

Do you want to preach more powerfully? By Bob Young

An interesting and helpful description of Christian preaching appears in a citation from Augustine (St. Augustine, *Teaching Christianity [De Doctrina Christiana]*, trans. Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle [Hyde Park: New City Press, 1996], IV.12.27). Augustine applies a passage from the Roman orator, Cicero (from Cicero's last book on rhetoric, *Orator*, written in 46 B.C. three years before his death).

An eloquent man once said—and what he said was true—that to be eloquent you should speak so as to teach, to delight, and to sway. Then he added, teaching our audience is a matter of necessity, delighting them a matter of being agreeable, but swaying them a matter of victory.

Augustine's basic understanding of preaching centered around three purposes of rhetoric: teaching, delighting, and persuading. These may be described as three functions of preaching. To these three goals, Cicero had linked three styles of speaking: subdued, moderate, and grand. In this article, I look at these three dynamics. Preachers, especially beginning preachers, who keep these three ideas in mind during the preparation and delivery of the sermon will be surprised at the increased power of the sermon.

First, effective preaching teaches. Not only is teaching an essential function of good preaching, it is the duty of the preacher of God's truth. The preacher is obligated to make clear what is good and true; the preacher is obligated to make equally clear what is bad and what is not true. Augustine said it this way, "The interpreter and teacher of the divine scriptures—therefore, the defender of right faith and the hammer of error—has the duty of both teaching what is good, and un-teaching what is bad."

Preaching must convince those of contrary belief, motivate the uncommitted, and clarify truth for those who are ignorant. Preaching must clearly declare what is at stake and what is the desired path for those who seek truth and good. This matter is essential, the matter that preaching must always include a good dose of teaching, because people always act on the basis of what they know, or of what they do not know. Imparting knowledge is the heart of teaching. Knowledge is the foundation of action. Knowledge leads to belief, belief lies behind the desire to change, the desire to change leads to conversion, conversion is essential for conviction that leads to commitment. Teaching explains and instructs so people know what they need to know. Teaching exposes, and the phrase "expository preaching" claims that preaching also exposes. Teaching is a well-accepted function of rhetoric and most often does not require bombast, force, or fancy wordsmithing. In fact, the best teachers are seldom so described. The best teaching is clear, concise, understandable and memorable. Many good preachers who are as much or more teacher as preacher have demonstrated this style.

Augustine thought that a plain style was easier to listen to—he used the word "endure"—than one more grandiose. People are often convinced by simple information about truth without the necessity of eloquent words. Truth has the characteristic of being pleasing simply because it is true and holds together with consistency. Students of rhetoric know also, however, that many are not persuaded by plain teaching.

Second, effective preaching delights. Such delightful preaching is "listenable." (My goal has always been to quit preaching before the audience quit listening, believing that such would delight the audience, but that is not exactly to this point.) Augustine believed that while a few would respond to teaching alone, that the good meal should not only be nutritious, but that it should also be appealing to the tastes and senses. Augustine called this delight—those things that hold the attention of the hearers. Augustine associated a moderate style of speaking with delight, seeking to delight the hearers intellectually. The truth must be presented, and the presentation must be pleasing. A number of things could be used to please hearers. Students of rhetoric learn a whole range of rhetorical devices and figures; the preacher who wishes to preach with delight would do well to become aware of the place of newness, freshness, surprise, the unexpected, and such like. Delightful preaching casts new light on familiar themes. Finally, Augustine issues an important

warning: delight is not used for the sake of delight, but to make it easier to hear, accept, and remember the truth.

Third, effective preaching is persuasive. It is sometimes said that evangelism depends on presence, proclamation, and persuasion. When evangelism is not effective, it is most often for lack of persuasion. I believe the same is true of preaching. Persuasive preaching is passionate and emotional. The listener must be moved to action. That means first that the sermon must clearly declare what kind of response is required. The lack of response to many sermons can be traced directly to the fact that the preacher did not tell the majority of the audience what they should do in response to the sermon.

Augustine calls this aim of preaching—swaying—a measure of victory because an audience can be taught and delighted without being moved to change anything. Delightful teaching does not automatically lead to agreement. How often have I left a great lecture thinking, “I learned, I enjoyed it, but I still don’t agree!” Effective, persuasive preaching helps the audience decide to do the things they know should be done. I cannot help but wonder how much further forward the modern church would be in we heard sermons that included a bit more persuasion, convincing us to do the right thing even though it is costly, uncomfortable, and not easy.

Persuasion does not rely on the styles that typically characterize popular, modern-day preachers. Persuasion is personal, subdued, touching deep feelings. Persuasion depends on the transparency of the preacher who is willing to reveal his own deep personal convictions. Here is passion and emotion, emotional intensity, the ability to implore, rebuke, and incite without seeming to do so. Persuasion is not the result of an emotional sermon, but of an emotional moment of appeal.

These three functions are not linear, they are used as needed, mixed and combined to give the sermon a hearing. Ultimately, with the Apostle Paul, we have to admit that it is not a message of eloquent words and persuasive speech that is powerful, but that the power is in the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:1-5). While brings us to the final point—sometimes modern sermons lack power because the sermon is not focused clearly and concisely on the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus is always at the center of Christian preaching. Preach the Gospel. Preach Good News!