THE IMPORTANCE OF AUGUSTINE'S RHETORICAL SYSTEM TO TODAY'S MINISTER

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Andrew Blackwood, in the preface to one of his books, asks this question: "Why should not every minister strive to excel in the finest of all the fine arts, that of preaching?[1] Of the many who have echoed this sentiment, Augustine, writing around 426 A.D., is remembered as one of the more prominent writers who presented some high principles to guide the minister.[2] The teachings of Augustine continue to influence the homiletical materials, as is seen from the references made to his writings by John Broadus[3] and Andrew Blackwood.[4] Many of Augustine's suggestions are of such enduring value that today's minister would profit from an application of them.

In the training of the Christian orator, Augustine urges the use of models as a means of inspiring the student to eloquence. Those of quick intellect, he thought, could learn eloquence easier by listening to and reading the works of eloquent speakers than by following rules for eloquence.[5] Likewise, today's ministerial student would profit by listening to the speaking of outstanding contemporary ministers. Regardless of whether he agrees with a particular preacher's doctrinal positions, the minister may be moved to produce eloquence similar to that which others have produced.

Uppermost in the thinking of Augustine is his insistence upon truth in the Christian's oratory. Truth or wisdom is of

much more importance than eloquence. One should beware of the orator who speaks "eloquent nonsense;" such an orator may make the audience think he is eloquent, whereas he is actually present- ing nothing which is worth their attention.[6] Surely this is a more noble attitude than that of Quintilian when he says: "To tell a falsehood is sometimes allowed, even to a wise man....Un- enlightened men sit as judges who must, at times, be deceived, that they not err in their decisions."[7] The importance of the centrality of truth is described by Phillips Brooks when he states that "preaching is the communication of truth by man to men."[8] Furthermore, one "speaks with more or less wisdom just as he has made more or less progress in the knowledge of the Scriptures."[9] If one were describing Augustine's rhetoric, he might thus style it not so much as a speaker-center rhetoric as a "Scripture-centered" rhetoric.

The need for such an approach to preaching remains the same today. A young minister may be tempted to unload such a display of oratorical fireworks that his hearers stand amazed at his ability, but fail to understand the message. Such an effort would result in the failure of the mission of preaching, for Paul told the church at Corinth that it was the pleasure of God to save the world through the "foolishness of the thing preached.[10]

Although Augustine emphasized the importance of truth, he did not eliminate eloquence from his rhetorical system. "If a man be not moved by the force of truth, though it is demonstrated

to his own confession, and clothed in beauty of style, nothing
remains but to subdue him by the power of eloquence."[11] The
sacred writers are given as examples of those who unite
eloquence with wisdom. This type of eloquence is to be one
which is appropriate to preaching; it is to be conspicuous
neither by its presence nor by its absence.[12]

This concept likewise needs to be attained by today's
effective minister. Many ministers present to us the picture,
perhaps, of a "Lifeless Lump" -- an "orator" with no visible
means of animation. Still again, we may have been forced to
listen to a "Sleepy Slump" -- a preacher evidently presenting
what has become to him a required ritual in which he has no
interest. Or finally, a preacher may appear to be a "Gloomy
Glump" -- one who casts over his audience such a feeling of
dismay that no eloquence can truly be manifested. The remedy
for such a situation would be for the minister to study, either
by means of rules or examples, the ways in which he can present
his message in such a manner that the audience may be impressed
with its value.

In accomplishing his purpose, the Christian orator will
manifest at least three characteristics of style: clarity,
elegance, and variety. Augustine considers clarity of style
to be essential for, without it, a discourse will fail to
instruct the audience. The necessity for clarity is demonstrat-
ed by the speaking situation in which the audience is unable to

ask any questions concerning doubtful points.[13] For this same reason, Augustine believes that the orator should discuss a subject so long as is necessary to make it understood -- neither too long nor too short a period of time. If a point is discussed for too great a length of time, the audience will lose interest in things which they already understand.[14] John Broadus has commented on the same point:

> The most important property of style is perspicuity. Style is excellent when, like the atmosphere, it shows thought, but itself is not seen....Good style is like stereoscopic glasses, which, transparent themselves, give form and body and distinct outline to that which they exhibit.[15]

Many modern sermons would be greatly improved by adding the quality of clarity. The young minister may attempt to impress his audience by using some ten dollar words, or perhaps by throwing in a few Greek, Latin, or Hebrew phrases. The older minister may have allowed himself to get so engrossed in his studies that he fails to present an audience-adapted lesson, but rather something which would find a happier home in a scholarly work. The result of either extreme would be a lack of instruction for the audience.

But then, a second characteristic of style is necessary for Augustine's orator -- that of elegance. Unless the Christian orator used elegance, Augustine believes that the benefit from a sermon will not extend beyond a few who are anxious to know whatever can be learned on a subject.[16] This realistic approach to the sermon would be valuable for any minister. A minister may allow himself to adopt a philosophy which will allow him to present a

lesson in a rough, unpolished style -- thinking that the responsibility for the acceptance or rejection of a speech will rest solely with the hearer. The minister must make the conscious effort to clothe his thoughts in such language as will impress his lesson on the mind of the listener.

A third characteristic of style is that of variety. Augustine mentions the traditional classifications of style as subdued, temperate, and majestic. Usually, little things are presented in a subdued style; moderate things, in a temperate style; great things, in a majestic style.[17] Granted that the Christian orator is constantly dealing with great matters, Augustine still insists that the style be varied.[18] Although the subdued style is used primarily in teaching, there is a strong need for it when one is explaining a difficult point in a majestic sermon. Furthermore, the majestic type sermon should be introduced by an introduction of a temperate style.[19] In addition, the temperate style may be used in an attempt to move men who are not so hardened as to need to be moved by the majestic style.[20] Unless the orator varies his style, the speaker will lose the attention of the audience.[21]

Although Augustine quotes from Cicero to tell us that the aim of the orator is threefold (to teach, to delight, to move), he actually believes that there are two essential aims: to teach, and to move. Of these two, teaching is the more essential, for it depends on what one says rather than how he

says it;[22]men must have something to know before they can be properly moved.[23]   The idea of delivering a sermon for the purpose of giving pleasure is strongly repulsive to the thinking of Augustine.   To him, this is not a worthy end.[24]   The type of pleasure which may be enjoyed will be that resulting from a knowledge of the truth.   "Truth, when it is exhibited in its naked simplicity, gives pleasure, because it is the truth."[25]

This idea is certainly worthy of modern consideration. Sometimes, one receives the impression he is listening to a speaker who is not trying to teach something instructive or needful, but is trying to present to his listeners that which they would like to hear.   Or again, one may hear a speaker as he attempts to move an audience without first giving them the reasons why they should be moved.   The result of the first attitude would be the reduction of Christianity to a series of epideictic speeches in which one praises his audience as being a group of perfect people -- a type of people who, if it were possible that such people might exist, would have no need of redemption.   The result of the second approach would be confusion; men would embrace a cause without knowing what the cause was -- a cause which they might soon abandon.   These comments should in no wise minimize the importance of moving an audience, for Augustine himself repeatedly emphasizes the fact that the Scriptures give us the best examples of writings designed to move audiences.[26]   So, although the orator must

instruct, he must not be content with stopping at this level, but should stimulate the Christian layman to the acceptance of the truths presented and to the exertion of greater efforts.

One other qualification for the Christian orator should be noticed -- that of ethical proof. Augustine would agree with Quintilian that the orator must possess nonartistic ethical proof, for he says: "The man whose life is in harmony with his teaching will teach with greater effect."[27] Henry Ward Beecher expressed this same idea when he told a group of prospective ministers: "You have got yourself to bring up to the ideal of the New Testament." Beecher told his students that they must be "pattern" men.[28] Numerous modern examples could illustrate this point. Everyone is familiar with the old expression: "How can I hear what you are saying, when what you are speaks so loud, it drowns the message out?" Churches have prospered when ministers who teach benevolence, practice it; when preachers who emphasize personal work, engage in it; when Christian orators who preach the Golden Rule, believe in it.

All of these principles are designed to help the Christian orator toward a single goal -- to produce the desired effect. On this point agian, Augustine transcends the thinking of his day when he announces that the principle of effectiveness is not the applause which one may receive from an audience; rather it is demonstrated by a change of life in the audience.[29]

Thus the Christian orator who proclaims the life of Christianity
may see that his preaching is effective when men repent and
reform.

Although the writer is somewhat hesitant to level this
criticism against contemporary preaching, the principle of
effectiveness does not appear to have reached the stage of develop-
ment which it should have attained in preaching circles. A
Christian minister has so often adopted the standards of the world
that the effectiveness of his sermons is measured, by him, in terms
of the material things which he possesses. Thus the minister who
is making $1000 a week in a wealthy congregation which is spirit-
ually dead is often styled as more successful than he who is having
to assume an additional occupation to make a living, but who is
also bringing about a spiritual reformation in a congregation.
One question that may enter into a preacher's mind before changing
locations might be whether he would be "stepping down" by assum-
ing a new work.

These principles, set forth in Augustine's On Christian
Doctrine over 1500 years ago, may still serve as helpful guides
to the minister of today. The principles may seem to be demand-
ing, and they are. Just as they transcended the ordinary rhetoric
of that day, so they would largely transcend the rhetoric of
today.

NOTES

David Walker is the desperate editor of this Journal who is in urgent need of good articles.

[1] Andrew Watterson Blackwood, _Preaching in Time of Reconstruction_ (Great Neck, 1945), p. 7.

[2] Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, _Speech Criticism_ (New York, 1948), pp. 111-113.

[3] John Broadus, _On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons_ (Garden City, 1929), pp. 5, 99, 138, 354, 541.

[4] Andrew Watterson Blackwood, _Preparation of Sermons_ (New York, 1948), pp. 15, 73, 110, 124.

[5] Augustine, _On Christian Doctrine_, iv. 3. 4.

[6] _Ibid._, iv. 5. 7.

[7] Quintilian, _Institutes of Oratory_, ii. 17. 27, 28.

[8] Phillips Brooks, Lectures on Preaching (Grand Rapids, [n.d]), p. 5.

[9] Augustine, iv. 5. 7.

[10] I Cor. 1:21.

[11] Augustine, iv. 13. 29.

[12] _Ibid._, iv. 6. 9.

[13] _Ibid._, 10.24.

[14] _Ibid._, iv. 10.25.

[15] Broadus, p. 361.

[16] Augustine, iv. 11. 26.

[17] _Ibid._, iv. 19. 38.

[18] Ibid., iv. 18. 35.

[19] Ibid., iv. 23. 52.

[20] Ibid., iv. 25. 55.

[21] Ibid., iv. 18. 35.

[22] Ibid., iv. 12. 27.

[23] Ibid., iv. 12. 28.

[24] Ibid., iv. 25. 55.

[25] Ibid., iv. 12. 28.

[26] Ibid., iv. 6. 9.

[27] Ibid., iv. 27. 59.

[28] Henry Ward Beecher, Lectures on Preaching (Glasgow, 1880) p. 33.

[29] Augustine, iv. 24. 53.