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MOVING SERMONS:
A FIELD EXPERIMENT ON THE PERSUASIVE EFFECTS
OF PREACHING

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ABSTRACT: In the present article, we report the findings of a field experiment on the effects of the use of direct appeal, invitation and ritual in sermons. In a church in the Netherlands that organizes two identical services on a regular Sunday, we exposed the hearers in one of those services to typical motivational elements that were absent in the other service: direct appeal, ritual, and invitation. Panel members of both services rated the sermons they had heard, both for appreciation of the sermon and their intention to change behavior. We found support for main and interaction effects for preacher and strategy on both evaluation and behavioral intention on the use of invitation. For the use of direct appeal we did not find any results since the manipulation failed. For the use of ritual, no significant effects have been found. We conclude by discussing implications for future research, and provide evidence-based, practical suggestions to preachers about the use of available rhetorical tools for reaching the high goals of religious services.

Keywords: sermon effectiveness, rhetoric, motivation, field experiment, church

INTRODUCTION

Persuasion is seen as a central feature of a sermon.[1] A wide range of rhetorical techniques are used in sermons to engage, persuade, and challenge listeners.[2] Hearers are invited to see things in a particular way and act in accordance with that view. In short, according to Lunceford, sermons are rhetorical playing fields,[3] but the outcome is uncertain. Carrell explored in a US-based study the aims and impacts of church sermons, asking both preachers and hearers about their experience of sermons.[4] The majority of preachers said that their main goal was to change the hearers' beliefs, values or actions. Strikingly, the hearers said that most preaching was completely irrelevant to their real lives. There is agreement among preachers and listeners that the aims of sermons are to challenge, to grow and take next steps.[5] Yet, everyone involved knows that this aim is not easily achieved. While this situation is

common knowledge, there is a lack of insight into the impact of rhetorical strategies in sermons. What makes a moving sermon?

In this research, we study the effects of three rhetorical strategies that preachers use to engage churchgoers, i.e. direct appeal, rituals, and invitations. As a context, we conducted a field experiment in a church that organizes two identical services on a regular Sunday. We exposed the hearers in one of those services to typical motivational elements that were absent in the other service. Comparing the evaluations of the services provides insight into the impact of the strategies. Since this type of manipulation are rare in sermons, this is a unique research opportunity to evaluate the impact of particular rhetoric strategies. Through this field experiment, we can learn about the dynamics of religious messages and provide evidence-based, practical suggestions to preachers about the use of available rhetorical tools for reaching the goals of religious services.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

When it comes to the impact sermons can have, the general impression from research is that attitude changes through sermons are not to be expected.[6] Sermons rather follow changes in occurring beliefs and attitudes than leading to them.[7] While these findings alone make one wonder why preachers are so stubborn to keep trying to influence their audiences, anecdotal evidence indicates that sermons can move, encourage, challenge, and convince people. Sermons can have life changing effects on hearers. Further, there are contexts abound where people are profoundly influenced through certain messages, including in health communication[8], governmental communication[9] and behavioral change.[10]

In this study, we put three rhetorical tools to the test to see how they influence hearers attitudes and behavioral intentions. We based the selection of tools on three selection criteria. First, we chose tools that regularly occur in sermons. We did not mean to come up with something entirely new, but wanted to test the impact of readily available and practiced tools in the context of sermons. Second, in this study we focused on the 'movere' part within the rhetorical realm. According to classic rhetoric the three main goals of communication are *docere* (to teach, inform and instruct), delectare (to please) and movere (to move, or 'bend').[11] Traditionally, speech is seen as designed to persuade and the ultimate goal of rhetoric is to move people in a certain direction, to persuade them to do what is right.[12] Third, the manipulation of the rhetorical tool should be a relatively small adaptation. To be practically useful, the rhetorical move needed to be a minimal intervention, an add-on to a sermon without which the sermon would also make sense for the group attending the service without the rhetorical tool. Based on these three considerations, we chose to include the following three rhetoric tools: direct appeal, ritual and invitation.

Direct appeal. A direct appeal addresses the audience with a clear and concrete conclusion with unambiguous suggestions for the course of action that should follow from the message.[13] In a classic study, Lindskold et al.[14] showed how the directness of appeals influenced the effectiveness of fundraising activities. The direct personal appeal ("Excuse me, would you like to contribute to the crippled people, please?") was more effective in raising money than open appeals ("Give to the crippled children"). The least effective was the silent indirect appeal, where only a canister was placed and the passerby had to interpret this as a call for collecting money.

Given that all people involved are aware that the goal of any sermon is the appeal made on the listener,[15] it seems reasonable to assume that to make the appeal explicit and direct is appreciated and granted. Applying the content of a sermon to the listeners' individual lives, addressing them personally by frequently using "you" is an easy way to make an appeal on the audience. For example, in a sermon on rage and anger a preacher could remain impersonal and leave the interpretation of the appropriate behavioral response to the hearer: "Sometimes, people can be very angry. It is better not to hang around with a bull of rage." The direct appeal translates the issue in a clear confrontation with the audience: 'Some of us here walk around very angry. You entered this service with your bull of rage and you need to get rid of it."

To our knowledge, the impact of direct appeal in sermons has not been a topic of research, even though it is used often in churches. We expect that sermons with direct appeals are more valued both in evaluation and in behavioral intentions.

> Hypothesis 1A: Sermons using direct appeal will be evaluated more positive than sermons without direct appeal.
> Hypothesis 1B: Sermons using direct appeal will create more intentions to change behavior than sermons without direct appeal.

Ritual. In religious contexts, rituals are established ceremonial acts.[16] Following a clear structure, rituals are attention-directing culturally embedded sequences of action. Rituals help to funnel the different thoughts, anchoring feelings and appropriate behaviors of those who take part in the ritual,[17] especially because it facilitates the practice of thought scripts.[18] Through the alignment of thought and action, rituals can be important means to make a sermon persuasive. The application of a ritual may facilitate internalizing the message and transmission of values and beliefs. Apart from the embodied expression of collectivity within a cultural realm,[19] rituals provide the audience with a multi-sensory experience: people feel, smell and taste the message of the sermon, which will probably positively influence the impact of the sermon.[20] It can thus be assumed that rituals will facilitate the translation of a sermon into practice.

> *Hypothesis 2A: Sermons using a ritual will be evaluated more positive than sermons without a ritual.*
> *Hypothesis 2B: Sermons using a ritual will create more intentions to change behavior than sermons without a ritual.*

Invitation. As a response to a sermon, an invitation serves as opportunity to explicitly respond to a call made in that sermon. Making one's response to a call salient is a statement that strengthens the transformational power present in the service. An invitation is also more open than direct appeals or a ritual. Where a direct appeal prescribes the appropriate action, an invitation is a call to respond. Rituals submit all participants to its structure, while an invitation is more open for the type of response someone wants to give. An invitation is a way in which a preacher can make his message concrete, by asking for a specific, public action to signify an inner decision or need. An invitation thus functions as a vehicle that helps people to make the leap.[21] While invitations occur regularly in (Pentecostal) churches and altar calls are generally appreciated by congregants,[22] little research has been done to the effects of an invitation at the end of a sermon. Still, the expectation is that the use of an invitation will have positive effects on the evaluation of and intention of behavior alteration after a sermon, as listeners are invited personally to make a choice or a commitment.

> *Hypothesis 3A: Sermons using an invitation will be evaluated more positive than sermons not using an invitation.*
> *Hypothesis 3B: Sermons using an invitation will create more intentions to change behavior than sermons without an invitation.*

METHOD

Context

The Vrije Evangelisatie Zwolle (VEZ) is an evangelical congregation in the Netherlands. Each Sunday, they hold two identical services for an audience of 1250 attendants each. These services are generally identical: they have the same liturgy, the same announcements, the same worship band, the same songs and the same preacher, preaching the same sermon.

Design

For the purpose of this study, we created a particular difference between these two services on a given Sunday. Two pastors of the VEZ, for whom we will use the pseudonyms "Bob" and "Frank," agreed to participate in a research where within a period of one year the experiment would take

place. During this year pastor Bob and pastor Frank meticulously worked on their sermons, creating two identical sermons for the two services—apart from one variation in the communicative realm. For example, one sermon would make use of direct appeal whereas the other sermon would omit these elements. At the beginning of the season, church attendants were invited to participate in a research project "concerning the effectiveness of sermons." These participants were unaware of the fact that the two services would not be identical. This invitation led to two panels of comparable size per service. On eight Sundays during the season, these participants received an online evaluative questionnaire right after the service. The two pastors Bob and Frank would preach the same message in both services, but would include movere elements in one of the two sermons, i.e. direct appeals, a ritual or an invitation. According to the hypotheses, we expected that people who attended the service with direct appeal, ritual or invitation, would evaluate the service more positively and report more behavioral intentions after the sermon than people in the service with the sermon missing these elements. This research is part of a larger study conducted in this church, investigating the effects of rhetorical instruments on the retention and intention of behavioral change in sermons. This research focuses on movere elements of rhetoric in a quantitative manner.

Participants and procedure

All 220 respondents in the two panels were members of the same congregation: 106 males (48%) and 114 females (52%). The age of the participants ranged from 15 through 69 (M=42). Educational level varied from primary school (1%), through secondary school (11%), intermediate vocational education (29%), higher vocational education (48%) and university (11%). Respondents have been church members for one through 50 years (M=15). Each respondent was asked to attend the same service (first or second) for the duration of the research in order to create fixed groups of respondents. Because not every panel member attended all services, the number of respondents in each separate survey varied (see Table 1). The online questionnaire consisted of one baseline measure per preacher and six surveys after the services. Answers were scored on a seven-point scale, ranging from 'not at all (1) to 'completely' (7).

Manipulation

The two pastors met before each Sunday and discussed the research goal of the sermon at hand. Both pastors would draft two versions of their sermons, one including the movere element due that Sunday.

Table 1: Variations between the manipulated and non-manipulated sermons.

	Non-manipulated service	Addition in manipulation	Manipulation t-test
Service 1 Baseline (Bob)	Identical		n/a
Service 2 Baseline (Frank)	Identical		n/a
Service 3 Direct appeal (Bob)	Speaking to people in general: Some people have hearts of stone and long for a new heart.	Speaking to people directly: Is your heart made of stone? Do you want a new heart?	n.s. (.24)
Service 4 Direct appeal (Frank)	Speaking to people in general: Some people may have a problem with anger. Let us consider this subject today.	Being very bold and blunt to people on the subject of anger: You entered this service with your bull of rage and you need to let him loose.	n.s. (.08)
Service 5 Ritual (Bob)	No ritual, but traditional ending of the sermon with a prayer (while congregation was seated) and a song.	People could walk up front, to the stage, standing there with their hands held open.	p=.00
Service 6 Ritual (Frank)	No ritual, but traditional ending of the sermon with a prayer (while congregation was seated) and a song.	At the end of the first sermon the children entered the auditorium and the fathers/men were asked to make a circle around the women and children and sing a song of blessing over them.	p=.00
Service 7 Invitation (Bob)	No invitation, but traditional ending of the sermon with a prayer (while congregation was seated) and a song.	Inviting people to stand at their place and receive prayer, while congregants around them stretched out their arms in prayer towards them.	p=.00
Service 8 Invitation (Frank)	No invitation, but traditional ending of the sermon with a prayer (while congregation was seated) and a song.	Inviting people to stand at their place to signify that they want to surrender all to find the treasure of the Kingdom of God.	p=.00

Manipulation check

In order to check the manipulation, control questions were added to the surveys. Each manipulation was checked by an additional question in the survey. For direct appeal, the question was: I thought the pastor addressed me directly. For ritual, the question was: The pastor included a ritual in his sermon. For invitation, the question was: The pastor used an invitation after his sermon. The manipulation on direct appeal failed for both pastor Bob ($p = .24$) and pastor Frank ($p = .08$). In the discussion section some possible explanations for this failure will be given. The manipulation on ritual succeeded for both pastor Bob ($p = .00$) and pastor Frank ($p = .00$). The manipulation on invitation succeeded for both pastor Bob ($p = .00$) and pastor Frank ($p = .00$).

Table 2. Descriptives of reported evaluations and behavioral intentions.

	Pastor	Dependent variable	1st service			2nd service		
			N	mean	sd	N	mean	sd
Baseline	Bob	Evaluation	80	5.96	.73	76	5.78	.96
		Beh. Int.		4.96	.89		4.89	1.11
	Frank	Evaluation	70	5.46	.96	73	5.59	.96
		Beh. Int.		4.58	1.19		4.70	1.18
Movere theme	**Pastor**	**Dependent variable**	**Non-manipulated**			**Manipulated**		
			N	mean	sd	N	mean	sd
Direct appeal	Bob	Evaluation	43	5.75	0.73	47	5.76	.81
		Beh. Int.		4.84	1.05		5.09	.90
	Frank	Evaluation	59	6.19	0.64	56	6.18	.66
		Beh. Int.		5.37	0.98		5.31	1.08
Ritual	Bob	Evaluation	34	5.61	.78	37	5.78	.95
		Beh. Int.		4.80	.95		5.15	1.11
	Frank	Evaluation	37	5.79	.83	39	5.95	.89
		Beh. Int.		5.05	1.05		5.08	1.34
Invitation	Bob	Evaluation	67	5.38	1.21	59	5.99	.73
		Beh. Int.		4.60	1.24		5.15	.94
	Frank	Evaluation	58	5.99	.78	45	6.11	.64
		Beh. Int.		5.30	.97		5.32	.75

Data analysis

The hypotheses are tested using a two-way ANOVA. This test examines the influence of different independent categorical variables on one dependent variable. The two-way ANOVA not only determines the main effects of the independent variables, but is also able to discover significant interaction effects between the independent variables. The independent variables in this research are the preachers, Bob and Frank and the manipulations of the sermons.

RESULTS

In this paragraph the results of the two-way ANOVA are presented and interpreted. First the results of the research on direct appeal are presented, followed by the results on ritual and concluded by the results of invitation. Table 3 summarizes the results of the manipulations of direct appeal, ritual and invitation.

Table 3. Evaluation and intention to behavioral alteration after the sermon for sermons containing and not containing Direct appeal, Ritual, and Invitation.

			df	F	η^2	p
Direct appeal						
	Evaluation of the sermon					
		Preacher	1	18.82	0.09	**0.00**
		Manipulation	1	0.00	0.00	0.97
		Preacher x manipulation	1	0.01	0.00	0.92
	Behavioral intention					
		Preacher	1	7.26	0.04	**0.01**
		Manipulation	1	0.49	0.02	0.48
		Preacher x manipulation	1	1.17	0.01	0.28
Ritual						
	Evaluation of the sermon					
		Preacher	1	1.61	0.01	0.21
		Manipulation	1	1,29	0.01	0.26
		Preacher x manipulation	1	0.00	0.00	0.98
	Behavioral intention					

		Preacher	1	0,24	0.00	0.63
		Manipulation	1	0.99	0.01	0.63
		Preacher x manipulation	1	0.79	0.01	0.32
Invitation						
	Evaluation of the sermon					
		Preacher	1	9.30	0.04	**0.00**
		Manipulation	1	9.49	0.04	**0.00**
		Preacher x manipulation	1	4.13	0.02	**0.04**
	Behavioral intention					
		Preacher	1	10.58	0.05	**0.00**
		Manipulation	1	4.57	0.02	**0.03**
		Preacher x manipulation	1	3.83	0.02	**0.05**

Direct appeal

Hypothesis 1A predicted a better evaluation of the sermon by pastor Bob and Frank when direct appeal was used. A two-way (Preacher x Manipulation) ANOVA was calculated to test for the difference between the evaluation for sermons with and without direct appeal. A significant main effect for the evaluation of the sermon was found for the preacher, but not for the manipulation. Also, there was no significant interaction between preacher and manipulation with regard to the evaluation of the sermon. Since the manipulation did not work, hypothesis 1A is rejected.

Hypothesis 1B predicted a higher intention to change behavior of the sermon by pastor Bob and Frank when direct appeal was used. A two-way (Preacher x Manipulation) ANOVA was calculated to test for the difference between the intention to change behavior for sermons with and without ritual. A significant main effect for the intention to change behavior as a result of the sermon was found for the preacher but not for the manipulation. Also, there was no significant interaction between preacher and manipulation with regard to the intention to change behavior as a result of the sermon. Since the manipulation did not work, hypothesis 1B is rejected.

Ritual

Hypothesis 2A predicted a better evaluation of the sermon by pastor Bob and Frank when ritual was used. A two-way (Preacher x Manipulation) ANOVA was calculated to test for the difference between the evaluation for sermons with and without ritual. No significant main effect for the evaluation of the sermon was found for the preacher, nor for the manipulation. Also, there was no significant interaction between preacher and manipulation with regard

to the evaluation of the sermon. Since no significant results have been found hypothesis 2A is rejected.

Hypothesis 2B predicted a higher intention to change behavior of the sermon by pastor Bob and Frank when ritual was used. A two-way (Preacher x Manipulation) ANOVA was calculated to test for the difference between the intention to change behavior for sermons with and without ritual. No significant main effect for the evaluation of the sermon was found for the preacher, nor for the manipulation. Also, there was no significant interaction between preacher and manipulation with regard to the intention to change behavior as a result of the sermon. Since no significant effects have been found, hypothesis 2B is rejected.

Invitation

Hypothesis 3A predicted a better evaluation of the sermon by pastor Bob and Frank when invitation was used. A two-way (Preacher x Manipulation) ANOVA was calculated to test for the difference between the evaluation for sermons with and without direct invitation. A significant main effect for the evaluation of the sermon was found for the preacher, and for the manipulation. Also, there was a significant interaction between preacher and manipulation with regard to the evaluation of the sermon. For both preachers the sermon with invitation was evaluated better than the sermon without invitation. Hypothesis 3A is thus confirmed.

Hypothesis 3B predicted a higher intention to change behavior of the sermon by pastor Bob and Frank when invitation was used. A two-way (Preacher x Manipulation) ANOVA was calculated to test for the difference between the intention to change behavior for sermons with and without invitation. A significant main effect for the intention to change behavior as a result of the sermon was found for the preacher and for the manipulation. Also, there was a significant interaction between preacher and manipulation with regard to the intention to change behavior as a result of the sermon. For both preachers the sermon with invitation resulted in a higher intention to change behavior among the participants. Hypothesis 3B is thus confirmed.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this project was to study the effects of direct appeal, ritual and invitation in sermons in order to gain more insight in this particular type of persuasive communication. With a unique approach of applying manipulations in sermons, we created the opportunity to investigate what influence the presence or absence of certain sermon characteristics has.

For direct appeal, we did not find any significant results, due to a failure of the manipulation. Possibly, the difference between the two sermons was too subtle to be noticed by the hearers. This outcome does not mean that direct appeals cannot influence the hearers, since other research has given proof for the influence of direct appeal[23] Since literature suggests direct

appeal is important in order to affect change,[24] we propose this subject to be investigated further, both in quantitative and qualitative ways. A focus group study could help filter nuances and gain a better understanding of the function of direct appeal in persuasive communication.

For ritual, the manipulation worked well, but there were no significant effects for evaluation or behavioral intention. A possible explanation can be that the ritual was not connected well enough to the content of the sermon or that the ritual was oriented towards someone else (in the case of the children and women being blessed by the men). Since the use of ritual may serve to turn the sermon into an event instead of a lecture[25] by providing the audience a multi-sensory experience this area deserves more research. It is possible that the multi-sensory aspect of ritual could influence retention of the sermon, since a memorable experience is created. Further qualitative research could give more insight into the function of ritual in persuasive communication.

For invitation, both hypotheses were confirmed. For both pastors both evaluation and intention for behavioral change were rated higher for sermons with invitation. The openness of the invitation (compared to the pre-structured direct appeals or rituals) could be one of the reasons for this strong effect, because hearers can frame the call as they want and respond in the way that suits them. This finding indicates the value of an embodied response to a rather passively received message in a sermon.

One contribution this research offers is that despite earlier findings[26] sermons can generate impact. However, the questionnaires were filled out the same day the sermon was delivered. It is unclear if the intention to change behavior resulted in concrete and long term action. It takes further research to investigate the influence of sermons in general and rhetoric devices in particular on retention and change.

LIMITATIONS

A factor to be taken into consideration is the fact that this research was conducted in an evangelical church. This church has affinity with the Pentecostal churches, as well as the Mainline churches. The results of this research may not be applicable to some Mainline churches, as the people there are not used to the use of ritual or invitation. Also, since the use of ritual has a different place in Catholic liturgy, the findings on ritual can differ widely in that context. At the same time this research gives ample reason for pastors from Mainline churches and Catholic parishes to experiment with the use of ritual and invitation. Also, the outcomes of this study are limited as we conducted the research in one church only, asking people to report personally on the intention to change behavior.

This research begs for further investigation on the persuasive power of sermons in specific and oral communication in general. Though this research has resulted in a number of conclusions it has also made clear that this is but the beginning. There is little literature on the use of direct

appeal, invitations or rituals in church settings, though these communicative strategies are frequently used all over the world.

Practical implications for preachers

A sermon is not finished when the text is explained theologically correctly. Communication science has wisdom to offer to the field of homiletics. The use of direct appeal, ritual and invitation may help the audience to deepen their experience of the sermon, even to the extent of concrete change in behavior, attitude or thinking. A preacher therefore would do well to ask the question in what ways the persuasive power of the sermon could be enhanced by conscious applying direct appeal, ritual or invitation. This requires sensitivity, creativity and boldness of the preacher. Sensitivity because the preacher has to draft a ritual or invitation that is suitable to the congregation and appropriate in the church calendar, to avoid an overkill or overdose of ritual and invitation. Creativity because a good ritual is appealing to people and breathes a natural connection to the central message of the sermon. And boldness because a direct appeal, invitation or ritual requires courage of the preacher. A direct connection has to be made, a call has to be uttered and an invitation has to be extended. Always a preacher may feel the fear: "What if nobody responds? What if I've crossed a line?" This feeling of vulnerability is an emotion the preacher has to deal with. But we encourage the preacher to move through these challenges and start experimenting with the use of direct appeal, ritual and invitation because the effects on congregants could be remarkable.

CONCLUSION

The use of direct appeal could not be measured because the manipulation failed. The use of ritual in sermons did not show any effect on evaluation of and intention to change behavior through the sermon. The use of invitation resulted in positive effects on the evaluation of the sermon and the intention to change behavior. All three communicative elements deserve further research, in both quantitative and qualitative ways.

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The Haddon W. Robinson Preaching Award

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The Haddon W. Robinson Preaching Award is an annual preaching scholarship established in honor of Dr. Haddon W. Robinson, one of the leading evangelical homiliticians of the later 20th and early 21st centuries. Robinson's teaching career in homiletics spanned decades, instructing students at three different seminaries. Dr. Robinson's classic textbook, *Biblical Preaching*, helped shape the place and force of evangelical homiletics. Robinson's legacy for preaching is captured in this significant award.

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- The Board will notify the students of the decisions at least 90 days prior to the EHS annual conference
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3) third place: $300

THE SUBMISSION DEADLINE IS 30 APRIL 2019.

Evangelical Homiletics Society

http://ehomiletics.com/competitions/robinson-award/