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Review of Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church

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Book Reviews

James E. Beitler III, *Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2019). 242 pages. \$25.00. ISBN 9780830852444.

Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church, by James E. Beitler III, presents illustrations from five Christian authors and communicators to spotlight the importance of rhetoric in sharing the Christian message. The five featured communicators are C. S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, and Marilynne Robinson. Beitler makes a good case that, although sharing the Good News is an important task for contemporary Christians, the principles and practice of rhetoric have been underused as a framework for helping Christians develop and disseminate the Christian message. Beitler notes that while the five people featured in the book are not recognized first and foremost as rhetors or rhetoricians, they nonetheless serve as case studies of exemplary communicators who can teach readers about the importance of being good advocates for the Christian message.

The book incorporates several concurrent themes that provide an overarching architecture for the ideas presented. First, strategies of rhetoric in general, and ethos (or good will) in particular, are promoted as important for persuading others to accept the Christian message. The introduction presents a well-articulated apologetic advocating for the importance of rhetoric as the seminal element in sharing the Christian message. Second, the book cleverly uses the seasons of the liturgical year to provide a coherent narrative linking the five authors. The Lewis chapter, “Preparing the Way,” focuses on Advent. Dorothy Sayers, the focus of Chapter 2, “Professing the

Creeds,” is applied to the Christmas season. “Preaching the Word,” the title of Bonhoeffer’s chapter, focuses on Epiphany. The Lenten season as illustrated by the writing of Desmond Tutu, is titled “Calling for Repentance.” The chapter illuminating Marilynne Robinson’s writing, “Hosting the Guest,” is framed in the season of Easter. A third theme embedded in the book, first noted in the introduction, is the “Rhetorics of Worship” in which Beitler suggests “the most persuasive forms of Christian witness are constructed by the worshiping body of Christ” (15). Finally, in an effort to synthesize the individual rhetorical elements of the five Christian authors, the last chapter, “Speaking in Tongues,” uses the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin to “bring back all of the book’s figures and introduce readers to Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia in order to reflect on the polyvocality of Christian witness” (21).

Sorting through the various themes can be challenging for the reader, who is asked to consider the importance of rhetoric, applications to liturgical seasons, heteroglossia, all with an eye toward enhancing the “rhetorics of worship.” Although the book generally succeeds in documenting how five Christian authors illustrate rhetorical applications in their work, these multiple, overlapping themes may need additional explication for the reader to fully understand and appreciate each theme. Ultimately, Beitler suggests that the goal of the book is to “encourage church members to reflect on various aspects of the rhetorical tradition, highlight important and practical ways of establishing *ethos* when witnessing, and bring the rhetorical facets of Christian worship into relief” (22). The book may well achieve that objective, especially among the most well-informed and well-read Christian rhetoricians. However, because it is more like a well-crafted paper presented at an English conference than a book accessible to the laity, the typical church member may need additional background to benefit from the well-researched details. The numerous footnotes (in some instances filling half a page) provide impressive scholarly documentation, but detract from the general rhythm of the writing and sometimes embed significant ideas. Given that one goal of the book is to help not just clergy, but *all* Christians, to understand and enhance their appreciation for rhetoric in the life of the church, a concluding chapter that would focus on “so what” applications of Beitler’s detailed discussion would add even greater utility to the rich scholarship presented in this book.

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