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Finding Their Voices—A Rhetorical Reflection

Gary S. Selby

I am honored to respond to D'Esta Love's pioneering work *Finding Their Voices: Sermons by Women in Churches of Christ*, which I read with delight. In a few cases, I was in the audience when the sermons were first preached, and going through the book evoked rich memories of communal worship. At other times, since I know the preachers themselves, I was able to imagine the unique rhythms and resonances of their voices as I read. But in every case, I found myself enlightened, challenged, and ushered into a deeper knowledge of the Word and of the faith.

I've been asked to respond to this book as a rhetorical scholar, and most of what I say will consist in a reflection from that perspective. But first I must speak as a child of the church. When my own congregation, the Church of Christ in Columbia, Maryland, was working through questions about the role of women in public worship in the early 1990s, one of the things that hit me then was how many of my sisters and mothers in the church had experienced the same call to preaching that I had felt as a young college student. Like me, many of them naturally engaged Scripture by imagining sermons. I also saw them facing a dilemma of how to honor that calling in a system that gave them no encouragement and very little practical guidance or experience in public speaking. And I saw them step into more public roles with great ambivalence and even fear. Regardless of what anyone said, none of the women in my church was itching to grab the mike.

As I read *Finding Their Voices*, I could hear the same deep stirrings in the lives of these women, the same struggles to make sense of their calling, the same ambivalence. But I also heard great courage, and perhaps also glimpses of hope that they might find a voice in this religious tradition—a hope that I share.

Now, to a rhetorical analysis. In rhetorical criticism, we distinguish between rhetorical *acts* and rhetorical *artifacts*. The act occurs in the ephemeral moment when the rhetor speaks to the audience. When the rhetor ceases speaking, the act is over. But traces of the act remain within the artifacts left behind—in recordings, transcripts, eyewitness accounts, etc. One way to critique a speech or a sermon is to work backward from these traces in an attempt to get as close as possible to the act itself, recreating the particular rhetorical situation in which a speech occurs, and then analyzing the rhetor's attempt to speak persuasively in that situation. *Finding Their Voices* contains a series of twenty-nine such artifacts that we might analyze in order to discover and critique the strategies with which these rhetors sought to achieve their ends.

From this perspective, however, as individual rhetorical artifacts, they are, well, unremarkable. In fact, part of what makes them striking is how unassuming they are, given the circumstances in which many took place. Kathy Pully's introductory statement captures that irony about her own sermon: "It was much less remarkable than the circumstances that surrounded it" (31). In a number of cases, what we are reading are the very first attempts of the contributors to preach before a mixed gender audience and, in some, their first time ever to preach in a Sunday morning Church of Christ assembly. And in a few instances, we are seeing what, for the churches themselves, is a historical moment, the very first time in their own history that a woman has entered the sacred space of the Sunday pulpit.

Throughout the history of rhetoric, all theorizing about persuasion has been rooted in the notion of the *kairos*, that never-before-seen and never-to-be-repeated moment, this gathering of these listeners in this place, facing this unique, unrepeatably set of circumstances. Virtue and excellence in persuasion centered on inventing a fitting discursive response to the *kairos*. And if there were ever a *kairos* that begged for some unusual or arresting response, it is this one—speakers and churches crossing the Rubicon of women not just sharing a meditation or a devotional thought, but preaching a sermon. And as the introduction to each contribution makes abundantly, even painfully clear, the preachers themselves recognize the gravity of the moment. Yet remarkably, with rare exception, they do not call attention to that *kairos*. They offer no defense of the appropriateness of what they are doing; nor do they employ any of the time-worn strategies for winning over a hostile audience. Rather, they simply preach.

The sermons themselves, moreover, do not stand out as paradigms of what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell called the *feminine style*, which she pointed to as a contrast to masculine forms of discourse, which are marked by what Blair, Brown, and Baxter identified as “impersonal abstraction, disciplinary territoriality, individuation and hierarchy.”¹ The feminine style, Campbell argued, reflects a personal tone and a strong identification between speaker and audience; it relies for its persuasive force on personal experience and extended narratives and anecdotes offered within inductive argumentative structures, and it has as its goal to empower its listeners.² As Dow and Tonn observed, these features of discourse reflect the demands of the private sphere of social life to which women have traditionally been relegated, a sphere in which women learned the “traditionally female crafts of emotional support, nurturance, empathy, and concrete reasoning.”³ To be sure, we do see these characteristics in many of the sermons, but their presence is not particularly striking, perhaps because contemporary preaching itself, especially as it takes on a more pastoral focus, reflects the qualities of the feminine style—it is relational, participatory, cooperative, inductive, and oriented toward the concrete and the personal. Thus, the sermons are not striking as models of the feminine style.

Further, inevitably absent from the book is a component of the sermonic act that might clearly mark these artifacts as unique for Churches of Christ, and that is the physical voices of the preachers themselves. In his book *The Divine Voice*, Stephen Webb unfolds what he calls a *theology of sound* that accentuates the crucial role of the voice in the communication of divine revelation.⁴ He reminds us that in the biblical tradition, God’s presence comes to us not as an image or a written text but as a divine voice—a voice that gets embodied in frail and finite human voices. In this sense, he argues, “the effective sermon is a miracle . . . analogous to the incarnation. The sermon consists of human words that nonetheless reveal the divine.”⁵ Building on the work of Walter Ong, Webb also underscores the unique power of the voice to create community. Whereas sight is fundamentally a private event, hearing is communal, establishing an “intimate relationship between source and perception”; we are most “present to each other in sound.”⁶ Likewise, in her ethnographic study of her “sistah proclaimers and preachers,” Theresa Fry Brown argued that much of what sets the sermons of women in the African American church apart from their male counterparts is the unique “preaching passions, body movements, [and] voice quality” that women bring to the sermonic performance.⁷ From this perspective, then, the power of these sermons would have resided, at least in part, in the fact that the Word was embodied within the bodies and voices of the women who preached them and, of course, this dimension of the preaching act is lost in an anthology of texts. For us to grasp the full power of these

1. Carole Blair, Julia R. Brown, and Leslie A. Baxter, “Disciplining the Feminine,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994), 389.

2. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak For Her: A Critical Study of Early Feminist Rhetoric* (vol. 1), 13.

3. Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn, “‘Feminine Style’ and Political Judgment in the Rhetoric of Ann Richards,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 287.

4. Stephen H Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

5. Webb 178.

6. Webb 39.

7. Theresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God’s Word* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 9, 174.

sermons, we would need to be immersed in that tension of being a Church of Christ audience hearing a good sermon uttered in the unique tones and inflections of a woman's voice. On the other hand, this lack of an actual voice supports the book's overall persuasive aim by inviting readers to consider the content of the sermons on their own merits.

In sum, the sermons contained in this volume offer little if any overt defense for women preaching; they seem not to accentuate a constellation of stylistic or structural dimensions that mark them as uniquely feminine; and they divorce the actual female voice from the sermon's content. So what *do* they give us? Simply this: *good preaching*. In some cases, great preaching. We encounter sermons that are solid, thoughtful, and challenging, that are attuned to the needs of their congregations and to the particular exigencies of the moment—the sale of a church building, the tragedy of 9/11, a college graduation, a feast day on the liturgical calendar, or the shared pain of family and friends gathered in a hospital chapel. While not every contribution is a gourmet feast, each serves up a theologically substantive and homiletically solid meal. This is the kind of preaching about which I found myself saying, “Yes, I could listen to this every Sunday.” They embody the kind of character Jeanene Reese described in her sermon's postscript, where “the word of God is spoken faithfully” and “the emphasis is and always should be on the message and not the messenger” (110). Indeed, we might even get so caught up in the sermons themselves that we forget these are sermons by women. It is in this sense, then, as artifacts capturing individual, strategic responses to a significant and challenging rhetorical kairos, that the sermons included in *Finding Their Voices* are unremarkable. And yet it is also in their character as “good preaching” that they have power.

But there is another way to assess *Finding Their Voices* as rhetoric, and that is to analyze the book itself as a rhetorical act. From this perspective, our task is not to try and reenter the rhetorical moment when each sermon was preached but, instead, to step back and consider the book in its entirety as an act of persuasion. And here, things get interesting. What we have is an elegant, hardbound book, artfully designed and packaged, published by the Church of Christ's only university press, presenting the sermons (not the reflections or devotional thoughts) of twenty-nine women all with roots in the Church of Christ. That, by itself, serves a legitimating function for women occupying the pulpit.

Beyond simply legitimating women's preaching through the publication of a collected volume of sermons, however, the book is rhetorically forceful in the way that it brings together these sermons, unremarkable beyond their status as good preaching, in conversation with the deeply personal and compelling reflections of the women who preached them. We find running throughout these reflections the preachers' acute sense of the gravity of the moment when they step into the pulpit, as “an important life event” (31) both for them and for the church. Some remembered feeling the pressure of knowing they were representing women everywhere: “I wanted to be good enough to make it work for all women everywhere. I felt intense responsibility” (37). Many remember feeling anxiety, with several recalling how they stepped into the pulpit with pounding heart. As one described the experience:

It felt like I was planning to step on holy ground that might sink beneath me, and yes, I did wonder if the sky would fall—perhaps not literally, but I had genuine fears about bad things happening. What if someone disrupted the service because a female was speaking? What if a church member walked out? What if I felt so awkward that the words would not come out? (31).

But those introductions also capture a profound love for God, Scripture, and the church. In many cases they give voice to a deep sense of calling to the ministry of preaching that, for some, went back to early childhood, as well as to deep frustration at the prospect that their sense of calling would never find fulfillment in this tradition. In sum, the stories that accompany the sermons are remarkable, profoundly moving, for they give us an inside view into the hearts and minds of these women. And of course, if we allow ourselves to hear their stories, we might find ourselves lowering our guard and listening to the sermons themselves with greater sympathy and grace. For it is hard not to root for the person into whose story we have entered.

And it is here, in the juxtaposition of these stories of struggle and calling, set side by side with examples of plain good preaching, that *Finding Their Voices* has its power as an act of persuasion. We hear the stories of calling and of a deep desire, not to seize power or “take over the church,” but to bring a Word from the Lord to people the preachers know intimately and love deeply, all fueled by “a burning fire shut up in . . . [the] bones” (Jer 20.9). Their example challenges the stereotyped attribution of motives related to power which often shut down this conversation, and even invites us to rethink our traditional prohibitions against women speaking. All of this makes *Finding Their Voices* a compelling, pioneering, and welcome contribution to our movement’s history.

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