

A Christian View of Rhetoric

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Rhetoric is a term that often has a bad connotation in today's society. We use the term to imply language that has ulterior motives, especially in the political sphere. This narrow definition of rhetoric needs to be expanded in order to see the influence rhetoric has on our lives and the ways that we use rhetoric in our interactions with other people. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines rhetoric as "the art of speaking or writing effectively." Although this definition might give a general impression of what the word *rhetoric* means today, it does not capture the history and formation of the word. Rhetoric, like everything else, can also be approached from several different viewpoints. Each worldview, or "comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), shapes our reaction to rhetoric. A Christian approach to rhetoric is defined by the three main ideas of Christianity: Creation, Fall, and Redemption. Rhetoric must be understood through the lens of the Christian worldview in order to bring glory to God through its usage in society.

Rhetoric began in the democratic systems of ancient Athens (Crowley and Hawhee 6). In the fifth century BC, all citizens of Athens had the right to speak in their legislative assembly, although the task of presenting resolutions and arguing for or against them usually fell to those who had the leisure to study the current issues and were trained in the art of public speaking. These men were called "rhetors," which is where the term rhetoric originated. (Crowley and Hawhee 7). Orators used rhetoric to persuade their audiences, whether in the courtroom or in the public affairs of the city. The use of persuasive language could "depose or empower tyrants, determine public policy, and administer laws" (Bizzell and Herzberg 2). As the art of public speaking developed, methods to successfully persuade people were invented and taught to others. Rhetoric began to develop rules of proper language, as well as examples of using language effectively. As rhetoric solidified the relationship between knowledge and its expression through language, it began to spread beyond persuasion into every form of communication.

Classical rhetoric refers to the system created by Aristotle and developed by Cicero and Quintilian. Classical rhetoric identifies three main types of speeches: forensic or legal, which deals with the past, epideictic or ceremonial, which deals with the present, and deliberative or political, which deals with the future and inspiring people to action. Originally, rhetoric was restricted to these three types of speaking, but rhetoric was later expanded to include all forms of conversation (Bizzell and Herzberg 3). Classical rhetoric developed not only the types of speeches but also the way that they should be created.

The classical approach to speech writing included five stages: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. Invention is the process of gathering rhetorical and linguistic devices to use in the persuasive speech. Arrangement focuses on organized the speech for the best effect and making sure the methods of persuasion, appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos, are included. Style includes the type of language, especially striking and effective language and linguistic devices. Classical speeches were delivered from memory, so the orator had to develop mnemonics to help him remember the speech. Finally, the use of hand gestures and voice was included in delivery (Bizzell and Herzberg 3).

The classical rhetors focused on using rhetoric for its “practical ends” (Bizzell and Herzberg 21). Corax and Tisias were two Greek rhetoricians who devised and compiled forensic speeches so that people could defend themselves in court (Bizzell and Herzberg 21). Cicero, the great Roman orator, used rhetoric as a political weapon, and although rhetoric was repressed during the Roman empire, the Roman emperor Quintilian “envision[ed] the creation, through rhetorical training that includes broadly humane learning, of a ‘good man speaking well’ who might save the state” (Bizzell and Herzberg 8).

In the middle ages, Christianity began to spread in the civilized world. The Church fathers did not pursue rhetoric because it was seen as a pagan practice and was not reconcilable to the new faith. Rhetoric devises “probable knowledge” from reason, whereas Christianity receives “absolute”

knowledge through revelation (Bizzell and Herzberg 8). Augustine finally recognized that rhetoric was extremely useful for organizing Christian beliefs and defending the faith from outside attacks. (Bizzell and Herzberg 8). Augustine's effort to integrate rhetoric into the Christian faith is a major reason that ancient literature survived the fall of Rome into a "welter of bloodshed and destruction that lasted for generations" (Maynard, et al. 81). Shortly after Augustine, a scholar named Boethius gathered all the information on classical rhetoric and condensed it into a single volume, which was preserved by the Church. Rhetoric was not developed much further after Augustine, although methods of letter writing and preparing sermons were developed (Bizzell and Herzberg 8).

The Renaissance expanded rhetoric to include all forms of communication, even private discourse. Various punctuation marks were added to the tools of language, including the colon, comma, apostrophe, and parentheses. Rhetoric also began expanding to include women. Previously, men were educated and allowed to speak in public while women stayed predominantly in the home. During the Renaissance, however, women's literacy increased and more attempts to gain the right to speak in public were made by women (Bizzell and Herzberg 9).

Different ideas about the purpose of rhetoric developed during the Renaissance. Peter Ramus, a French philosopher, theorized that a process called dialectic discovered absolute knowledge through logic, while rhetoric presented that knowledge to the people. Francis Bacon, an English philosopher, disagreed. Bacon argued that the only way to acquire new knowledge is through science, not logic. Some of Bacon's followers even argued that rhetoric is an unreliable tool for handling knowledge and must be understood within the context of bias and prejudice (Bizzell and Herzberg 10).

The Enlightenment brought the idea that the human language had too many generalities to make communication accurate, and John Locke blamed rhetoric's use of stylistic languages for this lack of scientific terminology. Because of this idea, style became less important in the use of rhetoric,

and instead, writers focused on clearness in their language. Another idea brought by the Enlightenment was uniform psychology, the belief that all human minds are essentially the same. Under the influence of uniform psychology, rhetoric lost its focus on the audience and instead focused on the arguments that were to be presented (Bizzell and Herzberg 10-12).

The modern and postmodern ages have returned the focus of rhetoric back to the purpose of persuading people to accept an idea. Thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche claim that truth is a “social arrangement,” not actual reality (Bizzell and Herzberg 13). Language in the postmodern eyes is synonymous with power, and the focus of rhetoric is on the meaning and context, not the words. “Knowledge and belief are products of persuasion” (Bizzell and Herzberg 15). Even in the realm of science, knowledge is progressed by argument, not “rational observation and the accumulation of facts” (Bizzell and Herzberg 15).

Rhetoric, like everything else, is affected by worldview. The term worldview originated from the term “*Weltanschauung*” used in nineteenth-century German theology (Naugle 7). *Weltanschauung* is the “widest view which the mind can take of things in the effort to grasp them together as a whole from the standpoint of some particular philosophy or theology” (Naugle 7). The theologian James Orr, building on the ideas in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, formulated the idea of Christianity as a worldview in response to the decline of Christianity in Europe. Orr uses rhetoric to present this concept of the Christian worldview in his book *The Christian View of God and the World*. In this book, Orr tries to convince his audience that the Christian faith is “an ordered whole” and that Christianity as an entire system can stand up to the challenges brought against it by the rising modernist worldview (Naugle 7).

Gordon Clark and Carl Henry were greatly influenced by Orr’s ideas. Clark uses the standpoint of the Christian worldview to analyze history, politics, ethics, etc. and present a perspective of each subject that is based in the Christian worldview. Using rhetoric, he expands the

worldview to encompass all subjects, not just religion. Henry follows the rhetorical approach when discussing the idea of a Christian worldview in that he “[seeks] to think clearly and effectively, consistently and comprehensively, about the total Christian world and life view” (Naugle 15). These ideas are formulated and presented to others through the use of rhetoric.

Abraham Kuyper was also concerned with the rise of modernism, and when he was invited to give the Stone Lectures at Princeton University, he sought to persuade his audience that Christianity, and more specifically Calvinism, was a “comprehensive vision of reality” that could stand up to modernism (Naugle 17). These lectures, contained in the book *Lectures on Calvinism*, are a great use of rhetoric to define the Christian worldview and its influence on all aspects of life.

Herman Dooyeweerd expands on this concept of a worldview. Dooyeweerd indicates that a worldview is not “*theoretical*, but rather *pre-theoretical*,” meaning that everyone, not just theologians or philosophers, has a worldview which influences their perception (Naugle 28). According to Dooyeweerd, a person’s worldview is based on his “religious ground motives,” which can either be directed toward God or directed against God (Naugle 27-28). The distinction between these ground motives and the worldview that they make up, however, is “razor thin” according to David Naugle (29).

These influential thinkers all used rhetoric to define the Christian worldview and develop it. This practical application of rhetoric to Christianity is also used by James K. A. Smith in his books explaining the significance of the Christian worldview and how it relates to life. Francis Schaeffer also applies rhetoric to the Christian worldview in order to present Christianity as a “cogent interpretation of life” (Naugle 30). Although these men give useful examples of using rhetoric to glorify God and describe Christianity, I think Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton give a very helpful description of a Christian approach to rhetoric in their book *The Transforming Vision*. Walsh and Middleton illustrate that scholarship is based on a religious paradigm. The questions that a

person believes are important to answer will be influenced by what that person believes is important. Faith always influences scholarship, and within scholarship, rhetoric, so the real question is “*Which faith?*” (Walsh and Middleton 169-171).

The approach to scholarship that Walsh and Middleton suggest corresponds with a Christian worldview is a multidimensional approach to the subject. According to Dooyeweerd’s “modal aspects of reality,” everything has multiple irreducible dimensions to it that must be taken into account to fully understand that object (Walsh and Middleton 180-182). This idea of multidimensionality is the opposite of reductionism, which would state, for example, that the sole purpose of rhetoric is to persuade others to take some action or believe some idea. While this is one of the main goals of rhetoric, it fails to account for many of rhetoric’s other dimensions. This failure can lead to reductionism.

Reductionism takes one aspect of creation and elevates it above all else. Because of its apparent ability to simplify life and consolidate the world into a simpler framework, reductionism can be very appealing, but the process of reducing life down to one of its component aspects robs it of the diversity that God created it with and elevates one aspect of the creation to the level of a god which can describe all else. Reductionism elevates one viewpoint to be the correct one, which is a form of human pride in exalting our perception of reality instead of recognizing our fallenness and limited nature.

To avoid reducing rhetoric to only its *lingual* aspect, we should also consider its other dimensions. The *ethical* dimension determines the purpose for which the rhetoric is being used: for the good of society, or for selfish reasons. Rhetoric is also, by definition, a *social* activity between at least two people. Rhetoric has a *formative* aspect in the sense that it is trying to change and form the beliefs and actions of the audience. *Aesthetics* may be involved in the choice of language and style. All



these dimensions, and more, combine to form the activity of rhetoric and need to be analyzed whenever rhetoric is used.

For example, in the engineering world, rhetoric is used to communicate with other engineers, as well as businessmen, architects, construction managers, etc. This communication is not just one-dimensional but also has a *legal* dimension as it is part of a contract between different people or companies. This rhetoric includes *economic* issues and ideas. The designers and the builders must agree on a plan that will use money efficiently while remaining functional and *aesthetically* pleasing. An *ethical* aspect of this communication involves whether one is presenting accurate information or withholding information that could influence a decision. Even in a field that is focused on science and technology, rhetoric needs to be used and analyzed in a way that includes the entirety of its multidimensionality, not just one aspect.

Two other dimensions of rhetoric are its *structure* and *direction*. The structure of rhetoric is that part which was created by God as good. The foundation of rhetoric is the communication of ideas between people. God made humans to be rational individuals, and so as part of that creation, He gave us the ability to communicate with each other and become a community. Rhetoric has a defined structure in the organization of ideas and the formation of speeches. This foundation of rhetoric is good; however, the direction in which rhetoric can be oriented is not fixed.

Rhetoric can either be oriented towards God or away from God. Because of sin, fallen humanity tends to direct things away from God, using them for their own sinful desires. Rhetoric is included in this misdirection, as people use rhetoric to persuade people to think or act a certain way. This is not always for the best interests of the community as a whole but serves to satisfy one person's desires.

Just as rhetoric can be directed away from God, it can also be directed toward God. When we use rhetoric for God's glory, we are no longer seeking to satisfy our own selfish desires, but we

are striving to do God's will by directing other people toward Him and renewing the creation. When we approach rhetoric with the goal of glorifying God, we switch our focus from helping ourselves to edifying others. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges believers to "let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as first the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4.29). We are to be careful to use our language and rhetoric for the benefit of our audiences and the glory of God.

In order to properly direct our rhetoric towards God, it is helpful to understand rhetoric in light of the three pillars of the Christian worldview: creation, fall, and redemption, as well as Kuyper's four main themes of the Christian worldview: God's restoration of creation through His grace, God's sovereignty over all, our task of developing and preserving creation, and the "antithesis" between the believer and the unbeliever (Naugle 22-23).

Understanding rhetoric in terms of creation, fall, and redemption is similar to the perspective of structure and direction. Rhetoric was created as part of God's good creation, but through man's disobedience, creation, along with rhetoric, was directed away from God. Now God is directing all creation back to Himself through redemption in Jesus. This ties into the first of Kuyper's themes, that God is restoring things through his grace. Rhetoric, though misdirected because of the fall, is being restored to God through His grace. Kuyper's second theme, that God is sovereign over all, relates to His redemption. God is restoring His sovereignty over His creation, and He wants us to participate in this process. Our task of developing and preserving creation, Kuyper's third theme, involves working with God to restore creation to God. Our approach to rhetoric and the rest of creation should be focused on bringing them under the lordship of Jesus and giving Him control. Kuyper's final theme focuses on the difference between those who recognize the lordship of Jesus and are working to further His kingdom, and those who do not recognize Jesus' lordship and are pursuing their own interests. In the context of rhetoric, followers of Jesus will generally use rhetoric

to develop the earth and help others, while those who are against God will often use rhetoric for their own ends.

The understanding of rhetoric has changed throughout its history, from being a secular search for knowledge to a tool for defending the Christian faith. It has been viewed as merely the mode of presenting ideas or the author of ideas themselves. Rhetoric is used in our society as a means to present information and persuade listeners. Without the guiding principles of a Christian worldview, this powerful tool can be used to destroy people, communities, and nations. A Christian worldview provides the necessary framework for rhetoric to flourish by uplifting others and inspiring them to follow God, thereby giving glory to God.

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