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Scott Culpepper

Dordt University, scott.culpepper@dordt.edu

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Rhetoric in the Worship and Witness of the Church: A Review of Seasoned Speech

Abstract

"*Seasoned Speech* contains a convincing appeal for Christians to take seriously the role of rhetoric in framing Christian life and witness, both individually and corporately."

Posting about the book *Seasoned Speech* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/rhetoric-in-the-worship-and-witness-of-the-church-a-review-of-seasoned-speech/>

Keywords

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in all things

July 11, 2019

Rhetoric in the Worship and Witness of the Church: *A Review of Seasoned Speech*

Scott Culpepper

Title: *Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church*

Author: James E. Beitler III

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James E. Beitler III offers a fascinating exploration of the place rhetoric plays in Christian life and witness in his book, *Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church*. Beitler, Associate Professor of English at Wheaton College, deplores the lack of emphasis on rhetorical skills, which he defines as the art of persuasion, in contemporary Christianity. To address that deficit, Beitler provides examples of five Christians who demonstrate rhetorical excellence in their writing and speaking. His examples include C. S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, and Marilyn Robinson. Beitler explains, “[b]y exploring the rhetoric of these Christians, the book aims to help change perceptions about rhetoric in the church and to demonstrate the importance of rhetorical reflection in a variety of ecclesial and cultural contexts” (6).

This concept of teaching by illustration is complemented by Beitler’s unique organization of the book. While there is a rough chronological order to Beitler’s cloud of rhetorical witnesses, he frames his analysis of each rhetorician by connecting them with the different seasons of the Christian calendar—from Advent to Pentecost. This device,

which was inspired by the work of McCormick Theological Seminary professor Jennifer M. McBride, allows Beitler to illustrate how each person illuminates a particular aspect of the origin story of the church, from the incarnation of Christ to the coming of the Holy Spirit. The themes of promise, expectation, and fulfillment recur at both the beginning and the end of this cycle.

Beitler focuses on the strategies each person adopted to establish *ethos*, or a standing of reliable authority that can convince an auditor or reader to consider the argument being presented. He establishes in the first chapter of the book that the argument will move from the illustration of an individual understanding of *ethos*, presented by C. S. Lewis in his essay collection *God in the Dock*, to a more communal sense of the term illustrated by Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*. "Taken together," Beitler writes, "the chapters demonstrate that Christians can enhance the persuasiveness of our witness as individuals and create a hospitable community for wanderers and wayfarers by paying careful attention to both the rhetorical tradition and our own liturgical practices" (22).

Each of the people Beitler writes about has a specific style of writing that catches their audience. Beitler describes the rhetoric of C. S. Lewis as a rhetoric of *eunoia* or goodwill. Lewis fashions a literary persona that welcomes the seeking reader, establishing his *ethos* through the benevolent invitation he extends to his audience to contemplate important ideas with him. Beitler notes the themes of anticipation, joy, and goodwill that parallel aspects of the Advent season. Dorothy Sayers, on the other hand, features the celebration of creeds and truth in her plays through dramatic demonstration rather than prescriptive exposition. Beitler compares Sayers' tendency to show rather than tell to the Roman rhetorician Quintilian's advocacy for *enargeia*, which also notes the importance of exhibiting a concept rather than just narrating it. The Christmastide season mirrors this rhetorical style by imbedding the redemptive goodwill of God toward humanity in the incarnated form of the Christ, where God's love is demonstrated through the incarnation act, rather than simply described.

Beitler's analysis of Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes his rhetoric of identification and separation. Bonhoeffer's identification with orthodoxy and the Confessing Church entails a natural separation from the official Church as it suffered the consequences of Adolph Hitler's Nazification program. Beitler draws a parallel between the underground movement Bonhoeffer helped lead and the Christ of Epiphany, symbolizing the glory of God veiled in human frailty and innocence. Beitler labels Archbishop Desmond Tutu's rhetoric of reconciliation as a constitutive rhetoric of interdependence. Tutu's work with South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as his ministerial emphasis on repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation resonate with the themes of lent for Beitler. The novels of Marilyn Robinson, particularly her *Gilead* trilogy, serve to

illustrate *eunoia* as dwelling place or community. Robinson fashions a rhetorical world in which her readers are able to join a community of souls wrestling with brokenness and blessing. Beitler links this tension between the brokenness and blessing of Christian communities with the celebration of Eastertide. In his final chapter, Beitler calls on the collective witness of his chosen examples to assert that Bakhtin's theory of *heteroglossia* captures the essence of the Christian witness as a community function.

Seasoned Speech contains a convincing appeal for Christians to take seriously the role of rhetoric in framing Christian life and witness, both individually and corporately. The contempt in which rhetorical studies is held by far too many champions of new media, even academic ones, ignores the rich rhetorical style of early radio and television personalities who were noted for their eloquence. Beitler suggests that one who has mastered rhetoric can run the gamut of popular and formal modes of communication as needed, while so many contemporary methods of instruction have left students trained only to cater to particular forms of popular media.

Beitler features people of significant skill who illustrate his argument well; however, there is some room for critique. While Beitler provides some rich historical context in his linkage of contemporary examples with ancient rhetorical theories, it might strengthen the book to provide some illustrations of effective Christian rhetoric in other periods besides the twentieth century. Although his choices provide a solid grounding in Christian rhetorical engagement of the late twentieth century, the richness of Christian rhetoric in earlier periods could deepen the study by demonstrating which rhetorical trends among Christian thinkers have been timeless, and what approaches have changed over time. Another critique might be the balance of the rhetoricians he chose to highlight. For example, the linkages between thinkers and the Christian calendar fit perfectly in the case of Lewis, Tutu, and Robinson, but are a little more strained in the case of Sayers and Bonhoeffer.

Overall, Beitler has provided Christians with an important resource to prompt reflection on the impact of rhetoric on lived Christianity. While the book will be most helpful for Christian communities, anyone seeking to understand the contributions of these thinkers will benefit from it. Beitler crafts an important model for both Christians and other readers of how Christian communities, at their best, reflect on the nature as well as the implications of their worship and witness.