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8-3-2022

Speaking is About the Hearer: A Review of Speaking by the Numbers

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Recommended Citation

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Speaking is About the Hearer: A Review of Speaking by the Numbers

Abstract

"Are there ways to help make public speaking less stressful for the speaker and more impactful for the listener?"

Posting about the book *Speaking by the Numbers* 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/speaking-is-about-the-hearer-a-review-of-speaking-by-the-numbers/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Speaking by the Numbers, enneagram, wisdom, teachers, pastors, communicators, Sean Palmer

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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Speaking is About the Hearer: A Review of *Speaking by the Numbers*

Dave Mulder

August 3, 2022

Title: *Speaking by the Numbers: Enneagram Wisdom for Teachers, Pastors, and Communicators*

Author: Sean Palmer

Publisher: IVP

Publishing Date: March 8, 2022

Pages: 192 (Hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0830841660

I have heard that there was once a study conducted to understand people's greatest fears. The results revealed people's number one fear as public speaking, with death being number two. If this study is accurate, the person tasked with giving the eulogy at a funeral is worse off than the person being memorialized. Joking aside, many people *do* find public speaking stressful, even though it is a normal part of life. Some professions—including pastors and teachers—involve constant speaking in front of groups. Are there ways to help make public speaking less stressful for the speaker and more impactful for the listener? Sean Palmer suggests that one answer to that question would be to leverage wisdom from the Enneagram to help you speak from your strengths in a way that benefits and blesses your audience.

In the past few years, the Enneagram has become quite popular. If you are new to this, a brief introduction might be helpful. In a nutshell, it is a way of describing nine different personality types that people exhibit. You may hear someone describing themselves, "Oh, you know...I'm such a One, I can't help but look for solutions to other people's problems," or, "I'm a Seven, so *of course* I look on the bright side of things!" The different numbers have specific characteristics that people tend to associate to that type. But what's different about the Enneagram from other popular personality typing systems—the Meyers-Briggs, the DISC, and astrological signs to name a few—is that the behaviors we might associate with a particular number are the outgrowth of an individual's core *motivations*. This shift in focus away from one's characteristics makes the Enneagram more compelling and more useful to me than other personality assessments.

I first encountered the Enneagram about five years ago while my wife and I were out with friends. One friend was a fan and explained it as a sort of personality test, then shared the link so we could figure out our "type."¹ Soon we were all on our phones, taking the quiz and reading the results. I remember us laughing together as we read the descriptions, considered how well

they described us, and noted famous people who shared our type. At the time, I wrote it off as just another fad personality test and didn't think much more about it. Not long after, however, I started seeing posts on social media about people's Enneagram numbers, and how they were finding value in understanding themselves as they learned more about their Enneagram types. I remembered our dinner laughter about how accurate my type description seemed. And so, I began doing some more reading about the Enneagram to try and understand it.² Since then I have found that the Enneagram has been a useful tool for understanding not just my personality, but my *motivations* for doing things. And this is where I found Palmer's book fascinating: as a teacher, there are things I am already doing as a public speaker that are a natural outgrowth of my Enneagram type, and there are things I could do differently that would likely help me to be an even more effective public speaker.

Palmer is a pastor, a public speaker, and an executive coach. He serves as teaching pastor at Ecclesia Houston, an outreach-oriented church based in downtown Houston, Texas. Palmer also serves on the board of Missio Alliance, a multicultural collective aimed at supporting and equipping churches and parachurch ministries in a variety of cultural contexts across North America. He has extensive experience in preaching, teaching, and speaking to all kinds of groups, as well as having an expertise in the Enneagram and how it can be a useful tool for Christians to understand the ways God has uniquely created each of us.

In *Speaking by the Numbers*, Palmer lays out strategies to become a more effective public speaker, and he uses the Enneagram as a way of organizing his teaching. His first chapter begins a very quick overview of the nine Enneagram types, followed by a pivot into exploring the different "intelligence centers" within the Enneagram, and how they function. Types Two, Three, and Four make up the "feeling center," types Five, Six, and Seven make up the "thinking center," and types Eight, Nine, and One make up the "doing center." These three intelligences describe the strengths that the types within that center tend to leverage. However, Palmer suggests that they can be *over-leveraged*, meaning that each type also has a weakness—a center that recedes and can become underdeveloped. Therefore, there are three different stances, based on which of these centers are repressed: the aggressive stance ("moving against," exhibited by Eights, Sevens, and Threes), the dependent stance ("moving towards," exhibited by Ones, Twos, and Sixes), and the withdrawing stance ("moving away from," exhibited by Fours, Fives, and Nines.) Without getting lost in the weeds, Palmer lays all of this out over a few pages to build a foundation for the remainder of the book.

The next few chapters illuminate how a speaker can approach connecting with people who exhibit each of these three different stances in a way that recognizes what people really need. Palmer gives specific examples for each Enneagram type within these chapters, such as how they tend to function, their fears, their strengths, and why a particular approach to speaking will connect with them better than other approaches. After each chapter spent explaining a stance, Palmer includes the manuscript from a talk he has given as an exemplar to demonstrate the concepts he has outlined. This was a highly effective approach: describing what different listeners need, and then giving specific examples to illustrate what this looks like in practice.

His concluding chapter was, in my opinion, the most useful of all. Speakers need to recognize that their audience will almost always include many of the Enneagram types, if not all. In a few brief pages, Palmer summarizes how a speaker can know that they have “stuck the landing” in a particular talk, ensuring that their words resonate with all nine types, as well as all three intelligence centers. Knowing your own type, with your specific strengths and weaknesses as a presenter, is obviously key. But there is much wisdom here for any speaker to connect powerfully with their audience.

This book could be beneficial for anyone who regularly does public speaking in their work. Pastors, teachers, salespeople, tour guides, politicians, and communicators of all kinds would likely find ideas and strategies here that would be helpful. To be clear, this book is not an introduction to the Enneagram. Palmer assumes that the reader has mastered the basics of the nine Enneagram types and goes quite deep quite quickly. If you are new to the Enneagram, I would recommend reading another book or two to help you get a clear handle on the different types, their motivations, and how those motivations are made manifest in behaviors before diving into this book; I think you will get a lot more out of it that way.³

That said, anyone who needs to ensure that everyone in their audience gets the message they are sending could certainly benefit from the clear examples and specific encouragement Palmer gives to public speakers in this book. The final line of the book—which I borrowed as a title for this piece—really sums it all up quite powerfully: “As speakers, we can fool ourselves into believing that speaking is all about us. It is not. Speaking is about the hearer.”⁴

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1. There are lots of different Enneagram tests available for free online, so if you are curious about your own Enneagram number, that might be a good place to start. But I’ll caution that these tests are almost always about traits or behaviors rather than motivations, and so the results might not be very accurate. Some further reading and study will almost certainly be needed to confirm your type.
 2. If you are new to the Enneagram but are ready to do some more reading, two books I would recommend:

The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective by Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, and *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery* by Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile
 3. again, my recommendation would be the two Enneagram books mentioned before

4. p. 173