based upon what they hear.

Argumentation is About Persuasion

Many contemporaries who write about argumentation would agree that argument is not about winning. Some of these will be identified later in this article. They prefer irenic, peaceful discussions and advocate the flexibility of the one presenting the argument, but from a view of results, the bottom line for all of these writer is persuasion. During the preparation and delivery of an argument, the presenter can learn and change as well as the listener, but the central purpose in argumentation remains the persuasion of the listener. My favorite ironical statement that shows the contradiction of espousing argumentation without persuasion, comes at the end of Deborah Tannen’s popular book *The Argument Culture* in which she is trying to persuade us to be less argumentative. After showing us that our culture has destructive argumentation, she argues that we must be less argumentative: “It’s a challenge we must undertake, because our public and personal lives are at stake” (Tannen, 1998, 290). She is using a persuasive technique of appealing to our emotion inducing a sense of survival to win her argument.

Jack Meiland in his article *Argument as Inquiry*, attempted to present argument in a new light when he suggested that in some circumstances argument should be seen as inquiry.

¹ This secondary source is due to the lack of Abailard’s work being available in English

² Spurgeon in his *Lecture to my Students* has a chapter entitled, “Conversion is our Aim” and Broadus in his legendary *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* has a chapter devoted to Argument.

This certainly has its merits, but in the context of argumentation, inquiry ultimately leads to persuasion, not just inquiry. If inquiry is the only goal, then it is not argumentation. However, given the context of our last century of a shift away from “winning” or “loosing” is understandable. Just after World War II argumentation took on a gravity of atomic proportions. In referring to shifts in the study of rhetoric, Doug Brent wrote,

Perhaps most important, the advent of nuclear weapons has made conflict resolution not just an ideal but a matter of human survival. In response to these social forces, the speech communication specialists of the 50s and 60s began to shift their interests from persuasion, the traditional goal of rhetoric, to the promotion of mutual cooperation (Brent, 1991, 453).

In the world of political negotiations and labor talks, persuasion is no longer presented as the goal. In many ways, this is a relief from the burden of one view being the only recourse available. But even in the confusing world of negotiation, there is still an element of winning and persuasion. It may not be a total change in an audience, but even a partial moving of one party towards the other involves persuasion. Thus, even when a relativistic view of the goal is held, winning is a factor in argumentation. The form of argumentation suggested in the paper (*Tapeinic* argumentation) attempts to bring a different perspective on winning. Following Christ’s commands, we must think about others as more important than ourselves in all areas of life, including argumentation. For the Christian, argument is not winning people to our side of the issue; rather, it is helping them move to, or at least towards, God’s side.

Tapeinic Argumentation

The growing hostility of the secular world toward the proclamation of the absolutes of Scripture and the radical claims Christ has upon us as His followers calls for a new form of argumentation. Various theories of argumentation already exist: the Toulmin model, the Rogerian model, the classic syllogism and even Aristotle’s enthymemic form of persuasion. While having many helpful insights, these theories, of course, do not incorporate Biblical guidelines. Biblical guidelines for argumentation are often mentioned in conflict studies such as Ken Sande and Jim VanYperen, but these are concerned with interpersonal and organizational conflict, not preaching. The Biblical mandates for the proper character of the preacher are frequently addressed in numerous homiletical textbooks. How character and argument strategy relate to each other is not addressed. By bringing together the “Egyptian gold”³ from argumentation theorists and the Biblical principles of other-centeredness and servanthood, Tapeinic argumentation hopes to suggest a form of argumentation that could move us towards increasing our effectiveness in the proclamation of God’s Word.

Tapeinic is the anglicizing of the Greek word for humility. It is presumptuous to say that we are humble in our argumentation, but this theory is not a legalistic step in the argumentation process. It is not just another part of the process we learn so that we can “win” in our next debate. J.C. Mahaney was asked to write a book on Humility. (I

³ Egyptian gold refers to the Israelites use of the gold from Gentile sources to build the Tabernacle. Often, Augustine is cited as the source of this metaphor.

suppose that otherwise it should not and could not be written.) In *Humility: True Greatness* he gives a picture of humility from the words of Carl Henry. When Mahaney asked our evangelical patriarch about maintaining a humble spirit, Henry responded, “How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross?” (Mahaney, 2005, 68). Tapeinic argumentation is an attempt to bring Carl Henry’s view of humility together with Argumentation theory. Borrowing the wording from Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric⁴, Tapeinic argumentation seeks to use every available means of persuasion while standing next to the Cross of Christ.

Biblical Mandates

The Scripture gives us many guidelines for our attitudes toward others. While an in-depth exegesis is important and helpful, that work has been done by others who offer much more than can be offered in this paper. The purpose here is to briefly remind us of these concepts and then to focus more on the theories of argumentation. The following serves as a reminder of these important concepts:

Servant’s attitude - If you want to be great in God’s kingdom, you must be the servant of all. In contrast to this our natural tendency in argumentation is to present our point in such a way that our hearers will think that we are right. This motive can become winning for the purpose of showing that we were right. Or, we win the argument so that we can show ourselves to be the greatest. In Tapeinic argumentation we seek to persuade so that the listener can benefit. Benefits to us should be of no consequence. Unlike the salesman who seeks the benefit of his customer *and* himself, we can seek to persuade purely for the benefit of the listener. *We persuade to serve our listeners.*

Loving heart - Perhaps the first command we learn is that we must love others. This gives the arguer the proper stance in argumentation. The motive in argumentation is difficult to articulate and to truly identify. The same is true for motives in preaching. Do we truly preach because we are called to or because we love others, or is it because when we help others they affirm us? Kenneth Burke in his *Rhetoric of Motives* speaks of our motives as the stance from which we present our argument. He says that ultimately our stance is based upon the “god term” (Burke, 1969, 90,110). While we would articulate our stance as being grounded in a personal God, Burke still helps us understand that our foundation or stance is related to our motive. The Christian’s foundation is easily identified as God’s love which should be our motive in argumentation. *We persuade out of love.*

Contributions from Argumentation Theory

The following is a summary of some contributions of argumentation theorists. Though they use different terms, they all have in common the subject of argumentation in the context of discourse. This is not a historical development of argumentation presented chronologically; rather major influences of various writers from various time periods are being brought into focus.

⁴ Aristotle defined rhetoric as “the ability to see the available means of persuasion.” Book 1 Ch 2.1

The recorded study of argumentation began in the classical Greek period. Isocrates and other sophists understood the power of properly formed arguments. Though we may disagree with his sophistic world view, it is interesting to note that Gorgias equates the power of rhetoric to the physical force that the strong exerts upon the weak.⁵ Thus, we who use words must be careful of the power we have.

Aristotle articulated how this works when he described the enthymeme as a central part of persuasion. An enthymeme is a syllogism with a missing part. That missing part is supplied by the listener.

If you want to be a good preacher /

be a good student of the Word.

Agreeing, we all say “Amen,” but there is a missing part of the syllogism to which we ascribe that brings about our strong adherence to the statement. Our unstated belief is: Good preachers proclaim the Word. Without this third part of the syllogism the statement does not evoke belief through demonstration of truth. Fully stated, the syllogism might look like this:

We want to be good preachers

Good Preachers must preach the Word

Then be a good student of the Word

When the middle element is left out, the audience must supply it. In a sense this is leading the audience to make a discovery based upon what they bring to the statements. The principle upon which Aristotle builds much of his rhetoric is that an audience is more likely to be persuaded if they are actively participating. Enthymematic speech relies upon this fact. So from Aristotle, we can learn that argumentation which expects the audience to supply something to the argument can be more effective.

This is related to Stephen Toulmin’s concepts that created a minor earthquake in the world of logic during the 1950’s. Toulmin suggested a graphic model for analyzing argument, which I believe has an enthymemic quality to it. An enthymeme relies upon assumed knowledge in the audience. Without this prior knowledge, the audience cannot actively participate in the argument, for they have nothing to bring to it. Stephen Toulmin speaks of the audience having a prior set of beliefs or “universal premises” (Toulmin, 1958, 113). In *The Uses of Argument* he presents a model that is grounded in logic to analyze argument. A common criticism was that Toulmin simply took the syllogism and laid it on its side. While his model does have some similarities to a classic syllogism, he presents new features and creates new categories which help our understanding of rhetoric and argumentation.

Toulmin’s model has three basic elements: (1) Data- a statement, (2) Claim- What is to be proven, (3) Warrant- a value or belief that makes the claim valid in the mind of the listener. These parts are interrelated and each is necessary for the argument. The data is a statement that serves as a beginning point which leads to a claim, with the warrant

⁵ Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* defends Helen’s wrong choices by saying that she was overpowered by the spoken word. He goes so far as to compare this to being sexually violated. She was not responsible for her decisions; it was forced upon her (Bizzell and Herzberg, 2001, 45).

serving as the foundation for the logic that links the statement to the claim. The data and the claim must be stated, but not the warrant. The data and the claim seem to be a renaming of the parts of a syllogism; thus, they add little to the development of argumentation theory. The concept of a warrant is new and understanding it can be very helpful. One might say a warrant is a finding of common ground in the area of values. Perhaps an example is in order. The statement, *Sam is an evangelical thus he believes the Bible to be the Word of God*, is something with which most of us would agree. Here is how Toulmin's model would structure this statement.

Data- Sam is an Evangelical.

Claim- So he must believe the Bible to be God's Word.

Warrant- Evangelicals believe the Bible is God's word.

In our use of warrants in our preaching we must remember that the foundation for our sermons is just what Sam believes: The Bible is God's word, thus it carries authority. If we speak to those who do not share this belief, then our data does not lead the listener to the claim because they do not share the same warrant that we do.

Data- The Bible says that sex outside of marriage is sin.

Claim- To have sex outside of marriage is disobeying God.

Warrant- What the Bible says is what God says.

If our goal is persuasion then to simply say the Bible says so is not enough to convince those who see the bible as anything less than God's word. We must always proclaim what God has given us in His word, all the while using all the creativity and resources He has given us to appeal to the warrants of our listeners.

Toulmin's model has additional qualifiers and rebuttals but the warrant is the unique contribution. Without a warrant, the audience has no reason to accept a claim. Therefore, it is imperative that we strive to understand the universal premises or beliefs of our audiences.

Toulmin's concern for the audience is expressed even more strongly in Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's *The New Rhetoric*. In this lengthy and complicated work they emphasize the values of the audience and make the audience the focus of their view of argument (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971, 65). They present a theory that has the audience as the determining factor rather than the presenter or the argument. The audience is what matters. This audience-focused approach expresses itself when they suggest that the audience may not fully buy into an argument but could rather increase in their adherence to a position. When it comes to giving a tenth with a joyful heart, an audience may accept having joy for the attitude, but they are still holding back on the amount.

This audience centered attitude is even more pronounced in "Rogerian" argumentation. While Carl Rogers, the famed psychologist, never articulated a theory of argumentation, others, namely Young, Becker and Pike in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* have taken this client-centered approach and applied it to argumentation. Their basic premise is to view the argument from the audience's view point. The speaker or writer attempts to state the audience's view in such a way that the audience knows that their view is understood. The speaker like the counselor says something like, "So what you are saying

is . . .” The client’s response is hopefully a better understanding of himself. So too, in Rogerian argumentation, the speaker attempts to present an opposing view so clearly and with so much empathy that the listener is rather amazed that the speaker understands him so well. This is an application of the truth in the pastoral cliché, “They don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” When a speaker shows that the opposing view is significant enough to warrant his effort to understand it, the audience is given credibility by the speaker which shows his care for them. This feeling of credibility can lead them to a level of confidence in the speaker that allows them to consider his view. When one believes that he is truly understood by a speaker, persuasion is more likely to occur.

Understanding of an audience by a speaker should create what Kenneth Burke calls identification. Burke states that identification is the key to rhetoric. When a person hears something in a speaker’s words or even feels something from a speaker’s non-verbal communication that is common in their experience, communication can take place. Without this identification one may understand the words and even “like” the person speaking, but persuasion does not happen until identification happens. One of the reasons organizations such as EHS are successful is that there is a high level of identification that exists in those who attend. However, even in this homogenous context we look for something with which to identify. Normally we attend paper presentations either given by someone we know or on a subject that we know, or at least one that piques our interest. This is a result of wanting identification.

The last argumentation theorist to mention is a popularizer of this field, Deborah Tannen. She writes from the perspective of a linguist and has given us not only help in the area of argument but has published a helpful book on gender and communication. The point of Tannen’s book is stated in the title: *The Argument Culture: Stopping America’s War of Words*. She shows how our every day vocabulary contains hostile, inflammatory words that have militaristic overtones. It is no longer a game of basketball; it is the battle for the title. She also shows how many of our systems are set up to be adversarial, such as our educational system where students are encouraged to present “both” sides of an issue. She makes the points out many cultural habits of “warring” are truly unnecessary.

An outline of Tapeinic Argumentation

Now that we have reviewed in a summary fashion Biblical principles concerning humility and been introduced to representative argumentation theories, an attempt will be made to combine these into a set of principles. Admittedly, argumentation is very dynamic and refuses to follow set patterns. This codification will allow for the discussion and use of important strategies and attitudes, but it is not a ridged set of steps to follow. These principles do follow a flow of thought but the order of their appearance in an argument will vary greatly according to the individual inventive process and the rhetorical situation. These concepts are based upon the work of others and it should be noted that phrases and concepts from many sources have been mixed into this set of principles. When it is a direct use of a source, it is noted, but at times, sources have lost their identity just as a specific spice loses its distinct flavor in a soup. However, I wish to acknowledge that various sources have contributed to this set of guidelines.

1. Desire to see audience benefit. Loving our audience might seem second nature to a person committed to the proclamation of godly truths, but we must remember our sinful natures. Though we can never be certain that our motives are pure, we must actively pray for the good of our audience. We must consciously have their good as the aim of our discourse and we must aggressively think of ourselves as their servants. This is in contrast to the view that seeks only to win or the view that seeks inquiry of a middle ground between two opposing sides.

2. Clarify the issue. This is not so much a principle from the theory of argumentation as it is from basic communication. What exactly are we trying to accomplish in our audience. It is as basic as the main idea of a sermon and the central purpose or focus. In contrast to most modern argumentation theories, we are presenting the absolutes of Scripture and we are striving to persuade.

3. State the opposition's view with accuracy and respect. I remember a preacher referring to this as people starting up their motor boats - but, but, but . . . We should address perceived opposition, but more than that, we should strive to present how the audience might view the issue. When we preach towards repentance, we may think we are presenting the congregation's opposition by saying, "sin is fun, but only for a season." Our acknowledgment of sin being fun is a good start in presenting how a congregation might feel, but we need to go further. Sin is not simply fun; it is part of a person's lifestyle, and it makes sense to them. We need to let them know, that we know, how hard and how disruptive repentance can be.

4. State how the opposition's view is credible given a certain set of presuppositions or contexts. State the value of this view - this is an extension of the previous concept. As we present the opposition, we can go a step further and show how this view not only makes sense to many people but that there is value in it. For example: Being unwilling to repent can produce a strong self-reliance. While the Scripture clearly teach us to depend upon others and God, many people see self reliance as a virtue. They see that in life a certain level of success can't be achieved without this self reliance. So, from their perspective, *not* repenting can bring benefits to your life. If all one is concerned about is success in certain parts of this life, then repentance does seem like a wrong thing to do. We need to be cautious here lest we end up like the dispensational eschatology professor who presented the amillennial view with such effort that he unwillingly converted some of his premillennial students.

5. Seek to identify with the audience. Concepts related to this are mentioned in many homiletics textbooks usually in the area of support material. We are taught to have illustrations that our hearers have experienced or at least have knowledge of. Identification is not limited to illustrations it extends to delivery, style, and virtually all areas of preaching. When speaking in deep East Texas my southern accent tends to increase because I am instinctively attempting to build an identity bridge between myself and the congregation.

6. Understand and use the values or beliefs of the audience. Each audience will have a set of values. Though it may require years of listening and living with people, one can learn the values of a congregation. These values give insight as to what enthymemic involvement the congregation can have. If a congregation in New England is being addressed, the value of tradition can be very important. For example, a lifelong friend of mine has an annual men's picnic at a lake in central Massachusetts. He revealed one of the New England values when he explained that they continue to serve Table-Talk pies even though hardly any one liked them, because that is what his grandfather served. The value was keeping the tradition. In speaking to an audience composed of people similar to my friend, the element of the syllogism that they as the listeners would supply, would be that "traditions are good and should be kept." As the speaker I assume this and it is left unmentioned.

7. Present your position and your argument. To those who not only deny but seem to disdain absolute truths, this part of Tapeinic argumentation will seem most foreign. Burke speaks of "pure" persuasion as being a rhetorical statement that "intuitively says, 'this is so,' purely and simply because this is so" (Burke, 1969, 269). But pure persuasion seems to be an ideal more than a reality. Burke does help us to articulate that the Christian who is speaking to persuade should not take satisfaction in winning. Rather the satisfaction comes because we have proclaimed the truth in such a way that demonstrates that "this is right," or it is "so". There should be satisfaction in the clear proclamation of the truth in a persuasive way.

8. Present how you might be positively affected by the opposition. This is an attempt to show the audience that they matter since you can be moved by them. This affect upon you must come out of love and respect that you have for those to whom you speak. Perhaps you are presenting your complimentary view of the role of women to an audience greatly influenced by feminists. You explain that the feminist teaching of women being "objectified" has helped you see a less than desirable mindset that you have towards women. When they hear that you have been helped by an opposing view there is a possibility that they will feel more confident and secure, thus putting them in a position to at least hear your view.

9. Request that readers or listeners consider adopting some (or all) of your view. As has been pointed out in evangelistic studies and in the experience of ministry, people often have to embrace the truth of the gospel in stages. It is rare that a person responds the first time he hears the gospel. So too, as Perelman points out, "increased adherence to a point of view is a valid goal in argumentation" (Perelman, 1971, 5,105). This can lead to an ongoing request for the audience to continue to consider your position.

10. Give an invitation to take action on your position (don't try to prove it). In James Crosswhite's book *The Reason of Rhetoric*, he presents the case that rhetoric has as its purpose action, not truth. A fireman trying to get a person to leave a burning building is not interested in the person believing a truth about a fire; they want them to leave the building—to take action. Ultimately in all rhetoric, particularly in argumentation, the issue is not truth but action. As proclaimers of God's Word we are

concerned with truth, but we want our hearers to go beyond an acceptance of truth to action. Is our purpose to get people to admit that what we are saying is the truth or to get them to believe it and take action based upon that belief? This seems to be an issue for philosophy, yet it is rhetorical as well. Richard Weaver, a rhetorician with a worldview more palatable to Evangelicals, closely links rhetoric and truth when he says, “There is, then, no true rhetoric without dialectic, for dialectic provides that basis of ‘high speculation about nature’ without which rhetoric in the narrower sense has nothing to work upon” (Weaver, 1970, 73). The rhetor without truth has nothing to say; the preacher without the truth has nothing to preach. It is not that we separate truth from belief, but rather we see the distinction between persuasion and truth. Commitment to something does not necessarily mean that you are positive that it is the truth. Did we come to faith accepting all the truths of the Bible? We all had to grow in our acceptance of the Biblical truth. Of course, truth is important, but at the point of persuasion, action seems to be the desired result. If one accepts the truth that Jesus is the only savior from our sin but does not follow through with trust, then we have failed to truly persuade them.

Conclusion

When we stand in our world to announce, “Jesus died for your sins and you must repent and trust Him as your savior,” we face both collective opposition from a relativistic mindset that rejects any “must” type of statements as well as, opposition from the individual sinful nature that rebels against God. Minds, hardened externally by culture’s insubordination to its creator and harden from within by a choice of pride, cannot be moved by our rhetorical efforts. Without the Holy Spirit convicting work in a person, there will never be true persuasion. Therefore, relying upon His work, we must attend to our work with all the tools we can find while maintaining a proper attitude. Tapeinic argumentation seeks to do just that by using every available means of persuasion while standing next to the Cross of Christ.

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