

**UNIT PAPER ON  
SMALL GROUP AND PUBLIC  
COMMUNICATION**

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### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe public communication in the movie *The Apostle* (Duvall, 1997) from the perspective of three theoretical models of rhetorical communication: Aristotle's Rhetoric, Burke's Dramatism, and Fisher's Narrative Paradigm. This movie presents how Aristotle's exploration of public discourse from the perspective of the speaker, speech, and audience can be clearly seen in the Apostle's preaching, while Burke's theory is evident in the identification of the Apostle with the people and his own guilt-redemption process, and the Apostle's life and message is a narrative of God's redeeming grace in spite of evil acts and wrong choices. The problem the movie addresses is a person's response to an evil he commits, and how he goes about setting it right, as much as possible.

The movie opens in Texas in 1939, with a young Sonny Dewey, attending a church, where he is exposed to passionate preaching. It flashes forward to an adult Sonny, a Pentecostal evangelist preaching in tents and small churches around the south. As he preaches against the devil, he preaches from personal experience. Early in the movie, his wife has an affair, Sonny hits her lover with a baseball bat, and he loses the church he founded. Sonny flees, fakes his own death, and goes to a small rural community in Louisiana, where he establishes himself as a small-town radio preacher known as the Apostle. He does good and helps people in every way he can through preaching and community service, knowing that the police will eventually find him. His life is a series of contradictions: he believes in what he preaches, though his life falls short of his message. The movie is interspersed with clips of his preaching—the typical fiery messages of a holiness evangelist.

### Discussion

The public discourse in this movie fits Aristotle's deliberative (political) model of speech situations, in which the speaker (the preacher) attempts to influence the audience to believe and act on the message, in this case, the preaching of the gospel. Aristotle explored the speaker, speech, and audience, and the movie reveals different aspects of this process in clips from different sermons. Most sermons did not attempt to persuade using logical proof (logos), though the final sermon presents the biblical message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Instead the ethical (ethos) proof revealed the Apostle's character through the speech, his identification with his congregation, and the goodwill generated by his virtuous character demonstrated by his caring and helping actions on behalf of the community.

What comes across most clearly is the emotional (pathos) response his preaching evokes in his hearers: the shame of confession of sin, the loyalty and friendship, the gratitude of his audience, and their free expression of praise and gratitude to the Lord. One powerful aspect of the movie lies in the contradictions evoked in the viewer, who has seen the Apostle's flaws and failures, yet also sees the good he is trying to do, and is in fact accomplishing.

Burke's Dramatism is demonstrated through the Apostle's words in many different contexts, the angry and sorrowful exchanges with his wife, the rage he expresses when he confronts her lover, the openness and honesty in which he cries out in repentance to God, and the passion with which he preaches to the people. He identifies with his audience by connecting with their feelings and emotions, as well as compassionate understanding of their situation and life experiences. The god term in this movie is Apostle, which the main character claims for himself when he baptizes himself while he is on the run from the law. This term is a new name, one he had not used before, and which demonstrates the guilt he

feels for hurting his wife's lover (who later dies), as well as the redemption he experiences through fulfilling his call to minister in a small rural town. The redemption is passed on to others, whom God saves through his ministry—saves from violence, drunkenness, pettiness, and backbiting. In Burke's dramatic pentad, the act in this movie is the Apostle's ministry, the scene is the setting of his violence which forces him on the run, the agent is the Apostle himself, the agency of redemption is the selfless preaching and giving to others (both in words and through community service), and the purpose is service to God. The movie acknowledges Burke's perspective on Sonny's animal nature, his anger and rage, which get him into the trouble that sets the stage for the rest of the events. Sonny's victimage doesn't seem to fit either of Burke's choices: he acknowledges his sin, but doesn't blame himself, and he doesn't blame others. Instead, he seeks redemption through doing what he can to serve God and others until such time as his past catches up to him. Like Burke, Sonny, though he does not turn himself in, does not try to justify his actions; he does not believe that the good he is doing justifies getting away with what he had done. He tries to redeem himself by doing what he can to make a difference, then goes quietly to face the consequences of his actions.

Fisher's Narrative Paradigm is evident in this movie through the sequence of events and experiences that develop the character as the movie progresses. The passionate preacher is shown to be equally passionate in his love for his wife and children as in his hatred for the man she leaves him for. His concern for an early convert is evident throughout the movie, as is his compassion and commitment to his new congregation. The compelling story is the story of how a flawed person can make a difference in the lives of others who respond to his passion and compassion in their own life experiences. The

paradigm in which people experience him is based largely on their prior expectations, though the movie also shows that people can change, both in themselves and in their responses to others. The Apostle's narrative expresses Fisher's paradigm shift from words alone to a narrative lived out in deeds of compassion as well as good words. The Apostle identified more closely with Fisher's narrative paradigm when he listen to people tell their own stories about themselves, and he told them stories of what could be, the lives the could choose to create and recreate. The story was coherent because the Apostle started acting in the mode we would expect—self-preservation. The story had fidelity because the viewer could identify with how they might respond in similar circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has presented an analysis of the movie *The Apostle* from several different theoretical perspectives in public communication. It explores what Blamires describes as a gospel “addressed to men and women whose lives present them with emergencies—with dangers, temptations, demands, threats, and risks” (1988, p. 14); the Apostle clearly exhibited all of these. It raises issues of ethical behavior in taking responsibility for one's actions, and the process of redemption through compassionate caring for others when there is no way to make up for an injury the protagonist has inflicted. This raises ethical questions when it attempts to define a context in which a person who has committed an evil act seeks redemption by helping others. Other authors studied have pointed to a variety of ways we construct meaning, but Vaill explores spirituality as a source of meaning, a perspective that seems especially appropriate for this movie. He says, “in times of confusion, fear, loss and doubt, human beings turn to transcendent sources of meaning for succor and re inspiration” (1996, p. 179).

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