

The Rhetoric Companion

THE RHETORIC *A Student's Guide to Power in Persuasion* COMPANION

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Introduction

The first question to ask and answer would be, “What exactly is *The Rhetoric Companion*?” And a related question might be, “Why do I need it?”

This text is designed for students of classical rhetoric who are old enough to drive, and young enough to still be breathing. As a stand-alone text, it can be used over the course of a term or semester. As a supplement or “companion,” it can be used in conjunction with some of the historic texts for the study of classic rhetoric, extended over the course of a year. At the conclusion of every chapter, the student will find suggested readings from texts like the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* or Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*. The best (or at least the fullest) use of this text will be as a companion to accompany the modern student in his readings of these ancient texts. If a student does all the readings, when the course is done, he will have read through Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, and all of Quintilian. Because of the nature of the case, these readings will not always correspond to the lessons, but there should usually be some level of interrelated relevance. The references will all be to the Loeb editions of these books, cited by book, chapter, and section.

At the same time, this text also seeks to incorporate two other sources of information about rhetoric—one foundational and the other more current and contemporary. The foundational issues are biblical—Christian writers were wrestling with how classical rhetoric intersected with Christian faith as early as Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*. The answers that Christians have offered have varied, but over the centuries a

How can we conceive of any real eloquence at all proceeding from a man who is ignorant of all that is best in the world?
—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 4¹

I. All quotations from Quintilian are taken from *Institutio Oratoria*, 4 vols., trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920–1922).

Without natural gifts, technical rules are useless. Consequently, the student who is devoid of talent will derive no more profit from this work than barren soil from a treatise on agriculture.

—**Quintilian**, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 1

consensus has emerged, thanks largely to Augustine. One ancient writer compared a Christian use of classical learning to an Israelite who saw a beautiful foreigner taken captive in war. He was allowed to marry her, but only after she had grieved the loss of her family and had been purged of all her pagan cultural trappings (Deut. 21:11). Her beauty was real, but so was the danger. Another common comparison was to the way the children of Israel left Egypt with a great deal of Egypt's wealth. Since that time, many believers have defended their appropriation and use of unbelieving culture with that particular phrase—"plundering the Egyptians." Unfortunately, this phrase is frequently used by Christians to defend the inputting of massive amounts of grimy media into one's skull. (That's more like dumpster diving in Egypt than plundering. The Israelites did not each give eight dollars to the girl in the ticket booth so that they could go in and look at the Egyptians' gold.) The ancient Christian writers had more of a grasp of what plundering was actually supposed to look like. Now as more and more classical Christian schools are flourishing, the question of what to do with "the gold" has arisen again. This text will seek to bring every aspect of the ancient discipline of rhetoric to the bar of Scripture.

The second issue has to do with how much the world has changed since the time of Cicero. What does rhetoric mean in a world of Facebook and Twitter, and how can an eloquent argument survive in an era of sound bytes and bumper stickers and one-handed thumb typing? In some ways the question points to a real dilemma—a great deal of our public discourse these days really is coarse and cheap, and politicians really are trained to not answer questions. But at the same time, the modern era is sometimes dismissed too readily. A bumper sticker or a tweet certainly can represent mere sloganeering, and the paucity of words often corresponds to the poverty of thought. However, short, pithy phrases have gone into the commonplace books of rhetoricians for centuries, and there is no reason why we should reject them out of hand. That being said, modern students have to make some mental adjustments as they seek to translate the classic principles of ancient rhetoric to the digital age. Would Cicero have had a blog? And if so, would it have been any good?

So this text is offered in the conviction that God in His common grace bestowed a great deal of practical wisdom about public discourse on the ancient practitioners of rhetoric. However, this cannot simply be assumed—we have to hold what they taught up against the final standard of Scripture. At the same time, we have to compare what they taught about a speech in a city forum, without microphones, to this age of global YouTubery. Unless we distinguish principles and methods, we will find ourselves using quill pens instead of laptops, and all because we are hung up on the particular methods of the dead.

With that said, at least, let us begin.

SUGGESTED READING

- I. Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), I.I.I-II.8

The road may be pointed out, but our speed must be our own.

—**Quintilian**, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 3

LESSON 1

Biblical Wisdom and Rhetoric

The study and practice of rhetoric is regarded today with an almost universal suspicion, from Christians and non-Christians alike. And why wouldn't we all be suspicious? In the modern world the word *rhetoric* smells like campaign lies, late night infomercials (only seventeen easy payments . . .), and every other type of self-interested manipulation. But for Christians the standard must always be, from beginning to end, the Word of God. If Scripture condemns thought-out and practiced rhetoric, then so should we. If it does not, then we have no basis for any real or abiding complaint. There are many subjects of study (like history or mathematics) that do not have to begin with a justification of their pursuit. But there are others where suspicion runs deep (rhetoric, philosophy, palm-reading, etc.).

Where does this almost universal suspicion of rhetoric come from? Is this a biblical suspicion, a suspicion of a legitimate pursuit now long-abused, a pagan suspicion of cultural maturity? If the latter, have Christians simply picked up this suspicion from the world? Or perhaps it is some tangled combination of all of the above? Suspicion of rhetoric goes back at least to the time of Socrates, but note what this does. Socrates was a pagan, just like the sophists were. Perhaps our *suspicion* of rhetoric is something we got from paganism also.

Rhetoric as a formal subject is the third part of the classical Trivium—grammar, dialectic and then *rhetoric*. It is almost at the halfway point in the seven liberal arts, the last four being the Quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. As a *formal* subject of study, it attracts less opposition. But as an *informal* whipping boy, rhetoric has become synonymous with “sophistry,” meaning some kind of chicanery with words, or empty rhetoric. “That’s a bunch of rhetoric” would never

At any rate let us banish from our hearts the delusion that eloquence, the fairest of all things, can be combined with vice.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 4

I hold that no one can be a true orator unless he is also a good man, and, even if he could be, I would not have it so.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 1

be mistaken for a positive statement. As just mentioned, this suspicion goes back at least to Socrates, who had a great deal of trouble with the sophists (mercenary tongues and brains for hire). We should share his suspicion of the emptiness there, but we should also remember that the suspicion was just as pagan in its origins as was the object of suspicion. Both sides were already in play in the ancient world.

With this popular understanding of “empty rhetoric” providing us with a starting place, consider some of the things the Bible says which actually do condemn it. St. Paul addresses rhetorical issues explicitly. The passage is the *locus classicus* on this subject, and so it is worth quoting at length. Some of the key phrases and relevant portions have been italicized.

For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: *not with wisdom of words*, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? *where is the disputer of this world?* hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. And I, brethren, when I came to you, *came not with excellency of speech or of*

wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was *not with enticing words of man's wisdom*, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Howbeit *we speak wisdom* among them that are perfect: *yet not the wisdom of this world*, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. *Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth*, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. (I Cor. 1:17–2:13)

Christians must obviously condemn what Paul here condemns and praise what he praises. Paul rejects the "wisdom of words," the "disputing of this world," "excellency in speech or wisdom," or "enticing words of man's wisdom." He contrasts all this with preaching Christ and the "foolishness" of preaching.

In a word, Paul is rejecting human *autonomy* in rhetoric. He is opposing every form of humanism in the art of using words well. But when we have rejected that autonomy, the myth of neutrality, does this mean that Christians must actively seek to stumble over their words? Is Paul himself clumsy with his words, or does he communicate effectively and powerfully? Does godliness mean we must cultivate a lisp or a distracting stammer? Should every preacher of the gospel, if he is to be faithful to

Eloquent speakers give pleasure, wise ones salvation.

—Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*¹

1. All quotations from Saint Augustine are taken from *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Given a sharp and eager mind, eloquence is picked up more readily by those who read and listen to the words of the eloquent than by those who follow the rules of eloquence.

—Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*

We easily escape the seeming disclaimer of the great Apostle, by asking what was that rhetoric which he repudiated, and whether he did not employ a method of his own? The Christian antiquary answers the first question. The spurious and unworthy art which is here rejected, was that of the Greek Sophists—a system of mere tricks of logic and diction, prompted by vanity and falsehood, and misguided by a depraved taste.

—R. L. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*²

this passage, seek to bumble around in the pulpit on purpose? (Some do, oddly.) No, of course not. But preachers and teachers and every Christian called to communicate (which is every Christian) still have to do *something* with this passage.

The foolishness of preaching. The foolishness of the cross, of humility, of stooping. Forget the “enticing words of man’s wisdom.” Christ (and His apostles) retooled effective communication and rhetoric. Let another praise you and not your own lips. No more ancient, self-praising, pagan rhetors chest-thumping like rappers. And perhaps most importantly, no longer is “convincing” one’s opponents the measure of success or failure. Christ functioned differently—“foolishly”—and so should we.

Definitions of rhetoric vary in the classical writers, but adapting one of them, with a peculiarly Christian backdrop and understanding, provides us with our working definition of rhetoric: *the art of a good man speaking well*. This definition has two clear evaluative terms in it, *good* and *well*. Whenever we hear words like this, we should realize that a particular standard is being assumed and applied, and we should always be asking what standard that is. What is a *good* man? And what does it mean to speak *well*? Such evaluative terms have to be defined in accordance with the teaching of Scripture.

The follower of Christ should learn how to speak honestly and plainly, with those terms understood scripturally. For the justification of this claim, it is only necessary to consider again the passage quoted earlier. But the Christian must also speak appealingly. “The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD: but the words of the pure are pleasant words” (Prov. 15:26). It is important to speak thoughtfully and deliberately. “Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? there is more hope of a fool than of him” (Prov. 29:20). And of course, one must speak appropriately—“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Prov. 25:11).

For the believer, manipulative sophistry is clearly out of bounds. But putting careful thought into what constitutes pleasant and appropriate words is not. What many people dismiss as “a bunch of rhetoric” is simply *poor* rhetoric. In the classical world, there were not a few “speech

2. *Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1979), 17.

instructors” who were willing to teach their students to lie, cheat, and cry, if it would only help them get their way or to win their case in court—a lot like today, in fact. Such dishonesty is completely inconsistent with a Christian approach to rhetoric and communication. But nevertheless, there is a Christian approach to rhetoric, and to a development of that approach we now turn. To the extent that the classical rhetoricians opposed empty sophistry, we join them in blowing dismissive raspberries. To the extent that they accommodated themselves to that same sophistry, we must kick them to the side and move on to cultivate a distinctively biblical approach to *the art of a good man speaking well*.

SUGGESTED READING

1. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I.II.9—III.6.
2. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. I, trans. H. E. Butler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), I.Greeting—IV.I6.

EXERCISE

1. Find twenty-five short, well-written excerpts from any outside reading and copy them (with citation) into a commonplace book. Select the strongest ten and work on delivering them orally until you can do them justice. Introduce and deliver them publicly.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where does the almost universal suspicion of rhetoric come from?
2. Is this a biblical suspicion?
3. What is the position of rhetoric in the Trivium?
4. What is the Quadrivium?
5. What is sophistry?
6. Does I Corinthians 1:17–2:13 require Christians to reject rhetoric? Why or why not?

LESSON 2

The Purposes of Rhetoric

What is rhetoric *for*? In a world where everyone was knowledgeable, agreed about everything, and was always prepared to do the right thing, rhetoric would be unnecessary. (Maybe.) But alas, that is not the case, and so here we are, studying rhetoric. The point of true rhetoric, in all its guises, is to deal with ignorance, bring about like-mindedness, and motivate to action. In stating this, we must not allow biblical standards to slip away from us. We must deal with ignorance as the Bible would define it; we should strive to bring about like-mindedness in the truth; and we should be motivating the listeners to right action.

But this is still too general. The specific purposes of rhetoric will vary with the occasion. Depending on where you are, you will speak in different ways in order to get a good result.

Aristotle taught that rhetoric was the “power of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever.”¹ Although Aristotle might complain we are engaged in gnat-strangling, his definition is not quite adequate. Someone could be an effective rhetor under this definition without ever saying anything. A cute girl winking can be very persuasive, but we wouldn’t normally call that rhetoric. A man could discover the possible means of persuasion without using any typical oratorical means. Also, we have the problem of certain activities that can be *very* persuasive that we wouldn’t want to classify as rhetoric—for example, sending Guido around to break someone’s kneecaps, sexual blackmail or seduction, bribery, and so forth.

Then there is the problem of limiting rhetoric to the *discovery* of the means of persuasion. A man could sit around in his sweatpants

The task of the public speaker is to discuss capably those matters which law and custom have fixed for the uses of citizenship, and to secure as far as possible the agreement of his hearers.
—Harry Caplan, introduction to the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*²

1. *Rhetoric*, I.2

2. All quotations from the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium* are taken from the Harvard University Press edition (Cambridge, 1954).

My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator. The first essential for such an one is that he should be a good man, and consequently we demand of him not merely the possession of exceptional gifts of speech, but of all the excellences of character as well.

—**Quintilian**, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 1

doing that and never speak to anyone (or even blog). This definition of rhetoric appears to be a good definition for the first of the five canons of rhetoric—*invention*. It is through the process of *invention* that we discover the “available means of persuasion.”

The definition in the previous chapter is Quintilian’s. The rhetorician is a good person, speaking well. This excludes the glib demagogue—at least if we remember our ethical basis for the term “good.” Further, this definition requires that we actually speak. But speaking well *how*? Where? Upon what sorts of occasions?

There are three kinds of rhetoric in the older classification, so let us begin with the ancient categories. These are *judicial*, *deliberative*, and *epideictic*.

JUDICIAL—The point in this form of rhetoric is to determine guilt or innocence. This is a significant part of Roman rhetoric, with their characteristic emphasis on courts of law. You would think that courtroom oratory would be important in our culture, but it is not, largely because of the procedures we have developed that enable us to establish (or circumvent, as the case may be) justice. Courtrooms are very important in our society, but now they are largely bureaucratically driven and manipulated by preemptive filings and motions. Oratory in our time rarely rises above “if it doesn’t fit, you must acquit.”

DELIBERATIVE—Should we go left or right? “Deliberative speeches are either of the kind in which the question concerns a choice between two courses of action, or of the kind in which a choice among several is considered.”³ This is the kind of oratory that is employed when an important bill is being debated in the legislature, or when a church congregation is trying to decide whether to hold a potluck this Tuesday or the next.

EPIDEICTIC—Is the guy under discussion a hero or a toad? Epideictic speeches are concerned with praise or blame. Here we can clearly see the relevance of our “by what standard” standard. The standards of the

3. *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, III.II.2.

classical world dictated what was considered worthy of praise or blame. “The following, then, can be subject to praise: External Circumstances, Physical Attributes, and Qualities of Character.”⁴ In the world today (thanks to the “foolishness” to which Paul was referring), serious praise would be reserved for the last category only. Praise in the first two categories, in our day, would be limited to puff pieces in *People* magazine. People still do it, but it is considered gossip in print and not a serious use of words.

So these are the ancient categories. But there have been Christian developments since then. The handling of the word of God in preaching has brought in a separate category. The ancient world had those individuals who spoke for the gods, but they had to be possessed or stoned or both in order for this to happen. A Christian minister speaks the word of the living God, and this changes everything. “[I]t applies to the will, the authority of God, the only Lord of the conscience.”⁵ In other words, Christian preaching and teaching claims to be able to bind the conscience authoritatively; the claim being made is an explicit authority to command in the name of God. So not only do we have the additional category created by “the sermon,” we also have additional types of public talks that owe something of their structure to the delivery of sermons over the centuries—modern political speeches would be one example. In a very real way, this binding of the conscience introduces a distinctly Christian understanding of proof—to prove something is not to establish infallible mathematical certainty; it is to obligate belief.

Remember that categories like this (that is, preaching and teaching) cannot be considered watertight. But these are two additional categories where rhetorical wisdom is called for. The first is preaching—the word of God is proclaimed by men, both to nonbelievers and to the saints. This is proclamation of what is called the *kerygma*, that which is set before us in order to be believed by us, the *credenda*. Then there is teaching, in which the word of God is expounded by men—the statement of the *didache*. That which is to be done is the *agenda*.

4. *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, III.VI.IO.

5. Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric*, 34.

The classic writer does not have to persuade the reader. All he has to do is offer the reader an unobstructed view, and of course the reader will see.

—Francis-Noel Thomas and Mark Turner, *Clear and Simple as the Truth*⁶

It may be noticed that missing from the list of preaching and teaching is the notion of a dry recital of data, the better to help you get your degree with. *The Matrix* notwithstanding, we cannot download data into our heads and expect to come away with true understanding. This “computer printout” approach to facts does happen in too many classrooms but cannot be considered in the study of rhetoric, except as a failure or an example to be avoided.

The purpose of rhetoric is to persuade men to believe and act in a manner consistent with whatever the circumstances require. If they are jurors, should they vote to acquit or not? If legislators, should they vote yes or no? If they are congregants, how should their lives be different over the course of the next week?

Let us expand our definition somewhat. A rhetor is a good man speaking well. But in a Christian context, what does it mean to be a *good* man? And does that context change anything about what it means to speak well? We should therefore say that a rhetor must be a *godly* man, speaking well in his attempt to persuade others to believe and act in accordance with biblical wisdom.

This a distinctively Christian definition because we live in a distinctively Christian world.

SUGGESTED READING

1. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I.III.7—V.7.
2. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. I, I.IV.17—VII.27.

EXERCISE

- I. Collect twenty-five more short excerpts for your commonplace book. Choose the most striking of the batch and make it your own in a composition. While trying to match the tone and voice of the quote, add 150–200 of your own words.

6. All quotations by Francis-Noel Thomas and Mark Turner are taken from *Clear and Simple as the Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 51.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the definition of rhetoric we are using in this book? How does the Christian faith affect the definition?
2. What are the three purposes of rhetoric?
3. What was Aristotle's definition of rhetoric? Are there any problems with it?
4. What are the three kinds of rhetoric in the ancient classification?
5. Have there been any developments "in kinds" since then?

LESSON 3

Basic Copiousness

Copiousness comes at the very beginning of the study of rhetoric, and it is the capstone at the end. It provides foundational material, and it enables the speaker overflow in a way that is rhetorically compelling. In a very real sense, copiousness refers to the stuff or material of speaking—what one has to say. Handled rightly, it also improves how one says it.

But let us make an important distinction. In this small book, we are using the term *commonplaces* in two different ways, although they are somewhat related. The first use comes from the Latin (*locis communis*), and refers to the commonly-held worldview phrases circulated in every community. “Think globally, act locally” is an environmentalist commonplace in this sense. A Christian commonplace would be something like, “hate the sin, love the sinner.” But remember, something can be a commonplace, even a Christian commonplace, and not be right. A commonplace is a proverb or a striking phrase at the acceptable end and a cliché at the unacceptable end. If it is false, then it becomes a lying cliché.

The second sense of commonplace is how we are using it in the phrase *commonplace book*. In your commonplace book, you should be collecting quotations, phrases, and poems to aid the flow of your own copiousness and to influence your own voice. Some of the items in your collection will probably also be commonplaces in the first sense. Collect them in order to use them.

First, the principle. The Bible teaches us, with regard to finances, that the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. This is a commonplace that applies to commonplaces. Applying this to public speaking, we can readily see that if someone has not taken very much in, there will not be very much that can come out. A hollow jug cannot pour for very

For a long time . . . we should read none save the best authors and such as are least likely to betray our trust in them.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, vol. 4