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Summary and Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

HOMILETICS AND RHETORIC
Relation in the past and potentials for the present

– research in the history of homiletics –

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Thesis 1

Everything that is manifested in speech already has a certain form, i.e. content and form are inseparable. They are an organic whole. Form (style) is a rhetorical category, so every era in homiletics that fought against a style (mainly against the sophistic usage) created their own style, thus their own rhetoric.

Thesis 2

The relationship between homiletics and rhetoric can be evaluated only in view of the given situation.

Thesis 3

The life (and speech) situation in which the message is delivered is still very important today.

Thesis 4

The task of rhetoric – that is re-evaluated in a new manner by hermeneutical philosophy – is to establish opportunity for a dialog, and equal conditions for the participating preacher and hearer.

Summary

The word 'rhetoric' has a pejorative meaning in our church today. Its tradition, i.e. that it is mainly identified with style, has always forced homiletics to keep a distance from rhetoric. Unfortunately, our age does not support its positive meaning either. Rhetoric is mainly identical with the discrepancy between words and deeds. It is frequently identified with the concept of manipulation. It is enough to think of PR and politics where the function of words is not constative (true or false), but performative (effective or ineffective). For example, you can often hear in

Hungary about the rhetoric of the parties. It means that there is a large discrepancy between the words and the deeds of a party. In a such milieu, rhetoric has a huge disadvantage when being related to homiletics where preaching can not relate to words such as manipulation or immorality.

However, if we look at the five tasks of an orator, we can observe that three of them are totally accepted in the Hungarian homiletic discourse. These are disposition, memory and pronunciation. The importance of invention is quite questioned. Many say that preaching does not need it because everything for a sermon can be found in the Scriptures.

The most challenged issue in homiletics is, however, the question of style, or as classical rhetoric called 'eloquence'. The third step of an orator is always argued: what sort of style and to what extent style can be used in a situation. Every era had its struggle of styles. However, we can generally say with Kennedy that philosophical rhetoric has always stood against the rhetoric of the sophists. The rhetoric of the sophists has a very high quality of eloquence and persuasiveness. Philosophical rhetoric on the other hand aims to discover, unfold and understand. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of Plato and Aristotle is the fruit of a debate with the sophists.

Homiletics are very similar to rhetoric in this sense as it tried to overpower the sophisticated, shining, ornate oration which was alien and gassy compared to the Word of God. This struggle by the rhetoric of God's Word and the struggle of Plato's and Aristotle's rhetoric are almost the same. They all want to link rhetoric to morality, justice and freedom, and leave style invisible. At the end of the 19th century, a so-called sophistic movement appeared in European homiletics. After positivist liberalism, science trusted in a never-ending development. On the ethical field, this age thought that man is able to become better end better. The

discourse of homiletics had a weaker relationship with the Word of God that comes from outside of humanity. Form was the most important part of preaching and sermon formalities were based on the classical tradition. So style became a symbol of the human part of preaching, and was handled as an art. The content of a sermon varied, and was far from the biblical meanings. So the last debate between form and content, supported by dialectic theology, occurred just after the first World War. Barth and Thurneysen said no to everything human in preaching. So rhetoric as the symbol of the human part became a target for the apology of dialectic theology.

The barthian theology did not turn the system (of form and content) around, but reserved the 19th-century structure and shifted emphasis from form to content. The latter became supremely important, and form was said to be an obstacle to the Word only. Ethos was also important, but not as an art (as in the 19th century) but as a servant of God that obeys in every case to the Word. So Logos and Ethos played a significant role in preaching, but Pathos as the emotional contact between speaker and audience lost its place and became insignificant, which means that very little attention was paid to the audience in dialectic homiletics. Style that can arouse emotions was thought to be very dangerous.

However, form that was suggested e.g. by the dialectic theologians has its own idiosyncrasy. A sermon should be clear, unambiguous, understandable and structured according to the text of the Scriptures, etc. This means that a sermon has its requirements of style. This style is always connected to content, but it remains style indeed. There is no text or speech without a style (appearance or form). It means that dialectic theology made its own frame of style, that is rhetoric as well, but surely different from the sophistic speech eloquence. If we read the

argumentation of Barth or Thurneysen we can observe a very strong rhetorical power in relation to the defence of God's revelations or the attack on classical rhetoric. (It is a periodic symptom. Plato and Descartes similarly attacked rhetoric, while using a very powerful rhetorical strategy.) So dialectic theology had created its own "rhetoric" against rhetoric. This sort of rhetoric can be understood only in its context.

In the 1960s, this model of homiletics became increasingly untenable, and many theologians attempted to find the right balance between form and content. There was no sense to return to the 19th century, although some tried it. A new model was necessary where content and form could coexist as an organic whole. This change arrived with the hermeneutical philosophy of language where these two speech elements were not rivals any more, but an essential one. This movement of thinking could unite content and form, and homiletic discourse embraced the results of this hermeneutical rise. Rhetoric was viewed differently. It was no longer the tool of effective and persuasive communication but a chance to start a dialog where truth can be materialized. This rhetoric is responsible for the equal balance of communication. According to Gadamer, language is not a weapon to fight against another man, but a chance to reach an agreement. The aim of a dialog is not to persuade, but to achieve an agreement on something.

This process of dialog is best shown in history (theological as well) as God seeks man. Protestant theology says that we can not find God by ourselves, only He can reach us. But He is approaching such that man has the opportunity to understand His word, grasp His reality and feel His love. So God wants to be in a dialog with men, and go along with them. Calvin calls this process of God *accomodatio*, that is God

accommodates Himself to men. He reveals himself in a manner that men can understand. Although this process precedes the age of classical rhetoric, it is still a very rhetorical act of God that He accommodates Himself to His “audience”.

In classical rhetoric, accommodation to the hearer was a requirement. In the history of the Old and the New Testaments, God shows the right way as to how He accommodated Himself to the apprehension, and not the needs of people. Calvin was a great master of this accommodation.

This accommodation of God means that He takes into account the complex situation of men. God knows the spiritual and the material context of a human being, so His Word is always actual in the concrete situation.

Hermeneutical thinking is always interested in the situation of the receiver (interpreter). So rhetoric in hermeneutical thinking is very attentive to the audience.

If we consider the meaning of God’s Word in Hebrew thinking, we can see that it has always been a concrete Word in a concrete life situation. Von Rad writes that prophets never looked at the Word of God as an object, but as an event that happened in a particular situation. The Word can not be understood without its context. So God’s Word has the another feature: it happens in time. It is word and deed at the same time. It was evident for Hebrew theologians thousands of years ago. Linguistic sciences in the second half of the 20th century discovered that this ancient thinking was still true. Pragmatic researches pointed out that during speech, something else also happens. According to the so-called speech act theory, words happen. In Germany, G. Ebeling applied this theory in theology. He laid down a good fundament in this theory of

keeping content and form together without any order. German homiletics following him and used the word 'rhetoric', but the meaning of rhetoric was different. This kind of rhetoric rooted in hermeneutical soil.

After the 1960s, this way of thinking appeared in the protestant homiletics of Europe and the US, called hearer-driven homiletics. Pathos, i.e. the relationship between preacher and hearer, became dominant in this model. It is very interesting however that although the movement of New Homiletics categorised itself as non-rhetorical, it was rhetorical as well. It denied the structure of "three points and a poem" sermons, but the intention was identical. It wished to have an emotional effect on the hearer. This model could arise as there was a change in American society that I call according to G. Schulze a "society of experience" (*"Erlebnisgesellschaft"*). „Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart, Campus Verlag, 2005.) So New Homiletics worked out and exercised strong pathetic rhetoric. It was based on psychological fundamentals, but the authors paid attention to the linguistic and other scientific results as well.

Structure of the dissertation

This work made a historical research in different eras of homiletics with respect to the relationship between rhetoric and homiletics.

In the introduction, after providing information about the relationship between rhetoric and hermeneutics, the rhetorical meaning of the so-called "rhetorical situation" and style is briefly analyzed.

Then Paul's method is examined as to how he used rhetoric against sophists in the letter to the Corinthians. Following this, Augustine, the father of Christian rhetoric is observed. He discovered that rhetoric was neutral and needed in homiletics.

In a longer frame, the different interpretation of rhetoric is analyzed in the age of reformation. The works of Erasmus, Melanchthon, Hyperius and Calvin show us everything from the conservative to the liberal meaning.

From the enlightenment to the beginning of the 20th century, the impact of Kant and Schleiermacher as made on rhetoric is investigated. There comes the reactive effect of dialectic theology. The impact of new hermeneutics is analyzed on new homiletics in the 20th century. Later the Hungarian situation is studied in the 20th century and nowadays. According to the homiletic results at the end of the last century, I try to summarize some advices that might be helpful for homiletics in Hungary in 2009. I believe that rhetoric has its place in the homiletic discourse, but we must interpret the word 'rhetoric', 'hermeneutic' and 'homiletic' in a useful way.

The results of my dissertation are summarized below. We must pay attention to the situation of the hearer in the church today. They come from a fragmented post-modern world and face the Word of God who wants to restore unity in their lives. The style of preaching must be effective. I do not support a very old-style language usage, neither a very modern one. I believe that Hungarian language can express the Word of God while still remaining Hungarian language. For the proper style, preachers should pay attention to the following.

- 1) The principle of homiletics is dialog. Firstly, God is in dialog with men, secondly a preacher is in a dialog with the hearer. Rhetoric starts with listening to others.
- 2) Preaching can be experienced in several forms, not just in one (e.g. narrative preaching, story preaching, three-point preaching, expository preaching, etc.). I think that the text (content and form) of the Bible suggests the best form for the sermon.
- 3) Preaching is an event of language. In this event, words are becoming deeds at the same time, so they become the Words of God through the work of the Spirit.
- 4) “For we know in part...”, said Paul. I think we do not possess God either in our experience, nor in the science of theology. We must be humble when we speak about Him. He possesses us.
- 5) The process of preaching is joyful and passionate. As Gadamer said, life is a game. “Thus it can be said that for the player the play is not serious: that is why he plays. (...) Play has a special relation to what is serious. It is not only that the latter gives it its purpose... More important, play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness. (...) The player himself knows that play is only play, and that it exists in a world determined by the seriousness of purposes. (...) Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. The mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object.” (Gadamer: Truth and method, 102-103.p., Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004.)