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Rhetorical Criticism

The focus of rhetorical criticism is on the strategies employed by the author of a work to achieve particular purposes. Aristotle formulated a theory that allowed for three “species” of rhetoric:¹

judicial: accuses or defends

deliberative: offers advice

epideictic: praises or blames

Phyllis Trible has offered this helpful summary of these three types of rhetoric:²

	Judicial	Deliberative	Epideictic
focus	justice	expediency	adulation/denunciation
setting	law court	public assembly	public ceremony
purpose	to persuade	to persuade	to please or inspire
time	past	future	present
emphasis	speech	audience	speaker

Thus rhetorical critics are interested not only in the point that a work wishes to make but also in the basis on which that point is established (the types of arguments or proofs that are used): sometimes external evidence or documentation may be cited; sometimes the trustworthy character of the writer is invoked; at other times, an appeal is made to the readers’ emotions or sense of logic.

Trible identifies three primary “goals of communication”:

1. intellectual goal of teaching
2. emotional goal of touching the feelings
3. aesthetic goal of pleasing so as to hold attention

In New Testament studies, rhetorical criticism has been used mainly in studies of epistles or of portions of the Gospels and Acts that may be isolated as distinctive units (e.g., speeches).

Two sample studies:

1. Hans Dieter Betz interprets Paul's letter to the Galatians as an instance of judicial rhetoric in which Paul defends his ministry and apostleship.³
2. George Kennedy discusses the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 5–7) as a speech that employs deliberative rhetoric: it offers advice to disciples on how to live if they want to inherit the blessings of the kingdom of heaven.⁴

1. See Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric* 3.1.1358a; also *The Poetics*.

2. See Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism*, GBS (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 9.

3. See Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

4. See George Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 39–72.