

Q & A: On Teaching Rhetoric

by George Grant, Parish Presbyterian Church and Douglas Wilson, Christ Church

For this issue of *Classis*, we asked George Grant and Douglas Wilson, two accomplished rhetoricians, to respond to some questions relating to the teaching of rhetoric in classical Christian schools.

1. Who or what was the most helpful to you in learning to speak well?

(GG) Over the years, I have listened to a lot of sermons and have greatly benefited from such men as Martin Lloyd-Jones and Haddon Robinson. Ultimately though, I found that old recordings of Winston Churchill's speeches helped me see most clearly the power of the spoken word. Like many, I have studied Spurgeon's "Lectures to My Students" and Dabney's "Evangelical Eloquence" to great benefit. And, the musicality of the prose of Chesterton, Lewis, Arthur Quiller-Couch (aka "Q"), and Belloc have been of enormous importance to the way I approach a talk or sermon.

(DW) I have to say that I don't fully know, but I suspect it was from imitating my father, who was quite an effective speaker.

2. Who are the most effective orators in today's society? What qualities make them persuasive?

(DW) I would mention men like John Piper (for passion) and Al Mohler (for cogency).

(GG) There are just two podcasts that I listen to faithfully every week: R.C. Sproul's and Douglas Wilson's. I also occasionally listen to Chuck Swindoll (not so much for

content as for rhetorical prowess) and John Piper (not so much for rhetorical prowess as for content).

3. What aspects of rhetoric can elementary teachers begin training into and out of their students?

(GG) Reading aloud, both prose and poetry, provide an excellent foundation for good rhetoric. Dramatic readings of stories, plays, and epigrams are likewise essential.

(DW) One thing is they can get all their students used to the idea of speaking to the group routinely. It should not be a foreign thing. I would focus on "little" things that are actually big—looking at the audience directly, speaking and enunciating clearly, things like that.

4. Which orators should our students be imitating, and for which particular skills?

(DW) The older traditions of public speaking are still alive in the world of preaching. It used to be common also in areas like law and politics, but it is much rarer there now. I would do what Patrick Henry did, learning from preachers like Samuel Davies.

(GG) I'd suggest Spurgeon and Churchill to read and study—Wilson for wit and wisdom, and Robinson for sermon construction.

5. Which speeches should students practice and deliver?

(GG) I love hearing students render the "St. Crispin's Day" speech of Henry V and Patrick

Henry's "Give Me Liberty" speech. But, a student should become familiar with the whole library of the great speeches of the past—from Bernard of Clairveaux's "Deus Vult" (see page 12) to William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold," from Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" to Reagan's "Morning in America."¹

(DW) I would amen what George said, and add Churchill's "Blood, Toil, Sweat, and Tears" speech.

6. What advice do you have for schools as they plan their thesis projects? How much time should be devoted to writing? How much time should be devoted to speaking? How rigorous should the public defense be?

(DW) I would dedicate a significant amount of time for writing. I would have sessions for practice runs in speaking, so that the "final" presentation is not the first time out. And the public defense should be rigorous, but take care to avoid being rigorous in irrational, persnickety ways.

(GG) The writing should be read aloud at every stage of the first drafts—so that the musicality of the prose becomes natural, so that the cadence is easy and clear, not forced and obscure. Then, when it comes time for the oral prep, the work is really mostly done.

7. How should rhetorical training be integrated throughout the poetic stage?

(DW) There should be rhetoric classes throughout the poetic stage.

(GG) Tolle lege! Always aloud!

8. Excepting Augustine, which Christian teacher/work of rhetoric would you recommend teachers and students of rhetoric read?

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Q & A . . .

(DW) Every person who has to speak at all should read Charles Spurgeon's book on preaching, *Lectures to My Students*. It is magnificent, and you don't need to be a preacher to profit from it.

(GG) Read Spurgeon, Dabney, Lloyd-Jones, Robinson—but I most prefer their works of rhetoric rather than just their works about rhetoric.

9. What is the biggest misconception in classical Christian schools about rhetoric?

(GG) That it is merely formal.

(DW) That it is our version of speech class, or a school equivalent of Toastmasters. There is some overlap, obviously, but rightly understood, rhetoric should be the crown of wisdom

for the whole course of study the student has gone through.

10. What is the next step in recovering rhetorical training in classical Christian schools?

(DW) The next step is finding teachers with a biblical worldview who can speak well themselves, and who have a passion to communicate it to others.

(GG) The next step, it seems to me, is in moving moms, dads, pastors, and teachers to integrate the principles of beautiful speaking, reading, and writing beyond the curriculum and into everyday discourse.

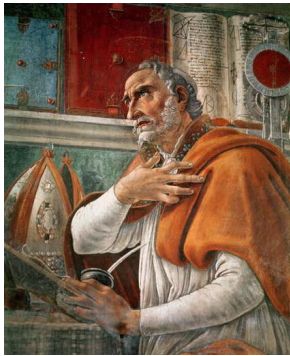
11. When the ruins have been repaired, what skills and abilities will a high-school graduate possess?

(GG) Articulate, beautiful, substantial communication will be woven into the fabric of every conversation, in every prayer, in every Facebook post, not just in every discourse.

(DW) He will know *what* he believes, he will know *why* he believes it, and he will be able to present those reasons effectively and winsomely.

Notes:

1. Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address", January 20, 1981. Listen to Ronald Reagan's First Inaugural Address at www.accsedu.org > School Resources > Journal and Newsletter.



Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of the truth shall be ignorant of that art? That the former are to tell

Is It Lawful for a Christian Teacher to Use the Art of Rhetoric?

Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo

their falsehoods briefly, clearly, and plausibly, while the latter shall tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in fine, not easy to believe it? That the former are to oppose the truth and defend falsehood with sophistical arguments, while the latter shall be unable either to defend what is true, or to refute what is false? That the former, while inbuing the minds of their hearers with erroneous opinions, are by their power of speech to awe, to melt, to enliven, and to rouse them while the latter shall in defence of the truth be sluggish, and frigid, and somnolent? Who is such a fool as to think this wisdom? Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and is of

very great service in the enforcing either of wrong or right, why do not good men study to engage it on the side of truth, when bad men use it to obtain the triumph of wicked and worthless causes, and to further injustice and error?

Source:

A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. 2, St Augustine's *City of God* and *On Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899), p. 575, <http://books.google.com/books?id=aQkNAAAAIAAJ&pg=PA575&dq#v=onepage&q&f=false>.