

ACADEMIA | Letters

The Missing Concept Among Those Who Speak The Most!

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“Preachers” are some of the most exercised public speakers in society today. What other group spends more hours in speech preparation and actual presentation than the 1000’s weekly sermonizers across America and the globe?¹ One might make the argument that professional speechwriters rank right up there. However, few of them actually “practice what they write.”

Aristotle wrote three books on public speaking. While the academic rhetorical world knows this, it may come as a surprise this most practice group in the art of public speaking – “preachers” – does not know that simple fact. Few preachers have spent any time in the study of classical or contemporary communication theory! Their focus has been on the content of their message far more than its effective presentation.

In a typical “seminary” education, two or three “homiletic classes”² are part of the three-year curriculum. That fact alone is rather shocking since those who spend their lives speaking publicly and who live in a world of words have little awareness of classical rhetorical or contemporary communication theory. In fact, the seminary professors who teach such classes have little-to-no rhetorical education. There is little difference between “Fundamental of Speech-101” and what is taught in most seminaries.

While some fundamental concepts are taught, one of the most valuable concepts unknown to most preachers, not to mention even “homiletic professors,” is the Aristotelian concept of “topoi.” One of the primary reasons that it is so valuable and essential to public speakers and

¹ Some have estimated that there are “around eight million church buildings on Earth.” If each church has only one speaker-preacher, there is a large audience for anyone who wants to reach out to a new and unique audience. *<https://thecompletepilgrim.com/many-churches-denominations-america-world/>

²“Homiletics” is the academic nomenclature for the study and practice of pulpit speech. While there have been 100’s of books published on the subject, most spend an inordinate amount of time on the history of preaching and examples of great sermons. Read any journal focused on pastors, preachers, or spiritual ministry, and you will find a lack of discussion and examination of communication theory and practice.

preachers is the “aloneness” of the communicator’s experience. Most

preachers practice their sermonic art at small churches with a limited staff. There are few, if any, other “public speakers” on staff who can provide rhetorical assistance or first-aid.

In many cases, the average preacher finds himself or herself left to their own mental and creative abilities. Few others are actively present to rhetorically contribute as he-she designs, organizes, and constructs their sermon. Few have the opportunity to sit around a conference table with other preachers or staff members to “brain-storm.” There are no “professional speechwriters” around to even layout an approach, write a preliminary script for consideration, review, revise, or polish. Typically, there is one “brain” in the brainstorming process when it comes to preachers.

That is why *one of the most valuable classical rhetorical concepts is “topoi.”* Aristotle knew that his students needed to develop the ability to call up possible arguments, approaches, directions, and lines of thought on the spot *and on their own*. His students were taught the concept of “topoi” so that they could *self-generate* ways to best drive home their point when they were “alone.”

There are mental “places” that a speaker can “go” to flesh out the speech or sermon content. Those “places” or “topoi” are mental-generators. They are part of the classical “invention” process, which is foreign to most homiletic professors and its most prolific practitioners - preachers.

For those unfamiliar with the concept of “topoi,” here is a simple example. If you were to ask someone to create a poster about an upcoming event, a seasoned “poster-maker” would know that . . .

Where

When (date AND time)

What

Who (is invited)

Why (why should you come?). . . .

. . . are all parts of creating a basic and effective flyer or poster.

Often, a “novice-poster maker” will leave out one of those “categories of thought” and have to rework the poster. There are the “mental places” that a novice soon comes to understand and “goes” in poster preparation and presentation. Yet, other “places” are still traveled by the most proficient and effective “promotional poster makers.”

Likewise, there are “mental places” that speakers and preachers can “go” to stimulate their thinking in preparation and presentation. Over time, a preacher-speaker needs to develop a mental list of all kinds of “topoi” (if not an actual tangible notebook) that can operate as a “mental pony motor” in the “aloneness” of speech-sermon preparation. That diverse list of

topoi can and will serve as a mental map for traveling down some different roads that arrive at the same general destination.

Imagine the task of preparing a “new” speech-sermon every week for a “serial-audience,” as their “serial-speaker preacher.” In fact, many preachers prepare and present more than one sermon a week. They would tell you that sermons are a significant and demanding part of their weekly responsibilities. While they understand the spiritual truths and principles they aim to preach and teach, they scramble week after week to effectively prepare and present those concepts. As many preachers know, sermon preparation is a demanding “Saturday night marathon.”

Over time, preachers employ “topoi” – yet unknowingly! Their sermonic style reflects that they have at least one place they mentally go in preparation and presentation. Their sermons have a curious similarity because they have gone to the same “mental-sermonic-place” time and time again. Over time, preachers may use a select few topoi (ways to make their arguments and drive home their points), which work for them, and which then characterize their sermonic style. They have become comfortable with the rhetorical roads they have learned to travel. As humorously described, their message is “three points and a poem.”

However, many alternative roads are never traveled. Other “places” remain unthought because the speaker preacher has become comfortable with developing the content of their sermons the way they have learned to do for years. Nevertheless, they may not consciously know and understand neither what they are doing nor how to drive home their point or argument a different way, to take a far different and/or even better road to that same destination. Understanding the concept, and recognizing the use of various topoi, allows for rhetorical effectiveness, conscious replication, and sermonic variety.

Those who travel in the world of words can add more and more pages to that mental or written compendium of “topoi” as they analytically listen to the “public speaking-preaching-politicking-lawyering-marketing” of others. Different ways of driving the argument, developing a point, using an illustration, highlighting a concept, etc., become more and more apparent to the speaker-preacher who goes analytical when listening to other effective practitioners in the art of public address. By going analytical, it causes one to realize that other “places to go” to make the point, make the argument, and/or drive home a truth or principle.

Understanding the concept of “topoi,” mentally or physically stowing them away, and calling them up during sermonic preparation is one of the most valuable and practical public speaking-preaching tools available to the “lonesome” preacher. Too often, the concept of “topoi” remains untaught to some of the most consistently exercised in the art of public speaking – the preachers. Preachers and homiletic professors would not only be well served to study classical and contemporary rhetorical theory but to focus on an understanding of how

“topoi” work in the preparation and presentation of sermons.

The need for a book or manual that *clarifies* the concept of “topoi,” and which provides repeated analytical examples from the contemporary world of public address and preaching, is long overdue. It is a book waiting to be written!