

RHETORIC IN THE RENAISSANCE ERA AND ITS IMPACT ON CHRISTIAN PREACHING

KENNETH B. STOUT, D.Min., Ph.D.

Introduction

Most sources frame the Renaissance as roughly the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. By nearly all accounts this was a period of sweeping change throughout Europe affecting much of society. A great, new intellectual movement began emphasizing human powers to know and alter the world and insisting on the right for men and women to pursue knowledge without restraint. Consequently new fields of study in "literature, history and science" were opened up.¹ It was during this time that rhetoric, the art of persuasion and reasoned argumentation, became, in various forms, a central issue on the European landscape and, ultimately, had an affect on the form and style of Christian preaching.

To better understand how this came to be, we need to be aware of several other key factors basic to the Renaissance itself, some of which are often misunderstood. As Thomas Conley suggests, "the familiar picture of the Renaissance as an age of erudition and eloquence, an age in which there emerged a sort of enlightened and committed stance toward the life of the mind, is factual enough, but unbalanced."² He goes on to suggest that the Renaissance had a "darker side" which also contributed to the rise and prosperity of rhetoric. He cites two major factors. First, the fact that the Renaissance was an age of violence and turmoil. A long list of "wars, skirmishes, invasions, and campaigns"³ occurred throughout the era, and the vast majority of people were consumed by these turbulent events.

Second, the renaissance was an "age of disturbing uncertainty."⁴ Many of the old ways of thinking were viewed as invalid. The worldview of nearly everyone had ben dramatically changed by the travels and discoveries of the great explorers

¹Patricia Bizzell, and Bruce Herzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martins Press, 1990), 463.

²Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (New York: Longman Press, 1990), 110.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

and conquerors, and by the scientific discoveries of men like the astronomer, Copernicus. These tensions of violence and uncertainty came together during the Renaissance and were intensified by the dynamics of the Reformation. Taken together, this created a receptive environment for rhetoric and aided its emergence as a powerful force. It has been suggested that in nurturing ideas of persuasion and democracy, rhetoric may have been perceived as an alternative to the use of force and violence, while at the same time, offering a way of 'managing' and working through uncertainty. Eventually, both scientists and statesmen turned to rhetoric for answers; so much so that it has been commonly stated in recent years that "rhetoric holds the key to Renaissance humanism and to Renaissance thought."⁵ As we shall see, rhetoric also came to have a significant impact on the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus by influencing the methods of Christian teachers and preachers.

It is difficult to get a precise handle on the rhetoric of the Renaissance, and to put clear, specific boundaries around it.⁶ Some historians mark its preliminary stirrings in the twelfth century. Others see the life and work of Francesco Petrarca or Petrarch (1304-1374), an Italian poet and scholar, as the initiating force. Its end is identified by some with the founding of the Royal Society of London in 1660, when a group of scientists and academics announced their opposition to the use of elaborate ornamentation in the serious pursuit of philosophy and science.⁷ But, again, there are differences of opinion.

The good news is that research has increased on this topic, especially since James J. Murphy's urgent appeal in 1983, that "Renaissance rhetoric is a large area that is still insufficiently explored by modern scholarship and badly in need of much further investigation."⁸ The bad news is, that as one of the relatively recent authors of a text on rhetoric has said, "a comprehensive history of Renaissance rhetoric has yet to be written."⁹ What we can say, in general terms, is that Renaissance rhetoric can be "traced along the path of Renaissance cultural development from Italy to northern Europe and on to England," and that "the pace of change varied greatly from place to place."¹⁰

While there are no crisp ways of exploring or explaining this period, I will try in this paper, to spot the broad trends, identify the key figures, and offer some new insights as based on my research. As the title indicates, I am not only interested in understanding the broad role of rhetoric in the Renaissance, but its specific impact on Christian preaching.

I will proceed through the paper in the following way: in section one, I will try to better understand the unique nature and development of Renaissance rhetoric

⁵James J. Murphy, *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 2.

⁶Bizzell and Herzberg, 463.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Murphy, 19.

⁹Bizzell and Herzberg, 464.

¹⁰Ibid.

by exploring its close linkage to the rise of humanism. In section two, I will attempt to identify some of the people who have played a key role in the history of Renaissance rhetoric. In the third section, I will specifically look at how Renaissance rhetoric helped shape the Christian preaching tradition. I will do this by trying to identify trends and influences in preaching practices, and especially by evaluating the development of rhetorical writings related to preaching.

Rhetoric and the Rise of Humanism

It has been suggested that “humanism is generally regarded as the first great intellectual movement of the Renaissance,” and that it “set the tone for the whole period.”¹¹ While Murphy wants us to be careful not to conclude that it is the only aspect of Renaissance thought which is important, Conley has gone so far as to say that humanism stemmed the tide of decline which rhetoric had experienced during the Middle Ages and that “it would be difficult to overestimate” the importance it achieved during the era.¹²

Many, however, do not know what “humanism” is—so what is it? Humanism is a difficult term to define since it has such different meanings for different people. Some see it as a “lofty ideal . . . in which human intellect reigns supreme”; others view it simply as an “episode in the history of education” which brought newly available scholarly materials to light in replacement of outdated or incomplete ones.¹³ The technical term, ‘humanism,’ actually had its origin in the nineteenth century, not the Renaissance. It was apparently coined by the German pedagogue, F. J. Niethammer (1766-1848), “who used it in 1808 to refer to a philosophy of education that favored classical studies in the school curriculum.”¹⁴ The humanists, and the humanism of the fourteenth century and throughout the Renaissance, usually stood for respected scholarship in many areas—including the area of religion—represented in many forms. To the surprise of many today, Renaissance “humanists in general were religious and at least broadly Christian,” according to Charles E. Trinkaus.¹⁵ Jerry H. Bentley notes that the “fundamentally Christian character of the humanists’ thought is well established,”¹⁶ and suggests that

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Conley, 109.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴G. Thomas Stadler, “Renaissance Humanism: Francis Schaeffer Versus Some Contemporary Scholars,” *Fides et Historia* 21 (June 1989): 7.

¹⁵Charles Edward Trinkhaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2:76.

¹⁶Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 219, ix.

Renaissance humanists interacted freely with Christianity and Christian antiquity—as well as with classical antiquity.¹⁷

Most scholars agree that Renaissance humanism emerged in northern Italy during the extremely difficult times of the fourteenth century.¹⁸ As Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg explain, “Late medieval prosperity, peace, and unity were disrupted after about 1250, as Europe was torn by warfare. Moslem forces began to subjugate Eastern Europe and finally conquered Constantinople in 1453, bringing Byzantine civilization to ruin.”¹⁹ France and England bloodied each other in the Hundred Years War (1337-1453), while Europe was devastated by the Black Death. Social and then religious unrest followed as the Roman Catholic Church was wrenched by the work of the early reformers such as John Wycliffe and John Huss.²⁰

The Northern Italian towns were largely protected from the worst of these forces and enjoyed prosperity as “centers of trade and learning.”²¹ The Italians took advantage of their favorable situation to build strong, fiercely competitive, city-states. Italian civic life came to serve as the ideal climate for a “remarkable enthusiasm for classical rhetoric” and really for general scholarly work which spread to other parts of Europe.²² Due to the Italians’ influence, “a knowledge of Greek and of works of Greek literature, including rhetorical treatises and orations, was recovered in the West.”²³ And important Latin rhetorical works, long thought to have been lost, were also discovered.²⁴ As Brian Vickers puts it, “the history of Renaissance rhetoric is, in part, the story of the assimilation and synthesis of a great number of classical treatises, together with the many handbooks in the European vernaculars.”²⁵ Renaissance humanists, for example, believed that the re-establishment of classical texts included a re-awakening to the important of Christian classics—including the Bible and the works of the Church Fathers.²⁶

Again, it was the Italian humanists who were behind these important developments. Now these humanists were not humanistic philosophers, but teachers or advanced students of the subjects known as *studia humanitas*, who

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 195, 196.

¹⁹Bizzell and Herzberg, 465.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Kennedy, 195.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Conley, 111.

²⁵Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 255.

²⁶Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Renaissance in the History of Philosophical Thought,” in *The Renaissance: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. Andre Chastel and Cecil Grayson (New York: Methuen, 1982), 134.

“studied on the basis of classical models and theories.”²⁷ The fact is that these humanists were consumed with an interest in the language and literature of antiquity and did everything they possibly could to recover them and make them the “basis of the twin ideals of wisdom and eloquence.”²⁸ As George Kennedy makes clear, the two factors of rhetoric and classicism reinforced each other. As the humanists studied the classics, they came to see a greater and greater connection to rhetoric, since rhetoric was “the discipline which had created the forms, disposed the contents, and ornamented the pages which they admired and sought to imitate.”²⁹

Most Renaissance historians trace the beginning of Renaissance humanism, as well as Renaissance rhetoric, to the work of Petrarch, “the first great representative” of Renaissance humanism.³⁰ Petrarch grew up in Avignon, studied law at Bologna, and spent the latter part of his life in Venice, Milan, and Padua, where he died. According to Bizzell and Herzberg, Petrarch sought for a “model of thinking, writing, and acting in society that was faithfully Christian,” yet superior to “scholasticism” in allowing for the development of individual talents.³¹ Therefore, Petrarch initiated what some have called a “Renaissance intellectual strategy.” This freed him from the Scholastics’ limited view of life. Petrarch felt that reading the ancients in their own language was important so he studied Aristotle in Greek and Cicero in Latin. He came to favor Cicero and his view of *humanitas*, and his *humanitas* became “the seminal concept of Renaissance humanism.”³²

Petrarch’s discovery of one of Cicero’s previously unknown letters in 1345 was what brought to life the fascinating career of the greatest Roman orator.³³ Later discoveries of other Ciceronian materials caused further excitement among Italian humanists. As Conley says, “for the first time, they were able to see a fleshed-out picture of the great Roman orator and for the first time, they were exposed directly to his political and philosophical ideas.”³⁴ Two other discoveries added thrust to Renaissance humanism and its emphasis on rhetoric. First, was the discovery of the complete text of Quintilian’s *Institutes* in 1416.³⁵ Second, was the discovery of the full text of Cicero’s *De Oratore*. These discoveries, taken together, offered first-hand insight into rhetoric as a coherent and holistic art.

²⁷Kennedy, 196.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964), 162.

³¹Bizzell and Herzberg, 465.

³²*Ibid.*

³³Kennedy, 198.

³⁴Conley, 11, 112

³⁵*Ibid.*, 112.

Eventually, humanism moved beyond the limits of Italy and all of Europe felt its powerful influence. The Protestant Reformation was also directly affected by it. Bernd Moeller has even suggested that it was a primary contributor to the reformers' success. He said, "No humanists, no reformation."³⁶ There is evidence that Martin Luther had a great appreciation for Renaissance humanism,³⁷ and that John Calvin was thoroughly educated in it.³⁸ It should be noted again, however, that Renaissance humanism was not viewed negatively as "pagan and anti-Christian,"³⁹ as humanism often is today; rather, it tended to focus on literature and good scholarship,⁴⁰ and emphasized rhetoric as the art of speaking effectively.⁴¹ Protestant reformers would ultimately "set up humanist curricula in the new Protestant universities they founded" and promote humanist learning side-by-side with evangelical theology.⁴²

Key Figures in Renaissance Rhetoric

In this section, I am to take a brief look at some of the primary contributors to the development of Renaissance rhetoric. The work of these key individuals would eventually help lay the foundation for both 'secular' and 'Christian' rhetoric or persuasion. I start with George Trebizond (1395-1472), since his work represents the beginning of Greek rhetoric in the universities of the West. Kennedy suggests that he became Italy's most important Greek emigrant, as far as the history

³⁶Bernd Moeller, cited by Lewis W. Spitz, in "Luther, Humanism, and the Word," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 65, no. 1 (Winter, 85):7.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Marvin Anderson, "John Calvin: Biblical Preacher," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 42, no. 2 (1989): 171.

³⁹Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 74. A change in perspective regarding humanism apparently began to occur in the nineteenth century that spilled over into the twentieth and has continued into the twenty-first century. According to G. Thomas Stadler, what was called a "second humanism" was developed by "Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) and his associates" which made "reason and experience" the sole basis for truth. See Stadler, 7.

⁴⁰Lewis W. Spitz suggests that a "new" or "third humanism" developed in the twentieth century which some have described as "militantly anthropocentric," "frequently anti-religious," and "existential" which clearly moved away from these more noble ideals of Renaissance humanism and became a humanism considered anti-Christian and anti-God. See idem, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971), 139.

⁴¹Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 214, 243. See also Bentley's comments, 219. There Bentley suggests that the "fundamentally Christian character of the humanists' thought is now well established."

⁴²Lewis W. Spitz, "Luther, Humanism, and the Word," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 65, no. 1 (Winter, 85): 7.

of rhetoric is concerned.⁴³ What is his greatest contribution to the history of rhetoric? Conley suggests that it is his *Rhetoricorum libri quinque*, or *Five Books of Rhetoric*, considered the most comprehensive treatment of rhetoric in the Renaissance.⁴⁴ Others suggest that his main claim to fame is his introduction of Hermogenes and the Byzantine Greek rhetorical tradition into the Western tradition.⁴⁵ Hermogenes' work had previously been unknown in the West.

Next we look at the Dutchman, Agricola (ca. 1444-1445). Agricola studied in Italy for ten years and is known for translating the *Progymnasmata* of Aphthonius into Latin. It became one of the most widely used of Renaissance rhetoric schoolbooks. Around 1480, he also made available his influential *De Inventione Dialectica*. In this work he seems to subordinate rhetoric to dialectic, by defining dialectic as "that which treats all arguments about the probable," leaving no room for rhetoric to deal with "probable knowledge."⁴⁶ Agricola further urges the use of the classical rhetorical *topoi* as a source of dialectical arguments, and follows up by suggesting that these be arranged in the order which Cicero recommends for orations. He also seems to play down stylistic rhetoric by referring to it as a secondary goal.

Erasmus (ca. 1469-1536) was not a professional rhetorician, nor did he write a book on rhetoric; but he became a great classical scholar and certainly one of the most controversial theologians of the time.⁴⁷ His special contribution to rhetoric came in the form of a literary tradition. As Kennedy puts it, "his life's work was the revival of Christian piety through study of the classics"; his greatest achievement "was his edition of the Greek New Testament . . ." ⁴⁸ He was also a major writer, producing such books as, *The Praise of Folly*, and the *Colloques*. He made key contributions to rhetoric in the areas of style, letter writing, and preaching.⁴⁹ He is well known for his vigorous debate with Martin Luther over the issue of free-will, which he supported.⁵⁰

Peter Ramus (1515-1572) was a follower of Agricola, a significant rhetorician and, eventually, a favorite of Protestant Christianity as we shall see later.⁵¹ Born of a poor farming family, Ramus was taken in by an uncle who somehow saw to it that he got a good education.⁵² In time, he became a professor at the University of Paris, and in 1543, he published his crucial work, *Dialecticae*

⁴³Kennedy, 199.

⁴⁴Conley, 115.

⁴⁵Kennedy, 199.

⁴⁶Bizzell and Herzberg, 471.

⁴⁷Ibid., 120.

⁴⁸Kennedy, 205.

⁴⁹Ibid., 205, 206.

⁵⁰Conley, 120.

⁵¹Bizzell and Herzberg, 472.

⁵²Conley, 128.

partitiones, advocating what was thought to be a new and revolutionary intellectual method. Despite experiencing initial resistance to his views, even bitter controversy and political retributions, he eventually gained a high ranking at the university. He was killed, however, in the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre of Protestants in 1572,⁵³ which gave him the status of a saint among Protestants.⁵⁴

Much of Ramus' professional work concentrated on the development of a "method of study and classification of the arts which increased the importance of dialectic, . . . and greatly decreased the importance of rhetoric."⁵⁵ His approach emphasized clarity, simplicity, and an easily memorized content. While Ramus appears, in some respects, to stand in the classical tradition, a more careful look shows practices and views that significantly differ from it. As Bizzell and Herzberg note, "Whereas earlier humanists had been careful to separate medieval scholarship from the classical authors, they claimed it had corrupted, Ramus wished to throw off all authorities, be they classical or medieval. . . ."⁵⁶

Ramus features invention and arrangement under dialectic rather than under rhetoric as classically understood. For Ramus, rhetoric is simply the study of "stylistic ornamentation" and therefore, insignificant. He favors the plain style for anything that is 'serious business.' The appeal of Ramism is primarily found in its "simplification of material" to fit into neat categories, and its easier use as a "pedagogical tool."⁵⁷ Over time, Ramus's views became popular, especially among Protestants. Kennedy theorizes that Ramus's emphasis on dialectic and his depreciation of rhetoric as unnecessary ornament, coincided with Puritan convictions in favor of plain thinking and preaching, and led to his popularity.⁵⁸ Due to the impact of his teachings in "rhetorical education and in the transformation of rhetoric itself," most historians of rhetoric view Ramus's teachings as a "watershed."⁵⁹

Our last figure is Francis Bacon (1565-1621), lord chancellor of England. Known as a profound thinker and "the herald of the new age of science," he was also recognized as a distinguished orator in the House of Commons and law courts.⁶⁰ He served his nation when there were serious debates on issues of crucial importance. The debates led to major orations in English for the first time in modern history.

Bacon discusses aspects of rhetoric in several of his works, including *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). Essentially this book is a creative attempt to "restructure human knowledge on rational principles useful for the modern world

⁵³Bizzell and Herzberg, 473.

⁵⁴Kennedy, 212.

⁵⁵Ibid., 210.

⁵⁶Bizzell and Herzberg, 473.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Kennedy, 212.

⁵⁹Conley, 124.

⁶⁰Kennedy, 215.

with its emerging new sense of science.”⁶¹ In his approach, there are a number of similarities to Aristotle’s theory of knowledge. But he adapts them to current concerns, including the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic.

Bacon attempts to divide human learning into three parts: “history which is based on memory; poetry, based on imagination; and philosophy, based on reason.”⁶² Bacon defines “the duty and office of rhetoric” as “to apply reason in imagination for the better moving of the will.”⁶³ So clearly, along with Plato and Aristotle, he focuses on the function and purpose of rhetoric rather than on its ornamentation. He puts a strong emphasis on the concept of ‘imagination’ as being rhetorically important.

In the end, Bacon calls rhetoric “a science excellent,” and makes it clear that “it has a secure place in the structure of knowledge, equal in importance to logic, because of its great practicability.”⁶⁴ According to Kennedy, Bacon is seen as the one who began the recovery of the strand of rhetoric, which is sometimes, called “philosophical rhetoric.”⁶⁵

In looking briefly at the lives and theories of these key figures of Renaissance rhetorical history we have come to a better understanding of their shaping influence upon rhetoric (i.e., persuasion)—and, ultimately, on preaching—and have gained a better chronological perspective on what transpired during this era.

Renaissance Rhetoric and the Preaching Tradition

In this third and final section, I want to look at the Renaissance era to find out how the various rhetorical trends of the era had an impact on preaching. I aim to take special note of the development of rhetorical materials for Christian preaching and the people who wrote them.

The Earliest Phase

The first significant influence affecting preaching during the Renaissance appears to have been George Trebizond’s *Rhetoricum libri V*, first published in 1433/1434 as a secular work. While this was not a religious document, it had importance for preaching because for the first time it made available in Latin a detailed account of Hermogenes’ writing, *On Ideas*, which later had a major influence on preaching rhetoricians. Of particular importance was Hermogenes’

⁶¹Ibid., 216.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., 218.

⁶⁵Ibid., 219.

view of “solemnity” which Christian rhetoricians picked up on later, and emphasized as a legitimate element in Christian preaching.⁶⁶

A second work of the fifteenth century was the epistolary rhetoric, *De ratione scribendi libri tres*, written by the Italian humanist, Aurelio Brandolini (apparently written before 1497/1498, but not published until 1549). This represented an early attempt to adapt classical rhetorical theory to Christian communication. Brandolini specifically changed his sections on “epideictic” or demonstrative oratory because he was under the conviction that most sacred oratory fits into this category of rhetoric.⁶⁷

The most important fifteenth century treatise dealing with rhetoric, however, was Rudolph Agricola’s (1443-1485), *De inventione dialectica libri tres*. Debora Shuger points out that in this work, Agricola makes suggestions in favor of the use of “emotion” “delight,” and “movement” in rhetorical presentations. This emphasis encouraged Christian preachers and rhetoricians of that period, to include these elements in their own rhetorical practices.

The first ‘humanistic sacred rhetorical work, *Liber congestorum de arte praedicandi*, was published in 1504 by Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522). It was generally considered a very weak treatise, however, and only about twenty pages long. It was basically a mix of classical and scholastic elements. The main purpose of the document was to recommend a simplified oratorical structure in place of the overly intricate subdivisions of traditional medieval sermons.⁶⁸ Interestingly, Martin Luther later used some of Reuchlin’s Hebrew texts. He may have been aware of this writing on preaching as well.⁶⁹ According to Shuger, the first decades of the sixteenth century were nearly barren of writings directly dealing with preaching.

A bright spot in this period was when Erasmus (1535) published his last major writing, *Ecclesiastes*. This was “the first full-scale rhetoric since antiquity and the very first comprehensive preaching rhetoric.”⁷⁰ While it reflected the medieval profile, Erasmus did more than simply repeat medieval themes. *Ecclesiastes* seriously explored the theological pillars of Christian rhetoric, though based on Augustinian theory. Erasmus made a strong appeal for passionate preaching and probed the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the preacher’s own expressiveness. He extensively covered elocution and emphasized figures of thought and vivid depiction of biblical scenes.⁷¹ We know that Martin Luther was greatly influenced by Erasmus’ texts and scholarship, despite their personal theological differences. It is said that Luther assigned Erasmus’ books to his

⁶⁶Debora K. Shuger, *Sacred Rhetoric: The Christian Grand Style in the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 60.

⁶⁷Lippo Brandolini, *De ratione scribendi libri tres* (London, 1549), 11, 105.

⁶⁸Shuger, 62.

⁶⁹Spitz, “Luther, Humanism, and the Word,” 7.

⁷⁰Shuger, 63.

⁷¹Desiderius Erasmus, *Ecclesiastes sive concionator evangelicus, Opera omnia*, 10 vols. (1705; repr. London, 1962), 983c-999e.

students. Perhaps this work on preaching enriched Luther's own preaching, since it was written some eleven years before his death.⁷²

The Protestant Rhetorics

The Protestant rhetorics of the sixteenth century formed a close linkage with each other. There was liberal borrowing and cross-referencing among the authors. Protestant rhetoricians genuinely tried to reflect reformed theology with its new emphasis on law and grace, faith and the Holy Spirit, in their rhetorical theories. This was a new, and sometimes difficult, task as they were still tied to features of the old medieval model. For the most part, they recommended and used what came to be known as the "passionate plain style." This was characterized by the tendency to highlight emotional power while rejecting artistic devices geared to elevate language.

The first of those Protestant rhetoricians, Melanchthon, began "not as reformer, but as a humanist."⁷³ In fact, his views on secular eloquence remained humanistic long after his sacred views had changed. Melanchthon's specific works on sacred rhetoric were written between 1529 and 1552. They were brief, but attempted to create a homiletical theory, while adjusting and holding onto Augustinian psychology. Most of Melanchthon's works were not intended for publication, but some were, nevertheless, copied and made popular. Unfortunately, according to Shuger, they all "share certain features fateful for much later Protestant rhetoric. They never mention the *genera dicendi* and rarely discuss language. Instead . . . (they warn) against . . . eloquence . . . ornamentation . . . (and reject) demonstrative oratory out of hand."⁷⁴

Yet Melanchthon's homiletical theory later changed, as classical rhetoric waned in influence. Emotion, for example, became a dominant feature in his writings. He came to divide sermons into two basic categories: those that taught dogma, and those that aimed at arousing the emotions. In the end, Melanchthon constructed what was a "wholly non-classical revision of rhetorical theory" in an attempt "to erect Christian preaching on the foundations of Reformed theology and psychology."⁷⁵ Certainly these works on sacred rhetoric were read, and likely used, by his close friend, Luther.⁷⁶ We know that Calvin assigned some of the writings of Melanchthon to his first-year students at the Genevan Academy.⁷⁷ Perhaps this work was among them.

⁷²Spitz, "Luther, Humanism and the Word," 7-10.

⁷³Shuger, 65.

⁷⁴Ibid., 67.

⁷⁵Ibid., 69.

⁷⁶Spitz, "Luther, Humanism, and the Word," 8.

⁷⁷Anderson, 177.

Eventually, sixteenth century rhetorics came to be divided into either 'liberal' or 'conservative' types. As Shuger suggests,

The former (liberal) point toward the great neo-Latin Protestant rhetorics of the seventeenth century, the latter (conservative) resemble more closely the vernacular English tradition. Yet both absorb elements of the grand style. While the more conservative rhetorics such as Perkins', *The Art of Propheying*, dismiss or ignore rhetorical eloquence in favor of a plain and spiritual preaching, they, like the medieval *ars praedicandi*, preserve two aspects of the classical grand style: passion and expressivity. As we have seen, the passionate plain style emerges when the Holy Spirit replaces language as the "prime mover" of the emotions.⁷⁸

In looking at the research done on John Calvin's and Martin Luther's preaching, by individuals like Marvin Anderson⁷⁹ and Fred Meuser,⁸⁰ as well as by directly examining their sermons, basic insights into the styles of these two great reformation preachers can be gained. It seems clear that Luther tended toward the "plain style,"⁸¹ while Calvin appears to be somewhere in the middle. Calvin seems to place more stress on oratory and eloquence, as preaching values, than does Luther. Yet Calvin, too, opposes what he calls "grandiloquence."

A fresh view of sacred rhetoric began to unfold within Protestantism around mid-sixteenth century as represented by Hyperius's *Practis of Preaching* (1553; trans. 1577). Hyperius followed the example of most preachers of that day in using emotional power, relying on the Spirit, and in being expressive. He tended to divide his sermons into various classifications as most others were doing at the time; but in *Practis of Preaching* he also showed an openness to explore the full range of classical rhetoric. While he did not go into great detail on these issues, he made it clear that his belief was that the orator and the preacher "have all matters in common,"⁸² including the need to use *elocutio*. His emphasis reintroduced into Protestant preaching the element of classical eloquence, and nudged Protestant sacred oratory more toward the grand style of powerful, affective preaching.⁸³

The Catholic Rhetorics

The Roman Catholic rhetoricians became active in direct response to the encouragement given to them by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). As Peter Bayley suggests, at the time of the Council, preaching was in a disastrous state

⁷⁸Shuger, 69, 70.

⁷⁹Anderson, 172, 173.

⁸⁰Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 48-57.

⁸¹Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Press; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986.

⁸²Shuger, 71, 72.

⁸³Ibid.

within the church.⁸⁴ The Council sent out a very simple, but forceful, decree insisting that “preaching is the prerogative of the bishop and those approved by him, and that parish priests should instruct their flock on Sundays and feast days in doctrines necessary to faith and morals.”⁸⁵

Following the Council of Trent, writings on preaching and Christian Rhetoric began to flourish in the Catholic Church. In fact, a full-fledged movement began in support of sacred oratory. As a result, Catholic writings on the subject came to represent the first fully developed Christian rhetoric since Erasmus’ time.⁸⁶ And the writings were of substantial length and quality. While Protestant texts of the same period ran from ten to forty pages, the “Tridentine Rhetorics,” as they came to be known, were 150-500 pages in length. They were rhetorical works in the classical sense.

An example of the best of these Catholic writings is Luis de Granada’s *Ecclesiastica rhetorica* (1576). It deals with issues such as the origin and functions of sacred rhetoric, invention, amplification, the emotions, types of sermons, elocution, style, pronunciation and gestures. It is quite thorough. While the classical origins were clear, there were significant changes in the five-part ancient pattern (invention, disposition, elocution, delivery and memory). *Compositio* and memory were dropped, while a section on amplification and emotion was added. It has been suggested that this may have been a conscious move away from Ciceronian emphasis on “aural rhythm and periodicity” toward greater stress on emotional expressiveness—a trend which was common at this time in Renaissance rhetoric.⁸⁷

There were several differences between the rhetorical works of Protestants and Roman Catholics of the time. One was that Catholic texts willingly embraced the legitimacy of deliberate eloquence. Another was that Catholic texts more aggressively pursued issues of style and amplification, while Protestant texts tended to view these as of only peripheral concern. Still another difference is the fact that Catholic texts had a much stronger sacramental tone. On the other hand, there were some important similarities. Both tried to reground classical rhetoric in Christian theology and psychology. Both saw the Holy Spirit as the prime mover in sacred expressivity. Finally, both emphasized the affective goals of preaching.⁸⁸

Summary

In summary, we can say that Renaissance rhetoric certainly did have a strong impact on Christian preaching throughout the entire era. During the fourteenth,

⁸⁴Peter Bayley, *French Pulpit Oratory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 43.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 43, 44.

⁸⁶Shuger, 76.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 76, 77.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 77-79.

fifteenth and well into the sixteenth century, most preachers were directly and heavily dependent on the various popular rhetorical views and classical approaches. Since rhetoric was so closely linked with general humanist education through this period, it had a profound effect on nearly everyone, and certainly on the trained clergy and church scholars. There was no uniform pattern of rhetoric at any given time, even from a secular viewpoint, so preachers were given flexibility to decide which pattern, or variation of a pattern, they wanted to work with; consequently, there were a variety of approaches among the preachers of this era. The tendency for the average preacher, however, was to largely reflect the popular rhetorical views and practices of his time.

As the Reformation progressed, both Protestant and Catholic scholars emerged to begin writing their own rhetorical treatises and books. At first, they largely mirrored the secular rhetorical texts, but, in time, they became more independent, and better oriented to the needs of preaching. The biggest challenge seems to have been for the rhetoricians, especially the Protestants, to think about how their theological views should and could be properly expressed through preaching.

We also notice that by the time of the Reformation, there came to be two broad traditions that formed around the art of preaching. One can be referred to as the "Passionate plain style," the other as the "Classical grand" or "Christian grand style." They represent two fundamental rhetorical and theological views.⁸⁹ It appears that, in general, Catholic Renaissance rhetoricians seemed to be closer, theologically and theoretically, to the "Classical grand style" of preaching, while the majority of Protestants leaned toward the "passionate plain style," or placed themselves somewhere in the middle.

It can again be said that Renaissance rhetoric, as well as Renaissance humanism, greatly influenced the shape of Christian preaching during the long era that we call the Renaissance. I believe that the impact was largely to the enrichment of preaching.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 70-79.