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Brian Fehler:

*Calvinist Rhetoric in Nineteenth-Century America: The Bartlet Professors of Sacred Rhetoric of Andover Seminary*

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Brian Fehler's *Calvinist Rhetoric in Nineteenth-Century America: The Bartlet Professors of Sacred Rhetoric of Andover Seminary* offers insight into the complicated relationship between rhetoric and religion in nineteenth-century America, showing how fundamental political and social changes prompted the period's Calvinist leaders, the New Divinity clergy, to draw upon rhetoric as a resource to bring new vitality to their spiritual mission. Their use of rhetoric, Fehler argues, also altered the intellectual landscape that delineated the work of these historically significant figures. Noting that most accounts of nineteenth-century American rhetorical history have focused primarily on undergraduate instruction, Fehler argues that important rhetorical work took place in graduate theological seminaries. He supports this claim through a careful examination of the rhetorical training and practices at Andover Theological Seminary, which he describes as "perhaps the most important site of rhetorical education in the nation in the decades of the Early Republic" (p. 1). Drawing on a range of primary sources, including sermons, articles published in contemporary Calvinist journals, letters, and treatises, as well as secondary sources across varied disciplines, Fehler provides an overview of rhetoric's important role at Andover and carefully considers how this role both shaped and reflected broader cultural concerns.

The "Introduction" (pp. 1-15) effectively outlines several important strains of Fehler's argument. Thus, Fehler maintains that the founding of Andover should be understood as rhetorically motivated, in so far as Calvinist leaders conceived graduate education as the means to bolster religious orthodoxy during a period of significant social change. In an earlier era, the training of Calvinist ministers had involved a general program of undergraduate study followed by apprenticeships with established ministers. However, social conditions in the nineteenth century called for a different approach, as "two trends, egalitarianism and a market economy, led not only to the democratization of American popular culture but also contributed to a spirit of competitiveness in public life" (p. 2). The forces of democracy and competition raised new questions about authority and compelled religious leaders to acquire rhetorical skills that would allow them to "find new sources of oratorical authority" (p. 2). Fehler argues that Andover's founding reflects the desire of Calvinist leaders to immerse prospective ministers in the principles of religious orthodoxy and to provide them with systematic rhetorical instruction that would equip them to become effective representatives of Calvinist views. He further suggests that the Calvinists' strategic appropriation of rhetoric allowed for their active participation in the dynamic culture of revivalism, even as they maintained orthodox positions in the face of challenges within and outside the church. At the same time, their willing engagement in oratorical culture contributed to a gradual modification of Calvinist theology. Having introduced his argument concerning the rhetorical motivations that guided Andover's founding, Fehler concludes the "Introduction" by defining the terms he considers to be crucial to the reader's understanding of the rhetorical

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situation. These terms include 'New England Theology and orthodoxy'; 'Arminianism' (which Fehler describes as "the theological notion that humanity maintained sufficient grace even after original sin to choose salvation" (p. 5), a position strongly disputed by most orthodox Calvinists); and 'oratorical culture' (that is, the twentieth-century term describing the emphasis on liberal learning and civic participation that, according to contemporary rhetorical scholars such as Gregory Clark and S. Michael Halloran, sustained rhetoric's development from the classical period through the nineteenth century). Citing Clark and Halloran, Fehler details the division between the classical goal of pursuing consensus and the nineteenth-century emphasis on "individual advancement" (p. 10). He notes that the powerful oratorical culture that surrounded Calvinist leaders in the early nineteenth century was destined to evolve into a modern environment characterized by the pursuit of professional credibility and expertise in specialized subject areas, rather than knowledge of a wide array of public issues. The five subsequent chapters in Fehler's book illustrate the ways in which these cultural changes shaped the Calvinists' interests in rhetoric as well as the strategies they adopted in an attempt to use rhetoric to achieve their goals.

Chapter One, "'God Is a God of Order': Federalist Era Revival Culture" (pp. 17-36), examines the ways in which the successful religious revivals beginning in the 1790s, which would in time be known as 'the 'Second Great Awakening' (p. 18), sparked the Calvinists' strong interest in rhetoric. Here Fehler describes the Calvinist struggle to maintain a central place in American religious life in the face of the challenges posed by competing evangelical groups such as the "Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians of a more Arminian nature" (p. 18), who were achieving new visibility and influence through revivals geared toward generating an immediate emotional response from their congregations. Although the emotional outpourings that were a feature of evangelical revivals threatened to undermine religious orthodoxy by weakening its intellectual underpinnings, the Calvinists found that the heightened spiritual interest that stemmed from the Second Great Awakening provided them with an opportunity to participate in an emerging oratorical culture. The Calvinist leaders countered the emphasis on intense and fleeting spiritual experiences with a notion of revivals that reflected their theological perspective: "the New Divinity clergy believed that revivals should express the orderliness of an ideal society. Revivals were not, for them, as they would later become in the popular imagination, departures from daily life" (p. 19). According to Fehler, the Calvinist clergy conceived their goal to be establishing "perpetual revivals" (p. 19), as "the clergy believed, in general, that revivals would have a more permanent effect if they displayed proper decorum, encouraged reflection, and united members of various congregations in a common cause" (p. 19). Thus, the Calvinists revised the conception of revivals in a way that supported the orderly and reflective orientation that they perceived as integral to the formation of a strong spiritual community.

This desire to strengthen the spiritual community formed through the revivals of the 1790s and early 1800s led prominent Calvinists to form institutions that would further support the growth of that community. Chapter Two, "Calvinist Rhetoric at Andover" (pp. 37-66), describes the establishment of the Andover Theological Seminary as serving several functions for orthodox Calvinists: countering the influence of competing populist religious groups such as the Methodists and the Baptists; opposing the growing prominence of more liberal views within Calvinist churches, as evidenced by the appointment of Henry Ware to Harvard's Hollis Chair of Divinity; and responding to the rise of professionalism, which heightened expectations concerning the educational training appropriate for members of the clergy. Fehler explains that, in contrast to the earlier practice of training ministers through apprenticeship, the formation of a graduate seminary at Andover provided the Calvinists with greater institutional cohesion and public visibility. The establishment of the Seminary also ensured that ministers received sound rhetorical instruction, preparing them "not only to preach the gospel but to promulgate a Cal-

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vinist orthodoxy in the new nation” (p. 52). These goals contributed to the formation of the Bartlet Chair of Sacred Oratory, the first endowed chair of sacred rhetoric in the United States. Fehler’s examination of the instruction provided by Bartlet Chairs such as Edward Dorr Griffin and Ebenezer Porter reveals an interesting blend of principles from classical rhetoric, belletrism, faculty psychology, and elocution, alongside the theological concerns that were of primary importance to these men. Thus, the homiletic style developed at Andover was one emphasizing restraint and rational engagement: “In contrast to America’s passion for things new, new wealth, new science, new frontiers, the Andover sermon would be the sentinel of tradition” (p. 59). As Fehler shows, in addition to training ministers to preach sermons that would solidify the community, the Calvinists developed the Andover *Bibliotheca Sacra* and other journals in order to communicate their theological positions.

The exposition of the rhetorical strategies used by the Calvinist clergy in promoting their particular vision of a unified culture continues in Chapter Three, “Classicism and the Church: Calvinist Recovery of Ancient Rhetoric” (pp. 67-100). According to Fehler, the Calvinist leaders invoked classical culture for the purpose of combating the growing emphasis on professionalism and scientific knowledge. Providing numerous examples of Calvinist leaders who were drawn to what they perceived as the cultural unity and idealism of classical Greece, he demonstrates how classical models were consistently used to illustrate the power of a value system distinct from the concerns with self-interest and commercial advancement that guided the modern professional culture. Thus, the Calvinist leaders depicted Greek philosophy as “preparing the way for Christian revelation” (p. 84).

The Calvinist belief in the value of rhetorical education extended to an interest in delivery that was new to the nineteenth century. Fehler explains that earlier Calvinist preachers, as for example Jonathan Edwards, had not explicitly emphasized delivery but had instead achieved powerful rhetorical effects through the content of their sermons. However, the emphasis on popular oratory provoked the preachers to acknowledge more directly the potential value of delivery for their presentation of sermons. In Chapter Four, “Calvinist Elocution in an Age of Popular Oratory” (pp. 101-140), Fehler discusses the view of the Calvinist leader Ebenezer Porter that the speaker’s responsibility towards the audience might require the integration of theology with delivery. Fehler notes George Campbell’s emphasis on faculty psychology as an important influence on the Calvinist preachers, but particularly highlights Porter’s role in providing a complete explanation of how delivery can become an integral feature of the preacher’s skills (p. 123). According to Fehler, Porter “built his concept of rhetorical action upon classical reading and personal observation” (p. 130), and his “advice on all things elocutionary was very specific” (p. 125). Porter’s lectures encouraged students to adapt their methods of delivery to the specific audiences they would address, in order to promote understanding, and to cultivate “natural movements and articulation” (p. 128). The lectures also included extensive guidelines for prayers delivered at public events – which Porter saw as key venues for the presentation of orthodox theology, since Calvinist preachers did not generally speak at secular events or forums such as Lyceum or Chautauqua lectures, or at camp meetings, which were the preferred vehicle of evangelical preachers.

Chapter Five, “Revival History as Rhetorical History” (pp. 141-170), offers Fehler’s analysis of how Calvinist leaders wrote historical accounts that systematically distinguished their revivalism from that of other religious groups and argued for the centrality of Calvinist revivals in American history. Interestingly, as Fehler shows, in making their case the Calvinists connected their work to the values of the surrounding culture: “The clergy recognized that they lived in an age of oratorical culture, and they defined their ideal form of revival in such a way that shared assumptions with the larger oratorical culture. The New Divinity endorsed several characteristics of oratorical culture, including an acceptance of neoclassicism, oratorical ethos, public

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meetings, and ‘corporate’ history” (pp. 150-51). In this way, according to Fehler, the Calvinists sought both to solidify their importance in American society and to define the character of American culture itself.

Fehler’s sixth and final chapter, “Eloquence Is Always a Means and Not an End’: The Calvinists and Rhetoric in Nineteenth-Century America” (pp. 171-181), begins with an account of the physical and ideological shifts that took place at Andover and in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* in the last decades of the nineteenth century, as these vehicles for the dissemination of theology moved decidedly away from orthodox Calvinism toward more liberal accounts of salvation. Fehler states that “Andover’s Calvinism remained orthodox in the decades following the Second Great Awakening” (p. 174), but adds that the years following the Civil War brought change, as additional endowments brought new faculty to Andover, some of whom “accepted Andover’s orthodox Calvinist creed with hesitation and qualification” (p. 174). However, as significant as these changes were, they should not obscure the fact that “the Calvinist interest in rhetorical education, during the years of the Second Great Awakening, had helped preserve the study of rhetoric in the nineteenth century” (p. 177). In Fehler’s view, then, the Calvinist leaders can be seen as central participants in rhetoric’s nineteenth-century shift from an oratorical to a professional culture: “Hinting at conceptions of rhetoric that would emerge full-blown especially in the latter half of the twentieth century, the Calvinists saw rhetoric not as ornament but as the means of all argument” (p. 179).

Drawing from a wide array of archival sources to support his contention that nineteenth-century Calvinists deserve recognition in the history of rhetorical education and practice, with *Calvinist Rhetoric in Nineteenth-Century America* Brian Fehler provides a thorough, clear, and compelling treatment of the rhetorical practices employed in the period’s American Calvinism, as well as a carefully developed analysis of the motives that guided the Calvinists’ decisions and the ways in which rhetoric both shaped and reflected their emerging public identity.

The book will be of interest to scholars in several disciplines, including American history, the history of education, and religious studies. However, its primary audience will be historians of rhetoric, particularly those interested in the complicated relationship between rhetoric and religion. Fehler’s insightful examination of the Calvinists’ participation in oratorical culture and their responses to the gradual fragmentation of that culture in the latter decades of the nineteenth century offers a valuable contribution to our field.

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