

A Listening and Rhetorical Analysis Guide For Listeners, Readers and Preachers of Scripture Texts And Sermons from Them

JESUS is the master of preaching and teaching. He preaches and teaches to persuade people of God's truth and the ethics of His kingdom. He came to preach this good news of the kingdom of God and of His death, burial and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins. On the basis of His gracious sacrifice God forgives us of our sins and welcomes Christians into His family. Early in His ministry He said, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for" (Mark 1:38).

We can learn a lot from listening to Jesus' powerful preaching. Rhetorical analysis is one tool to help us. Rhetoric is the art and science of persuasion. Its ultimate goal is positive change in the listener. Rhetorical analysis is just one of many tools that can be helpful in understanding the backgrounds, intent, meaning, depth and beauty of Scripture.

The purpose of this abbreviated guide is to provide a checklist of questions and probes into Scripture texts and the substance and structure of sermons that come from them. It is meant to have practical value in the day to day, week to week, reading, listening, study, exegesis, interpretation, and preaching of Scripture texts and sermons from them. You may check each item () and make notes as you use the checklist.

1. RHETORICAL UNIT

- Does the text have definite boundaries as a rhetorical unit?
- Is there inclusio (key words or concepts that form "bookends" for the passage or sermon)?
- Does it have unity?
- Is it, by definition, a true example of the truth or rhetorical message which the preacher seeks to communicate?
- Are the rhetorical devices true examples of their type by definition?

2. RHETORICAL SITUATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

- What does the Scripture text and its contemporary rhetorical situation reveal about these important factors:

1. Exigence / Purpose

_ What pressing circumstances require urgent action to remedy? What is the purpose of the speaker or the writer of the text?

2. Topic

_ Where is the speaker coming from (his *topos*, or place)?

_ What is he talking about?

3. Speaker

_ What *ethos* (ethical character, guiding beliefs) does the speaker possess to establish his authority with the audience?

_ What has he done, said or believed to make his audience receptive or antagonistic?

_ Is he likely to make a social statement that agrees or disagrees with the status quo?

4. Audience

_ Are there elements of inattention, mis-presentation, misrepresentation, lack of motivation or inertia that will affect the audience's receptivity or response to the speaker?

_ In addition to the immediate audience, will the speaker aim at and reach his universal audience?

_ Are the listeners equipped to decode the message?

_ Are they equipped to encode it in their own terms for future use?

_ What are the relations between the speaker and the audience that will affect the outcome of the speech?

_ What are the conditions of *pathos* (pity, compassion, sympathy) and identification between the speaker and the audience?

5. Objects

_ What objects will appear in the setting?

_ Are they common or novel?

6. Persuasive Field

_ What "competing voices" vie for audience attention?

_ How will these voices impinge on the audience's metabolizing of the speech after the rhetorical event? (C.F. the Parable of

the Sower, the Seeds, and the Soils.)

- Is the speech a counter statement to other messages or codes of living to which the audience is accustomed?

7. Events

- What important events lead up to and follow the message?
- What events occur in the message itself, through description or dramatization?
- What events does the speech generate within the imagination of the listeners or bring to their memory?

8. Place / Physical Setting

- Is there historical significance to the place setting that will affect the message or its effect?
- Will the message add significance to the place and its association in the minds of the hearers?
- Can or must the speaker speak in this place in a way he could not elsewhere?
- Does this have a positive or negative impact on the outcome?

9. Time

- What time in history is the speaker delivering the message and how does this time impact the relevance of his purpose?
- Is the speaker making history through his remarks?
- What can the speaker say, or not say, by virtue of the timing of his speech?

10. Medium

- What media are at the disposal of the speaker?
- What medium does the speaker chose and how is it likely to affect the reception of his message?
- What imagery is appropriate to the medium?
- To what extent are rhetorical devices consciously a part of the speaker's communication strategy?
- How does the speaker exploit the force of personality, delivery, and gestures, to maximize the impact of the message?

11. Conventions

- What social or cultural conventions will restrain or liberate the speaker and/or the message?

12. Cultural Boundaries

- What cultural boundaries are explicit and implicit in the setting?
- How well does the speaker know these, and how well does he exploit them?
- To what extent are cultural and social constraints part of the rhetorical problem the speaker addresses?
- To what extent does the speaker attempt to cut across existing cultural boundaries to establish new ones?

3. RHETORICAL PROBLEM

- What are the exigencies of the rhetorical situation (the issues or wrongs that requires an urgent response)?
- What motives are at work in the audience?
- What possibilities, options, solutions, could be on the mind of the speaker, or in the mind of God, as he looks at the situation?
- Do any of Aristotle's seven causes of action have a bearing on the status quo of the audience: "chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reason, anger, and desire"?
- How open is the audience to change?
- Is this a "rhetorical" situation in the sense that there is a high probability that speech can lead to positive rhetorical effects?

4. RHETORICAL ARGUMENT (1. "INVENTION" in classical rhetoric)

- What are the central ideas the speaker wishes to deliver to address the rhetorical problem?
- What are the species and subspecies the speaker chooses:
 - judicial: accusation or defense
 - deliberative: persuasion or dissuasion
 - epideictic: praise or blame?
- Does he use a combination of these?
- What are the major claims, evidence and warrants of the argument?
- Does the speaker use artistic or inartistic proofs?
(Is his evidence primarily figurative or factual?)
- Is the argument inductive or deductive?
- How does the speaker "work out" (develop) his ideas?
(What is the internal logic of the argument?)
- What references and decisions does the speaker want the audience to make in response to his ideas?

– Are there any promises implicit in the speech?

5. RHETORICAL STRUCTURE (2. “ARRANGEMENT” and 3. STYLE” in classical rhetoric)

– What is the basic arrangement of the speech and are there clear expressions of: 1) introduction, 2) proposition, 3) proof, and 4) closing?

– What structures and devices does the speaker use to establish identification with his audience and a bridge to them?

– Does the speaker vary from this traditional form and, if so, how does the structure of the speech support the ideas it conveys?

– What is the mood of the speech and how does it support the main ideas?

– Are the ideas running, in shotgun fashion, or periodic, focused like a rifle?

– How does the speech employ the classical virtues of:

– correctness (grammar)

– clarity (expression, arrangement of ideas)

– ornamentation (use of figures to amplify)

– propriety (matching style to content)

– Is the style grand, middle or plain (to move, to please, or to teach)?

– How does the speaker use language:

– words and their syllabication

– monosyllabic words

– bisyllabic words

– trisyllabic words

– polysyllabic words

– phrases

– clauses

– sayings

– rhythm and phrasing

– number of words per sentence

– shortest sentence

– longest sentence

– number of sentences per paragraph

– links and seams between paragraphs

– shifts in thought between paragraphs and sections

– How does the speaker use tropes, schemes, figures of speech, and figures of thought to amplify his ideas?

- _ Is the vocabulary easy for the audience to understand?
- _ Does the speaker use figurative language to bring new meaning to familiar words or settings, and to introduce new possibilities to his listeners?

6. RHETORICAL EVENT AND DRAMA (4. “MEMORY” and 5. “DELIVERY” in classical rhetoric)

- _ What does the speech contain to make it:
 - _ easy for the speaker to memorize
 - _ easy for the audience to visualize
 - _ easy for the audience to remember later?
- _ Are there dramatic elements that reinforce the delivery and reception of the message?
- _ Are there elements of hierarchy that will prod (motivate) the listener to a diligent response?
- _ Are there physical elements of the environment that the speaker can use or adjust to his advantage?
- _ What vocal devices and gestures does or could the speaker employ to increase the impact of the message?

7. RHETORICAL EFFECTS

- _ What is the main outcome the speaker seeks?
- _ What changes could or will the listeners make in their thinking and motives to properly respond to the speaker’s ideas?
- _ What specific actions can the listeners take in response to the speakers ideas?
- _ How did the speech affect the status quo and the inertia of the audience?
- _ How did or could the speech affect the mood of the audience?
- _ Will there be polarizing effects and chances for acceptance or rejection that the speaker can measure?
- _ What specific internal or external changes can the speaker actually measure empirically or anecdotally?
- _ How can the rhetorical experience help the speaker better communicate his ideas in future rhetorical situations?

Paul Birston
March 2004[©]