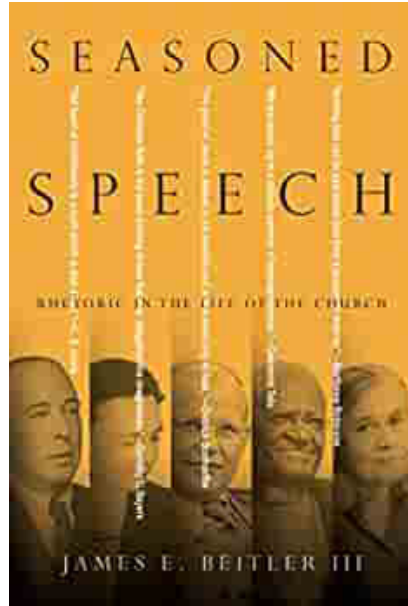


Book Review Supplement

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James E. Beitler III, *Seasoned Speech: Rhetoric in the Life of the Church*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

The Roman orator Quintilian defined a rhetorician as “a good man speaking well” (Quintilian Book 12, Chapter 1). In *Seasoned Speech*, James Beitler expands that definition to include five Christian masters in the art of persuasion and effective communication—C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, and Marilynne Robinson. Beitler offers a well-researched and perceptive survey of these five Christian authors, showing how all of them discovered the most effective rhetorical strategies to communicate their most significant ideas. Many of the principles Beitler discusses are not only pertinent to these authors but to all those seeking to improve their powers of persuasion and expression.



Seasoned Speech takes its title from Colossians 4:6: “Let your speech be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” In common parlance, the word *rhetoric* is usually used negatively, a reference to manipulative or deceitful speech or writing. But Beitler points out that rhetoric simply means the art of persuasion, or of effective communication in general. Those who say they will dispense with rhetoric are making their own rhetorical choice, trying to communicate simply and clearly with a minimum of verbal ornamentation. But “no-rhetoric rhetoric” is as much a chimera as the “non-hermeneutic hermeneutic” of some Bible commentators who claim they read Scripture for what it says, with no interpretive principles or presuppositions.

Beitler associates each of these five twentieth-century Christian writers with a key rhetorical strategy. C.S. Lewis in *God in the Dock* elicits a sense of *eunoia*, good will, in his readers. Dorothy L. Sayers in her radio play *He That Should Come* makes use of the classical device of *energeia*, vivid depiction, to shock listeners into realizing how startling the Christian creeds actu-

ally are. Dietrich Bonhoeffer utilizes contrasting tactics of identification and distancing, depending on which audience he is addressing: those who have surrendered to Nazism vs. those who are trying to subvert it. Desmond Tutu, as chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, enlisted the broadly African concept of *ubuntu*, that every person is a part of every other person. On the Commission, which was established by the post-apartheid government, Tutu consistently invoked spiritual values of confession and forgiveness. Marilynne Robinson, in her Gilead trilogy, sidesteps rational apologetics in favor of helping the reader "'feel more at home' with belief and some of its more difficult questions" (21).

Perhaps less persuasively, Beitler also associates each of these authors with the seasons of the liturgical calendar—Lewis with Advent, Sayers with Christmas, Bonhoeffer with Epiphany, Tutu with Lent, and Robinson with Easter. There are indeed some striking parallels here, though Beitler himself admits that another commentator might have discovered a different set of correlations.

Beitler is a seasoned scholar of rhetoric, and he does not consider these five Christian figures in isolation. The book starts with Augustine and his famous criticism of rhetoric as "the market of speechifying" (1). In analyzing Bonhoeffer, *Seasoned Speech* makes excellent use of the theories of Kenneth Burke, and the book's conclusion rightfully invokes Michael Bakhtin's notion of *heteroglossia*, "other tongues": a recognition that many languages deserve to be heard in order that rhetoric be seen as a community of voices, not a monologue of those in power. As Beitler concludes, "our liturgical practices offer us a variety of rhetorical resources for Christian witness" (198).

This book is especially praiseworthy for its thoroughness of research and clarity of style. Beitler interweaves the biographies and writings of these five authors with handbooks on rhetoric, cultural commentary, and edifying spiritual commentary. This is one of those books in which you cannot ignore the (voluminous) footnotes, as they often add substantive quotation, citation, and interpretive depth to the main text. Beitler takes difficult rhetorical concepts and strategies and makes them understandable with well-chosen definitions and illustrations. The prose style is lucid throughout and occasionally even poetic: Lewis and his friends enjoy "pipes and pints" (44); Hitler hopes to "Nazify, and eventually nullify, the church in Germany" (95).

Seasoned Speech could serve well as a textbook in a class on rhetoric and communication, particularly in Christian colleges and seminaries. Beitler covers many of the key theorists in the rhetorical tradition, from classic to contemporary, and he explains the components of rhetoric as they have been identified from ancient times to the present. Alert readers will find plenty of helpful guidelines for effective communication in this book, whether for a college essay or a Sunday sermon. All in all, *Seasoned Speech* is a welcome

addition to rhetoric theory in Christian contexts, and it offers both the theory and practical advice to help readers learn how the Good News may be spoken well.

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