Zoltán Literáty

Rhetorical homiletic in the 16th century.

From Erasmus through Melanchton to Calvin

Erasmus

After Augustine, Erasmus was the first person who attempted to establish the theory of preaching on the basis of the classical science of rhetoric. Although he was aware that Italian ecclesiastical oration applied the genus *demonstrative* as the foundation of sermons, he did not regard this as adequate. The fact that in spite of this he still chose classical rhetoric, became a determining feature for several centuries in the European science of homiletics. Because of its wide spread and effect, it was probably Erasmus' handbook, which removed the system of medieval *artes* from rhetorical thought. This work was his *Ecclesiastes sive Concionator evangelicus*[1], published in 1535.

Erasmus in his work called preaching 'prophesising', in the sense of teaching. The objective of a preacher is to convey God's will clearly and vividly, and to induce the listener to obedience.[2] However, teaching according to Erasmus is never a didactic, dry flow of thoughts, but one which is always connected to practical life; in other words, the object of the preacher is to compose his sermon in order to instruct and convince his audience. Erasmus places great importance on the personality of the preacher. He bridges the tension between divine and human speech by applying the teaching of classical ethos, the preacher must be a trustworthy person with moral integrity. Accordingly, a person in whose heart Jesus is living, by the power of the Spirit, cannot preach falsely.[3] Erasmus was also aware of the fact that the object of homiletics differs from that of classical rhetoric. The former does not dwell with persons and deeds, but with parts of the Scripture. In the thinking of Erasmus instead of the traditional divisions and subjects of oratoria, classical grammatics and the secondary stylistic and exegetical features of literary rhetoric gain importance. Further concentrating on explaining the text in fact determines homily as the perfect form of ecclesiastical communication". Erasmus, by the way, introduced a new word into homiletics to express sermon, which has not been defined through the scholastic *ars praedicandi*, but was taken from earlier times. This word is *concio*, which appeared in this sense only rarely in earlier church literature, but from then onwards became common usage. Erasmus begins his work with the following sentence: "The word *ecclesia*, which we translate *church*, is the same as the latin word *concio*, which signifies an assembly of people called together for the purpose of discussing matters of general concern; and that which is appointed publicly to address the assembly is called *ecclesiastes*... Of these public speakers there are two kinds: the one, whose office it is to declare the laws and constitutions of government to the people… the other, whose duty it is to lay before their hearers the will and commands of the Lord and Sovereign of the world, and exhort them to obedience."[4] The word *ecclesia,* used by the apostle Paul, is also connected to sermon; he defines preaching with it also. In other words, with the parallelism of these concepts, Erasmus defined the framework of preacher and sermon and their relationship for the next period of time. As in the antique literature the word *concio* was coupled to the genus *deliberativum*, the nature of preaching was defined in this form.

[1] Erasmus, Desiderius: Ecclesiastes Or the Preacher: An Essay, Kessinger Publishing, 2003.
[2] Ibid 2.
[3] Ibid 15-22.
[4] Ibid 1. *ecclesiastes* = speaker, preacher.

Erasmus thus interpreted the nature of preaching along these lines, in contrast to the *demonstrativum* used in the 15th century by *oratoria*. The link to *deliberativum* strengthened the intent of persuasion within the theory of preaching, as we have seen in the letters to Corinth by the apostle Paul.

Erasmus never became a true reformer, though one cannot imagine the spreading of reformation without his activities. He himself, as an inveterate humanist, faded gradually both in the protestant and Roman denominations, but through the fact that he explained homiletics within the framework of rhetoric, had great influence on the theory of preaching in both churches. However, his ideas were developed further, though in different directions, in the two denominations.

The teaching system introduced later by Melanchthon became the most important in the development of protestant homiletics, the *deliberativum* became only secondary. In the Roman church however the latter kept its leading position even against *demonstrativum.* The initial point with both denominations was naturally Augustine's ciceronial triplet, according to which the task of preaching is *docere, delectare* and *flectere.* While this concept was both imaginable and realizable in the Roman church, in the protestant ethos *doceret* and *delectaret* were regarded as irreconcilable components.

The other great, if not the greatest, influence of Erasmus on protestant homiletics was the *usus*-s, taken from *genus*-s, better known as the separation of application within preaching. This phenomenon was observable at around the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. At that time Hyperius's homiletic work (*De formandis concionibus sacris, seu de interpretatione Scripturarum populari libri duo*) was also well known, which had great influence in the protestant practice.

Erasmus's theory on preaching distinguished five types of sermons. Four of these, *persuasio, exhortatio, admonitio* and *consolatio* originate from *deliberativum*, while the fifth, the genus *laudatorium* has its roots in *demonstrativum.* Beside these five genus-s, aiming to teach, each sermon contains a sort of metagenus, by which the preacher defers or delays the selection of the genus-s into the second half of his talk. This teaching metagenus of Erasmus, followed by the five homiletical genus-s was the first step in the history of homiletics towards the trend, by which the realization of the genus-s happens towards the end of a sermon. The five genus-s of Erasmus are therefore relevant at the final phase of the construction of a sermon, and their application depends on the composition of the audience.

We can see from the efforts of Erasmus that he was the first after Augustine who continued consciously to develop rhetorical concepts in homiletics. He also emphasized the importance of the rhetorical situation. Humanists characteristically borrowed conceptions from sophistics. In the case of Erasmus this did not mean the refinement of style, but that type of thought, according to which only rhetoric can secure the development and practice of sciences. Thus, he did not mean to apply a sort of force over homiletics, but he was convinced that only rhetoric represents the sole way by which science can develop in general, and through which different sciences can relate to one another. As preaching always contained certain intentions towards the audience, Erasmus used this thought in developing and realization of the concept of applications. He did what he could towards this aim.

Melanchthon

One of the greatest scholars and orators of the reformation was Melanchton, professor of Wittenberg. The young professor at twenty one, in his inaugural lecture, discussed *The*

Improvement of Studies of Adolescents (De corrigendis adolescentiae studiis, 1518)[5] outlining the correlating programme of humanism and reformation. This meant that with the aid of substantial knowledge of free arts one could understand philosophy, and through this also theology. By rekindling the free arts, and within this by attainment of the thorough linguistic culture of *trivium,* one can return to the source, where Christ can be recognized. At the beginning of the Middle Ages rhetoric possessed a sort of integrating dominance over dialectics and grammar, but this integrating power faded in the age of renaissance. It was Melanchton, who wanted to try to restore this order.

He regarded language as a gift of God, which helps to understand the text of the Holy Scriptures. Solely the Bible contains the necessary means to attain salvation, It is the word of God, and because understanding of it leads to salvation, all means must be invested to understand this as well as possible. It was Luther, who dismissed the old hermeneutical methods and stated that the church, which can explain the holy script, is itself the product of the same script, and is not the mother of the gospel. Reformation, disregarding the hermeneutical methods of the scholastic age, applied new concepts, which were based mainly on the knowledge of antiquity and renaissance, in other words on the rhetorical culture.

Melanchton, in his essay on *Laudation of eloquence (Encomium eloquentiae, 1523)*[6] drafts as follows: "*Videtis qua ratione nobis eloquentiae studia commendem, quod nec exponere quae nolumus ipsi, nec quae maioribus recte scripta extant, intelligere proximus nisi certam dicendi normam.*"[7] The close intertwinement of rhetorical and hermeneutical heritage is most obvious in the works of Melanchton, who applied humanistic values in theology. He was of course aware of the fact that rhetoric cannot solve all problems in the understanding and preaching of the scriptures, nevertheless he regarded it as indispensable. He knew that without the guidance and Spirit of the Lord one cannot understand the holy script, but knowledge of the system of the language is also necessary. The following quotation enlightens this: "*Verum praeter prophetiam verborum cognoscenda est, tanquam in sacrario quodam, divina mysteria recondite sunt. Quid enim si non intellect verba magico more pronunties none furdo? At de sermone iudicare nemo recte poterit, nisi qui recte dicendi rationem perdidicerit.*"[8]

As an example Melanchton wrote that incorrect interpretation of scriptures *("corrupta lingua monachorum")* can only result in incorrect doctrines *("doctrina corrupta").* This is why the knowledge of linguistic sciences (the *trivium*) is necessary, because only through these can one be lead to correct interpretations.

Melanchton thus regards hermeneutics as the science of understanding the scriptures, while rhetoric is required for the adequate communication of the correctly interpreted message. His rhetorical system can be understood in details from his work: *Two books of principles of*

---

[5] I use here a Hungarian translation that was made by the original work from Corpus Reformatorum. See Melanchthon, Philipp: Az ifjúság tanulmányainak megjobbításáról, in Retorikák a reformáció korából, szerk. Imre Mihály, Debrecen, 2000. ISBN: 963 472 441 8. pp.19-31.

[6] See Latin text: Url: http://dfg-viewer.de/show/?set[image]=8&set[zoom]=default&set[debug]=0&set[double]=0&set[mets]=http%3A%2F%2Fdaten.digitale-sammlungen.de%2F~db%2Fmets%2Fbsb00077516_mets.xml (Downloaded: 2013.12.20.)

[7] Ibid 8-9. According to my translation: Now you see for what purpose I suggest you learning rhetoric. There is no possibility for performing and understanding the heritage of our ancestors unless we acquire the rules of the art of speech.

[8] Ibid 13. One has to understand the power of words that as a sanctuary hides the godly secrets. What happens when you preach words the audience does not understand like a magician does? You tell the deaf tales. But nobody can judge the speech only the one who expansively studied the rule of the oratory.

rhetorics (Elementarum Rhetorices libri duo 1549)[9]. As this work is based mainly on the principles of classical rhetoric, I do not discuss further details here, but would like to point out some deviations from these. One most important and definitive of such deviations is Melanchton's understanding of the nature of preaching. It has been proven that the works of Erasmus induced him to deal with *genus*-s. This influence does not originate from the *Ecclesiastes*, but from a much earlier work, published in 1522, entitled *Opus de conscribendis epistolis (The art of letter writing)*[10], which he wrote for one of his students.

Melanchton also followed first the Italian practice of interpreting and allocating preaching even in the age of reformation as part of the *genus demonstrativum* , but later realized that such interpretation does not fit into this system. As neither the *genus iudiciale* , nor the *genus deliberativum* or even the *genus demonstrativum* were not adequate concepts to describe the theory of preaching in the reformed church, he extended the originally antique system by a fourth element, the rules of teaching sermons, the *genus didascalium. "Vulgo tria numerant genera causaru… Demonstrativum… Deliberativum… Iudiciale… Ego addendum censeo didaskalikon genus, quod etsi ad Dialecticam pertinent, tamen ubi negociorum genera recentur, non est praetermittendum: praesertim cum hoc tempore vel maximum usum Ecclesijs habeat, ubi non tantum susasoriaeconciones habendesunt, sed multo saepius homines dialecticorum more, de dogmatibus relegionis docendi sunt, ut ea perfecta cognoscerepossint. Est autem didaskalikon genus methodus illa docendi…"*[11]

This has the greatest power and the greatest benefit – he wrote a little later. Evaluating Melanchton's methodical innovations, I believe that the *didascalium* is the product of an age in which the new type of interpretation of scriptures became important, not so much from the view of *persuadere* but rather from that of *convincere*, thus from the view of intellect. Melanchton's definitive role had even here an influence on the thinking in the age of reformation. Partly, he recognised that preaching cannot be restricted simply to trying to convince [the audience], but that the Bible always talks about the function of teaching. Furthermore, he recognised brilliantly that the areas and congregations, converted from the Roman into the reformed churches had to be taught first of all to understand the new system of faith. Thus, as a result of his activities, besides of the *deliberativum* the use of an appropriate kind of *didascalion* has influenced the development of homiletics for centuries.

Calvin

The presently accepted rhetorical framework of the theory of homiletics for the age of reformation, after the activities of Erasmus and Melanchton, was developed first of all by Calvin. His exceptional rhetorical skills were known in his age, his early studies and his commentaries on Seneca prove that he was familiar with the whole area of classical culture. Old wrote about Calvin, that his level of knowledge of classics was higher than that of Luther, Bucer, Brenz or even Zwingli. He quickly acquired the new scientific knowledge of

---

[9] See Latin text: Url: http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb10184259_00039.html?zoom=0.5&numScans=2
[10] O'Malley, John W.: Content and Rhetorical Form in Sixteenth Century, ed. James J. Murphy, Renaissance Eloquence, Studies int he theory and practice of renaissance rhetoric, University of California Press, 1983. 243-244.
[11] Elementarum Rhetorices libri duo, 20. Although it belongs to the dialectics, we cannot set didaskalikon aside when we use the *genus* of discussions, especially in today' popular ecclesiastical field, where not only persuasive speeches are held, but more often people are taught about religious dogmas in the dialectic way in order to make them understand better. The *genus* of didaskalikon is nothing else than a method of teaching, which is the subject of dialectics and orators preserved its parts in *status finitivus*. The *genus demonstrativum* is adjacent to the *genus* of didaskalikon.

the renaissance like historical criticism or literary arts. He absorbed everything that Erasmus published in the field of antique grammar and rhetoric. He even advised Erasmus about some techniques.[12]

In the following I try to examine how Calvin used his exemplary knowledge of rhetoric in his reforming work. Calvin, making use of the rhetorical science of the 16th century, developed his theory of God's Word. He uses his rhetorical knowledge with such ease that one hardly notices it. Thus, in all his writings there is recognition of scientific rhetoric, perhaps most completely in the later editions of his *Institutio*.

Among thoughts of Calvin the realization that God's word has been transmitted by human word achieved greatest effect. In other words, God used human speech, language and its whole system as the medium through which he reveals himself and makes himself known to humans. God is capable of talking through human language. This is a fundamental, axiomatic belief of Calvinistic Christianity. However fragile and imperfect the human word, it can be the medium of God, through which he can reveal himself. Calvin's statement, that human word is capable of transmitting the reality of God, is based on his thoroughly constructed theory on the role and nature of human language. I will now examine, the importance Calvin assigned to the role of language at theoretical and practical levels.

Both in the field of preaching and interpreting of scriptures it can be shown that Calvin did not regard a self-contained practice in the explanation of the holy script, and did not satisfy himself merely by creating the correct doctrines. For him the true challenge and purpose meant ensuring that the truth of the Bible should become a real experience. He not only wanted to interpret the text of the holy script correctly, but tried to apply his preaching and explanation in order to change the lives of his audiences. His first purpose was not to induce conversion, as that is only the first step in the lives of believers. His real aim was to lead his congregation through sanctification to obedience of God's word. One can organize those means, by which he achieved these goals. With Calvin the true aim is efficacy, attainment of the relevant effect. The reformer achieved this goal by using classical models, like Cicero of Quintilian says Gánóczy.[13] Calvin often regards brevity and conciseness as important. Speech [esetleg sermon] cannot be self-contained, long and incomprehensible; it must aim to be relevant and intelligible by everyone.

After all in the opinion of Calvin the most suitable tool is speech, which is adjusted to the requirements of the audience - well illustrated, touching and mobilizing speech.

In Calvin's theology and communications model this appears as the theory of adjustment or accommodation. In theology this is known as the doctrine of *accomodatio*. "In the holy scriptures, so says Calvin, God appears verbally, in the form of words. But how can words reach up to the greatness of God? (...) What Calvin says about this problem is regarded as the most valuable construction in Christian thought. His theory is usually referred to as the 'principle of adjustment'. In the revelation God adjusts himself to the abilities of human brain and heart. God illustrates himself in such a way, that we should be able to understand him."[14] The doctrine of *accomodatio* was not Calvin's invention; it was developed earlier by

---

[12] Old, Hughes Oliphant: The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church, Vol 4. The Age of the Reformation. William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002. 93.

[13] Gánóczy Sándor: Kálvin hermeneutikája, Kálvin Kiadó, Budapest, 1997. 68. See: Ganoczy, Alexandre: Die Hermeneutik Calvins: Geistesgeschichtliche Voraussetzungen und Grundzuge. Steiner, 1983.

[14]Alister E. McGrath: A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture. Oxford-Massachusetts, Wiley-Blackwell Publisher, 1993. 129.

Origenes. According to Origines's analogy, if a father wishes to communicate with his child, or a teacher with his pupil, he must adjust himself to the perception of the former. This is also the basis of Calvin's own communications model. Accommodation here means that one has to adjust, shape to the necessities of the situation or to the ability of humans, so that the message should be understood says McGrath. According to Calvin, God in his revelation adjusted himself to the abilities of human brain and heart. The analogy which lies behind Calvin's thinking at this point is that of a human orator. Good speakers know the limitations of their audience and adjust the way they speak accordingly."[15] Gánóczy drafts this in a similar manner as he writes that according to Calvin God accommodates our abilities of perception, and acts as a good educator, a good pedagogue who opens the gate for humans to understand his word. He reveals himself both in eloquent, artistic, elevated, sublime talk but also in simple, plain words.[16]

In Calvin's thoughts about God's accommodation to human levels there is the ideal of the reformer about the preacher. The preacher should be able to adjust himself to his audience, and be able to convey difficult theological concepts so that his listeners can understand them. The good orator knows the limitations of his public, and speaks to them accordingly. Orators of the classical age were educated, cultivated persons, while their audiences were in general ill educated, and could not express themselves eloquently. Thus, these orators had to stoop to the intellectual level of their audiences, so that they should be able to understand their thoughts. Calvin knew this and used this in his theology. And this thinking, that was begun by Erasmus and more fully worked out by Calvin, still determines our theory of protestant preaching today.

---

[15] McGrath, Alister: Christian Theology: An Introduction. Wiley-Blackwell Publisher, Oxford-Massachusetts, 2010. 192.

[16] Gánóczy 57.