

Christian Conservative Radio Rhetoric

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Hundreds of Christian radio broadcasts are aired on thousands of radio stations nationwide, ranging from AM to FM, to internet and satellite radio providers every day. Approximately 24% of the US population listens to at least one Christian radio broadcast daily. And here is what they might hear if they were listening to Focus on the Family, one of the most successful and respected shows of the genre. "We need to secure the family and not let these sodomites ruin the family and then our world".

Messages like that are heard or seen on James Dobson's radio and TV broadcasts by 28 million people a week. That gives him a greater reach than either Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson at the height of their appeal. He has become a major player in Republican politics. His books have sold more than 16 million copies, and his other tracts and pamphlets have sold millions more. His organization, Focus on the Family, has a budget five times the size of the Christian Coalition's and gets so much mail it has its own ZIP code.

In my speech, I am going to examine a Focus on the Family radio broadcast. The significance of this broadcast lies not only in what is said, but in what is left unsaid. Rather than espouse the inclusive, loving aspects of the Christian religion, this show focuses on specific sections of the Bible, which can be interpreted to denounce certain segments of the population. This focus on the family broadcast utilizes the bible to create intolerance for an other that it constructs. This broadcast is a pertinent example of one type of Christian Rhetoric that is on the air today. But, inequity is not the sole province of Christian Right Wing radio shows.

In my speech, I argue that people should use a critical model to evaluate Focus on the Family, and also inequities in any rhetorical world. Specifically, I lay out a rhetorical model based on an article by Ray McKerrow entitled "Critical Rhetoric Theory and Praxis" as seen in the June 1989 edition of Communication Monographs. Then, I analyze Focus on the Family using this model to identify this intolerance. And, finally, I conclude with implications for how we might become more critical of the messages we listen to.

Ray McKerrow has provided a very pertinent means of critiquing intolerance that he calls a "Critical Rhetoric." Three aspects of his critical approach are important to the analysis I will engage in.

First, rhetoric is material. Rhetoric is not just the expression of an idea. Rhetoric literally constructs who we are and is physically palpable in how we talk, act, and behave.

Second, rhetoric is doxastic. As Foucault has argued, it creates an opinion rather than just knowledge. Rhetoric encourages an audience to take on beliefs, doxa. These ideas have no necessary basis in truth, but in holding these beliefs, they establish the grounds for what is and is not accepted, and for further action.

Third, naming is central to rhetoric. The terms a speaker utilizes when addressing an audience are indicative of the worldview he or she wishes to reinforce. This rhetoric is (1) designed to shape the social relation being sustained or entered into by the audience and (2) programmed to shape the opinion of the audience. In doing so, rhetoric frequently serves the function of establishing opinions into a material world that constructs and reinforces inequity.

McKerrow's model is a good starting point but we also need to pay attention to how these rhetorical worlds are constructed and how they are made difficult to critique. In applying McKerrow's analysis to the "Focus on the Family" broadcast, we turn first to the rhetoric in its material form. This broadcast constructs a material world where Dobson is a prophet who we must listen to or we will suffer damnation.

Dobson constructs his prophetic position with a message heavy in biblical references. He cites scripture, showing that these ideas are not his, but that they come from God. Since the audience may have a limited knowledge of the Bible, they turn to the speaker to teach them. Dobson's audience implicitly grants him the status of biblical "expert," a title that assumes a high level of importance.

The following excerpt is from the Oct. 2nd installment of Focus on the Family, entitled "Why we need to be intolerant".

Ezekial 33:3 says this. It says, "The watchman sees the enemy coming and sounds the alarm." And I'm sounding that alarm and some people, it says furthermore, "if they hear the alarm and don't take heed they are responsible for their own death." If they die it's their fault.

Many of the listeners are Christians who believe that what the Bible says is true. However, many probably have limited knowledge of the Bible. Dobson establishes himself as the watchman, and the fear of the enemy coming causes people to turn to him for guidance. Dobson goes on to say:

The lord has opened my eyes. HE has let me see the future I thank God for that passion. It's just hard. I've seen the enemy coming and the Lord says I'm responsible. I am responsible for the people.

He is on God's mission. He even claims that God directly communicated to him that his mission was to preach intolerance; and that not calling out evil in the world is sinning. This

is a very hard line of rhetoric to contradict, because he has tied himself directly to the highest power of the Christian World: God and the Bible.

This Focus on the Family broadcast uses its biblical authority in my second point of analysis to create an enemy. Dobson's doxastic rhetoric encourages his audience to believe there is an enemy on the horizon. Who is this enemy? The program makes clear that the enemy is all of those that are "living outside the bible", namely the abortionists and sodomites, who according to Dobson will somehow kill, and damn, us. This leads people to not just know the enemy, but also to take on the enemy, to form an opinion against the enemy, and to act like the watchman-to warn others of the evil of abortionists and sodomites. Dobson encourages this further when he notes that the bible said "Love one another as you love yourself, that that meant "to love one another that we must be intolerant of each other". Thus, if someone is not following the bible, we must be intolerant of that aberrant behavior.

Naming comes into play when Dobson moves on to tell us who our enemy is. He encourages his audience, as Christians, to take action to reverse the fate of the nation by becoming active in his anti-tolerance campaign in order to fend off "the enemy". By doing this, he creates an idea that the Christians are on one side, the rest of the world is on another. By dividing the Christians and "the world," Dobson encourages his audience to adopt an "us vs. them" mindset, one that serves well his attempt to recruit and rally them.

And who are those enemies that are named explicitly? Again, they are those individuals that fall outside of the scope of Conservative Christian morality, they are the "sodomites", or homosexuals, the "abortionists" or pro-choice advocates, and of course, the "lecherous" and "murderous" that he ties directly to the preceding groups, solidly creating an inherently evil other.

By utilizing his audience's identity as Christians to substantiate his claims, Ryan Dobson is setting up Christians everywhere to fully participate in the act of intolerance, a plague that has ravaged our world since the dawn of history. And exiting this world into thoughtful criticism is not easy.

The format that Dobson has chosen for presenting this material is exceedingly difficult to examine reflectively and critically. Mechanically speaking, the broadcast is only available as a live radio show, or as a streaming media feed on family.org, the Focus on the Family Website. Focus on the Family does not make their broadcasts available in transcript form for any reason, and dissuades listeners from making their own transcripts by not offering a downloadable version of the shows. I had to spend hours to transcribe a small portion of the show, as the streaming media connection was lost each time I paused or otherwise manipulated the audio timeline.

Listeners have been told the show is from God's word, violating that threatens a life after of hell. Remember, if you don't listen to the watchman you will be damned for sinning and not properly intervening with your intolerance of evil. Also, the act of fully reflective criticism requires heavy technological and time considerations.

My analysis has shown the following:

1) I've added to Mckerrow by pointing out how critical worlds get constructed and made difficult to critique so that their inequalities even glaring and announced ones become accepted. The focus on the family show is an excellent example of this in the world. Here, the creation of an enemy is accomplished with a process of subversive naming such as "sodomite" for "homosexual", and a subsequent coupling of a term that is easily identifiable with evil such as "murderer". This process makes difficult the possibility of a tolerant approach because to criticize requires a position that is damned by the rhetoric.

2) Focus on the Family utilizes its God given power of expression to convincingly communicate its message of intolerance. By starting with the unarguable word of God, Bible verses such as "Ezekial 33:3", the speakers on the show establish their credibility with the Christian listening audience. From there, the process only requires a plausible link story between the Bible and the message of intolerance. In this instance that plausible link was a story of direct communication between Ryan Dobson and the Lord: "The Lord says I'm responsible for the people".

3) We should be critical not just of Focus on the Family but ANY rhetoric constructing a world of inequality. For example, we should be critical of John Ashcroft's recent speeches referring to Middle Eastern immigrants. Have you been listening to my speech with that critical ear? I've rested my credibility on Ray McKerrow, a transcript of Focus on the Family, and my speaking; I've created an inequality in constructing Focus on the family as a kind of enemy in that we must be critical. What about other instances of rhetoric? President Bush's speeches? Rush Limbaugh? Bill Maher? Michael Moore? More often than not, all of these individuals rely on the creation of an other in the construction of their rhetoric.

We must be vigilant in our critiquing of all these communications lest we be fleeced into false perceptions of the world around us. Those that construct the discourse of power create a difference between us, a difference that might not be readily apparent if we were to just bump into one another on the street or if we were sitting together at a bus stop, perhaps a difference that is not even there at all. Wherever you see a discourse of power at work, unpack the rhetoric and discover who the speaker wants you to distance yourself from, analyze the beliefs that you are being prodded to engender, and look at the names, and subsequent worldview, that is being reinforced.

From this, perhaps we can hear Focus on the Family's message in a different light:

And some people will hear what I have to say and say "you need to be more positive Ryan, we don't like what you have to say" You're responsible for your own death. But if the watchman sees the enemy coming and does not sound the alarm, then he is responsible for the people's death. If I see the enemy coming and I do not sound the alarm. I am personally responsible.

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