

They're Not Just for Sundays: Homiletics, Public Address, and Organizational Rhetoric

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As much rhetorical criticism has indicated, genres occasionally shift, yielding to new rhetorical situations. The White House “Photo of the Day,” for example, demonstrates how presidential rhetoric has evolved to encompass modern communication practices and expectations. At the same time, pre-existing genres of rhetoric are often put to new uses. For instance, Barack Obama and other American political figures frequently adopt generic forms with Judeo-Christian origins (see John Murphy’s essay, “Barack Obama, the Exodus Tradition, and the Joshua Generation”). These generic adoptions and evolutions demonstrate the modern extensions of my research, which focuses chiefly on religious rhetoric and, more recently, early Church homiletics as organizational rhetoric.

One section of my dissertation, for example, identifies how the jeremiad, or the form of speech exhibited by the prophet Jeremiah, was adopted and adapted by early Christian rhetors. The jeremiad and prophetic discourse in general have continually been relied upon by orators—from Jeremiah to Barack Obama—to move their audiences. Attention is perhaps no better won than through words that threaten and even condemn with divine authority. And while the jeremiad has received much scholarly attention, more remains to be understood of its history. One question of merit, for example, is how the prophetic tradition, especially the jeremiad, evolved during the early years of the Church in light of the arrival of Christ. In one chapter of my dissertation, I trace the influence of these rhetorical shifts in the rhetoric of the early Church and, more specifically, in a homily given by Saint Basil. Basil’s homily “In Time of Famine and Drought” provides a clear example of the early Christian adoption and adaption of the jeremiad. In my chapter, I conduct a generic analysis of Basil’s homily and argue that, as a presbyter, Basil constitutes a new middle ground between a strategic rhetor and an inspired prophet to meet the evolving needs and nature of the early Church. The ethos and form that Basil presents showcase a rhetorical reinvention of the traditional Hebrew jeremiad.

My focus on early Church homiletics allows me to blend a variety of scholarship and create, through the union of diverse perspectives, what I see as a magnificent mosaic. Because homiletics encapsulates a number of specialty research areas, the subject bridges disparate

fields and potentially offers valuable implications for theologians, historians, classical scholars, rhetorical critics, and organizational rhetoricians.

Although grounded in public address scholarship, my primary research on religious rhetoric is subtly connected to the study of organizational rhetoric; the Church, after all, is one of the largest and oldest global organizations. Several of my side research projects retain more overt organizational frames. Two recently published articles, for example, explore how visual representations of organizations (a strip club and, separately, the National Pan Hellenic Council) communicate un/intentional messages. Another project (currently under review) explores the visual apologia of the California dairy industry. As with many scholars, these (seemingly disparate) projects are equally informed by my rhetorical training, my personal interests, and my local concerns.

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