

# THE BACKGROUND OF GRECO-ROMAN RHETORIC

As early as the fifth century B.C., there was an attraction to eloquent speech. There was a great tradition of delight in the spoken word. The ideal for the Greek was to be someone versed in the art of eloquent expression. This delight, however, soon became full-blown idolatry. Many Greeks began to worship the goddess *Peitho* (Persuasion).

The most well-known men of this period were Plato and Aristotle. Although these men had a great influence on the rhetoric of the day, the most notable impression was made by Isocrates. This man was the leading teacher of rhetoric during his day. He was widely known for the powerful speeches which he wrote and for his handbook on rhetoric. Students from all over the Greek world came to his school. Though his teaching covered a wide variety of subjects, at the center of it all was training in eloquence. Litfin establishes four themes of rhetoric from this time (1994:64-66):

The first theme established **persuasion as the goal of rhetoric**. People saw the need for the powers of persuasion in order to convince the court to decide in their favor -- even if it meant misrepresenting the facts. For Isocrates, and other serious students of rhetoric, eloquence was always a matter of persuasion.

The second theme outlined the **intimate association between eloquence and power**. From the beginning, there was a close connection between eloquence (*logos*), power (*dunamis*), and wisdom (*sophia*). The well crafted speech was extremely powerful, and this fact was very important to the ancients. In the ancient world it was believed that the conduit of true power (*dunamis*) was eloquence. The power of speech was *not in the content*, but in the speaker's ability to be persuasive. Litfin observes, "The speaker leaned solely upon his own brilliance to accomplish his task" (1994:134).

The connection between rhetoric and wisdom is important for our purposes. In the ancient Greek world thinking well and speaking well went together. The converse was also true. If a man could not communicate his thoughts well, he was considered inferior. After all, the brightest, most well-educated, most sophisticated men were those who graduated from the schools of the philosophers and Isocrates believed the discipline of rhetoric was at the center of sound philosophy.

The third theme suggested that **adaptation was the genius of rhetoric**. The best speakers were those who were able to analyze the audience as they were speaking and make the necessary adjustments during the presentation in order to reach them. Adaptation was a crucial issue because it was the one factor in persuading an audience that the

speaker himself controlled. Litfin comments, "Indeed it is not too much to say that the central purpose of the entire complex of ancient rhetorical theory, technique, teaching, and writing was to train the orator in how to do precisely this" (1994:247).

The final theme suggested that **eloquence was seen as an avenue to honor, wealth, position, and influence**. The common people greatly admired the rhetoricians because they believed that they were better than other men. The crowds would flock to hear the great orators and their fame spread throughout the ancient world.

Although these characteristics have been associated with the rhetoric of Isocrates' day, Litfin shows that they continued into the first century. The leading rhetoricians of this time were two Romans, Cicero and Quintilian. It is difficult to overestimate how popular these orators and their craft were. They were our modern day film and music stars. Though not everyone was an orator, the people of the day recognized good rhetoric when they heard it. By the same token, they also recognized bad rhetoric when they heard it as well. Often the listeners would compare and criticize the orators they had heard, choosing one over another. Litfin summarizes the point by saying, "The truth is that rhetoric was not merely common in the Greco-Roman culture; more than that, it was endemic, an inherent part of life" (1994:125).

Litfin, Duane. *St. Paul's Theology of Proclamation: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Greco-Roman Rhetoric*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.