

ROCKBRIDGE: RHETORIC IS . . .

by Jerry Keehner, Rockbridge Academy

Christian rhetoric is the clear and persuasive communication of truth.

During the summer of 2011, I was preparing to teach rhetoric at Rockbridge Academy for the first time. Our curriculum guide provided much help, especially the “essay” that follows. That essay was what launched my search for a way to define “Rhetoric at Rockbridge.” The search was further fueled by folks asking, “You teach *what*? At a *Christian* school? Why?” That search culminated in a series of lessons in which we carefully define various terms.

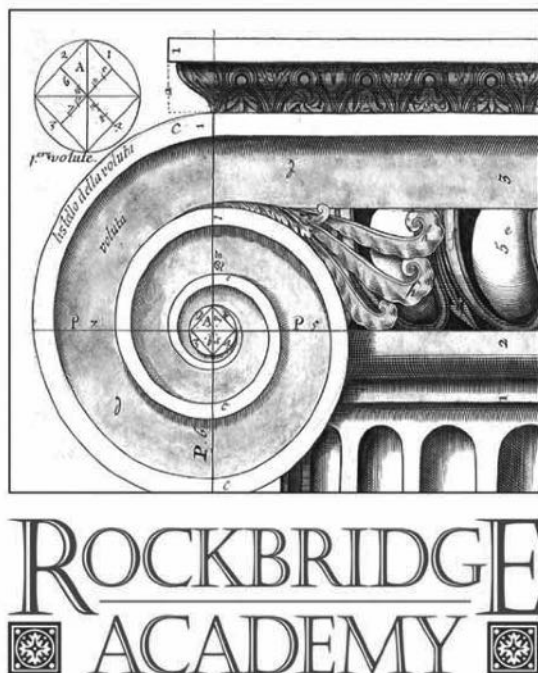
We begin this discussion during the first week of Rhetoric I when we explore “nominal rhetoric”—rhetoric as understood by the culture at large. Our culture sees rhetoric as adorned speech, focused on persuasion, whether or not one actually believes what one is saying. People in our culture recognize the existence of this type of communication and largely reject it. Especially in political seasons, we hear about speeches full of “empty rhetoric” or “mere rhetoric.” The implication is that it is not necessarily true. At best, it is relatively true . . . depending on your perspective.

This is what we must dispel. As followers of Christ, our first responsibility is to truth. Rhetoric, therefore, must be concerned primarily with truth. Rhetoric, of course, uses words, so it is the purposeful *communication* of truth.

It is not, however, enough to say that *Christian* rhetoric is the communication of truth. Christian logic achieves that end. Christian rhetoric goes beyond mere communication or expression to search for good and beautiful ways to express that truth.

While there might be many different ways in which goodness and beauty could be expressed in service of truth, one consistent requirement remains: truth must always be expressed clearly. Too often today, as in fifth-century B.C. Greece, practitioners of “mere rhetoric” seem to specialize in communication that obfuscates. Let us call that brand of communication what it is: sophistry. It is not rhetoric—Christian rhetoric—and those who practice such sophistry do not share our commitment to truth, beauty, and goodness.

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That commitment is the key. Like it or not, Christian rhetors bear a moral responsibility. We have the responsibility to take every thought captive to obey Christ, He who is the way, the truth, and the life (2 Cor. 10:5, John 14:6). *Truth* can be a slippery concept in twenty-first-century America. It need not be. In John 18:37, Jesus told Pilate that “everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” That listening is more than mere hearing. It is giving heed, obeying. Thus, we have the responsibility to obey Christ’s voice. Where do we hear that voice today? We hear it primarily through His Word. Jesus confirms that in His high-priestly prayer, saying, “Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Thus, Christian rhetoric as practiced at Rockbridge Academy has what some might call a narrow focus: *it must cohere with the Word of God*. I would suggest that such a narrow focus is ultimately a good thing, for it requires us, at every step, to align our thoughts, as much as we are able, to God’s Word.

What, then, is rhetoric at Rockbridge? What is Christian rhetoric? As we work through various definitions during that first week of Rhetoric I, we consider many options. Definitions provided by

Aristotle, Quintilian, and Augustine, as well as quite a few contemporary thinkers, are assessed. Each has strengths. Many are from a decidedly non-Christian worldview, though, and could be misinterpreted and/or misappropriated. Finally, in my search, I opted for simplicity. *Christian rhetoric is the clear and persuasive communication of truth.*

FROM THE ROCKBRIDGE ACADEMY CURRICULUM GUIDE FOR RHETORIC:

CLASSICAL METHODOLOGY:

There is a common misconception about rhetoric that must be exposed and dismissed if this course is to fulfill its goals. The misconception is that rhetoric is the art of adorning the content of speech and writing. Aristotle defined rhetoric as seeing the available means of persuasion in any given instance. If this course properly teaches by that definition, the false idea that rhetoric is primarily concerned with flowery speech and fluffy writing will fall away.

It is true that rhetoric studies the eloquence of speech and the beauty of words on a page, but those concerns are secondary to the goal of rhetoric. Aristotle does not say that rhetoric is victoriously persuading with “eloquence” in any given instance; it is “seeing” the available means that is the goal. Hence, rhetoric aims first to improve the thought of the rhetorician himself, the “seeing” itself. Logic demands clear thought, and rhetoric compliments logic in this pursuit of truth. That is why Aristotle follows the above definition of rhetoric with the statement that rhetoric is the antistrophos (or counterpoint) to dialectic. Just as dialectic seeks by the law of non-contradiction, to know what a “thing” is and what “it” is not, rhetoric deepens our understanding of this “thing.” Logic defines it, rhetoric describes it. A syllogism allows us to recognize a concept, but a poem brings us the character of that concept. We deepen our understanding of the logical

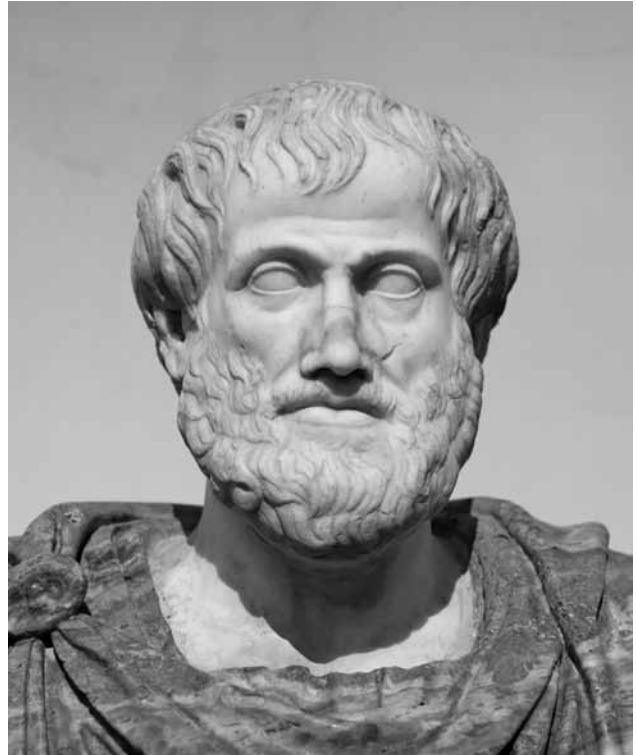
assertion, “wisdom makes a man blessed,” when we read that he shall be like a tree, planted by rivers of waters, and its leaves never wither. Rhetoric deepens understanding, and we are called to seek understanding.

As rhetoric begins the philosophic endeavor to gain understanding of truth, it is clear that this understanding must be verbalized through speech and the written word. This is where the eloquence of speech and the beauty of writing enter rhetoric. When understanding is verbalized, the proper words must be appointed to name understanding. Because the Creator and His works are true, beautiful, and good, the words we use to speak of the Creator and creation must properly name truth, beauty, and goodness. In doing so, we become like Adam, who took dominion in the act of naming. This is a philosophic endeavor that requires dialectic to find “what is,” and rhetoric to deepen our understanding of “what is” by speaking of it in the best possible words. Poetry is the highest use of language, and that is why St. Augustine the philosopher and Dante the poet are close companions in the pursuit of truth.

Rhetoric is concerned with precision, eloquence, and beauty because those qualities are attributes of truth. There is no real separation between content and style. What we think and how we think determines what we say, and the things we say are testimony to our thoughts. Rhetoric is not the art of adorning truth, it is the art of speaking truth. The goal of rhetoric is, therefore, to find the right words to speak the truth. Psalm 130 speaks of the Psalmist’s “distress,” yet he spoke of it beautifully—he uttered a cry from depths of woe. Those beautiful words grant both the Psalmist and the reader a deeper connection with the sensation of drowning despair when hope is hidden. Precise words—the right words—are rays of light in the midst of darkness.

These principles are the best “methodology” for teaching rhetoric. Rhetoric cannot be taught as a list of linguistic tricks and fancy speech that persuade. That is sophism. Rhetoric is the culmination of a study—the point where students find the proper terms to speak of the liberal

arts they studied in their passage through the Trivium. Tropes and schemes, appeals and topics are advanced ways of speech and writing because we are called to be “advanced thinkers” that can see the available means of persuasion in any given instance. Rhetoric is advanced speech. And advanced speech is advanced thought: full of grace, eloquence, humility, and nothing less than the worship of the Divine Word with our words.



Aristotle