

David Cunningham

on a Rhetorical Approach to Teaching Theology in the Classroom & Congregation

By Tracy Schier

(This edited conversation is one of several pertaining to issues within Theological Education.)



David S. Cunningham is Professor of Religion at Hope College in Holland, Michigan. He also directs the college's CrossRoads Project, a program of Lilly Endowment's PTEV initiative (Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation). Cunningham's interests extend beyond theology and religion into the fields of communication studies and literature and he has published extensively in the areas of Christian theology and ethics. Among his books are *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology*; *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*; and *Reading is Believing: The Christian Faith Through Literature and Film*. The latter is an exploration of the central beliefs of Christianity through novels, plays, short stories, and films.

His most recent book is *Friday, Saturday, Sunday: Literary Meditations on Suffering, Death, and New Life*. Cunningham holds degrees from Northwestern University, University of Cambridge (England), and Duke University.

This interview is prompted by Cunningham's commitment to theological education and to his work with a dozen scholars from widely ranging denominational traditions, seminaries and universities. This group's work, culminating in the book *To Teach, to Delight, and To Move: Theological Education in a Post-Christian World*, involved study of both the classical and

postmodern rhetorical traditions as they were and are practiced as well as considered theoretically, and how they might be integrated into contemporary theological education. The following scholars collaborated with Cunningham in the project and in authoring the essays in *To Teach, To Delight, and To Move*: A.K.M. Adam, Wes Avram, James L. Boyce, Don H. Compier, Susan Karen Hedahl, Bradford Hinze, Don Juel, Patrick Keifert, Frederick W. Norris, Richard R. Osmer, Janet I. Weathers, and Stephen H. Webb.

This edited conversation is one of four on the topic of Theological Education. The first was with Katarina Schuth. Others to come include Charles R. Foster and Malcolm Warford.

Q. You and your colleagues, in writing *To Teach, To Delight, and To Move*, are proposing that theological educators consider adopting a rhetorical approach to the teaching of theology. Can you describe for our readers what a rhetorical approach to theological education looks like? Do you have a working definition?

A. When I think of how we define a rhetorical approach I turn to the idea of persuasion. What we are trying to do is to draw people into a conversation, a sustained conversation about our beliefs and convictions, and to encourage them to adopt those beliefs and convictions as their own. Of course, this goes both ways; our interlocutors are trying to persuade us as well. So we are talking about a dialogical process that is intentional: as Christians we have something that we think is important and thus it is worth explaining to others. We don't start without any views on these important matters; we start from a premise of "I think this is true and here's why." To achieve a genuine rhetorical approach to pedagogy, theology needs to be willing to engage others, to know who our audience is, and to understand their needs. If something is important to a person, then he or she should be able to construct an argument that is persuasive and clear. At the same time, the audience must have a desire to listen to those ideas, absorb them, and engage in dialogue about them.

A rhetorical approach to teaching theology is the antithesis of a top-down pedagogical approach—we are not interested in resolving issues by fiat or power or intimidation. Rhetoric is all about persuasion and the willingness to be changed and to be drawn in. It is about teaching, as the title of our book suggests, but then it is also about delighting those engaged in the conversation, and finally it is about moving them, a term that implies taking action.

Q. The very term “rhetoric” or “rhetorical language” carries some baggage. We hear about “empty rhetoric” or we say that someone’s ideas are “mere rhetoric.” When rhetoric is used in these ways, how is it being misused or misunderstood?

A. Rhetoric is not a gimmick or a trick or even a technique. It is not an add-on; it is always at work, any time we communicate. Good rhetoric has to be—literally—a merging of style and substance. Theology is concerned with words and with how words are understood in certain historical contexts. A true rhetorical approach to teaching and learning theology means that we are in intentional conversation, not just with students or congregations, but also with those persons who uttered words in the past—words that form scripture and tradition. There is nothing static in the idea of rhetoric—it is a dynamic endeavor. It is not just a coating, layered onto the top of ideas as ornament or decoration. Thus, a rhetorical approach to teaching and learning theology involves seeking the truth of God as it manifests itself in our world. People want to believe something, to believe *in* something, and they want to share that with others. Employing a rhetorical approach means recognizing that, in order to do that sharing, they must be clear about their convictions.

In thinking about the rhetorical approach as it applies to teaching, we can learn something by thinking analogically about the world of advertising. Advertisers do not say to their audiences, “What do you need?” and then, if they happen to have that item, offer it to them. Rather, someone has a particular product or idea that they believe in, and they persuade their audiences to become oriented toward that product or idea. Too often, Christianity seems to be saying to its audience, “What do you need? Whatever it is, we’ll figure out how to give it to you.” As a result, the conversation pretty much stops there without any back and forth dialogue, and without any conviction on the part of the church that it might be able to persuade its listeners that they really might want what the church has to offer. Instead, we might want to say: “Isn’t it possible that what you are chasing after might turn out to be an illusion, and that you might be happier if your search were to be redirected or reoriented?” This would draw people into theological discussions.

Q. Can you give an illustration of how this might work in a pastoral situation?

A. I read recently of some congregations that are trying to draw young people, young men especially, into their youth groups by hosting events where the kids play violent video games. Here’s a case where we’ve said, “You tell us what you

need, and we'll provide it"—and then we try to slip a little Christianity in around the edges, once we have them in the door. By using a rhetorical approach to the young people (who, I might add, would be playing these games anyway, just not in a church setting) a pastor or youth minister might approach things differently. That leader might first notice that the young people seem to have a “need” to play these games. But rather than just rushing to meet that need, we might engage youth in conversation to help them understand what it is that draws them to these games. And then, further along in the conversation, the minister asks, “Is it possible that what you're really chasing after is something else altogether?” It is then that the minister can bring these young people into a theological discussion that helps them understand the ramifications of their actions and their attraction to whatever needs the culture is creating in them, whether for violent games or anything else. It is very different from the “thou shall not” approach, and also different from the “come and do whatever you want” approach. It takes time, patience, and a willingness to listen and talk, talk and listen.

Q. It seems to me that this approach requires a great deal of openness on both parties in a dialogue, or in the case of a theological classroom on the part of the teacher and the learner. Am I right?

A. Absolutely. It means that students, or the members of a congregation, have to be willing to be engaged in true dialogue. In our culture people listen to talk radio a lot—and what are they listening to? They are listening to those talk show hosts whose opinions and ideas mirror their own. This type of listening negates any effort at constructive engagement with ideas, any openness to being persuaded or redirected toward another way of thinking. The ancients recognized that people had to be willing to be engaged. Remember Socrates—when someone suggested that they could get him to do what they wanted by force, he said, “Why don't you try to convince me instead?”

Q. How do you respond to people who may object that a rhetorical approach to theological education could lead to radical relativism?

A. This is philosophically complicated. We tend to think that relativism is only one thing: that it means anyone can believe anything, that one set of beliefs is just as good as another. This position is held up as being opposed to being dedicated to *the truth*. But, in reality, people don't hold these kinds of absolutely relativistic opinions and positions for very long; they don't really believe that one set of beliefs or practices is just as good as another. It may feel like that when they're comparing a couple of widely held ethical positions or a pair of political candidates; but if you get them started talking about Nazi Germany or child abuse or slavery, they will quickly retreat from their absolute relativism.

Rhetoric orients things differently. It says that truth is something we are always working *toward*, and a rhetorical approach acknowledges that we do not have immediate access to an externally verifiable notion of truth. In keeping with the longstanding Christian tradition, a rhetorical approach recognizes that every element of our knowledge arises from an encounter, a dialogue between a speaker and an audience, with both willing to listen to the other in a shared desire to arrive, eventually, at truth. And there also needs to be acknowledgement that arriving at truth may necessitate change. This doesn't mean that truth is relative, it just means that we are dynamic creatures who are shaped and formed by our encounters with one another.

Q. There must be a firm knowledge base to engage in true rhetoric—right?

A. A true rhetorical approach to theological education begins with knowledge and conviction and a willingness to take our partners in the dialogue through the process from one place to another. Good rhetoric cannot exist without a firm knowledge base. It also cannot exist if the person who is listening is not really listening. We don't learn if we cannot really hear the other. Think about the phenomenon of talk radio and how people listen to it today—too often, people tune in to hear people who reinforce their (often not very well developed) ideas rather than to learn from someone else. Add that to the fact that in our country we have a very democratic attitude regarding religion. Everyone thinks that they can talk about theology and religion, or write about theology and religion, without a firm intellectual base that comes from solid grounding in scripture, history, and tradition. The level of general ignorance about religious belief is really quite appalling—and that's true among intellectuals like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, just as much as it is among certain unthinking fundamentalists.

Q. Do you have any sense that theological educators are adopting a rhetorical approach in their classroom teaching?

A. No doubt some have always done so, whether or not they've called it that. We have very little hard data on the question, so we really don't know. In my case, what my co-authors and I are proposing is not a “program” that we want to enlist people to offer to others. What we have seen is that as seminaries' curricula are being revised there is some effort being made to attend to audiences, both students and congregations. In the wider academy in general there has been a growing interest in rhetoric so I think we can say that the topic is “in the air,” but not in any organized way. And that's fine. It's not something

that can or should be forced on anyone; it needs to arise from within the theological subdisciplines in an organic way. We haven't heard many people objecting to a rhetorical approach, we just see that people are not sure what it might consist of, or how to make use of it in the classroom or the congregational setting. We hear professors saying that the rhetorical approach has potential but they don't know if they can use it or even if they are already doing it.

And of course, professors face the added problem of the incredible superficiality of our public discourse about religion, some of which has crept over into our churches as well. People talk in slogans and their viewpoints tend to be random, based on whatever view they've heard espoused recently and forcefully. Often we seem to lack the patience needed to present a case that is based on clear thinking and solid grounding in the knowledge of the disciplines. People tend just to declare those who have an opposing view to be heretics. Obviously, that can be a real conversation stopper.

Q. If seminaries educated future pastors to take rhetoric seriously, what would be the effect on congregations?

A. I truly believe that congregations would benefit. Members of a congregation would have more opportunities for conversations about their deepest faith issues and face their conflicts more directly. They would be more intellectually and spiritually active rather than passive folks who just fill pews. And this doesn't necessarily mean that preachers should be asking for “talk-back” sessions after their sermons, nor that denominations ought to rewrite their liturgies from scratch. The starting point would be for pastors to take their own expertise more seriously, and to feel more secure that the knowledge they gained in seminary is part of what they have to offer. Too often, pastors tend to dwell at the extremes of either false modesty or immodesty. Those with false modesty are not willing to stand up and say what they believe and walk their congregation through a conversation about why they believe. The immodest ones are merely dogmatic and rigid. The alternative is to have the courage of one's convictions, but also to be open to dialogue and conversation, and to be willing to change when someone else has the better claim.

It's interesting to compare pastors to medical doctors. They both require rigorous training in their disciplines, but doctors never forget that they know more than their patients, and patients usually remember that as well. Interestingly, people seem to take the state of their bodies more seriously than they do the state of their souls. They don't validate the expertise of pastors like they do that of medical doctors; this leads pastors to lose confidence in their own knowledge and skills. Doctors are listened to—and pastors should be as well. I talked before about the democratic attitude toward religion that has everyone

thinking they are experts without really knowing too much about the history and intricacies of the faith. People don't go to their medical doctor with such an attitude. Also, we live in a therapeutic culture. People pay for psychiatrists and psychologists—we go to these people in ways that we don't go to a pastor. Part of this might be tied up in the fact that you have to pay for therapeutic help but when you go to a pastor you don't have to pay for spiritual help. In our culture, what is free is not seen as valuable. So let me stress again that the pastor has to be knowledgeable and explain that knowledge in clear terms, allowing for discussion and questioning. The dialogue is important.

Q. If such an attitudinal shift were to take place, how might a congregation look different from, say, a congregation of 20 years ago?

A. If I can go back to the medical analogy, I think that when pastors once again know their worth as ministers in the way that medical professionals are confident about their worth, and when members of a congregation value the worth of ministry as they do that of medicine, we will see a very different scene. Pastors will see themselves as teachers and congregations will see themselves as learners from someone who knows more than they do. Of course, they can and should engage in dialogue with their teacher, just as patients may ask questions and even argue with their doctors. But this doesn't change the fact that my doctor has more expertise about my physical health than I do! An improved relationship between pastor and people will allow congregations to tap into the notions of happiness and the good—this is the concept of delight that we talk about. People should be moved by the theological claims of the faith, and they should experience delight in their newfound understandings of theological ideas. The title of our book is taken from St. Augustine, who borrowed it from Cicero: good theology, like all good rhetoric, should teach, delight, and move its audience.

Q. It seems to me that the rhetorical approach to theological education, and the communication environment and events that flow from it, may be predicated on situations and activities where people must be physically present to one another. If this true, where would our contemporary trend toward more and more distance learning via computer and other means fit in?

A. In its oldest, classical incarnations, rhetoric was about physical presence: speakers and listeners, face-to-face. But when writing was developed, the speech-only connotation shifted; people sought to persuade one another through

the written word. Think of the broadsheet as a propaganda device and how effective it was as an early type of persuasion. It involved reading rather than listening, but it still got the message across. So now we may be seeing an additional shift, which is different from the shift from speech to writing, but with some similarities as well. It’s possible that this new shift to virtual media, social networking, and distance learning may require us to go through a similar set of adaptations, just as we did when shifting from speech to writing.

There is both gain and loss involved. When a person is present to another person there is an emotional appeal that cannot be had in the reading or viewing experience. On the other hand, when we think of those people who are very successful on the web today, we have to acknowledge that they know a lot about their audiences. They certainly know more about their audiences than practitioners in the early days of radio or television programming knew about theirs. So in that sense, the internet may be closer to face-to-face communication, in which speakers knew a great deal about their audiences and shaped their own messages in ways that attended to that knowledge.

Unfortunately, however, I am afraid that distance learning practitioners are not tapped into sources of knowledge about their audiences the way advertisers are, so their knowledge base about the audience may not be satisfactory for good, web-based rhetorical practice. We still have to figure out what makes sense online and what doesn’t. Maybe we will find out that theology cannot be carried out over the web, but maybe it will simply take a different form. One thing we do have to keep in mind is that the formation that is so much a part of theological education is not likely to be complete without some face-to-face contact. We didn’t allow the invention of printing to replace that personal contact that is essential to theological education, and we probably shouldn’t allow other new technologies to do so either. After all, we are still trying to figure out the implications of the printing press. It’s not clear that we’ve completely taken it on board, even hundreds of years after its invention; for example, we all still need a better understanding of the extent of our own responsibility to read in order to gain knowledge.

As far as formation is concerned, I am still a fan of residential theological education. Time is a factor here, as well as physical presence. Theological education is not a hobby—it takes time. We need to acknowledge that many factors need to be present to educate a person in depth.

Q. How might the rhetorical approach to theological education prepare students who are not well catechized and who are not grounded in doctrine or rituals?

A. Teaching must be a rhetorical effort, even (or perhaps especially) when students don't bring much background knowledge to their study. There can be no pandering or putting them to sleep. As I said before, theological teaching ought to bring about delight and learning should be joyful. The rhetorical approach is not about force, it is about persuasion. Or, consider another analogy: drama is closely related to persuasion. A trip to the theater, a good experience of drama, should *change* us. Actors, directors, and playwrights know this—they have something they believe in, and they want their audiences to believe it too. So they have to have the courage of their convictions and put their ideas out there in ways that draw people in and move them to engage with the material. In fact, seminaries—especially those embedded in universities—might be well advised to take advantage of the drama and communications departments at their institutions or nearby. This would serve as a reminder that a lot of what ministry is about is similar to what theater is about, in seeking to teach, delight, and move its audience. Pastors should seek to do what actors and directors do—to draw people in. Not at any cost, not by pandering to them, but by believing in what they're doing strongly enough to persuade others to come along as well.

Q. *As you worked on this book project did you have any surprises or frustrations?*

A. Working on the book was a wonderful experience—we had great conversations and the whole process was a real joy. I suppose our biggest frustration was the lack of data; we couldn't really find out how extensively seminaries might already be employing rhetorical approaches in their teaching. Ultimately, I would like to be able to work with seminaries to see how they are structuring their curricula, and to think about what rhetorical and dramatic elements are already at work there—as well as what new approaches might be productively employed.

The important thing for me is that theological schools be successful as they prepare future ministers and teachers. The approach we suggest is only one avenue. So I would just go back and reiterate my analogy to the medical profession. I would like to see the day when people know the worth of their ministers in the way that they know the worth of their doctors.