

Perspicuity in the Preaching and Pietistic Thought of Basil Manly, Jr.^{1 2}

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Introduction

In the spirit of full disclosure let me state quite plainly at the outset that I have become somewhat of a “Rhetorical Snob.” Rhetoric has fallen on hard times. Most in this culture do not possess a working knowledge or even a rudimentary understanding of its Classical Tradition or usage. The rich texture and craftsmanship of the orator has escaped the notice of the contemporary masses, even though they are persuaded every day by the Madison Avenue types to part with their hard earned money for some trivial bobbles, beads, or trinkets. One rhetorical critic writes:

Rhetoric is commonly used to mean empty, bombastic language that has no substance. Political candidates and government officials often call for “action not rhetoric,” from their opponents or the leaders of other nations. In other instances, *rhetoric* is used to mean flowery, ornamental speech that contains [an] abundance of metaphors and other figures of speech. . . . Rhetoric is communication; it is simply an old term for what is now commonly called *communication*.^{3 4}

Rhetoric is, at best, misunderstood on the one hand; and, at worst misused, misapplied, and misappropriated on the other. This essay is one humble attempt to save Rhetoric from an untimely demise by demonstrating its varied usage by Basil Manly, Jr in his preaching and pietistic thought.

One of the chief aims, if not the only aim of all communication is *clarity*. If what is said and heard is not understood, then what good is the particular communication’s event? Whether in personal conversation, small group gathering, TV commercial, or sermon; there must be clarity

of thought and expression if the rhetor is to put the point across to the hearer. In Rhetoric this clarity is called *perspicuity*.

Perspicuity: A Definition

“Ad fontes”⁵ should not be the cry of the Protestant Reformation alone. This expression can also be applied to rhetorical inquiry. It is almost universally held that Aristotle is the “font” of rhetorical thought and praxis. Aristotle discussed perspicuity under the heading of *style*. He declared: “We may, then, start from the observations there made, including the *definitions of style*. Style to be good must be *clear*, as it proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do” (italics added).⁶

Clarity of style was packaged for the sermonic use of rhetoric in the term *perspicuity*. A major figure in the 18th and early 19th Centuries that influenced Sacred Rhetoric was The Rev. Dr. Hugh Blair. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Blair offered a definition of perspicuity that gave deference to Aristotle and became a basis for homiletics of the 19th Century. It sounds new to the ear of the 21st Century student but was common fare for homiletics study of former days. He wrote:

With respect to style, that which the pulpit requires, must certainly, in the first place, be very *perspicuous*. As discourses spoken there, are calculated for the instruction of all sorts of hearers, plainness and simplicity should reign in them. All unusual, swoln,⁷ or high sounding words should be avoided; especially all words that are merely poetical, or merely philosophical (italics added).⁸

So then, “Perspicuity requires attention first to single words and phrases, and then to the construction of sentences. When considered with respect to words and phrases, syntax and grammar, it requires these three qualities, *purity*, *propriety*, and *precision*.”⁹

Blair continued his understanding of how perspicuity should be applied to an address, sermon, or manuscript by the novice:

Young preachers are apt to be caught with the glare of these; and in young composers [of manuscripts] the error may be excusable; but they may be assured that it is an error, and proceeds from their not having yet acquired a correct taste. Dignity of expression, indeed, the pulpit requires in a high degree, nothing that is mean or groveling, no low or vulgar phrases, ought on any account to be admitted. But this dignity is perfectly consistent with simplicity. The words employed may be all plain words, easily understood, and in common use; and yet the style may be abundantly dignified, and at the same time very lively and animated.¹⁰

Here, Blair laid out four elemental principles of clarity the young minister should endeavor to learn and incorporate into his pulpit manner. These are: 1) plainness and simplicity, 2) limited use of high sounding words, 3) decorum or dignity in the pulpit, and 4) plain words that are easily understood.

Perspicuity in the Preaching of Basil Manly, Jr.: A Case Study

Let us consider how Blair's definition can be applied to a sermon of Basil Manly, Jr.:

“HALTING ON THIS SIDE OF JORDAN, OR, SHALL YOUR BRETHREN GO TO WAR, AND SHALL YE SIT HERE?”¹¹

Manly, Jr. started by giving an extended introduction in his address by rehearsing an obscure section of Scripture from the Old Testament—Numbers 32:5-6. This is the instance where the tribes of Reuben and Gad desired to settle the land on one side of the Jordan River because it was goodly land for pasture. They wanted to “halt on this side of Jordan.” Their intent seems laziness at best and selfishness at worst. They asked: “Why should we go on and fight, help our kinsmen, when there is land enough here for us?” Moses considered this suggestion to be out of “insolence, avarice, or cowardice,”¹² according to Manly. This is the only place where he employed such a high sounding verbiage that the general masses of folk may not have understood. Generally throughout the sermon he maintained an economy of such lofty sounding words.

Moses pressed the Reubenites and Danites with a sharp rebuke: “Shall your brethren go to war, and shall ye sit here?”¹³ Manly couples this general upbraiding with one much stronger that most Baptists have heard preached and resides in our “collective psyche”—“be sure your sin will find you out!”¹⁴

These select Israelites protested that they did not intend to commit the sin of which Moses had accused them. They had no desire to leave the fight and the rest of Israel alone to the ensuing war with all its battles yet un-fought. They only wanted to settle their families and livestock and leave a garrison to protect them. The bulk would go along and fight. Then, “The proposition in this form is accepted by Moses and their wish is gratified.”¹⁵

Here in the sermon Manly gave the two tribes the benefit of the doubt. Their motive remained unknown in his thinking. However, he used this as metaphor as well as double entendre to make a point and transition. This address was given circa 1861-1865. As any student of history knows, this was a terrible time for the South. Evidently many Southerners had chosen to be “*keepers at home*.”¹⁶ These had, according to Manly;

avail[ed] themselves of the flimsiest pretext for exemption and to slink behind the feigned diseases, or trades and professions long abandoned, to shield them from an honorable discharge of their duty to the country. It is not my intention, nor is it necessary, that I address a word to this class. They are not in the army—where this tract [or sermon] will find its circulation.¹⁷

What Manly did here seems quite plain and simple, but it was homiletically ingenious. He took a portion of Scripture that was probably known to all; whether educated or not, farmer or shop keeper, urban or rural, high society or low, and made an appeal across all social and economic strata of the day asking: “SHALL YOUR BRETHREN GO TO WAR, AND SHALL YE SIT HERE?” He then made a quick jab at those who found some personal issue of “exemption” in order to stay home and assuage their “guilty conscience,” not waning to fulfill their military obligation. Here he launched into his transition. Manly made a loud but clear

connection between the Biblical passages with his hearers who had “HALTED” in that present day. This extended exposition and application makes up the remaining portion of his address.

Manly declared very distinctly that there is, “a deadlier foe than the Yankees—a war which demands and deserves the concentration of every man’s powers, and which must be prosecuted with unanimous zeal, and with patient endurance to the—not bitter, but—glorious end.”¹⁸ What is this war? It is “spiritual warfare.” “[T]o halt on this side of Jordan, to leave to others the toils and the honors of these celestial victories, to sit still while the brethren go to war. I am afraid there are some of these in the [Christian] army,”¹⁹ he exhorted. This “spiritual warfare” schema was fleshed out in the balance of his address in four distinct ways:

1. *There are some who “discourage the heart. . . .”*
2. *There are some who attend to their own conveniences and personal comfort first. . . .*
3. *There are those who stop short in Christian progress, as if all the work were accomplished. . . .*
4. *There are some who are always leaving their work to be done by others. . . .*²⁰

Let each be considered in turn.

“1. *There are some who ‘discourage the heart.’*”²¹

First Manly took up the idea of morale. He stated distinctly what every general knows quite well:

Everything, in war, depends on keeping up the spirit of the army. Defeat by overwhelming forces is nothing. Good soldiers can rally and try it again. But, if the spirit is broken, whether by *treacheries*, by *hardships* and *abuse*, by *multiplied desertions*, by *discouraging speeches* from generals or comrades, failure is almost inevitable (italics added).²²

His use of this plain metaphor was quite appropriate on the heels of the cited Biblical passage.

Manly added to the morale image with an appeal to the ear: “[T]here are, among those who profess to be Christians, some *croakers*, who never sing except to a mournful tune, some icebergs that radiate nothing except chilliness.”²³ Surely these predominately rural folk would

have made the connection to the “croakers.” In 21st Century parlance we might say something like—these “always rain on other’s parades.”

Manly then painted a clear verbal picture of a railway station where the troop trains are passing through to the front lines to fight. Many would stand around “always expecting to be taken care of and comforted” personally, “but never dreaming that they might help or take care of any body else”²⁴ for the Southern cause. These are hangers-on. They are no good to anyone—not even themselves. With poignancy and distinctiveness he inquired: “Are you one of these?”²⁵ “2. *There are some who attend to their own conveniences and personal comfort first.*”²⁶

Next, Manly turned his attention to selfishness. Like these select Israelites, there were those among them who were selfish for their own issues with little regard for others. The preacher demonstrated well how the “last shall be first and the first shall be last”²⁷ by demonstrating the ultimate ends of Reuben and Gad:

First located indeed, they were but first displaced afterwards, first relapsing into idolatry, first carried away into captivity, first passing into extinction. Severed gradually in interest and in sympathies, from those on the other side of the river, attempting miserable neutrality, when enemies assailed the common cause and buying inglorious and fatal peace instead of daring and winning in honorable warfare, their history remains a warning of what awaits those who hang back when common duty demands general sacrifices.²⁸

He well enumerated rhetorically, ethically, and morally that those whose concern is selfish at the first may very well have the harder lot at the last.

“3. *There are those who stop short in Christian progress, as if all the work were accomplished.*”²⁹

Many, Manly observed, “have been just converted, perhaps, and conclude that now the important work is done.”³⁰ “They are [also older] Christians who have ‘lost the warmth of their first love . . . ’”³¹ for the Savior. Again he used the war metaphor with a brilliant simplicity as he exhorts those in the Lord’s army on to faithfulness:

Incessant vigilance is the price of human warfare. It is even more so in the spiritual, as our enemies are more watchful, eager, and powerful. There must be constant aggression on the army of Satan. Every birth adds one to the ranks of evil: the hosts of God are losing by every death, and can only be replenished by conversion, by winning over our opponents.³²

There are those faithful, however, in the army of God who “are warring with all their might against the sins that still annoy” while these “are sitting still, while their foundations are crumbling beneath them.”³³

“4. *There are some who are always leaving their work to be done by others.*”³⁴

At the last Manly described those who would be “drop outs” or possessed with laziness concerning the Kingdom’s increase. Many knew for sure that, “There is . . . a great deal to be done in the Redeemer’s cause, very important to be done, in fact indispensable, and a very firm conviction that somebody ought to do it, without the idea once occurring to them that they have a share in the responsibility.”³⁵ He described those who seemingly came to Christ but are “at ease in Zion”³⁶ after their initial conversion experience.³⁷ Though he did not deal with the possible fact those of whom he says made declaration of their faith, may well have confessed a spurious faith. He did offer this jarring comment: “This necessary labor is to be done by certain nameless persons, of whom all they know is, that *they* are not of the number.”³⁸ Accurately has James said of such, “Faith without works is dead!”³⁹

Manly’s address was concluded with some tried and true, plain but sure methods. He did this in order to call for changed hearts and directions by his hearers. His appeal employed a typical preacher’s closing: an exhortation, an application, and an invitation.

Perspicuity in the Piety of Basil Manly, Jr.: A Case Study

Consider Manly’s article in *The Christian Index*, “A Call to the Ministry.” In it he posed the question: “WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS REQUISITE FOR A MINISTER OF THE

GOSPEL?”⁴⁰ ⁴¹ He gave a terse and penetrating answer using Blair’s constructs of perspicuity: *purity, propriety, and precision.*⁴² He declared:

It need be said that *piety* is essential. No amount of talent, no extent of education, no apparent brilliancy of fervor, should ever be allowed to gain admission into the ministry for one whose piety there is a reason to doubt, or who has not a more than ordinary active and consistent holiness. A Christless minister is as horribly out of place as a ghastly skeleton in the pulpit bearing a torch in his hand.⁴³

Piety, “purity of heart,”⁴⁴ and “consecrated men”⁴⁵ all descriptors of personal holiness, which is the most important thing for the one who would possess the “QUALIFICATIONS”⁴⁶ for ministry.

From these three heart issues flowed others that should augment the minister’s call. These were: “*Good intellect . . . [and] facility in acquiring knowledge . . . [with] some capacity to speak;*” “*common sense;*” “*energy of character;*” and “*an ardent and self-denying desire to labor for the good of souls.*”⁴⁷ His description of those who were called was poignant yet straightforward, clear but compelling. It also possessed simplicity of character that would compel all who heard or read the address to be sure to pause, ponder, and consider the question Manly posed.

Later as Manly drew the address to a close, he set up a distinct contrast with the former section. He then made appeal for “numbers in the ministry.”⁴⁸ He urged:

Now we need numbers in the ministry. . . . But we need purity more than numbers. . . . Above all we need *consecrated* men,—men who have stood beneath the cross, till their very souls are dyed with Jesus’ blood, and love like his for perishing millions has been kindled within them. We long for such men, but for such only, as are willing to “endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ” (italics added).⁴⁹ ⁵⁰

His description of the consecrated was a distinctive way of observing that numbers were needed in the ministry. Numbers were not needed only for their sake, however. Numbers were not to be substituted for those with truly pietistic and consecrated hearts who “are dyed with Jesus’ blood” after having “stood beneath the cross.”

With the clarion call of an Old Testament shofar, Manly puts forth a series of “Do you . . . ?” rhetorical and actual questions for the would-be young minister’s consideration:

Do you habitually entertain and cherish conviction that you are not your own; but, as dead with Christ, are bound to live unto yourself, but unto him who died for you, and rose again?

Do you feel willing to serve him in whatsoever employment you can most glorify his name?

Do you watch for opportunities of doing good . . . in the Sunday school, in the prayer meeting, and by the wayside?

Do you sincerely desire to make it the business of your life to labor for souls?

Do you find that other employment seem comparatively uninviting, and this delightful, apart from any considerations of worldly ease or emolument?

Does your impression of duty with regard to the ministry grow stronger, at those times when you are most favored with nearness to God, and when you most distinctly realize eternal things?⁵¹

Blair’s ideas described as purity, propriety, and precision of speech were obviously woven into the fabric of Manly’s homiletical character. These he demonstrated in sermon and address as these two case studies well demonstrate.

Lastly, in his “QUALIFICATIONS” inquiry, Manly showed an expert oratorical ability that appealed to his auditor’s apparent piety. Manly pressed them with an exhortation containing all the dynamics of classical rhetoric—ethos, pathos, and logos. He sensed in them some deep level of concern for the Savior’s cause. He understood their desire to enlist and fight “in the Lord’s army.” So he called them forth to action in a manner so plain, yet so moving, that any with whom the Holy Spirit was working could be borne along with his simple words of persuasion. He did not make appeal for an altar call experience. It was not in a formal invitation at the end of the service to which he called them to respond. His appeal was his entire sermon, with and open invitation to the work of ministry. It was woven throughout the warp and woof of the address. Even when read, one joins with the ancient king who was “almost persuaded”⁵² to hear the call of the Gospel minister. Listen! Can you hear or read Manly’s words and not be moved even today?

Is your willingness to engage in such service connected with the clear and cordial renunciation of self seeking, and a simple reliance on him whose grace is promised to be sufficient?

It is joined with the humble estimate of your own powers, and with a willingness to use all necessary and suitable means for the improvement of those powers?

It is a desire for this work, not as a temporary resort, as a refuge for indolence, or an avenue to fame, but as a lifetime labor, in prosperity or adversity, in evil report and in good report that God may be honored and sinners saved?

If you answer, “Yes,” then welcome, brother! We give you the right hand of fellowship to go forth and labor for Jesus.⁵³

Concluding Observation

There is an unseen and lost historical irony here of sorts. John A. Broadus was known as the “preacher extraordinary.”⁵⁴ Arguably this tenant of perspicuity in Sacred Rhetoric came down to the Southern Baptist Convention’s own “prince of preachers.”⁵⁵ And he dealt with the topic quite extensively in his monumental work, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*. In it he exhorted:

The most important property of style is *perspicuity*. Style is excellent when, like the atmosphere, it shows the thought, but itself is not seen. . . . [G]ood style is like stereoscopic glasses, which, transparent themselves, give form and body and distinct outline to that which they exhibit.⁵⁶

But surely, as Manly preached and wrote, his own “style of *perspicuity* . . . like the atmosphere . . . shows the thought, but itself [was] not seen.”⁵⁷ His preaching, no doubt, possibly came up to the level of Broadus the master orator himself. Could it be that perhaps Manly was just as much the pulpit orator as Broadus? If clearness of thought and application for all who heard was the standard—then truly he may have been.

¹See: Timothy George, “On Preaching,” *Journal of Beeson Divinity School*, Samford University (2009): 2-3. In this piece George gives a great overview and summary of what preaching *is* and *what it should look like*. Both sermons considered in this rhetorical reading of Manly’s, “HALTING ON THIS SIDE OF JORDAN, OR, SHALL YOUR BRETHREN GO TO WAR, AND SHALL YE SIT HERE,” and “A CALL TO THE MINISTRY,” would fit well with George’s description.

²A sincere thank you goes to my pastor, Dr. Phil Newton, South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN and my longtime mentor and friend Rev. Calston “Red” Berry, retired pastor, Oklahoma, City, OK for their editing work and feedback on this article. Without their help and insights this endeavor would not have been possible. I would also like to thank Dr Tom Nettles, Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY for the opportunity to contribute to this issue of the *Founders Journal*.

³Sonja K. Foss, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Project Heights, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989), 3-4.

⁴Also: See my previous discussion of “rhetoric” in “‘Compel Them to Come In’: Posture and Persuasion in the Preaching of Charles Haddon Spurgeon,” *Founders Journal* 74, (Fall 2008): 2-11.

⁵“Ad Fontes,” A Latin expression that means “back to the font” or “back to the sources.” See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ad_fontes article.

⁶Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Random House, 1954), 167; See also: Lane Cooper, *The Rhetoric of Aristotle: An Expanded Translation with Supplementary Examples for Students of Composition and Public Speaking*, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1932), 185.

⁷This is a contraction for “swollen.”

⁸Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, Volume II, (Boston: Printed by I. Thomas & E. T. Andrews, 1802), 56.

⁹Hugh Blair, *An Abridgement of Lectures on Rhetoric* (Northampton: Published by Simon Butler, 1818) 53; Electronic source:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=ffoAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA53&dq=hugh+blair+rhetoric+style+perspiciuity&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html>, retrieved 27 April 2009.

¹⁰Hugh Blair, *Lectures*, 56.

¹¹ Basil Manly, Jr., "Halting on This Side of Jordan, or Shall Your Brethren Go to War, and Shall Ye Sit Here?" [Raleigh, NC.: s. n., between 1861 and 1865]. Accessed from, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/manlyb/menu.html>, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill digitization project, *Documenting the American South*. Accessed 24 June 2008. Note: in the digitized version, "No. 67." and "BY REV. B. MANLY, JR., D. D., GREENVILLE, S. C." are both in the superscription of the manuscript. This seems to indicate that the sermon or address manuscript was delivered or printed on more than one occasion.

¹²Ibid. Note: The reader is encouraged to acquire a copy of Manly's address from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's digitized project to read.

¹³See Note 11 above.

¹⁴Numbers 32:23.

¹⁵See Note 11 above.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Matthew 20:1-16.

²⁸See Note 11 above.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Revelation 2:1-7.

³²See Note 11 above.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Amos 6:1.

³⁷This section of “HALTING,” could be considered “prophetic” in tone if not prophetic of office or gifting. Manly dealt with many of the very same issues Baptist pastors still consider troubling in a 21st Century church setting.

³⁸See Note 11 above.

³⁹James 2:20.

⁴⁰Basil Manly, Jr. “A Call to the Ministry,” [sermon on line], accessed 2 July 2008; available from http://books.google.com/books?id=4IEDAAAAYAAJ&pg=PT261&lpg=PT261&dq=a+call+to+the+ministry+basil+manly+jr&source=web&ots=UhlT97uw_e&sig=tmZayACBN90CCh6q4ffZJj7-Zyo&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=3&ct=result; Internet. Also see: Basil Manly, Jr., “A Call to the Ministry,” *The Christian Index* [Georgia State Baptist Paper], 15 November, 1866; also published by the American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, 520 Arch Street, n.d.

⁴¹The reader is strongly urged to get a copy of “A Call to the Ministry” to personally consider its rhetorical as well as practical and pietistic dynamics.

⁴²See Note 9 above.

⁴³See Note 40 above.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰2 Timothy 2:3.

⁵¹See Note 40 above.

⁵²Acts 26:28.

⁵³See Note 40 above.

⁵⁴Vernon Latrelle Stanfield, *Favorite Sermons of John A. Broadus* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), 1.

⁵⁵“Prince of Preachers” was a common term referring to Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great 19th Century English Baptist orator and minister.

⁵⁶John A. Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, (Philadelphia: Smith, English, & Co., 1871; reprint, Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan-University Library, n.d.), 339 (page citations are to the reprint edition). It should be noted that in Part III of Broadus's *Preparation* he gives an entire chapter, Chapter II, to the discussion of *perspicuity*. Broadus states in a footnote: "On perspicuity, consult Campbell, and Herbert Spencer's Essay on Style" (p. 339). These are both teachers of Rhetoric that any who studied the Classics in the 19th Century would recognize to be leaders in the field.

⁵⁷Ibid.