

Rhetorically speaking

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

In Review



To Teach, To Delight, and To Move: Theological Education in a Post-Christian World

David S. Cunningham
Cascade

We face no shortage of proposals for fixing theological education. Sometimes the most outlandish are the most illuminating. Stanley Hauerwas has suggested scrapping the current fourfold academic division (biblical studies, church history, theology and ethics, and practical theology) in favor of directing all academic efforts toward answering one question: Why must it be that only ordained people should preside over the Eucharist? Attending to the questions of authority and sacramental practice inherent in that single query would quickly open up every other topic of import to Christian faith and life.

By comparison, the recommendation made by *To Teach, To Delight, and To Move* is rather mild, though still significant: ancient rhetoric should be returned to the forefront of theological education.

Education shaped around rhetoric would involve studying and imitating great rhetors of antiquity, pagans like Cicero and Aristotle and Christians like Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen. Students would be examined on their ability to perform the function of rhetoric described by Cicero: Can they “teach, delight and move” a congregation? A child in catechism? A hostile board? A skeptical world?

This shaping of seminarians into ecclesial rhetors would not involve a return to the sexism and ethnocentrism of studying only “great men,” for rhetors must attend to their audiences in their specific cultural contexts in order to speak persuasively, and their seminary training must prepare them to do so.

To Teach, to Delight, and To Move is born of a Lilly Endowment-funded series of conversations among theological educators about the utility of rhetoric as a curricular resource. The result is a series of essays that is repetitive in two ways. First, many of the authors have written extensively about their topics elsewhere: volume editor David Cunningham has written about rhetoric and trinitarian theology, A. K. Adam about postmodern approaches to biblical studies, Frederick Norris about Nazianzen, and so on.

Second, the essays tend to cover the same ground: many of the authors write about Aristotle’s tripartite division of rhetoric into *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, and several attend to “testimony” as a specifically Christian category for which the importance of rhetoric is obvious.

Toward the end I grew tired of complaints about the modern academy and longed for more constructive solutions, which these authors seem strangely reluctant to give. Repetition in itself is no sin on rhetorical grounds, but here it does threaten to weaken the authors' case.

This weakness continues until the final essay, in which Patrick Keifert and the late Donald Juel, to whom the volume is appropriately dedicated, discuss their efforts to reconfigure the curriculum of Luther Seminary along rhetorical lines. They report that in faculty study groups their colleagues hesitated to venture opinions about any subjects outside of their expertise, so the conversation could barely get off the ground.

Even with its modern banishment, rhetoric still matters, and it works even on experts, as law students can attest. The discussions at Luther Seminary were ultimately productive, yielding the suggestion that seminary coursework be divided into three parts roughly corresponding to Cicero's "teach, delight and move": "story," "interpreting and confessing" and "mission."

Coursework on the first of these three parts, or "moments," would provide the background in scripture and church history that seminaries once assumed their students entered with. The second would require students to articulate the church's story in their own words. The third would involve the organization of the church's specific efforts toward mission—the spreading of this story to others. The three moments match the movement of the gospel itself and so should better serve students preparing for ministry.

But perhaps even this is not radical enough. Keifert and Juel conclude by suggesting that seminaries are entering a time of "continuous innovation," which sounds not so much like ancient rhetoric as like a modern panting after the "new and improved." A glance at Luther Seminary's Web site suggests not a radically reworked curriculum but a differently titled one, a repackaging rather than a restructuring. This collection of essays even models replication of the modern divisions, not a break from them: a biblical scholar writes about rhetoric in the Bible, a historian about the rhetoric of the church fathers, and so on.

It doesn't have to be this way. I know of a trained philosopher whose application to teach at St. John's College in New Mexico—a "great books" school—was met with the question of whether he would be willing to direct laboratory science! Surely those

called to their vocation by faith ought to be willing to teach in risky ways.

This collection is an accessible introduction to some of the best thinking about how to cure what ails theological schools, but I am left wondering about more radical alternatives of the sort Hauerwas proposes. If we are going to choose an ancient pedagogical locus around which to reorient theological education, why not the Eucharist? Or the monastic liturgy of the hours? Or the doctrine of God? Or a category with greater biblical and philosophical depth: wisdom?

It may be that these authors call for a focus on rhetoric because it is academically fashionable, and therefore more likely to be palatable to universities, various seminary constituencies and church licensing boards. The limits on modern pedagogical categories may be so overwhelming that our best efforts to think our way out of them leave us right back where we started.