

**Persuasion Strategies in Vintage Rally Day Postcards: Postal Religious Communication**

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## **Abstract**

Postcards can yield insight into persuasion strategy, religious events, and social situations. Rally Day postcards reveal how churches at the start of the 20th century characterized a pivotal day in the life of many churches—Rally Day, the start of a new church year; how churches framed their messaging to communicate with congregants; and how churches solicited involvement from members. This present analysis surveys a sample of twelve Rally Day postcards. The postcards were repeatedly read by the author to discern consistent themes. Four themes emerged: (1) Celebration; (2) Learning; (3) Community; and (4) Avoiding Failure. These themes are described, with representative data from the postcards offered as examples, followed by a discussion of findings and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: postcards; persuasion; visual communication; ephemera; church communication; strategic communication

## **Persuasion Strategies in Vintage Rally Day Postcards: Postal Religious Communication**

Despite a reputation as “ephemeral, commercial, and unscientific social jetsam” (Carlson, 2009, p. 215), postcards offer a unique reflection of places and people, a “mutual touching-surface[s] between the co-participants” (Östman, 2004, p. 439), possessing “an ongoing aesthetic and documentary role which outlives their often short availability on store racks” (Mayes, 2010, p. 8). Postcards can be used for health messaging (e.g., Larson et al., 1982), political communication (e.g., Palczewski, 2005), travelogues (e.g., Markwick, 2001), and more. They can also—as is the focus of the present essay—serve as modes of religious communication. In terms of religious postcards, scholars have noted the depiction of angels on religious postcards toward the end of the Victorian era (Boyce-Tillman, 2017), religious postcards for sale at Armenian marketplaces (Antonyan, 2020), and other types and aspects of postcards.

Some protestant churches hold an annual event called Rally Day, which celebrates the start of a new church calendar year. Often held in the fall (September or October), Rally Day attempts to, as the name clearly indicates, “rally” church members. In this essay, I survey postcards used to promote Rally Day in the early 1900s, a timeframe when Rally Day was characterized as “an excellent opportunity for gathering the stragglers together, strengthening the weak places, and making definite plans for the future” (Lawrance, 1916, p. 67). This timeframe also corresponds to a time that Rally Days were growing in popularity among churches (Lawrance, 1905), and when postcards had become a common mode of promotional Rally Day efforts. Lawrance (1916) contends: “Probably no other festival day of the year has developed such a wealth and variety of printed matter as Rally Day. Fancy post-cards galore and all sorts of designs and pictures are called into use” (p. 67). Such postcards offer a unique view of persuasion efforts, postal messaging, and religious communication and contributes to an area of religious communication scholarship that explores, in broad terms, religious marketing and public relations (e.g., Kuzma et al., 2009; Marmor-

Lavie et al., 2009; McDaniel, 1986; McGraw et al., 2012; Vokurka & McDaniel, 2004; Vokurka et al., 2002; Webb, 2012; Webb et al., 1998; Wrenn, 2011).

For this present analysis, I surveyed Rally Day postcards from a personal collection. The sample consisted of twelve postcards that specifically referenced Rally Day, with 11 of the 12 cards mentioning “Rally Day” on the front (picture side) of the postcard. The postcards were repeatedly read by the author to discern consistent themes. Four themes emerged: (1) Celebration; (2) Learning; (3) Community; and (4) Avoiding Failure. These themes are described below, with representative data from the postcards offered as examples.

### **Themes of Vintage Rally Day Postcards**

#### **1. Celebration**

The tenor of many vintage Rally Day cards is one of celebration, of strong positive emotions. The Westminster Press’ “Rally Day/Form A” (postmarked 1910) and “Rally Day/Form W” postcards, as examples, characterize Rally Day as “a rousing beginning of our winter work.” (See Figure 1 and Figure 10). Such terminology—characterizing the event as “rousing”—frames Rally Day as a festivity, denoting excitement and likely making the receipt of the postcard a more welcoming, positive experience. Some Rally Day postcard images further emphasize the celebratory nature of Rally Day. People illustrated on some postcards are portrayed as happy and smiling (see Figures 2, 4, 5, 12) and/or engaged in celebratory actions, like speaking through a megaphone (see Figure 3) or playing a drum (see Figure 5).

#### **2. Learning**

Some postcards emphasize the educational component of Rally Day—of preparing one’s mind for the impending year of Bible study. “Help Your Class Measure Up” (n.d.) encourages recipients to “Be on time/ With a studied lesson/ And a mind to learn” (see Figure 2). Others also

emphasize preparation for rigorous study, including “Rally Day/No. 1,” which notes that “Sunday Schools are getting into line for vigorous work” and address postal recipients, “Dear Scholar” (postmarked 1909, see Figure 11).

### 3. Community/Relationships

Many Rally Day postcards emphasize community in general and relational themes of friendship and loyalty in particular. For example, the postcard “Next Sunday is Rally Day Please Come” reads, in part, “And today your Best Friend He will be” (see Figure 4). Other cards feature images of Jesus inviting postcard recipients, including “Come Unto Me...” (n.d., see Figure 8).

Some postcards emphasize an aspect of loyalty to community, and furthermore, that attending the Rally Day event is a sign of loyalty. For example, “Rally Day/No. 5” closes its message with: “I am confident that every loyal member will say yes. What do you say?” (postmarked 1910, see Figure 6). We find similar themes that emphasize accountability to community, or more to the point, anticipated accountability. The postcard “Next Sunday” ends its message with: “Be sure that you are present/ To answer to your name” (postmarked 1936). Others implore attendance with such lines as “Every scholar should be present” (“Rally Day/No. 1,” postmarked 1909).

Another key feature of the community framing is to grow the numbers of the community. Postcards call for “every pupil present” (“Rally Day/Form A,” 1910, see Figure 1) and tell recipients to “Urge your parents to come. Please invite your friends and bring some one with you” (“Rally Day/No. 1,” 1909, see Figure 11). Other cards go further, inviting not only pupils but seemingly *everyone*: “Tell father and mother to come too. Auntie and uncle may come if they want to. So may any boy or girl you want to invite” (“I Hope That Next Sunday Will Be A Bright Day,” n.d., see Figure 5).

To achieve this growth, some postcards reference particular Bible verses. The postcard “Help Your Class Measure Up” (n.d.) includes references to Scripture: “And He increased His people greatly” –Psalm 105: 24a (see Figure 2), as does “Next Sunday is Rally Day Please Come” (postmarked 1937): “Suffer little children, and forbid them not to come unto me,” Matthew 19-14 (see Figure 4). “Rally Day is Sunday” reference Psalm 122:1: “I was glad when they said unto me,/ Let us go into the house of the Lord” (see Figure 12).

#### **4. Avoiding Failure**

Most of the postcards surveyed here are positively framed, and especially those that characterize Rally Day as a celebration. Other cards, however, are negatively framed. Consider, for example, “Rally Day/Form D,” postmarked 1909, which implores recipients: “Do not fail to come” (see Figure 3). This approach starkly contrasts more invitational tones, such as the “Next Sunday is Rally Day” postcard approach which suggests, in letters nearly as large as those used to spell out “Rally Day,” *PLEASE COME* (postmarked 1937, see Figure 4). The postcard, “I Hope that Next Sunday...” (n.d.) tells recipients: “Don’t forget it [Rally Day]” (see Figure 5).

### **Discussion**

Despite evidence of a renewed interest in religious and spirituality marketing in general (e.g., Marmor-Lavie et al., 2009; Stolz & Usunier, 2019; Wrenn, 2011) and church marketing in particular (e.g., Joseph & Webb, 2000; Vokurka & McDaniel, 2004; Vokurka et al., 2002; Webb, 2012), analyses of historical church marketing efforts are less common. This void is unfortunate, as studies of historical efforts can both clarify precedence of religious communication but also, at the same time, serve as indicators of a distinct religious context. Like travel postcards, Rally Day postcards “have an ongoing aesthetic and documentary role which outlives their often short availability on

store racks” (Mayes, 2010, p. 8). Or, as Östman (2004) put it, the postcard is “partaking in the general process of establishing, construing, and mirroring the society and culture at large” (p. 424). Postcards can serve as enlightening social/historical artifacts (Smoot, 1982).

1. Celebratory messaging might be more palatable as a frame for religious public relations/marketing efforts. Although conducted in a different time era (the 1980s), McDaniel’s (1986) study of church advertising found that the general public was less open to church marketing than clergy, especially when it centered on theological positions of the church. Recipients of church marketing messages can find the practice distasteful or inappropriate. A celebratory message—and especially a celebratory message about a celebratory event—seems likely to be more favorably received by its recipients.

2. Characterizing church as a site of learning is a common feature of Rally Day postcards. Of course, a review of historical religious communication artifacts cannot reveal perceptions of these messages. We can assume, however, that the event (Rally Day) and the subsequent educational programs had differing effects based on the participants’ experiences, including their attitudes. More contemporary research has found that even when different curricular approaches have a similar effect in terms of factual knowledge, attitudes toward the church programs can be decisively different (Burton et al., 2006). Burton and colleagues (2006) found that a curricular approach based on, among other features, active learning led to more positive attitudes toward the church educational programs. One could surmise that the interactive, dialogic nature of postal letters (senders and receivers engaged in transactional messaging; “[Letters] are conversation-like but not actually conversations . . .” Stanley, 2004, p. 209) is a more active process of religious communication than more linear, passive transmission of information. Postcards may function much like the genre of open letters (see Chesnokova, 2015).

3. The theme of community is prevalent in Rally Day cards. This theme of community, or more to the point, of congregating, clearly matches the inherent, denotative meaning of the name, Rally Day. In an early guide for churches, Lawrance (1905) observes of the name, *rally*:

When a general is preparing for a battle he is said to rally his forces. When a sick person begins to recover it is said of him that he is rallying. When a bookbinder brings together in one place the different sections of a book to be bound into one he is said to be rallying the book. All of these phases may be applied to the Sunday-school work; we are rallying our forces for the great campaign of the fall and winter. The Sunday-school has not been up to its full strength and vigour in the summer and is now girding on its power. And, like gathering the sections of a book, the rallying process binds it into a unit so that it is usable. (p. 147).

The event seems to fit well, then, with this larger theme of community. Indeed, Marmor-Lavie et al. (2009) note that “integration with others” (p. 9) is a key part of spirituality advertising (and see Wrenn, 2011). When religious marketing emphasizes relationships and community, church marketing efforts are more likely to be accepted by the general public (McGraw et al., 2012). Then again, we should caution against attributing too much relational power to the postcard; as Letiche, Kuiper, and Houweling (2011) observe, “the connection is a simulacra—neither the sender nor the receiver really knows if the relationship is (still) intact” (p. 399).

Loyalty is a key theme of the relational, community-based postcards. Indeed, similar to themes of celebration, the theme of loyalty has a clear relational component, which is often a core feature of church advertising efforts in general (McDaniel, 1986; McGraw et al., 2012; Marmor-Lavie et al., 2009). Marmor-Lavie et al. (2009) note that “integration with others” (p. 9) is a key part of spirituality advertising. It is of note that this commitment to Rally Day is, one would imagine, intended as a deeper commitment to continuing attendance at church services; a contrast to



encouraging attendance at one event where “the individual only has to show up once and is sure to have an extraordinary experience, but does not have to commit to a recurring and fixed ritual” (Stolz & Usunier, 2019, p. 13). Furthermore, another common focus of community- and relational-based Rally Day messaging is the intent to grow numbers—to increase the size of the community. Many of these cards specifically call for postcard recipients to reach out to their social networks of friends and family. This idea of building relationships through interactions with friends and family continues to guide contemporary church marketing efforts (Webb, 2012).

### **Conclusions**

There remain many future areas for inquiry of religious communication in postcards, building from the results of this historical survey. For example, it would be interesting to further consider whether the themes of learning and celebration are complementary in communicating Rally Day. More contemporary examinations of conceptualizations of learning and fun reveal differences in how church leaders and children conceptualize the two, with church leaders seeing fun as a pedagogical tool and children seeing fun as a distinct construct (Zonio, 2014). Future work should also more fully explore the unique aspects of the visual dimensions of Rally Day postcards. Consider, for example, visuals of Jesus on some Rally Day cards (see Figures 4 and 8). Hirdes et al. (2009) analyzed Jesus merchandise—products sold with Jesus’ name or image—and found that images of Jesus were used mostly for emotional appeals. They found that one of the most common strategies for Jesus merchandise was to evoke good feelings, or “fun/happiness/good times/warm feelings” (p. 153). They also found that the most common communication function of Jesus merchandise is edification—to appeal to Christians’ personal growth. Further work should explore different types of Rally Day postcard messaging, including those that were dismissed by some church leaders. For example, Lawrance (1916) observed that some Rally Day postcards reflect “a

burlesque upon the whole Sunday school work” (p. 67). Finally, future work should also study more recent Rally Day cards. For example, “Sunday is Rally Day,” postmarked 1949, takes a subtler approach than many of the more direct messages examined here, with wording such as “We invite you to begin a new church year with us” (see Figure 7).

It would be a mistake to dismiss postcards as mere ephemera (Carlson, 2009). Instead, as this review reveals, these small pieces of paper can yield insight into persuasion strategy, religious events, and social situations. Rally Day postcards reveal how churches at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century characterized this pivotal day in the life of many churches, how they framed their messaging to communicate with congregants, and how they solicited involvement from members. Because, like letters, postcards sit at the edge of private and public communication (Stanley, 2004), they allow us a snapshot of dialogue, a chance to listen in to early conversations between the church and its congregation.

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Figure 1. Rally Day. Form A. The Westminster Press, Phila, PA. Postmarked 1910.



Figure 2. Help Your Class MEASURE UP On RALLY DAY Next Sunday. Form 1025, S. P. Co. Printed in U. S. A. Unpostmarked/Undated.



Figure 3. Rally Day. Form D. The Westminster Press, Phila., PA. Unpostmarked/Undated.



Figure 4. NEXT SUNDAY IS RALLY DAY PLEASE COME. R. D. No 205. G & W Co., N.Y.C. Printed U. S. A. Postmarked 1937.



Figure 5. I HOPE THAT NEXT SUNDAY WILL BE A BRIGHT DAY. R. D. No. 4.

Goodenough & Woglom Co., 122 Nassau St., N. Y. (n.d.)



Figure 6. RALLY DAY. R. D. No. 5. Goodenough & Woglom Co., 122 Nassau St., N. Y.

(postmarked 1910).





Figure 7. SUNDAY IS RALLY DAY. Form 756. S. P. Co. Printed in U.S.A. Kodachrome  
by Harold M. Lambert. (postmarked 1949).



Figure 8. COME UNTO ME... No. 1018. Abingdon. Lito in U.S.A. (n.d.)



**Figure 9. NEXT SUNDAY R.D. No. 206. G. & W. Co., N.Y.C. Printed in U.S.A.**

**(postmarked 1936)**



**Figure 10. RALLY DAY IN OUR SCHOOL. Form W. The Westminster Press. Phila. PA.**

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Figure 11. RALLY DAY. No. 1. Starr Sunday School Supply Co., Toledo, O. (postmarked 1909)

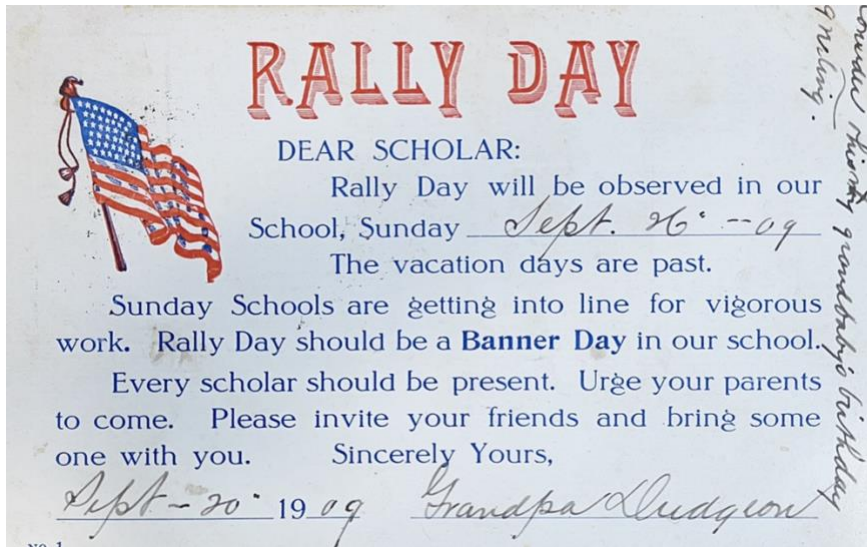


Figure 12. RALLY DAY IS NEXT SUNDAY. No. 710. Abingdon. Lito in U.S.A. (n.d.)

