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Appearing four times in the Synoptics, Jesus’ warning to his disciples that they will be coerced into a witness involves a command not to worry about what to say and a promise of divine assistance. This is direct instruction about rhetorical practice, yet few scholars have made explicit the connection between Jesus’ logion and the broader range of Christian strategic communication. By considering the communication assumptions embedded in Jesus’ command and promise, I uncover how time and power can serve as coordinates for an ethic of Christian rhetoric. These directly affect how a disciple is to conceptualize normatively the strategic preparation and presentation of the gospel.


INTRODUCTION

Any attempt to articulate a Christ-based rhetoric runs headlong into a fundamental question: What is the role of divine power in human rhetorical practice? If our persuasive messages (preaching, teaching, evangelism) ought to be fully dependent on divine direction, then the focus of message preparation ought to shift from a strong sense of human agency to a weaker sense of that agency. What does this shift mean for the speaker’s rhetorical training, preparation, and performance? Does divine power require speakers to minimize or relinquish the intentional strategizing of rhetorical power? How does a Christian communicator faithfully enact rhetorical effort while maintaining dependency on divine inspiration?

An answer to these questions will take the shape of a normative theory of Christian rhetorical practice. I accept as a starting point that the Christian advocate ought to submit reverentially to divine power. Therefore, these reflections on the role of intentional strategizing in preaching or teaching will point toward an ethic for persuasive discourse, namely, a description of how one is to practice rhetoric under the rule of Christ.
This is a well-worn path of inquiry and I do not presume that my answer adds novel ethical insight to the centuries of reflection on these matters. Rather, I will bring Matt 10:17–20 and its Synoptic parallels—Mark 13:9–11, Luke 12:11–12, and Luke 21:12–15—to the discussion, a logion that contemporary NT scholars rarely exposit in any depth in relation to rhetorical ethics or practice.  

By reflecting on these passages, I will uncover assumptions about human and divine discourse that sharpen our focus on the proper performative relationship of strategy and dependence, of rhetorical technique and spiritual inspiration.

**Baseline Understanding**

I begin with the following baseline understanding of rhetorical practice and divine power: human rhetorical capacity (involving skill, training, and/or practice in persuasive speaking) is compatible with the divine work of proclaiming, preaching, and teaching the gospel. Although this position is itself worthy of continuing debate, it has garnered sufficient support…

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among scholars to justify it as a workable starting point. Of course, this baseline position assumes that any human practice aspiring to be in harmony with God’s divine work ought to be performed with a dependence on the Spirit’s guidance. The general scholarly consensus, then, is that a Christian’s rhetorical strategizing is one of the resources that the Spirit uses in bringing forth God’s word to persons.

This consensus appears in recent scholarship on 1 Cor 2:1–5, in which Paul distinguishes between eloquence and divine power: “My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (2:4). In his helpful review of the relevant research, Anthony Thiselton explains that Paul is distinguishing between the preferred rhetorical practices of Corinth—involving the pursuit of status through an “applause-generating” discourse—and his own rhetorical practice, which rejects “seductive shortcuts” and “self-advertisement” through a dependency on the Spirit’s powerful agency. Thus, Paul is not disavowing rhetorical technique (for he uses it throughout his oeuvre); he is insisting, rather, that “something more is involved that speaks to the heart as well as to the mind.” Lim summarizes: Paul is “willing to employ human eloquence . . . as long as it remains subservient to the message of the Gospel and the divine work of the Spirit.”

Other commentators have concurred with a similar general read of Paul’s distinction. The exegetical challenge in this passage is to specify what exactly about eloquence Paul disavows. Or, as André Resner Jr. states it, the task is to identify “how Paul uses rhetoric in expressing the gospel—both in epistle and in proclamation—even as he critiques rhetoric.”

Most scholars tend to agree that Paul is drawing a distinction between the self-aggrandizing rhetorical practices of Corinthian sophists and a Christ-centered discourse that eschews the limelight of Corinthian fame. Still, though, the exact line distinguishing between a spiritual rhetoric and an

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3. All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.


5. Thiselton, Corinthians, 223; also see Gordon D. Fee The First Epistle to the Corinthians (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 94 n. 27.


7. Resner, Preacher and the Cross, 98, emphasis in original.
earthly rhetoric is hard to draw, and scholars will vary slightly in their views. Craig Keener emphasizes the difference between “persuasive form and truth content,” with Paul working the philosophical distinction between a groundless rhetoric, with its “shallow forms of delivery,” and a rhetoric grounded in substance. Gordon Fee distinguishes between Paul’s “persuasion” and that of the “wandering sophists and orators,” “where the power lay in the person and his delivery.” The type of eloquence celebrated in Corinth was “self congratulatory” and “divisive,” rooted in the competitive desire to achieve “excellence.” Similarly, Alan Johnson characterizes the type of eloquence Paul disavows as that of the “Sophists, who competed with great showmanship of rhetoric at the Isthmian Games.”

Michael Bullmore advances a more precise characterization, arguing that Paul is disavowing the “syllogistic virtuosity” of Corinthian orators who favored an Asianist grand style. Resner, in his own impressive review of theological and homiletical resources on this topic, focuses on the role of ethos in Paul’s ministry, emphasizing the contrast between Paul’s cruciform mindset with the “cultural credibility standards current in Corinth.”

It is worth noting, in additional support of this baseline position, that this recent scholarship on 1 Cor 2:1–5 dovetails comfortably with Augustine’s classical reconciliation of rhetoric and Christian preaching. He directly addresses the proper relationship between human power and divine inspiration in De doctrina christiana, claiming that divine inspiration works during the whole process of speech preparation and performance (4.30.63). To reject training or preparation in the name of Spirit-dependence, he reasons, is to think contrary to the witness of the NT. For instance, Jesus and Paul instruct in prayer even though Jesus promises that the Father knows our needs prior to our asking; and Paul provides ample instructions about all matters of ministry and doctrine, even commanding the young preacher to study for the challenging tasks that lie ahead (Matt 6:8–13; 2 Tim 2:15; Aug., Doctr. chr., 4.16.33). Certainly, Augustine emphasizes that the preacher fully commit to prayer and the proclamation of Scripture; these take priority over the learning of eloquence (4.15.32; 4.5.8). And if the speaker does not have the ability or training to speak eloquently, Augustine explains, then it is far better to pursue godliness so that the preacher’s “way of living may be, as it were, an eloquent speech” (4.29.61 [Norlin, LCL]). Nonetheless, the ideal remains: speakers should include the techniques of

9. Fee, Corinthians, 92, 94.
rhetorical power in the preparation for their sermons and lessons (4.2.3; 4.4.6). Augustine is no ally for those who avoid planning discourse in the name of godliness.

Overall, then, Paul’s dissociation of human eloquence and divine power in 1 Cor 2:1–5 does not establish a clean break between the suasory resources of rhetorical art and the spiritual power of divine wisdom. Rather, Paul is drawing a fundamental ethical distinction between valued rhetorical practice in the name of Christ and those rhetorical practices operating according to the wisdom of the world; he is rejecting “not rhetoric, but the cultural values wedded to it.” Paul inevitably generates discourse that is rhetorically astute; however, its effectiveness cannot be determined by the reigning standards for rhetorical excellence within Corinth, or, for that matter, anywhere that rhetorical mastery takes priority over the crucified and risen Christ. As Augustine puts it: Paul was not concerned about “how his speech is preferred to that of another” (Doctr. chr., 4.28.61). Yet, Paul’s discourse was designed to achieve effects consistent with the truth of Christ. We ought not accept, therefore, a deep chasm between the power of human rhetorical art and the power of divine inspiration. The challenge, rather, is to move beyond the specific situation of Paul’s Corinth and articulate the contemporary relationship of human rhetorical intentionality to the power of God’s Spirit. What is the point at which human artistry treads on the territory reserved for the work of divine power?

Given this baseline position on rhetorical power and divine power, we need to consider the logion of Jesus in which he explicitly references suasory discourse and its role in the disciples’ gospel witness. Although these passages are readily dismissed by most contemporary scholars as having any implications for the types of rhetorical situations faced by most preachers and teachers, a closer look will guide us in articulating the ethical line between acceptable and unacceptable rhetorical practice.

COMMAND AND PROMISE

Appearing four times in the three synoptic Gospels (with some significant variations, to be noted in course), the instruction consists of a command and a promise. In each passage, Jesus gives disciples advance notice of their persecution and the inevitability that some of them will be

brought before a tribunal. At such an occasion, he commands, they ought not prepare in advance, trusting instead that God will give them whatever discourse is needed at that time. Matthew puts it this way:

Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles. When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt 10:17–20)\(^\text{17}\)

Herein lies the rub, of course. At the very moment that rhetorical preparation would be highly beneficial for defending against false accusations, Jesus seemingly disavows it.\(^\text{18}\)

What do we make of this? Three observations lay the groundwork for the deeper exploration of agency and rhetoric. First, in all the synoptic accounts, Jesus’ command not to worry about speaking is highly specific, referring to the forced appearance before both secular and religious councils and magistrates. In Luke 12:11–12, in fact, the command follows a warning about apostasy; Jesus gives assurance that God’s Spirit will provide words to the believer whose fear and worry might otherwise overwhelm a faithful testimony.\(^\text{19}\) Jesus, then, is not providing a general directive for the more frequent and less hostile speaking occasions faced by pastors, itinerant ministers, or apologists. He is focusing on an exceptionally difficult and threatening situation, perhaps a situation where a believer’s fear of betrayal (and blasphemy “against the Holy Spirit,” Luke 12:10) is palpable.\(^\text{20}\)


Furthermore, the grammar in Mark 13:9 might indicate that the testimony given by the disciples will actually incriminate them; thus, their suffering is no mere option but the likely outcome of what they say, a *fait accompli* of whatever speech the Spirit gives to them.21 The command, then, ought not be stretched to deny a religious communicator’s strategic intentionality in the vast majority of speaking situations.22

Furthermore, and second, the opposition between “you who speak” and “the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” typically is not a forced disjunction in Semitic thought (Matt 10:20); it is a contrast that emphasizes reverence and dependence, not the absence of agential action.23 Indeed, in the Luke 12 pericope, Jesus also commands against worrying in matters of clothing and eating, promising that God will clothe and feed his disciples (vv. 22–31). Just as we ought not force a dichotomy between divine provision and human responsibility in making basic provisions for food and clothing, neither ought we force the matter in speaking.24

Despite these important contextual and Semitic considerations delimiting the application of Jesus’ teaching, a third observation works against marginalizing the application of this teaching to more extreme rhetorical situations. Although the disjunction between human and divine speaking may not be absolute, the broader scriptural pattern prevents us from trivializing the distinction. The OT provides specific cases, such as Moses and Jeremiah, where a full dependence of human words on divine words is effectuated (Exod 4:12; Jer 1:7–9). Balaam’s ass further illustrates that, indeed, God can speak without human agency (Num 22:28–30).25 And the

NT phenomenon of glossolalia further evidences the passivity of human agency in some circumstances. As Davies and Allison note, early Christian texts often link the Spirit’s inspiration with a disciple’s appearance before the authorities.26 The four synoptic passages about the divine provision of words, then, coalesce with the broader scriptural testimony and subsequent Christian experience concerning the rightful subordination of human words to divine power. God’s work is done only through his power, not through mere human cleverness (e.g., 1 Cor 2:1–5). In reflecting on Moses’ ineloquence, Stephen Webb writes: “[Moses’ condition] is played out again and again with the prophets, who, like Moses, must struggle to find the courage to speak on God’s behalf. It is as if faith is functionally equivalent to the power of speech, a power that is not of our own making.”27 So, although we rightly limit Jesus’ command and promise in Matt 10:17–20 and parallel passages to the specific occasion of a forced testimony (μαρτύριον, Matt 10:18), we see in his logion the echoes of a more expansive teaching that ought not be readily dismissed through narrowing its application. This ought to give substantive pause to Christian rhetors seeking to do God’s work through strategic discourse. What can we draw from this teaching that affects rhetorical practice?

SHAPING DEPENDENCY

The most obvious lesson, of course, is fully consistent with the baseline position on divine power and human rhetoric I sketched above: a Christian’s preaching and teaching ought to proceed through a full dependence on divine power as given through the Spirit. Thus, the priority shaping all preparation and delivery of a message is the prayerful consideration of God’s word and the full openness of the speaker to the Spirit’s direction. That Jesus’ “divine speech” logion is directed specifically to instances of coerced witness does not gainsay the panoramic scriptural portrayal of human speech in which his teaching takes shape. This logion does not alter that portrayal but adds a specialized application highlighting and reinforcing it.

Beyond this, though, the logion provides additional insights that orient the entire speaking process, including the ends desired and the means used to achieve those ends. By looking at the presumption of temporality within the sayings, I identify both time and power as coordinates for an ethical rhetoric. Temporality is the foundational analysis, and this will allow a briefer reflection on the dynamic of earthly and divine power.

Time

In three of the four passages, Jesus highlights worry, but his phrasing also indicates that speech preparation is in view. In Matt 10:19 and Luke 12:11,

26. Davies and Allison, Matthew, 185; also see Stott, Between, 302–9.
Jesus commands not to worry about “how” (πῶς) to speak, which extends the command beyond the “what” and into the means of the discourse. In these two passages, and in Mark 13:11, Jesus also promises that divine speech will be given in the specific time (ὥρα) of the appearance before the authorities, as though prior planning in this instance is contrary to divine inspiration. As William L. Lane explains: “The servant of God would not have to be concerned over Roman judicial procedure or the lack of adequate counsel.” The implication in these three passages is made explicit in Luke 21:14: the disciples ought not to “prepare...in advance” (προμελετάω). This added focus on temporality is not at all a necessary component of the comfort that comes from the Spirit giving them words. Although early Christian documents presume that the Spirit is “most manifest in times of crisis or great difficulty,” this comforting presence need not prohibit the Spirit giving words anytime, including in the days or hours leading up to their arrest. What is it about such an occasion that makes an impromptu discourse necessary? Liefeld and Pao suggest that, on the occasion of persecution, the “preparation of an adequate defense is hardly possible.” Such a gloss, though, begs the question of temporality: Why would the disciples’ advance preparation be inadequate for the persecution that Jesus assures them will be forthcoming? Other answers are equally unsatisfactory. France maintains that the intimidating situation and the disciples’ “low social status” would combine to overwhelm their “intelligence and rhetorical power,” thus requiring divine intervention. Similarly, Gundry labels the disciples “nobodies” who would be “easily overawed.” The inability of the disciples to perform satisfactorily in times of crisis, though, is an insufficient account of the full situational dynamic that makes their training or strategic planning undesirable.

It is worth reiterating that Jesus’ primary emphasis here is to reduce anxiety and assure divine provision; he must deal directly with the human propensity to worry about what lies ahead—especially if certain persecution is on the horizon—and the resulting tendency among his disciples to neglect faithful submission to God’s care (cf. Matt 6:34). Yet, anticipatory planning need not be incompatible with submission. In fact, one might surmise, in contrast to Liefeld and Pao, France, and Gundry, that it would be more comforting for the disciples to have the Spirit give them words

29. Lane, Mark, 463.
30. In Mark 13:11, TR includes the phrase μὴ μελετᾶτε (“neither do ye premeditate” KJV), which is absent in WH. Among its wide range of ancient uses, Greek orators used μελετάω to indicate speech preparation (e.g., Demosthenes, Mid., 191; Isocrates, 15.291; also see Marshall, Luke, 768). The Lucan term for premeditate in 21:14, προμελετάω, is a hapax legomenon formed from μελετάω.
31. Davies and Allison, Matthew, 185.
33. France, Matthew, 393.
34. Gundry, Mark, 739.
beforehand in a time of relative peace and in the context of mutual support and encouragement. Such advance work would give them confidence that they would be saying something fully consistent with God’s plan. Jesus’ teaching in this logion, therefore, is peculiar. He is doing more than urging disciples to trust and not to worry; he is specifically promising that God’s Spirit (or he himself, Luke 21:15) will enable witness at the very moment it is needed, and not before. Why does he deny prior inspiration or prior preparation?

Jesus is fully capable, of course, of providing his disciples with a general template for ministry-related discourse or even specific words that they should use on specific occasions: he did this when asked about prayer (Matt 6:8–13—and parallels), when he commissioned them (Matt 10:7), on the occasion of his entry into Jerusalem and with the preparations for the Passover (Matt 21:3, Mark 11:1–6, Luke 19:29–34; Matt 26:18, Mark 14:13–14, Luke 22:10–11), and he vastly expanded their discourse by commissioning them to speak forth the commands of his entire teaching ministry (Matt 28:20). In preparing the disciples for their most hostile speaking occasion, though, Jesus gives neither a general template nor specific phrasing, and he directs them to avoid preplanning. The disciples are to be fully dependent on the Spirit within the specific moment of their coerced witness, relying neither on scripted answers nor a designed defense. Jesus’ command and promise, then, foregrounds a radical temporal dimension of divine dependence. Why?

Jesus’ insistence on inspiration within the moment is not surprising given the fundamental nature of effective discourse. At the level of its temporal sensibility, his teaching is fully consistent with an axiom of oral communication concerning the linkage between message timeliness and message outcomes. This presumption was everywhere apparent in Greek oratorical theory and training, ranging from the metaphysical rhetoric of Socrates, to the philosophical rhetoric of Aristotle, to the sophistic rhetoric of Gorgias, and to the virtue-based rhetoric of Isocrates. It was fully absorbed by Roman rhetors, who insisted on the appropriateness (L. decorum) of oratory, a fitness of the discourse to the moment. In classical rhetoric, being falsely accused and needing to defend oneself before a tribunal was one of those “opportune moments” (καιρός) in which speech skill meets the unique demands of the occasion. Therefore, an apologia delivered on such an occasion was to demonstrate a lively sensitivity to the demands and expectations of all involved, and it should convey a freshness and creative insight of argumentation.  

cation, timely speaking continues to be a central emphasis in theory and practice. It is not surprising, then, that Jesus discourages speech preparation for an indeterminate occasion. To construct a speech without knowing situational specifics would undermine its potential effectiveness in accomplishing the rhetor’s purposes. As Isocrates explains, speakers who proceed without attentiveness to the opportune moment are likely to miss their mark, displaying their poor judgment and a boorish indifference to their auditors (12.28–29). Jesus, therefore, teaching in a way consistent with these elemental insights into communication effectiveness, recognizes the distinctiveness of these unusual occasions in requiring discursive flexibility; he urges his students to respect that temporal dynamic. Indeed, as the instances of coerced witness in Acts demonstrate, the Spirit-led discourses vary widely, from Peter’s explanation of a healing, to Stephen’s narrative of redemptive history, to Paul’s personal testimony and legal appeal. No single prepared message can cover the variety of challenges the disciples will face (“governors and kings,” Matt 10:18; “councils,” “synagogues,” Mark 13:9; “rulers,” “authorities,” Luke 12:11; “prisons,” Luke 21:12).

My point here, though, is neither that Jesus intentionally relies on the Hellenistic rhetorical tradition for his instruction nor that interpreters have missed the unique role of ancient rhetorical theory in expositing this logion. It is, rather, that Jesus’ command, at one level, reinforces a basic presumption of effective communication. It is fully understandable, from a rhetorical point of view, that he would privilege an impromptu defense that fully takes into account the situational dynamic. Thus, Jesus can assure his disciples that by following his command their accusers will be unable to “withstand or contradict” the inspired speech (Luke 21:15).

Yet—and this is obviously salient—Jesus’ directive to his disciples also is notably dissimilar to conceptions of timely speaking in antique rhetorical theory. Jesus displaces the source of discourse from the defendant to the Spirit and thereby promises the divine effectivity of the apologetic. Indeed, καιρός, the ancient rhetor’s term for strategic timeliness, is not used in any of the “divine speech” passages; the moment of witness is identified as a specified time (ὥρα in Matt 10:19; Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12) and not as an “opportune moment” calling forth strategic rhetorical action. As John Nolland notes, the use of ὥρα “underlines the correspondence between the needs of the moment with all their specificity and the concrete provision made by God.” Thus, defendants are to speak not through their mastery in meeting the opportunity but as recipients of God’s speech.


secular defendants, an apologia that meets well the timely opportunity is a demonstration of rhetorical prowess, an accomplishment of skill, training, and natural ability that is worthy of honor. Jesus’ insistence that the Spirit provide the defense strips any sense of prowess or accomplishment from the defendant. The outcome is not a demonstration of the defendant’s rhetorical skill but of unusual confidence and courage that evidences spiritual empowerment. For instance, in Acts 4:13, an occasion mirroring the one described in the “divine speech” logion, the Sanhedrin are struck by the “boldness” of Peter and John (παρρησία), a term used throughout the NT to distinguish direct, plain, and confident speaking from figurative, obscure, or tentative speech (e.g., Mark 8:32; John 11:14, 16:25; 2 Cor 3:12). This was not an occasion of rhetorical success but of Spirit-produced courage and clarity. The disciple who speaks from within God’s provision performs the very faithfulness that the discourse espouses; the courageous affirmation of God’s salvation will be itself enabled by the saving power of God. The inspired discourse “expresses a reality that is tangibly present in and with the speaking.”

Jesus’ prohibition of preparation, therefore, precludes the defendants’ sense of strategic achievement. Disciples ought not see this occasion as an opportunity to rely on oratorical training or talent. Rather, this is to be an occasion in which defendants subordinate rhetorical preparedness to the force of God’s Spirit. Whatever eloquence emerges from the Spirit’s divine direction of the defendants’ capacities and trained abilities, it will not be a self-promotive display of the defendants’ rhetorical artistry. Through this logion, Jesus urges his followers to set aside fully any concerns about performance that will foster either incapacitating anxiety or the temptation to arrogant accomplishment.

Given the nature of human rhetorical practice and the complex dynamic of a hostile tribunal, Jesus’ instruction makes perfect sense. The occasion of coerced testimony will be saturated with dynamic factors fully beyond the control of a speaker. The wisdom necessary to speak the gospel truthfully under duress, and to do so in a way that actually is effective for accomplishing God’s purposes in a highly threatening setting, is beyond human rhetorical power. Thus, this is an occasion for which the only preparation is a full dependence on divine wisdom and speech. This is the only way that the disciple will provide a fitting witness within the complex of spiritual and material forces at work in the moment.

**Power**

The emphasis on time in Jesus’ “divine speech” logion foregrounds the realities of the occasion that would defeat any merely human effort. And this leads us to a consideration of power. By being coerced into a witness,
the persecuted disciple faces a complex speaking situation that cannot be treated as an “opportune moment” for rhetorical action. Only the Spirit can speak effectively at this time, for the Spirit’s very being is to speak faithfully of Christ (cf. John 15:26; 16:13–14). This is an occasion in which the earthly powers are aligned against the kingdom of God; it is beyond any human rhetorical practice to speak in such a way that defuses these earthly powers. As Jesus makes abundantly clear throughout his own confrontation with the religious and secular tribunals, God’s purposes are accomplished not through a strategic defense but through obedience to his superior authority. Jesus witnesses against those hostile legal and political authorities not by seeking to win an argument, or by justifying himself or his cause, but by exposing their complicity with the worldly patterns of political success and violent authority. When standing before Pilate, Stanley Hauerwas writes, Jesus’ silence is “necessary to challenge uncomprehending political power”; Jesus “refuses to speak in response to the high priest’s challenge because his truthful response cannot be heard as true.” And standing before Pilate, Jesus’ continued silence “is the sign of the end of the power that the Pilates of the world represent.”

Jesus’ highly specific instruction about the timing of the Spirit’s inspiration, then, is rooted in his highly specific insight into the nature of the powers on display in such an occasion. Any discourse prepared in advance as an apologetic defense is designed to proclaim innocence and to avoid suffering; thus, it would be a performance that submits to the earthly economy of rhetorical power fully embedded in, and reinforcing of, the very structures of authority in which the persecution of Christ is carried forth. Preparing the discourse, then, would most likely result in a speech that is complicit with the secular and religious legal structures enabling persecution. It is not surprising, then, that Matthew has the “divine speech” logion following immediately after Jesus charges his disciples to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). The wisdom Jesus advocates is the practical judgment (φρόνιμος) to recognize the situational dynamic; the innocence he commends to them is the purity and integrity (ἀκέραιος) of their commitment. Innocence is the necessary corrective for those tempted to speak according to rhetorical expectations of the tribunals. As Calvin Porter explains, “through compromise and self-deception the church’s witness becomes mixed with and confused with the values, schemes, and agenda of the world.” The prepared tool of a rhetorically astute apologetic would be, in this situation, an attempt to use the discursive power of this world

42. Based on his study of the linguistic temporal markers in Mark 13, Gustavo Martin notes that Jesus’ audience is “not in a position to carry out any actions” in response to the violent attacks of their persecutors (“Procedural Register in the Olivet Discourse: A Functional Linguistic Approach to Mark 13,” Bib 90 [2009] 481).
46. Ibid., 24.
to achieve the divine power of God. The witness of Christ, then, would be reduced to merely another ideology, to a judgment of victory or defeat by a tribunal guided by the logic of worldly power. Since the power of God’s work differs from the expectations of power operating within earthly structures, the intentional strategies of rhetorical power, to the extent that they are implicated in the economy of self-defense and legal victory, are to be eschewed at that specific time when the witness of Christ is challenged by that economy. The disciple is not to fight the spiritual battle with the weapon of the opponent.

When commanding his disciples to wait for the Spirit’s words, then, Jesus is urging them to recognize that prior planning or a prepared script cannot satisfactorily meet the full complex of spiritual forces and material variables at play in the moment. He is calling his disciples to imitate his own obedience to the Father. The faithful defendant is to accept a cruciform witness, a self-denial through which the power of God’s Spirit is fully efficacious for the purposes that God accomplishes. The disciples’ sole task is to witness to God’s salvation through Christ, not to defend themselves or to seek retribution against the accusers. In Nolland’s felicitous phrasing, “The Holy Spirit will teach the disciple, in the hour of stress, the priority of confession over self-defense.” Indeed, in the book of Acts, the several accounts of disciples obeying this command demonstrate their cruciform discourse with outcomes varying from physical beating, to extended imprisonment, to death (e.g., Acts 5:40, 7:54–58). This discourse is the performed witness that God uses to advance the Gospel.

**Drawing Lines**

When disciples are dragged before the authorities, they are coerced into a nexus of time and power that can only be effectively managed by divine empowerment. This is the occasion for the Spirit’s discourse, a speech


that comforts the disciple and enables faithful—and courageous—witness. The dynamic factors and forces calling forth an apologia exceed whatever rhetorical preparation the disciples could bring to bear in anticipation of that moment, overwhelming the truth of the witness and co-opting its message into the ideology of secular power. Jesus’ command and promise, therefore, expose the realities of timeliness and spiritual power as inescapable coordinates affecting the rhetorical situation. On the occasion of a coerced appearance before a tribunal, these realities coalesce in a way that incapacitates rhetorical preparation as achieving any effectiveness on behalf of the Gospel.

We must remember, though, that Jesus’ “divine speech” logion ought not be used to force an absolute divide between a disciple’s rhetoric and the Spirit’s inspiration, as noted above in the second preliminary observation. The Spirit uses whatever skills and sensibilities the disciple brings to the situation. Nonetheless, Jesus identifies a specific occasion in which the balance shifts heavily toward the inspiration side of the continuum. The distinction is not absolute, but the disciples would not err by setting aside any prior considerations regarding the how and the what of their witness.

Not all speaking opportunities are coerced by hostile authorities, though. In most occasions, Christian rhetors operate according to the baseline position on human rhetorical effort and divine inspiration. Jesus’ logion of “divine speech” does not overturn the insights of Augustine and the evident rhetorical practices of Paul. The logion does, however, reinforce two coordinates shaping the use of rhetorical power within the economy of the gospel. Concerning power: rhetorical preparation and performance ought never bring the speaker into conformed subservience to the economy of rhetorical prowess in which Christ becomes merely another ideological position within the cultural struggles for victory, honor, and self-justification. The eloquence of the Christian rhetor, then, is consistently directed toward the faithful presentation of Christ’s alternative reality in which the cruciform shape exposes the light of God’s redemption amidst the darkness of worldly wisdom. As André Resner Jr. explains, this requires the preacher to live a cruciform life (dependent on and encouraged through a cruciform community) that grounds and shapes the preacher’s rhetorical strategizing.\(^53\) The preacher prayerfully sifts discourse strategies for any trace of technique that crosses the line between the elevation of Christ and the elevation of earthly accomplishment.

Although the coordinate of power draws a line, it does not affix it to a catalog of acceptable or unacceptable rhetorical practices. And this is fully consistent with the temporal coordinate implicit in Jesus’ command and promise. The line will vary according to the full consideration of the occasion’s dynamic, such as the psychological, cultural, historical, and spiritual factors constituting the identities and relationships of speaker and listeners. Because the “divine speech” logion affirms the temporal dimension of suasory effectiveness, we speak consistently with Christ’s instruction

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by building our rhetorical practice attentive to the particular demands and opportunities of the given occasion. In those cases of coerced witness, Christ gives specific instructions, drawing a line that drastically limits rhetorical intentionality. On other occasions, though, the line will shift. Some speaking opportunities may involve audiences and speakers who embrace potent suasive technique as a testimony to the beauty and glory of God; at other times, such technique would be an impious display of a speaker’s self-importance, an attempt to grasp the honors bestowed by this world at the expense of the Gospel. Since the temporal dimension alters the effects of any given rhetorical utterance, we cannot satisfactorily settle on a line de-marcating the appropriate from the inappropriate use of rhetorical power. We cannot generate rules of application or a list of acceptable techniques that promise transtemporal answers to time-specific questions.

Augustine, again, is helpful on this matter. In describing the three ends of persuasive preaching—to teach, to delight, to move—Augustine links these to variations in the types of style—subdued, moderate, grand (Doctr. chr., 4.19.38). If a listener needs to be motivated to act on some truth of Scripture, Augustine explains, then the preacher will employ a grand style, involving more intensive emotional appeals and a more ornamented prose (for example, tropes and figures). In teaching Scripture with a focus on the listener’s learning, the preacher should use a subdued style, featuring minimal emotional appeals and unadorned prose. The moderate style, though, is a curious case because it was used by secular rhetors as a means of delighting an audience through highly figured prose that draws attention to the rhetor’s performance. Such orations typically combine both the affirmation of audience values and a showy display of the speaker’s abilities. Augustine, though, shifts the purpose of the moderate style to the reinforcement of “good habits” and the avoidance of “evil” ones (4.25.55). “We use the ornaments of the moderate style,” he explains, “not ostentatiously but prudently, not content with its end that the audience be pleased, but rather using them in such a way that they assist that good which we wish to convey by persuasion” (4.25.55). A highly ornamented style, therefore, may not cross the line into worldly self-promotion if it seeks the audience affirmation of spiritual values. A preacher’s rhetorical artistry can be fully consistent with the Spirit’s inspiration on those occasions when discursive style strengthens an audience’s adherence to the good and their rejection of evil. By considering temporal factors, therefore, the Christian rhetor modulates strategic intentions.

Importantly, this emphasis on timeliness also means that the preacher ought to be fully attentive to the Spirit in the moment of delivering a prepared discourse. In his monumental study The History of Preaching, O. C. Edwards Jr. advances only one generalization derived from centuries of Christian discourse: “most of the greatest preachers spoke without a manuscript.” 54 Given the impossibility of accurately divining the

54. Edwards, History, 836. I am grateful to Michael Quicke for directing me to this source. In addition, I extend my gratitude to Meredith Cargill, Lynn Cohick, and Alan Johnson for
full range of an occasion’s demands and nuances, Edwards’s observation ought not surprise us. Preachers ought to be willing to add to or subtract from prepared outlines or manuscripts as led by the Spirit’s promptings and with full trust that God’s kingdom purposes can be accomplished independent of the speaker’s knowledge or skill. After all, the Spirit has situational knowledge vastly exceeding the preacher’s. As Dale Sullivan rightly claims, the response of faith cannot be reduced to a mere rational calculation of arguments and evidence; the very moment in which divine truth comes to a listener is the moment in which the Spirit empowers the message, effectuating it beyond whatever rhetorical resources the speaker employs. Therefore, a rhetor ought to allow the Spirit to shape rhetorical intentions and guide the presentation of truth in the very moment of utterance. These impromptu alterations may serve to chasten rhetorical arrogance, call forth a more faithful cruciform witness, or heighten a persuasive appeal to meet a listener in ways the rhetor could not anticipate.

**Revisiting the Baseline**

Although Jesus’ logion clearly demarcates a limit boundary on the intentional strategizing of message effectiveness, our broader theological reflections on this teaching have produced coordinates allowing a less rigid set of considerations guiding the wide array of speaking and preaching occasions faced by Christians. This more flexible approach to the question of rhetorical intentionality has implications for the ongoing exegetical work within the baseline position surveyed above.

Working from 1 Cor 2:1–5 (and the broader context of 1 Cor 1–4), some scholars attempt to specify precisely, and universally, what constitutes the proper or improper use of rhetoric in proclaiming the gospel. The coordinates of time and power caution against this tendency. I find plausible, for instance, Michael Bullmore’s claim that Paul was disavowing the rhetoric of Corinthian stylistic virtuosity, which was likely characterized by the grand style. Yet, the grand style need not always be disavowed by godly rhetors, as Augustine ably demonstrates with examples not only from Paul’s own

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55. Dale L. Sullivan, “*Kairos and the Rhetoric of Belief,*” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992) 317–32. Although Sullivan’s analysis of *kairos* in the NT admirably reinforces the inspired and improvisational dimension of gospel proclamation, he overplays his hand in forcing a contrast between the rational and nonrational in Christian rhetoric. He sets the interpretive frame for his study of *καρπός* early on, claiming that the world of the NT is “a mythic-poetic culture rather than a rationalistic culture” (p. 320). Consequently, he does not give satisfactory account of key evidence that complicates the easy disjunction: (1) in Acts 26:25, Paul explicitly rejects the association of his speaking with madness (a discursive mode Sullivan connects with mythic-poetic culture), referring to his inspired discourse as a matter of “sober truth” (*ἀλεθείας καὶ σοφροσύνης*); (2) Paul uses *καρπός* in contexts of explicit instruction in which disciples are educated about spiritually desirable action and urged to act on that instruction (Gal 6:10; Eph 5:16; Col 4:5); (3) the “divine speech” logion, which Sullivan cites as support for his thesis, does not rely on *καρπός* and, thus, does not reference the sort of kairotic speaking that Sullivan links to the mythic-poetic culture of the pre-Socratics.
letters, but also from Cyprian, Ambrose, and himself (Doctr. chr., 4.42–53). Similarly, I accept Duane Litfin’s distinction between an audience response effectuated through rhetorical strategy and an audience response effectuated through the transformative work of the Spirit. Yet, on many occasions, the evangelistic proclamation of the Gospel is faithfully performed through intentional audience analysis and strategic considerations. The coordinates of time and power may lead some evangelists to produce sermons of extravagant beauty or high emotional engagement that simultaneously glorify God and are empowered by the Spirit to effect conversions.

Indeed, the coordinates from within Jesus’ “divine speech” logion provide a hermeneutic corrective for those scholars who push Paul’s distinction between human eloquence and divine wisdom into stable categories of acceptable rhetoric. Although I am indebted to Thiselton’s overall analysis of Paul’s Corinthian passage, Thiselton drifts from the coordinates when expositing Paul’s distinction in 2:4 between “plausible words of wisdom” and “demonstration.” In referencing Pogoloff’s analysis of the Aristotelian distinction between argumentation relying on persuasion (πείθω) and argumentation relying on demonstration (ἀπόδειξις), Thiselton accepts this as an epistemological distinction between rhetorical (“instrumental”) and philosophical (“Platonic-Aristotelian”) reasoning and then reads this epistemology into Paul’s view of appropriate persuasion. Certainly, Paul associates the gospel with truths effectuated by the Spirit and dissociates it from the argument practices of Corinthian sophists. Yet, from the vantage point of Jesus’ logion, the crux of Paul’s contrast relies not on the nature of argumentation but on the nature of spiritual power. As Paul explains in chs. 1–4, salvation comes to the Corinthians not through Paul’s ability to speak the lingua franca of Corinth’s rhetorical culture but through a spiritual work altogether different from the oratorical construction of ideological allegiances. If Corinthian faith had been a mere oratorical effect, then the Corinthian believers would be merely another cultural faction along the ideological spectrum of rhetorical power brokers competing for audience approval. Their faith cannot be accounted for in this way, Paul explains, because he did not proclaim the gospel “with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (1:17).

Therefore, Paul is not establishing an epistemological dividing line between a respectable philosophical argumentation on one side and a merely rhetorical argumentation on the other. Rather, Paul’s contrast between “demonstration” and “eloquent wisdom” is a commonplace within the ancient world used to characterize the difference between trustworthy and specious discourse. Paul uses the commonplace in 1 Cor 1–4 to differenti-

56. Litfin, St. Paul’s Theology, 247–50.
57. Thiselton, Corinthians, 219–20; Keener’s distinction between strategic form and rational substance is similar to Thiselton’s in this regard (Corinthians, 32–37).
58. Thus, Paul is not inserting himself or his proclamation into the perennial dispute between rhetors and philosophers over the nature of reasoning. On this dispute, see, e.g., Chaim Perelman, The Realm of Rhetoric (trans. W. Kluback; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre
ate the genuine spiritual power of his cruciform discourse from the culturally powerful argumentation of both rhetoric and philosophy. He is not using the trope to establish any particular mode of reasoning as a universal principle for gospel proclamation. The coordinates of ethical rhetoric culled from Jesus’ “divine speech” logion clean our interpretive lenses sufficiently to avoid this tendency toward a subtle exegetical overreach.

**CONCLUSION**

Jesus’ command and promise regarding the disciples’ coerced witness do not give us clear direction for all possible speaking opportunities. It does, though, give specific direction about one occasion for speech and, in the process, provide ethical coordinates for the broader array of opportunities faced by most preachers, teachers, and apologists. Significantly, these coordinates direct us away from some proposed answers to the question of rhetorical artistry and divine inspiration and toward more open-ended valuations of differences across speakers, cultures, and denominational traditions.

In 1 Cor 2:1–5, for instance, Paul describes his own gospel rhetoric by considering time (the Corinthian situation) and the dynamic of secular power in that historical moment (the economy of oratorical accomplishment). Other than the unique situation of a coerced witness, the “divine speech” passages do not provide more specific guidelines to lay on top of this baseline position on Christian rhetoric portrayed by Paul throughout 1 Cor 1–4. In fact, these passages caution against more specific guidelines. Thus, Christian rhetors throughout history and across cultures probably have not erred in generating radically different judgments about rhetorical strategizing. In U.S. history, for instance, various constellations of denominational, geographical, and educational differences have led some preachers to denounce rhetorical training altogether as a violation of the Spirit’s work, whereas others have accepted rhetorical intentionality as a worthy ingredient in the preacher’s ministry. As argued above, the logion does not support the extreme view of those who completely denounce rhetorical intentionality. The only way it could serve as such support, according to the interpretation I have provided, would be to assume that any intentional use of rhetoric in proclaiming the gospel is complicit with earthly powers at every moment, on every occasion.


59. Keener, Corinthians, 28. Paul’s use of the commonplace, then, would be an instance of what Thiselton describes as “persuasive definition,” “code-switching,” or “the rhetorical technique of transposition”; Paul reconstructs the cultural coding for argument quality in the process of using it in his communication with the Corinthian believers (Corinthians, 43, 154).

In contrast to an extreme antirhetoric position, though, the “divine speech” logion seems to validate the broad range of rhetorical practices that are endemic to Christian proclamation, with the proviso that any specific judgment about rhetorical invention on one occasion (in one denomination or subculture, for instance) ought be neither presupposed as universal nor imposed on another. There are many ways to live and speak a cruciform life persuasively.

Jesus’ one exception to this general practice of rhetorical preparation and performance is the time (ὥρα) of coerced witness: he draws the line with worry and preparation on the one hand and the Spirit’s inspiration on the other. On other occasions, though, the disciple is to make “the most of the time (καιρός)” with a strategic sensitivity to the role of human discourse in God’s redemptive work (Col 4:5–6). Jesus’ logion provides the disciple with the normative coordinates guiding those judgments about appropriate rhetorical preparation and performance.