

THE ROLE OF “SUBLIME” EXPERIENCE IN CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

FOR THE BILLY GRAHAM CENTER AND MARION E. WADE CENTER EVANGELISM
ROUNDTABLE V “IMAGINATION AND THE GOSPEL: HARNESSING THE IMAGINATION TO
ENGAGE CONTEMPORARY CULTURE AND COMMUNICATE THE LIFE-CHANGING GOSPEL”

April 23-26, 2008

(Draft of April 8, 2008)

BY GEORGE HUNTER

Ever since major sustained events in Europe (like the Renaissance and the rise of science, nation-states, cities, and rationalism) produced the Enlightenment, Evangelical thinkers have too often conformed to the Enlightenment’s paradigm. Nowhere is this conformity more obvious than in our tradition’s prescription for how Evangelism “ought” to be done. We have often recommended a left-brained, rationalistic, didactic, apologetic, propositional approach to presenting the Gospel.

Most pastors, evangelists and church leaders have usually ignored the advice of their academic leaders. Why? While American folk-evangelicals are often too scripted by anti-intellectualism to be academically influenced, they have also intuitively understood that the left-brained approach does not fit most populations in grass-roots communities. The rationalistic approach, when tried, has consistently failed to engage people, or even to secure their attention--except for the small “left-brained” market that is “wired” that way. As western culture has become increasingly post-modern—with fewer people now scripted by the Age of Reason, rationalistic evangelism is virtually a spent force.

So this conference has featured a potent theme that has too often, and too long, been ignored in the ministry of Christian evangelism. We have suggested that it is okay to make the

communication of the meaning of Christianity's gospel interesting, engaging, and contagious. We have seen that the Gospel's more effective communication will involve harnessing the communicators' imaginations in apostolic service, and engaging the imaginations of the message's receptors. We have observed that the imaginative communication of Christianity can, and should, take many forms—from narrative and fiction and music, to drama and cinema and the visual arts, and not through teaching and preaching, only; indeed, preaching and teaching must become more imaginative in their expression than the tradition once imagined!

This concluding paper proposes to advance our discussion by adding two other categories to our reflection on the power of “Imagination”—without which any discussion of Imagination would be less complete.

The first of these categories is Emotion, what philosophers have called the “passions,” or what Edwards and Wesley called “religious affections.” This category is important because the imaginative communication of ideas, especially ideas of great importance and ideas that are relevant to people's needs and aspirations, communicates the ideas more clearly and memorably AND often moves people emotionally; indeed, this is one reason we want to harness imagination in the gospel's service.

The Enlightenment taught that human beings are essentially rational creatures—who, unfortunately, are saddled with some residual emotionality from their evolutionary past, out of which they need to be “educated.” The Enlightenment's doctrine of human nature may have been wrong by (say) 180 degrees! The following counter-assertion may be more plausible: Human beings are essentially emotional creatures who are sometimes capable of thinking! Furthermore, what we think about is influenced by our background emotional state, and how we

think about it is influenced by the emotions we experience at the time. For example, we think differently, and make different decisions, when (say) we are peeved than when we are ecstatic.

Rhetorical theorists have especially focused on the interface between Imagination and Emotion. Francis Bacon's seventeenth-century reflections on Psychology in The Advancement of Learning, for instance, inferred a pre-scientific model of the brain—in which five mental “faculties”-- “the intellect,” “the emotions,” the imagination,” the memory,” and “the will”—were thought to be rooted in five distinct areas of the brain. Bacon hypothesized that persuasive communication had to engage all five “faculties.” George Campbell's Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776) stood on Bacon's shoulders and delineated the most important body of rhetorical theory since Aristotle. He believed that the effective public speaker has to achieve four objectives: to inform the understanding, to engage the imagination, to arouse appropriate passions, and to move the will. He contended, “To say that it is possible to persuade without speaking to the passions is but, at best, a kind of specious nonsense.”

The other known category that fills out our understanding of Imagination is Experience. Some movements within Christianity have often emphasized religious experience more than others—several movements of Mysticism and Pietism come to mind, and early Methodism, and more recent Holiness, Pentecostal and Charismatic forms of faith. Some writers, today, see many western populations as increasingly seeking experiences. Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's The Experience Economy (1999), for instance, reported that what once drove much of economic activity shifted from goods-based to service-based, and more recently from service-based to experience-based. (It occurred to me, in checking out their thesis, that the people who throng Starbucks are not paying that much money because the coffee is that much better than the Folgers Instant available in their kitchens.) More and more pastors, and church music,

education, and youth directors, are aware that they are employed to manage and shepherd experiences for their people. More and more religious seekers appear to be less interested in knowing about God and more interested in experiencing God.

One theoretical perspective (with a very long history) that brings these three themes together-- imagination, emotion, and experience-- is the Theory of the Sublime.

A first-century Roman rhetorical theorist, whom the tradition knows as “Longinus,” emphasized the role of transcendent emotion in persuasion. He perceived that “sublime” discourse (oral, written, or dramatized) amplifies the emotional experience of discourse. Sometimes, he observed, public rhetoric can so enthrall audiences and readers that it transports people into such a transcendent emotional state of consciousness that they become convinced on non-rational (though not necessarily irrational) grounds that the truth claim or rhetorical vision must be true. Something like the “awe” that we can experience in observing some natural wonder can also be experienced through an encounter with magnificent music (like Bach’s Mass in B Minor), or great art and/or architecture (like Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel), or a great speech (like King’s “I Have a Dream” speech).

Our occasional experiences can confirm Longinus’ point. We have all been so powerfully engaged by some powerful aesthetic experiences, from a great moment (say) in film, poetry, or music, that we were inclined to believe whatever message it served! As Aristotle reminded us, however, the three modes of persuasion (logos, ethos, and pathos), quite including the use of emotional power in the arts and public address, can be used for good or evil; for example, the Russian people sometimes experienced sublime power in Lenin’s speeches, and the Third Reich used the emotionally compelling music of Wagner to engage and stir the masses.

(Aristotle argued, however, that the possible misuse of knowledge about communication effectiveness is NO reason to abandon such knowledge. Truth, he said, is more powerful than its opposite, but it needs advocates who are schooled in the communication arts to represent Truth to audiences; the con men, marketing gurus, charlatans, and demagogues learn all they can about engaging audiences. Advocates who know the Truth must not abandon Truth naked before its enemies.)

We think we have inherited only most of Longinus' On the Sublime (some fragments were lost over time), but the text we have is enormously significant. The word "sublime" is rooted in the Latin sublimes—which suggested looking up, or being raised to great height. Longinus observed that "Sublimity, . . . produced at the right moment, tears everything up like a whirlwind, and exhibits the orator's whole power at a single blow. . . . Real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is difficult or rather impossible to resist and makes a strong and ineffaceable impression on the memory. . . . Sublimity is always an eminence and excellence in language; and that from this, and this alone, the greatest poets and writers of prose have attained the first place and have clothed their fame in immortality. For it is not to persuasion but to **ecstasy** that passages of extraordinary genius carry the hearer." More than the other classical rhetoricians, Longinus stresses the power of the imaginative communication of great thought to "elevate," to "uplift," and to "transport" people out of themselves.

Sublime discourse, Longinus observed, can engage many types of human beings in the same interacting audience—which amplifies people's sense that the message must be true; the audience socially constructs a shared response to the message. The shared experience of being enthralled (like in an audience) produces a kind of shared meaning or conviction, and a shared

identify, in a previously more heterogeneous audience. Longinus, in an early summary, clarified “five most productive sources of sublimity” in oral and written discourse:

1. Great Ideas
2. Strong and inspired Emotion.
3. Certain Figures of Speech.
4. An elevated and noble tone of expression
5. Dignified and Elevated Word-Arrangement

Longinus’ treatise was probably not very influential in the classical period, and it was all-but-forgotten until its translation into French in the sixteenth century. In the last four centuries, however, a number of thinkers and movements have stood on Longinus’ shoulders. His theory now helps explain the most powerful (though occasional) kind of experience in public life. A range of writers and schools of thought have reflected on Sublime theory in recent centuries. The following may be especially instructive for Evangelical communicators.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797, Irish philosopher and statesman in Great Britain’s House of Commons), in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, suggested that populations who struggle, who experience difficulty, pain, danger or “terror,” or are concerned for their lives, may be especially open to, or needing, sublime experiences that lift them up. Burke believed that the capacity for sublime experience is rooted in human physiology and psychology. Comparing beauty and sublimity, Burke suggested that beauty engages the serene harmonious feminine part of human nature; sublimity engages the rougher more turbulent masculine dimension within us. (If Burke was right, sublime experience is a means to reaching men.) Sublime experience catalyzes the capacity within us to think

differently about the matter than we did before; sometimes the sublime experience “anticipates our reasonings and hurries us on by an irresistible force.”

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804, philosopher in the Late Enlightenment period), influenced by Burke, boldly included Aesthetics within Philosophy’s scope. He reflected on the mystery of sublime experience in Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime (1784) and in the chapter on “Analytic of the Beautiful” in his later Critique of Judgment. He wrote, “We call that sublime which [we experience as] absolutely great.” Sublime experience involves human understanding and imagination, but it is much more a subjective aesthetic experience than an objective logical conclusion. The experience is a deep subjective response to something perceived as so “absolutely great” that it cannot be quantified or measured; the experience is one of deep “delight,” from which people may respond in deeper moral judgment or commitment.

Many writers and thinkers of (and following) the Romantic Period reacted against the Age of Reason, and they substantially reemphasized the role of powerful emotions in human experience—including sublime emotional experience (though not always employing the term). **Victor Hugo** called for authors and artists to make sublime experience possible for people, and people experienced many of his poems as sublime. English writers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Brownings, and De Quincey in Great Britain, and Lindsay, Longfellow, Lowell, Whittier, and Emerson in the USA, often appealed directly and deeply to the hearts of readers. Matthew Arnold’s poetry and literary criticism established a place for the doctrine in the British academy once again. The Romantics helped pave the way for “the religion of the heart,” championed by Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley that catalyzed the Great Awakening. In time, however, the theory’s currency was devalued; anything that merely inspired someone was now regarded as “sublime!”

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), in works like Attack Upon Christendom, Edifying Discourses, Either/Or, and Fear and Trembling, reflected upon the spent “Christendom” period of his native Denmark. “When everybody is a ‘Christian’” (as creatures of a so-called “Christian” culture or country), he contended, “Nobody is a Christian” (in the New Testament sense of a follower of Christ.” Kierkegaard contended that it was futile to attempt the direct communication of Christianity’s message to people who had heard it so many times before that they assumed they already understood it. So he advocated an “indirect” approach to communicating Christian truth, in which the preacher or writer, substantially through narrative, helps the receiver to “discover” Christian truth-claims, experientially. In Fear and Trembling, for instance, his dramatic narration of Abraham’s emotional dilemma when told to sacrifice Isaac enables the reader to experience something of Abraham’s sublime agony and, through the vicarious experience, to discover something about the faithfulness of God.

Although **Rudolph Otto**’s The Idea of the Holy (1869-1937), does not cite Kierkegaard’s work, Otto continued Kierkegaard’s move to ground the theory theologically more than before, and the idea (though not always the term) has been more influential in theology every sense. For Otto, God is Transcendent, “Holy;” God’s realm is the “numinous,” and He is “wholly other” than humankind. IF people have any significant experience of God, the experience is one of “mysterium tremendum”—typically characterized by awe and wonder (and perhaps dread or terror), as well as by remarkable vitality, passion, spiritual power, and supreme fascination. Otto claimed, “This mental state is sui generis and irreducible to any other;” it is supra-rational, and therefore cannot be understood in rational categories.

Otto contrasted our capacity for significant religious experience with our sexuality—which “lies just on the opposite side of ‘reason’ to the numinous consciousness; for, while our capacity for sublimity is ‘above all reason’, the sex impulse is below it, an element in our instinctive life. ‘The numinous’ infuses the rational from above, ‘the sexual’ presses up from beneath, quite wholesomely and normally out of the nature which the human being shares with the general animal world.” Furthermore, the two experiences—our sexuality from below and the numinous from above—cannot be sufficiently expressed in language. So communicators, from poets to artists to theologians, can only point toward, and perhaps facilitate, religious experience.

Our approach to communicating the Sublime can, to some extent, be taught, but Otto believed that the experience of the Numinous couldn’t really be taught; we can, however, “cooperate with this process” and thereby increase the possibility of people experiencing the sublime. In Otto’s lexicon, “sublime” is a category from Aesthetics, while “mysterium tremendum” refers to religious experience per se. Otto strongly suggests, however, that the sublime experiences that are sometimes possible through great art, music, and other artful human expressions can help evoke the experience of the Numinous. Otto observes, “A feeling, no less than an idea, can arouse its like in the mind; and the presence of the one in my consciousness may be the occasion for my entertaining the other at the same time.” Otto reflects upon the record of Isaiah’s call experience (in Isaiah 6) as a case of the numinous mediated through the sublime.

Post-Modern thinkers, who have generally rejected the Enlightenment’s hyper-rationalism and scientism, have often observed a widespread hunger for imaginal and emotional experience. They have pioneered a focus upon subjectivity and socially constructed perceptions

of reality, so they have (understandably) elevated Sublimity theory into a new prominence.

Jean-Francois Lyotard famously observed, in The Postmodern Condition, that post-enlightenment postmodern people view “all metanarratives” with “incredulity.” In the postmodern era, with less certitude and more pluralism and diversity, with shrinking stability and stampeding complexity, people have become remarkably more open to mystery, to the supra-natural, and to experiences of transcendence. Lyotard assigned to artists and writers the task of connecting with the human community for the sake of “healing it”—by making sublime aesthetic experience available for the masses. Lyotard featured Marcel Proust and James Joyce as writers who engaged postmodern people through “allusion.” “Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing. . . It is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. . . . Let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable.”

Michael Osborn, a contemporary rhetorical theorist, has employed the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King to reflect upon and update theory of The Sublime. Osborn believes that Sublimity theory substantially explains the mystery of “great speaking.” He believes that the following explanations help account for the sublime impact that communicators sometimes achieve in the audience’s experience.

1. The communicator’s very high credibility with the audience is probably a prerequisite to the experience. As Longinus observed, “Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.”
2. The speaker embodies an “Elevation of Mind. Great ideas are intrinsically involved in sublime experience.

3. The Structure of discourse contributes to the sublime effect. Osborn believes, “The speech must seem to build as it progresses, to rise to some height of insight and emotion as it carries its audience along with it.” For instance, Osborn perceives “four movements” in King’s address: a) King positioned the moment in historical perspective; b) He named and described the injustices that made the Civil Rights movement and the specific occasion necessary; c) He shared his Vision of the future that is possible; d) “He virtually commanded his vision to be fulfilled.”
4. The speaker draws from, and amplifies, precedents, ideas, and opportunities that are already present in the audience and in the context—such as King’s commemoration of the nation’s past, his drawing from the guarantees in the people’s Constitution, and from the nation’s known Promises to all of its people, and from the values already clear to many auditors, and upon the dynamics of the speech’s immediate setting—a vast audience gathered at the Lincoln Memorial, at a crisis time in the nation’s history.
5. The speaker employs (what Cicero and Augustine called) the “grand style” in language and delivery. The speaker employs the figures of speech that produce the “bold imagery” that arouses the people’s imaginations. Bold concrete images can catalyze what Longinus called a “superior force,” with which “we are drawn away from argument pure and simple to any startling image within whose dazzling brilliancy the argument lies concealed.”
6. The speech “transports” the audience. As Longinus wrote, “The effect of elevated language upon audience is not persuasion, but transport. . . . Sublimity flashing

forth at the right moment scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt, and at once displays the power of the orator in all of its fullness.”

7. The speech extends a “great challenge” to the audience.
8. Partly as a consequence of all of this, sublime speech can give audiences a kind of “rebirth,” in which a) they see the world in a different way, b) they discover a new identity and purpose, c) from which they engage in new actions, and d) (in Longinus’ words) the experience “implants in our souls the unconquerable love of whatever is elevated and more divine than we.”

Let me submit that the Sublime tradition might call us to move toward a renewal of Greatness as we consider the forms in which the Gospel, expressed in many ways through human imagination, can engage our generation. One day, we will know if the Church responded to this Opportunity, because Longinus left us with this test: “That is really great which bears a repeated examination, and which it is difficult or rather impossible to withstand, and the memory of which is strong and hard to efface.”