
REVIEW

Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church, by James E. Beitler, III. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019. pp. 256. \$25.00 paper.

James E. Beitler's *Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church* takes its name from Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." The book takes its subject from the convergence of the Christian and rhetorical traditions, joining a conversation at least as old as Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*. Though the contexts and figures have changed, the core questions remain essentially the same: Can finite languages crafted by man convey the infinite truths of God? Does the unvarnished expression of truth require training in speech and argument? Does Christian discourse have a place for rhetorical theory and practice? Like Augustine, Beitler acknowledges the challenges before ultimately endorsing a distinctly Christian rhetoric. Indeed, his chapters suggest that it has been there all along.

To make this case, Beitler considers five exemplars of Christian expression: C.S. Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, and Marilynne Robinson. Drawn from across the last hundred years and around the globe, these five are selected not because they staked any particular claims on Christian rhetoric, but because their—primarily *written*—public messages demonstrate the potential for Christian witness in rhetorically savvy hands. Few critics would take issue with these choices. On the merits alone, they must rank among the most significant Christian rhetors of the twentieth—or in Robinson's case, twenty-first—century. Beitler considers each with care, placing all in conversation with rhetorical theorists both ancient and modern.

One matter that may be disputed, however, concerns the arrangement of the text, which seems more complex than necessary. Given the stature of his subjects, Beitler might simply consider them in chronological order, mapping their contributions longitudinally across recent history. This he mostly does, except that the chapters then also "track with the times and seasons of the church year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost," with each then "themed around a different element of the Christian worship service: collect, creed, sermon, confession, Eucharist, and benediction." Beitler explains that this braided organization reflects his conviction "that such ways of ordering time are among the church's, and indeed all of humanity's, greatest rhetorical achievements," a claim that feels somewhat overstated (18). Though the several layers do give the book a certain texture, stacking three analytical lenses one atop the other does not necessarily bring the subject into clearer focus.

Still, the center does hold, largely thanks to Beitler's running emphasis on *ethos* as it pertains to each of his subjects. Appropriately for a book on Christian witness, *Seasoned Faith* confers special status on the character and credibility of the rhetor, examining in each case how the speaker-writer crafts a public presentation deserving of the public's trust. Even more than reason and emotion, the successful Christian message depends upon the honest integrity of the sender in order to be received. In his first chapter, for example, Beitler lauds Lewis' conscious maintenance of "goodwill," a quality

traceable to Aristotle that demands treating the audience with humility, receptivity, and respect. Loosely synonymous with deliberation in “good faith,” goodwill precludes an officious rhetorical posture, requiring the speaker-writer to assume a divine equality with listener-readers. Modeled here by an Oxford don without excessive self-regard, its persuasive value is evident. This essay is arguably the best in the collection, and the one most intimately paired with a church season. In Lewis, Beitler identifies the animating force of Advent, illustrating how Christian rhetors may step back from the antagonism of earthly life and into the goodwill of expectation.

In the second chapter, Beitler examines *enargeia* as it appears in the plays of Dorothy Sayers. An accomplished dramatist and devout believer, Sayers critiqued the preachers of her day for failing to capture the narrative power of the Christian cosmology, remarking in her correspondence that “they’ve got the most terrific story in the world and *they don’t tell it*” (62). Drawing here on Quintilian, Beitler defines *enargeia* according to vivid, three-dimensional narration as it applies to—what could be, in the right hands—the greatest story ever told. Sayers embraced this challenge in *He That Should Come*, her radio play first broadcast on Christmas day of 1938, and considered here in light of Christmastide.

In chapter three, Beitler turns to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian most famous for his underground activities—and ultimately, his death—under the National Socialist regime. With an opening nod to Kenneth Burke, Beitler invokes “The Rhetoric of Hitler’s ‘Battle’” to set the scene for Bonhoeffer’s action, and *identification* as the heuristic through which to examine his witness. Specifically, Bonhoeffer’s clandestine ministry relied on a mix of revelation and concealment, whereby his congregants would identify themselves to and with each other, their allies, and the beleaguered Jews, while concealing their movements from the Nazis. Beitler then draws conclusions about the nature of Epiphany, meditating on the revelation by faith of an otherwise concealed Christ.

The fourth chapter considers Desmond Tutu, with special attention to his campaign against apartheid and leadership of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Beitler examines Tutu’s unapologetically Christian rhetoric as Chairman of the TRC, casting it alongside the published response of Afrikaner journalist Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. He does so with help from Maurice Charland, identifying both Tutu’s discourse and Krog’s response as *constitutive* rhetorics and situating both within the season of Lent.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, Beitler turns to Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* trilogy and its implicit employment of *ethos* as a “dwelling place,” allowing her Christian readers to “feel more *at home*” in their struggles and existential questions. In her books *Gilead*, *Home*, and *Lila*, Robinson depicts the quiet heartland life of the Ames family, with its members both devout and wayward. Because Robinson casts each character in a soft and sympathetic light, her fiction serves as the vehicle for a reassuring Christian rhetoric tolerant of honest doubts and difficulties. In these books, Beitler identifies a sacramental world that beckons readers to table, inviting them to a sort of Eastertide feast.

The book concludes with a discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia* as it applies to Christian evangelism. Acknowledging but sidestepping the long-running internal argument over “speaking in tongues,” Beitler recounts his five subjects as exemplary of the diverse avenues available to those hoping to craft a public Christian witness (203). Given the various talents dispersed across the body of Christ and the array

of traditional resources shared between, there is no reason why the “good news” should be presented in monolog. Rather, Beitler argues, the careful consideration and employment of Christian rhetoric, by a variety of speakers and writers across a range of genres and venues, is likely to yield a strong return from a broad assortment of audiences. His case studies support this claim.

Though addressed to a general audience of Christian readers, *Seasoned Faith* will be especially applicable to students and professors of rhetoric. Beitler grounds every page of the text within the rhetorical tradition, citing generously from Plato and Aristotle through Cicero and Quintilian through Erasmus and Ramus and all the way up to the *Journal of Communication and Religion*. The book may thus serve as a helpful introduction to the discipline as well as a compendium to the faith. The five core chapters will be most interesting to those already somewhat familiar with the figures under consideration, and may well deepen the understanding of those who know them well. As noted at points above, I think this book could be streamlined and clarified for more pronounced effect. But it is undeniably well-researched and argued, highlighting a cast of Christian men and women well-deserving of attention and emulation.

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