

Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in Thought, Word, and Deed

Unleashing the Power of Rhetoric

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Now if (as we have assumed) there were no souls, and there were no need at all of schools and languages for the sake of the Scriptures and of God, this one consideration alone would be sufficient to justify the establishment everywhere of the very best schools for both boys and girls, namely, that in order to maintain its temporal estate outwardly the world must have good and capable men and women, men able to rule well over land and people, women able to manage the household and train children and servants aright.
Martin Luther (AE 45: 367–68)

STATEMENTS LIKE THESE, EASY TO come by, indicate the importance Doctor Luther placed on education. The hypothetical notwithstanding (a universe where there were no souls), Luther clearly considers “the very best schools” those based on a classical liberal arts curriculum to educate boys and girls for two ends: growth in the faith (“for the sake of the Scriptures and God”) and cultivation of good leaders for both the “temporal estate” and families. Those parts of the curriculum that equip especially for handling God’s truth well and for leadership are dialectic and rhetoric, which should not just be mastered theoretically, but applied so as to cultivate wise judgment. Through these arts of wisdom and eloquence the student develops mental dexterity and aesthetic sensibilities and is ultimately equipped to be a good Christian exercising practical wisdom. “In the restored man dialectic and rhetoric will go along hand in hand as the regime of the human faculties intended that they should do.”¹

This is the restorative effort of classical Lutheran education, built around dialectic and rhetoric and aimed at equipping students to pursue excellence. Indeed,

Liberal arts schooling always seeks to educate the conscience and . . . liberal arts thinking blended with Christian theology promises the greatest opportunity for genuine character education. Of the three elements of the trivium, rhetoric is most helpful in the construction of a total curriculum with character formation and cultural leadership as its chief goals.²

Rhetoric — along with dialectic — forms not only the mental habits capable of treating of truth, beauty, and goodness, but also character. To understand this dynamic entails understanding the relationship of dialectic to rhetoric, then of poetics to rhetoric, and ultimately, of rhetoric to ethics. This paper therefore details my own approach — and its pedagogical underpinnings — to teaching rhetoric and dialectic. The analysis culminates in some observations on the well-known sentence that captures the educational bearing of Lutheran reformers such as Luther, Melancthon, Bugenhagen, and Sturm, “The aim of education is a wise and eloquent piety.”

Teaching toward the achievement of excellence in the practical arts is different from teaching for the mastery of subject matter. The former features praxis and minimizes theory; the latter emphasizes contemplation and theory. Theory informs practice, to be sure, but the seminar-style discussion of readings (the “Great Books” approach) will not help students hone their rhetorical or dialectical skills as much as getting in front of an audience and making arguments or engaging in debate about contemporary controversies. To master the piano one does not merely immerse oneself in music theory or read the lives of great musicians. One learns to read notes and practices every day until the skill becomes “second nature.” Theory is then tackled as one matures in one’s art. Theory follows practice. Again, theory is vital, but it is not age-appropriate to “lead” with volumes of theory.

In my Public Speaking course I attempt to lay a foundation in rhetoric that guides students in the fundamentals of speech composition. What one considers fundamental is, of course, open to interpretation, but I demonstrate why a rhetorical approach to the art of speech making, in the classical liberal arts vein, teaches the true fundamentals and elevates the enterprise without overburdening students with 2,500 years of theory.

I begin by pointing out to my students that they already know a great deal about eye contact, gestures, volume, rate, pitch, and so forth, and that I could cover those topics in about a half-hour. So, what are we going to discuss for the rest of the semester?

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1. Richard M. Weaver, “The Cultural Role of Rhetoric,” in *Language is Sermonic* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 184.
2. Robert Littlejohn and Charles T. Evans, *Wisdom and Eloquence: A Christian Paradigm for Classical Learning* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 2006), 133.

(This pedagogical move generates enthusiasm on the part of my college students and assures them that they will not again be force-fed the minutiae of rhetorical mechanics that they mastered long ago!) I propose studying the art of rhetoric from a traditional liberal arts perspective. I then pose a question: "Why are you at a university? If you just want a good job that pays well, you could spend a lot less time and money going to a tech school and learning a trade. What do you get at a university that you don't get elsewhere?" Eventually they take the bait: "A liberal arts education!" This realization, of course, raises the question: what is a liberal arts education? And so we're off and running.

I then discuss with them the nature of liberal arts education, borrowing heavily from Dorothy Sayers.³ This is followed by a definition of rhetoric and an explanation of how rhetoric was, in its golden age, considered the "most humane of the humanities." Breaking it down into its constituent parts, I explain how this theory will provide a framework for the entire course and will inform their practices. There is also a good bit of instruction in fundamentals of logic (syllogisms, dialectic, and common material fallacies, to be precise) on the assumption that, if they are intellectually engaged, when they speak they'll have something of substance to say. In other words, thought is foundational to speech. Teaching rhetoric begins by placing it within the context of liberal arts learning.

Classically educated young people should begin with a series of "stair-stepped" exercises to master foundational, then more advanced, rhetorical dynamics. They learn by doing. They are informed by theory, but only enough theory to enlighten, not to overburden. The line of demarcation between "overburdening" and sufficient rigor, will, of course, vary among children. Make learning fun! Luther repeatedly characterizes learning as "child's play" (and suggests that teachers overburden their students, in part, to build their own reputation).

My Argumentation & Debate course closely examines the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric. It enables students to engage in practical argumentation by examining and discussing patterns of reasoning, fields of argument, and standards of evidence, and to apply classical rhetorical concepts to contemporary controversies. Because thought is fundamental to argument, the course begins with the fundamentals of logic. The logic instruction dispensed in Public Speaking at strategic intervals is condensed into a three-week "bootcamp of the mind."

"Bootcamp of the mind" concludes with a philosophical speech (which draws upon the *Great Books of the Western World*) and a graduation ceremony. Each of the three remaining units of the course, following Aristotle's *Rhetorica*,⁴ features a different context for arguing cases: the court of law, the moral dilemma, and policy controversy.

My approach to Advanced Public Speaking is also classical. The core of the course consists of *imitatio*, a pedagogical scheme originating in the classical world and widely practiced in me-

dieval times, that exposes students to great oratory. After they study it, they imitate it. Once they develop a feel for stylistic excellence, they compose original works. This "stair-stepped" approach is very effective. The course is the right-brain equivalent to Argumentation & Debate. Building on the foundation in rhetoric from Public Speaking, it emphasizes style and the cultivation of imagination and memory over logic.

Students learn to instruct, persuade, and delight audiences.

Advanced Public Speaking begins with a refresher on rhetoric in the classical liberal arts, followed by focused study in elements of style. Real application of classical concepts begins with a memorized speech. An "essentializing exercise" follows, in which students first identify the essential message of that speech and then create an *imitatio* that applies that theme to a contemporary situation and emulates the style of the speech they memorized. The course culminates in a "student's choice" speech that demonstrates mastery of course content. They learn a great deal about how to move an audience (*pathos*) and, more specifically, how to deploy figures of speech masterfully.

Taken together these three courses constitute an integrated approach to the study and practice of rhetoric, which cultivates practical wisdom and eloquence. By understanding the concepts of rhetoric and practicing it as an art, students learn to reason with precision, spot faulty logic, exercise insight and forethought in deliberations, use language masterfully, and think both logically and analogically—in short, to instruct, persuade, and delight audiences.

While this cycle of learning imparts both practical wisdom and eloquence, it also has ethical, moral, and theological dimensions. Rhetoric and dialectic, united "as the regime of the human faculties intended," are involved in a complex and nuanced interplay. As Aristotle notes in the beginning of his treatise on rhetoric, dialectic and rhetoric are "antistrophes" (counterparts) of one another.⁵ They appear as two plants growing up side by side but share a common root below the surface. Phenomenologically, rhetoric is the art of argumentation; dialectic, the art that tests the truth of debatable propositions. But that aspect of rhetoric that precedes argumentation, namely, rhetorical reasoning (the faculty of discovering the crux of the matter in difficult cases), exposes their common root. Dialectical inference operates in rhetorical reasoning in a manner that accentuates just how deeply intertwined the two are.

3. Dorothy L. Sayers, *Education in a Free Society* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1973). Visit my Rhetoric Ring for a brief description of the shape of this conversation: http://www.phc.edu/r_ring_d.php

4. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library), 1954.

5. *Ibid.*, 1

Think, for instance, about the manner in which an elder makes an argument to raise his pastor's salary by \$2,000 for the coming fiscal year. The considerations that must be brought to bear, the counterarguments that must be anticipated, the distinctions established prior to making a single argument, all bespeak the subtle interplay between dialectical inference (drawing fine distinctions, defining terms, and establishing parameters) and rhetorical reasoning (determining, out of the potentially limitless parade of considerations, which hold the most weight and are most relevant given the question at hand). Over time and in the natural course of things, learning to operate in this arena cultivates insight, discernment, prudence, foresight, mental discipline and dexterity; it equips one to handle truth.

We are not bodiless machines moved only by logic, but incarnated minds and souls moved by vivid images and inspired by beauty. One of the beautiful things about rhetoric is that it appeals to humans in their whole being. Crafting fine speeches and papers designed to move an audience to dream big dreams or think big thoughts requires aesthetic sensibility. Learning to use language artfully, to appeal not only to the mind but also to the imagination and the heart, is a humanizing activity (for both speaker and audience). Albert Einstein's quip "Imagination is more important than knowledge" bespeaks the importance of style in rhetoric. You can muster all the logic at your disposal, but if you fail to move your audience, you will never persuade them. The end of persuasion is action, and to move an audience to action you must move the soul. This view elevates the enterprise of speech composition. I reinforce this notion through a lecture on human excellence, asserting that excellence is, in keeping with Einstein's sentiment, more a matter of creativity than of logic alone. The cultivation of imagination and reason is best accomplished concurrently.

In *De augmentis*, Sir Francis Bacon defines rhetoric as "the application of reason to imagination for the better moving of the will," an apt introduction to the canon of style because it gets one thinking about the relation of style to pathos. Style is about crafting strong mental imagery and building a verbal crescendo, with the assistance of figures of speech. The canon of style deals with the appropriate use of poetry and aesthetics in argumentation, resulting in communication with a beauty and grace that adds impulse to the truth. Rhetoric, in the final analysis, moves the soul toward the good. So we teach our students to "preside over their art with secure mastery"⁶ — not a dry, sterile communication of ideas, but good reasoning combined with passion and vivid imagery to pique the imagination, to stir the emotions, to move the will.

Vivacity is a key concept in classical rhetoric. The audience finds the vivid (lively) idea "striking." The opposite is moribund. Vivid imagery is thus key to rhetorical potency: a good metaphor laid before an audience imaginatively has the power to move. Indeed, the very appeal to the audience's imagination

pays compliment to their humanity; it cultivates their moral imagination and aesthetic sensibilities. This is why beauty matters and must be found in, with, and under rhetoric. But this power must be wielded with grace, decorum, propriety, proportion, and measure. Even in the fanciful dimensions of rhetoric, the speaker must cultivate good judgment.

Rhetoric teaches one both to be good (to establish trust) and to aim at the good (to make the aim of persuasion true). The former entails the goodness cultivated within the rhetor (virtue); the latter, that to which and from which our rhetoric points. Trust is a precondition of persuasion. Similarly, a nagging feeling in the audience that one's aim is not true, that the proposed course of action may lead to ruination, naturally militates against rhetorical success!

In Book 12 of his *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian argues that an orator must be a good man because he is to lead. A leader cannot create civic virtue through good laws and the praise of virtue if he has not himself cultivated virtue or if his judgment is warped. Credible speech requires a credible speaker, who must also love both the state and its citizens.

Rhetoric teaches one both to be good and to aim at the good.

Plato's prescription for "redeeming" rhetoric in his *Phaedrus* entails a methodology grounded in the study of the soul. Taking Plato's suggestion seriously, Aristotle makes *ethos* (personal character) one of the three "modes of artistic proof." He asserts that a trustworthy character is required because "we believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided."⁷ In fact, "Character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion [the rhetor] possesses."⁸ Later, in Book II, Aristotle identifies *phronesis* (practical wisdom or prudence) with *ethos*. This is a key extension because *phronesis* is exercised with respect to the other. Plato's negative view of the sophists was motivated by his conviction that their distortions would warp the soul of Athenians. While we are far removed from fifth-century B.C. Athens, our interest in the souls of our charges abides.

Our students have souls, and this is the ultimate justification for teaching them "old school," as it were. In the context of postmodernity, they need to be educated in this fashion simply to hold on to the faith we confess, a faith that confesses an absolute truth. "Unless one believe this, one shall surely perish." This is unequivocal.

6. Joseph Dunne, *Back to the Rough Ground: 'Phronesis' and 'Techne' in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 9.

7. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a 3.

8. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1356a 5.

In the Small Catechism, Luther, true to his classical training, employs rhetorical devices to facilitate learning and memorization. Take, for example, the section on the Creed. The ubiquitous "What does this mean?" begins each explanation, and the repetition of "This is most certainly true" is a hammer of God driving the lesson deeper and deeper, fortifying the student's soul. Observe the deliberate use of couplets in the First Article: "He also gives me *clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children*, land, animals, and all I have. . . . For all this it is my duty to *thank and praise, serve and obey* Him." This rhetorical scheme aids memorization; the rhythm established helps the lessons penetrate; the dialectical treatment of each chief part aids memorization.

Why is this important? While cultivating our pupils' appreciation of these forms aids in memorization, it also develops habits of mind that make them more receptive to truth, better equipped for learning, and inclined to think in a principled, methodical, and sacramental fashion. In short, our children will feel at home within our faith tradition because liberal arts education gives them "ears to hear" better the rhythms

of Scripture and "eyes to see" better the truths it expresses through images.

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Beyond the Small Catechism, Luther and Melancthon spearheaded a revival of classical liberal arts learning in Europe, the Lutheran gift to the civilized world. How tragic if our own children did not learn to think like Lutherans because we neglected that heritage! **LOGIA**

Inklings



This? Oh. I press it when I fall and can't reach my beer.