

O God, from whom all good proceeds: Grant that by your inspiration we may think those things that are right, and by your merciful guiding may do them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Apollo, Dionysius, and Christ: Why Language Theory Matters

As a culture we have lost the ability to communicate well. Few of us in this room would disagree with that statement. I would like to suggest that this failure to communicate derives from a pedagogical failure to impart adequate language skills to our children. Our pedagogical failures derive from both the method and means of instruction forged out of two theories of language at war with one another and with Classical Language Theory. As the metaphors in my title allude, I will argue that two secular theories of language and have dominated the West for the last 200 years: Apollo metaphorically represents Modern Composition Theory, the objective pole (dominate

from 1800 to the 1980s); and Dionysius represents Process Theory the subjective pole (dominate from the 1980s until now); and both at the expense of a biblical language theory—classical language theory, which served the West and the Church for over 2 millennia.

I believe this issue around language theory is one of our strongest arguments for classical Christian education. The absence of a biblical language theory at the heart of education has been devastating. Our pedagogical failure affects not only students who struggle with writing, but even our naturally gifted writers. I would go so far as to suggest that our most gifted communicators today would have a hard time stacking up against the likes of Demosthenes, Cicero, Augustine, Erasmus, or Milton. This failure can be illustrated from the college entrance boards. Both the ACT and SAT, came out in 2005 with an optional writing portion in an attempt to help address the problem of inarticulate student writing by giving colleges some objective guidelines in placing students in the appropriate college level writing courses. A

little over half of students write the optional essay. Only 23% of them are able to write a cohesive and coherent essay—earn an 8 out of a possible 12 points. 23% of 50% is a horrifying 12%. Only 12% of our college bound graduates are competent writers, a skill that until very recently was considered a necessary component to be considered literate. I propose that we have reached this nadir of incompetency because the West has become incompetent in teaching the skill of writing that in turn undermines our ability to communicate in any and all forms. Our educational incompetence results from faulty language theory, that is, a faulty understanding of what language is, which is itself a result of an unbiblical understanding of what a human being is. As people of the Word, the way out of our predicament is to insure that our biblical understanding of Man determines a biblical understanding of Man's unique gift, language, and with that knowledge to regain an effective, efficient understanding of language education that loves, imitates, and is like Christ.

I am aware that the use of the term unbiblical used in relation to language theory may be a highly charged, almost provocative idea so let me explain a little further what I mean by these words. God gave to man the gift of language. The very first Hebrew word in the book of Genesis makes this deduction clear. God communicates His revelation to us through language both written and oral. He also reveals to us in Gen 1.27 that He created us as His image bearers:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27, ESV)

In some mysterious way we as relational creatures, male and female, with communication and language at our core, have been created in the image of God. A biblical theory of language should account for the totality of relational possibilities in our humanity. Our reason works by and through language. Our reason connects us to God the Creator, to

one another, and to his creation. We participate in God's creation through language but we do not, as He did, create reality through language. We are not the Creator. A biblical theory of language should account for man's participation in God's good creation not man's creation of his own reality. Man is also fallen and a biblical theory of language should account for the imperfect state of a human mind. Further, pedagogies derived from such a biblical theory must likewise account for our imperfect minds. Imitation alone, as Augustine tells us is not sufficient for effective, efficient learning.

Further, and equally important consider what Gen. 2.7 tells us about the nature of the human soul:

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

As living souls we are dust enlivened by the breath of God. We are not just matter. We are more than mere elements. We are also not a spirit trapped in a body. We hope not for a harp in the afterlife but for a

resurrected body. In our very nature we are both matter and spirit. As creatures we embody conflicting concepts of essence. A biblical language theory must do likewise.

Let me also be clear that when I claim that a language theory is not biblical I am not saying anything about teachers. Our classrooms are Christian because of Christ not the Trivium. My presentation this morning is a challenge first and foremost to myself. None of us have been nurtured and trained in classical language theory and our entire movement is about self-reformation and the pursuit of excellence.

However, having said that, I worry that even in the face of immensely successful writing curricula that have become available to us, as classical Christian educators, in the last decade, such as we have with Aphthonius' progymnasmata, Hermogenes' *On Issues and On Style*, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, Erasmus' *De Copia*, and on and on, we are unable or unwilling to change how we think about language and its instruction. Our impulse is to adapt classical curricula to our

contemporary conceptions of language rather than adopt the curricula with the consequent alteration in our own conceptions around language. Adapting is an easier response than correcting our thinking. This task is made more challenging by the extremely different views of language available to us today. For fallen human beings moving to extremes is easier in the sense that it is intellectually simpler with less ambiguity and tension.

However, extremes are seldom wise and in education they often prove fatal in terms of their results. The title of this talk includes images or metaphors for extremes in human experience: Apollo, which represents our impulse to object, to Intellect; and Dionysius, which represents our impulse to subject, to Passion. Our hope for redemption lies in the third image, the incarnate God, Jesus Christ the Son, who brings together and holds together in his person the most mysterious of extremes, God and Man. Philip Donnelly in a wonderful book entitled *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning* explains Milton's concept of reason and its

underlying language theory as “the poetic gift of peaceful difference.” Again we see two apparently contradictory concepts “difference” and “peaceful.” Milton refuses to embrace one extreme or the other but holds them in wonderful tension. I would maintain that a key component in his ability to hold ideas in tension is a presuppositional stance brought about through his language arts education in Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. Contrast this with contemporary secular culture’s acrimonious discourse with its inability to hold in civil tension difference and peace. I believe this inability is exacerbated by the mental formation and training imparted by our culture’s contemporary language instruction whether that be Modern Composition Theory or Process Theory.

A key, fundamental, inductive argument I will suggest for a return to classical language theory is one of historical precedence. The discrepancy in the longevity of each of the three language theories is significant. Historically we see inevitable swings within the classical

world between Apollonian and Dionysian conceptions of experience and education. In other words within Classical Discourse Theory various schools of thought at various times would emphasize either the objective or subjective components of human experience but never to the exclusion of one or the other. The fundamental trinity of classical language theory: ethos, logos, and pathos, remained the foundation of all language study and instruction thus ensuring a dynamic tension between object and subject; intellect and imagination. Classical Discourse theory remained firmly in place in the west for over two thousand years allowing for an intense focus and pursuit of excellence that resulted extraordinary curricula for the classroom. The Preliminary exercises or Progymnasmata developed over at least 500 years until perfected by Aphthonius in the fourth century AD. Stasis Theory, which examines the rational structure of rhetorical argumentation and can be traced back before Aristotle in the 4th century BC, and reaches its zenith in the second century AD with Hermogenes' definitive work *On Issues*—600 years of development. Hermogenes, a brilliant oratorical star, also

writes the definitive curriculum on the canon of Style, again with 600 years to distill the purest instruction. Aristotle had articulated the common and special topics of invention in the fourth century BC but their use in the classroom, arguably, reached their height with Quintilian in the first century AD. These consistently successful writing pedagogies go on to train the West's young for over a thousand years.

However, with the coming of the Enlightenment and a fundamental change in the West's view of man an intense battle began in the middle of the 17th century that ended with the overthrow of Classical Discourse theory by 1800 and the dominance of Modern Composition Theory. An example of this battle is seen at Harvard College, which began in 1630 with the Progymnasmata as its foundational writing curriculum but abandons the Exercises in 1660 as they rewrite their rhetorical manuals to become more logical and objective and less imaginatively engaging. Apollo, as our metaphor for the objective, usurped Christ in the West's understanding of what

constitutes conversation among literate men. The triune purpose of classical discourse theory's participatory persuasion regarding the past, the present, or the future is replaced with the monolithic mastery of object and information. The human mind is assumed to be sinless and un-fallen so for the Moderns an objective demonstration of what is true theoretically suffices to change human thinking and thus behavior.

Modern Composition Theory maintains that intellectual mastery is sufficient to produce action in contrast to Classical Language Theory, which for two millennia, maintained that reason and passion together through the engagement of the imagination produce action. There is a coercive nature to Apollo which ignores the true participatory nature of reason in the Father's good creation. Classical Language Theory observes that behavior change requires both proposition, Apollo, and passion, Dionysius. Scripture demonstrates this duality of human experience. Jesus proposes that, "God is love," and then demonstrates the proposition with imaginative narrative, "The Prodigal Son," which, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, opens our eyes to see and our ears

to hear the love of the Father. Modern Composition Theory considers mere adornment what Classical Language Theory understands as the good, true and beautiful engagement of the soul of God's pinnacle of creation—Man. The West jettisoned two thousand years of a Trinitarian biblical discourse theory and replaced both its view of man and its view of discourse with a monotheistic discourse theory.

Modern Composition Theory dominated education for a mere hundred years before a battle once more began at the end of the 19th century as Process Theory championed by John Dewey begins to make headway into educational theory. He states in 1897 in a work entitled *My Pedagogic Creed*, "I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living." Dionysian experiential, progressive learning begins a fierce and acrimonious war with the objective, traditional classrooms of Apollo. By the 1980's the battle is over and the West's schools of education are dominated by a belief that truth is subjective created by

either the audience or by the speaker and the concept of objective reality is an obsolete and ruinous dogma. Process Theory dominates the field for a few short decades before its disastrous consequences open the doors of conflict once more as society cries out for basic literary competencies of reading and writing through objective assessments and standards.

We are swinging once again between the extremes of Apollo and Dionysius. However, without Christ as our pedagogical center what in the past was a cycle of leaning towards the poles of the objective and subjective components of language, has now become wild gyrations seeking to place the poles themselves, falsely and disastrously, at the center. This denial of Christ's centrality and the subsequent removal of classical language theory has broken our literacy model. Because the most recent swing has been the triumph of Dionysius, the subjective, our temptation as classical Christian educators is to enter the fray on the side of Apollo as we look back to education before Dewey and

mistake traditional education and Modern Composition Theory for a biblical, classical concept of language and its consequent curricula.

Why is this tempting to us and why will it be ultimately disastrous?

Why must we reject both Apollo and Dionysius as centers and insist on the biblical image and the reality of Christ who brings together the extremes in language theory and educational methods? Christ embodies God made Man. It is the Son incarnate who reveals to us the mysterious tension of the living soul of man, reveals to us the mystery of dust breathed upon by God, of Man the Divine image bearer.

These metaphors, one might almost say the icons, of Apollo, Dionysius, and Christ may help us to understand how our conception of and approach to language impacts our experience of God's creation and, reciprocally, how experience informs our understanding of language and how we teach it. Apollo symbolizes the impulse to the objective, to the intellect or spirit, even, we might say to the divine.

This metaphor is singular in its focus. Apollo represents universality and

the general. If Apollo becomes the center we are left with an abstract, monotheistic conception of man and creation in which the only reality is the ideal. Dionysius symbolizes the impulse to the subjective, to the body or passions, to the particulars of human experience, to the dust. This metaphor is plural in its focus. Dionysius represents individuality and the particular. If Dionysius becomes the center we are left with a concrete, polytheistic conception of man and creation in which the only reality is the individual. The icon for Modern Language theory is monotheistic and the icon for Process Theory is polytheistic, neither of which is true, let alone good and beautiful. The good, the true, and the beautiful is found in the image of Christ who is the icon for Classical Language Theory, Trinitarian in its nature.

Christ as God made man, the second person of the trinity allows us to conceive of a metaphor that reveals the true nature of language and creation. He brings together and holds together the Divine and the human, God and man. His incarnation illuminates what our

contemporary culture believes impossible—the bringing together of Apollo and Dionysius, the objective and subjective. His miraculous intervention into the affairs of creation provides for us the image which enlightens our understanding of man and God’s intent for the gift of language. Paul writes in Colossians describing Christ the Son,

Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature:

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:

And he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

Further, Christ’s incarnation makes clear to us the Trinitarian nature of our Creator, which must inform our conceptions of man, made in God’s

image, and the unique gift of language given to us in the beginning.

Dorothy Sayers wrote:

“...The Christian affirmation is, however, that the Trinitarian structure which can be shown to exist in the mind of man and in all his works is, in fact, the integral structure of the universe, and corresponds, not by pictorial imagery but by a necessary uniformity of substance, with the nature of God, in Whom all that is exists.”

The only Trinitarian language theory available to the West is Classical Language Theory with its core conceptions of ethos, logos, pathos; and its pedagogical arts of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. The Church embraced Classical Language Theory almost immediately because as Sayers states the Trinitarian image of God in the mind of Man and all his works is, by the unimaginable grace of God, articulated and affirmed in this theory of language and communication.

Historically, we can trace classical language theory back to Aristotle in the 4th century BC, and arguably, even further back with to Isocrates who wrote of the obvious fruit of a true understanding of and instruction in language or what he terms philosophy and eloquence in a speech entitled *Panygericus* given in the 5th century BC. Isocrates explains why Athens is special and as he does so gives us tremendous insight into the extraordinary benefits of true language instruction and mastery. He has just finished a long list of the beneficial institutions Athens has developed. He then writes the following paragraph about reason and language,

Philosophy, moreover, which has helped to discover and establish all these institutions, which has educated us for public affairs and made us gentle towards each other, which has distinguished between the misfortunes that are due to ignorance and those which spring from necessity, and taught us to guard against the former and to bear the latter nobly—philosophy, I say,

was given to the world by our city. And Athens it is that has honoured eloquence which all men crave and envy in its possessors; for she realized that this is the one endowment of our nature which singles us out from all living creatures, and that by using this advantage we have risen above them in all other respects as well; she saw that in other activities the fortunes of life are so capricious that in them often the wise fail and the foolish succeed, whereas beautiful and artistic speech is never allotted to ordinary men, but is the work of an intelligent mind, and that it is in this respect that those who are accounted wise and ignorant present the strongest contrast; and she knew, furthermore, that whether men have been liberally educated from their earliest years is not to be determined by their courage or their wealth or such advantages, but is made manifest most of all by their speech, and that this has proved itself to be the surest sign of culture in every one of us, and that those who are skilled in speech are not only men of power in their own cities but are also

held in honour in other states. And so far has our city distanced the rest of mankind in thought and in speech that her pupils have become the teachers of the rest of the world...--Isocrates,

Panegyricus, 47-51

I find it striking that at both ends of the historical spectrum of classical language theory a key attribute is Isocrates' "gentleness" in public affairs and Milton's "poetic gift of peaceful difference."

The Church adopted the Greco-Roman classical language theory and the Liberal Arts as thoroughly Christian from the very beginning as early church Fathers recognized the Trinitarian structure inherent in the theory and the form that education took as a result. The Greeks believed the Liberal Arts were a gift from the gods given to Athens that raised men above the level of beasts. As Christians we understand with the Church Fathers that language is an original gift from God which allows Man to participate uniquely in God's good creation. Adam's Fall ruined the perfection of that gift though God in His mercy and kindness

allowed us the use of language even in our ruin. God in his grace gave the Greeks insight into the human mind and the role of language with the Trivium: Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric. The Church with its revealed clarity around the true nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was presented with a Trinitarian pedagogy compatible with the image of God in Man. As classical Christian educators we should likewise be utilizing such curricula with the accompanying language theory in our homes and classrooms.

The likelihood that a secular, contemporary language theory, whether it be Modern or Process would align itself well with a classical or Christian understanding of Man is not strong. When the Enlightenment rejected a biblical view of God and of man it also as a matter of logical and philosophical necessity rejected a biblical view of language. Modern Composition Theory evolved out of the Enlightenment which sought to negate subjectivity and mystery, and understood ideas like the Trinity and the Sacraments as superstitious at

best and manipulative at worst. Ideologically to be fully human meant embracing the objective, embracing Logic exclusively as the virtue that set us apart from beasts. The error here is, of course, one of omission not commission. Logic and objectivity are not only virtues but attributes of God. However, through the glorious mystery of creation, God has created human beings to experience the objective world as subjects. Classical language theory fully embraces Logic, but unlike Enlightenment theory not to the exclusion of the subjective—to pathos and ethos. By insisting that the objective extreme become the center, Modern Composition Theory becomes monotheistic in its view of language and discourse. Apollo rejects the validity of engaging subjective perceptions and emotions to the end of fostering belief and its subsequent action in the life of the community.

Process Theory on the other hand is birthed in reply or reaction to the objective focus of the Enlightenment classroom. Progressive education emphasizes the humanity and emotion of both writer and

reader. It places the subjective reality of discourse at its center. On this opposite extreme Process Theory and the Romanticism from which it sprung rejects truth as objective, placing experience as its epistemological touchstone. This stance places the creation, perception, and application of truth not in the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob but in Abraham, Issac, and Jacob themselves. Each writer's as well as each reader's subjective experience is claimed as truth. Dionysius in its polytheistic perceptions of reality seeks to place our subjective experience of creation at the center. Again, the error here is one of omission not commission. Christ as the Incarnate Son demonstrates that emotions and imagination are virtues but even as Jesus came to do not His will but the will of the Father so subjective human beings must acknowledge they experience a real objective creation. Classical Language theory insists on holding these opposites together. Each and every discourse is a true, unique event, utterly particular in its experience but constant in its universal form of ethos, logos, and pathos—three in one—goodness, truth, and beauty.

If language is an original gift from God and a part of his creation, then language should reflect the nature of the Creator. In addition to these historical and philosophical differences these three theories of language differ significantly in the ends they seek. Classical Discourse theory recognizes communication as a real event in time with intent. Augustine quoting Cicero states the purpose of rhetoric is to teach, delight, and move. Human communication mirrors by analogy the creative act of God revealed in Genesis. Our discourse differs from Genesis chapter one in that we do not create out of nothing. Our discourse is similar in that we speak words and those words effect or move ourselves and our communities. God places great worth in our discourses and when we misuse our tongue the effect may devastate our audience as well as our own souls. Communication is never just objective. Language is a function of the soul utilizing reason and passion, intellect and imagination, to impact our world. The arts of Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric allows us to teach students through

instruction day in and day out, week after week, year upon year that whenever we converse we do so with effect and purpose.

Our culture and the Church will gyrate between the two extremes of Apollo and Dionysius until we immerse ourselves in a Christ centered view of language. In order to be classical Christian educators we need to utilize a classical theory of language; a classical theory of discourse. We cannot rely on Process or Modern discourse theory to effectively teach writing, let alone teach it classically. In fact, those theories are antithetical to classical discourse theory, and not antithetical in the Hegelian sense of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, but in the biblical sense of David and Goliath—somebody lives and somebody dies. In other words this issue of language theory has never been about synthesis but rather about survival.