

Hebrews as a Sermon: Learning from its Preaching Style

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Preachers today have access to the best of preaching from around the world via the internet, and they do well to avail themselves of this rich feast. Listening regularly to good preaching helps feed a preacher's own soul while he constantly feeds others and it also has the distinct benefit of shaping and sharpening the preacher's thinking about preaching. There is much to be learnt from good models.

The plethora of resources today, however, may disincline preachers to undertake the harder work of learning from past preachers. Church history provides us with many superb models as well as great soul food. More significantly still, the Bible itself provides us with a number of brilliant sermons that we need to both feed on and learn from.

One such "sermon" is what we know as the epistle to the Hebrews. The book of Hebrews puts before us a sermon manuscript from the first century - a sermon manuscript composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, no less!

Many scholars have pointed out that not only does Hebrews lack the formal greetings typical of an ancient letter, but it is also explicitly identified as a "word of exhortation" (13:22), a designation that is used also in Acts 13:15 for Paul's sermon in Antioch, and which seems to have been an expression used for sermons in synagogues.¹ Moreover, Hebrews is unique in its content. It does not merely quote texts in passing but expounds and applies them at length. As R. T. France explains, "The Letter to the Hebrews stands out among the New Testament writings as the one which typically 'expounds' a selected text at some length, exploring its relevance to the current situation of the readers."²

This leads France to conclude:

¹ For further comment on the meaning of this expression, see the article by Stephen Voorwinde, "How Hebrews Works (Theme, Structure and Purpose)," in this edition of *Vox Reformata*, 25.

² R. T. France, "The Writer of Hebrews as a Biblical Expositor," *Tyndale Bulletin* 47 (1996): 245.

We see a first-century example of a Christian expositor whose instinct it was to develop his argument by focusing successively on a number of key texts, and in each case not simply to quote it and pass on, but to stay with it, exploring its wider implications, and drawing it into association with other related Old Testament ideas, so as to produce a richer and more satisfying diet of biblical theology than could be provided by a mere collection of proof-texts.³

This pattern of biblical texts, expounded and applied, looks more like what we are used to as a sermon than anything else in the New Testament.

Hebrews is also like a sermon in that it seems to be distinctly written for the ear. It was written to be spoken and has the sound of an orally presented message. “Listen” to these verses:⁴

2:5 - It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are *speaking*...

5:11 - We have *much to say* about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.

6:9 - Even though we *speak* like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case - things that accompany salvation.

8:1 - The point of what we are *saying* is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,

As in a spoken message, the “preacher” is not too worried about detailed referencing either:

2:6 - But there is a place where someone has testified: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

And as the preacher speaks, he is conscious of what nearly every preacher is conscious of: time constraints!

³ France, “Hebrews,” 250.

⁴ Italics are mine here and in subsequent biblical quotations.

9:5 - Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. *But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.*

11:32 - And what more shall I say? *I do not have time* to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,

Perhaps rather optimistically he says at the end, “I have written you only a short letter” (13:22). It should be noted, however, that it only takes about 45 minutes to read this letter out loud in English. It is even shorter if the sermon proper finishes at the end of chapter 12, as is probably the case.⁵

Perhaps what is most striking, however, as regards the oral tone of the sermon, is that it is not only the author/preacher speaking, but God. Throughout, there is an emphasis on hearing God speak now. The sermon begins with telling us that “in these last days God has spoken” finally and definitively through his Son (1:2). So, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart” (3:7). Rather, “See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking” (12:25, ESV).

God’s present speaking to his people through the sermon is highlighted by the way Old Testament quotations are introduced. Whereas Paul typically uses *γέγραπται* - “it is written”, the preacher in Hebrews frequently uses the present tense of *λέγω* as, for example, in 3:7 where it says, “So, *as the Holy Spirit says*: “Today, if you hear his voice...”

These factors combine to convince us that this is indeed a first century sermon. William Lane appropriately concludes: “Hebrews is a sermon prepared to be read aloud to a group of auditors who will receive its message not primarily through reading and leisured reflection but orally... Hebrews was crafted to communicate its point as much aurally as logically.”⁶

What, then, can we learn from the way the Preacher preaches? In asking this, we must be careful not to set this sermon up as establishing a paradigm for all preaching. This sermon is not normative for preaching and

⁵ The case for this is put by Voorwinde, “How Hebrews Works,” 25.

⁶ William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary: Hebrews 1-8*, (Dallas: Word, 1991), lxxv.

is not primarily intended to teach us how to preach.⁷

We can, however, ask, What makes this sermon effective? To this we may give four answers, each affording some challenge to and insight for contemporary preachers.

1. The preaching is effective because the preacher knows his people well and identifies with them closely.

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from this sermon is the value and importance of preaching with pastoral intent. From beginning to end this is a message to real people with real problems, temptations, needs and burdens. It is designed to minister to them - to strengthen, rebuke, encourage and challenge them. Hebrews is not, fundamentally, a theological treatise on the supremacy of the Son of God. Nor is it a biblical exposition on Psalm 110 or any other passage. It is theology and biblical exposition for a purpose - a pastoral purpose.

This is a mark of all good preaching. Effective preaching speaks God's Word to people in a way that addresses the real issues of their lives.

To do that effectively, we need to know the realities of our people's lives, as the Preacher of Hebrews did. It is clear, for example, that he knew their past well. In 10:32-34 he is aware of the early days after their conversion when they stood firm in the face of suffering: public insult, persecution, imprisonment and the confiscation of property.

He also knew, however, that they were not standing so firmly now. The

⁷ An online article by C. J. H. Venter, "Hebrews as an Expository Sermon" (<http://www.ehomiletics.com/members/papers/03/Venter2003.pdf> - accessed 29 Sept 2008) is one of few papers that explicitly seeks to learn from the homiletics of Hebrews. However, Venter makes the mistake of effectively taking the sermon as normative. For example, he says, "This unity between explication and application therefore implies that as a homiletic rule an expository sermon ought to offer the congregation explicatory application and applicable explication throughout." (p. 9). The principle may be true enough, but this is not a sound way to use Hebrews. Rather than trying to draw principles from the Hebrews sermon we are better to make observations about the preaching approach of Hebrews, with the possibility of making appropriation of some of those features in our own preaching. Venter also tends to take traditional homiletic categories and looks for examples of them in Hebrews rather than working inductively from text to principle.

section from 5:11 – 6:12 in particular sheds light on his knowledge of where they were at spiritually as he wrote to them. They were dull of hearing; slow to learn. They were not as mature spiritually as they should have been. They ought to have been teachers but they were not. They needed spiritual milk and were not yet ready for meat. They should have gone on to greater holiness of life, but had not. They lacked the maturity to distinguish good from evil.

Why were they at this point? It seems they had grown weary, worn down by struggles, persecution and therefore disillusionment. Thomas Long describes their situation well:

The Preacher is not preaching into a vacuum; he is addressing a real and urgent pastoral problem, one that seems astonishingly contemporary. His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing their confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. The threat here is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away.⁸

The entire sermon is designed to address that need. The Preacher speaks to it directly and pointedly. He is upfront about it, identifying their struggles and their failings.

This is useful for us to remember when we preach. We should not only speak about the biblical text. We should also speak about the lives of the people in front of us. Arguably, then, the best preaching for a congregation is preaching from their own pastor – one who knows, cares, understands and has goals and passions for the people to whom he is preaching. Itinerants can be fresh and striking, but regular pastors can speak to the real issues of a church's life in a way no one else can.

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Knox, 1997), 3. Long's commentary is extremely useful for the preacher in that he is sensitive to the sermonic genre of Hebrews and frequently describes very lucidly the homiletic intent of a passage.

Significantly, however, the Preacher does not only speak directly and pointedly. He also speaks personally. Evidently he has once been one of them and hopes to soon be restored to them (13:19, 23). He therefore preaches as a friend. In Lane's words, "The writer is a friend with a pastor's heart. He understands their peril and their fears – and he cares... He prepared his sermon with a heart full of compassion because he cares for these men and women."⁹

As one of them, he constantly preaches in the first person plural. Some preachers have contended that authority in the pulpit depends on much use of the second person.¹⁰ The preacher must point the finger, as Nathan the prophet did to David, saying, "Thou art the man!"

But the Preacher to the Hebrews shows us that you can have authority with the first person plural, as demonstrated, for example, in 2:1-3:

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what *we* have heard, so that *we* do not drift away.² For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment,³ how shall *we* escape if *we* ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to *us* by those who heard him...

Using "we" and "us" makes preaching much warmer. Of course there are times when we must stand prophetically and point the finger, as the Preacher does in 5:11-13. More often, however, we will stand with the congregation, and together look up and ask, "Lord what would you have us hear today?"¹¹

⁹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews: A Call to Commitment* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985), 25.

¹⁰ For example, Jay Adams strongly advocates this in *Preaching with Purpose* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982), 54.

¹¹ Donald Sunukjian begins his recent book, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 9, with these words: "After preaching one Sunday morning, a man asked me, 'Don, how do you see yourself when you're up there preaching? What is your self-image? Do you see yourself as an evangelist? a teacher? a 'kerux'?... I'd never considered that question before, but within a split second I instinctively answered, 'I see myself standing with you, under the Word of God, saying, 'Look at what God is saying to us.'"

If we would preach warmly and pastorally we need to include ourselves in many of the applications we make because, while we are heralds of God's Word, we are also members of God's church. We bring the Word, but we are also under the Word.

We have seen, then, that the Preacher preaches with pastoral intent. But that raises the question, How does he meet this pastoral need? Thomas Long answers well:

What is most striking about Hebrews is that the Preacher, faced with the pastoral problem of spiritual weariness, is bold enough, maybe even brash enough, to think that christology and preaching are the answers. The Preacher does not appeal to improved group dynamics, conflict management techniques, reorganization of the mission structures, or snappy worship services. Rather, he preaches – preaches to the congregation in complex theological terms about the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ.¹²

In light of this we can make a second observation about the Hebrews sermon:

2. The preaching is effective because the message is firmly grounded in substantial biblical truth.

It is a grave mistake for preachers or congregations to think that pastoral preaching cannot be doctrinal preaching. Too easily we may think that people need something more practical than doctrine. They need advice, help, programs, manageable steps, action plans. They don't need more teaching. They need something practical, not doctrinal.

But that is an entirely false dichotomy. What is more practical than knowing that suffering is part of the plan and purpose of the Christian life because it was the pattern of Jesus' life? What is more practical than knowing that Jesus is our high priest in heaven, interceding for us, able to save us completely, because he has shed his blood for all our sins? What is more practical than knowing that holiness is not some unobtainable goal, possible only for the most super-spiritual, but is within reach of every single one of us because under the new covenant God writes his law on our

¹² Long, *Hebrews*, 3.

hearts and etches it on our minds? What is more practical than knowing that this world is not all there is, but there is an eternal city and its pleasures are worth waiting for? What is more practical than knowing that hardship and suffering are not signs of God's displeasure, but his love, and therefore knowing that all hardship is to be endured as the discipline of a loving Father who cares for you?

This is the kind of practical doctrine that Hebrews delivers and it is a model of the kind of doctrinal preaching still needed today. People need to know Christ, the gospel, the promises of the new covenant, the differences between Sinai and Zion, and the lives of the biblical giants who have gone before us.

They need doctrine, but they do not need dreary, dull lectures. Martyn Lloyd-Jones asked, "What is preaching?" and then answered, "Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not. Reason concerning this Truth ought to be mightily eloquent... It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire."¹³

Our congregations need truth on fire, delivered with passion and urgency because we know that the people to whom we are preaching need that truth. Hebrews does that, and that is why there is a constant alternation in this sermon between explication and application. All the explication is for the purpose of application. The Preacher does not open up his texts for the sake of novel or clever exegesis. Nor does he teach truth purely for truth's sake. He opens up truth to make a point – an applicatory point. The sermon never travels for long without application.

Scholars argue about which is actually dominant in the sermon: theology or ethics; doctrine or life? Is the author interested in doctrine because it leads to ethical living? Or is he interested in ethical living because it leads to and flows from a true knowledge of God? The answer, of course, is that the relationship between the two is reciprocal and fully interactive.¹⁴ All doctrine is to be applied and lived. All Christian living is a response to the gospel and every Christian action has a doctrinal foundation.

¹³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 97.

¹⁴ See Long, *Hebrews*, 31.

It is significant, of course, that in Hebrews, the doctrine given is textually based. The preacher turns to the Scriptures to establish his doctrine. He preaches the Word. In that, he sets a laudable example for preachers to follow. By expounding and applying God's Word we give our people a more solid foundation for Christian living than anything else can give.

This close interface of doctrine and application leads to the third characteristic of the sermon in Hebrews:

3. The preaching is effective because varied and pointed application is made throughout the message.

The paraenetic and hortatory sections of Hebrews demonstrate great skill in the application of biblical truth. Paul says in 2 Tim 3:16 that "All Scripture is profitable for teaching, correcting, rebuking and training in righteousness". In 2 Tim 4:2 he writes, "Preach the Word... correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction." This is exactly what the Preacher of Hebrews does. He teaches, corrects, rebukes, trains and encourages, with great patience and careful instruction.

Two aspects of his application stand out. First, he skilfully blends encouragement and comfort with warning, rebuke and challenge. As a skilled preacher, he knows how to both wound and heal, sting and sing, disturb and comfort. People are seldom completely bad or completely good. They are usually mixed and they need mixed medicine. It is not just that we should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed; we must both disturb and comfort people who tend to be simultaneously both disturbed and comfortable!

A great example of this is seen in the seemingly parenthetical section from 5:11-6:12, which turns out to be one of the most significant portions of the whole message. The preacher begins with rebuke. They should be more mature than they are. They should be eating solids instead of still being on milk. They are proving to be dull of hearing. They are not the brightest class spiritually.

No doubt that was not particularly pleasant to hear. But it is as if he says this only to provoke them to protest that they are not immature but are

entirely ready for more solid teaching. It is, perhaps, reverse psychology.¹⁵ As if anticipating their protest, he therefore immediately changes his tone and says he will leave the elementary matters and move on.

In moving on, however, he does not go straight to the teaching about Melchizedek that he wants to give them, but rather, offers one of the sternest warnings of the entire sermon. He warns them of the danger and terror of apostasy. It is important to note that he does not actually say that is where they are at. This description is effectively in the third person, through a string of participles. It is not in the first or second person. But they cannot miss the seriousness of the warning which is then backed up by the illustration of 6:7-8. The analogy forces them to ask of themselves, “Are we good land or bad? Is the rain, the spiritual blessing, that has fallen on us producing a crop or not? Are we near to a curse?”

Having put the heat on them in this way, he then administers comfort (v. 9). He calls them his “dear friends” and says that he hopes for better things in their case. He reminds them that God sees their hard work and their love and they will reap a reward for it. But just as they breathe a sigh of relief, he prods them again (v. 10), effectively saying, “Just be sure you are diligent to the end. Copy those who persevered, not those who were lazy and fell short.”

This is what the Puritans would have called “close dealing with the soul” and it is a hallmark of good preaching. The effective preacher does not brush lightly over the soul condition of his hearers. He knows how to wound and heal, sting and sing, disturb and comfort.

The second notable feature of the Preacher’s application is his art of persuasion. Stuart Olyott helpfully writes:

Persuasion sets out to show people that the suit you have tailored is worth wearing. It tells them of the happiness and blessedness that will come into their life if they put God’s truth into practice. It explains what dangers they will avoid, what spiritual progress they will make, what experiences they may have and how obedience pleases their Redeemer. It leaves people not just willing but *wanting* to walk God’s way.¹⁶

¹⁵ This is the plausible suggestion of Long, *Hebrews*, 71.

¹⁶ Stuart Olyott, *Preaching: Pure and Simple* (Bryntirion, Wales: Bryntirion Press, 2005), 124.

That is what the Preacher of Hebrews does. By warning, rebuking, encouraging and comforting, by speaking of both the majesty and humility and suffering of Christ, by laying out the examples of old covenant saints who have gone before them, by warning of the judgment of God and the danger of apostasy, and by depicting the glory of Mt Zion and the reward of Christian pilgrimage, he seeks to persuade them that it would be folly to give up, when, by persevering, they will receive the richest reward.

In this way, persuasive preaching does not only preach to the will, telling people what to do, it also preaches to the mind, conscience and affections. It certainly does preach to the will, making clear the best and right course of action. But it addresses the will via the mind, giving reasons, incentives and motivations for right action. It also addresses the will via the conscience, convicting the hearer of the need to take action. And it addresses the will by speaking to the affections – the deepest desires, needs, fears, loves and longings of the soul.

Hebrews does all this. It is persuasive speech, indicating that the Preacher has thought hard about *how* he states his case. That leads to the final observation regarding this message:

4. The preaching is effective because of its deliberate rhetorical power.

Nearly every commentator on Hebrews makes mention of how well it is written. The writer/preacher is a master of his language. He uses words well and is clearly skilled in the art of rhetoric.

A few examples will suffice to highlight the fact that in preaching it is not only *what* you say that matters, but *how* you say it.

First, the sermon is masterfully structured. It begins with a powerful introduction (1:1-3) that acts like the overture to a symphony, introducing nearly all the main themes of the work that follows. From there it proceeds to five major sections¹⁷ (or is it seven?, or eight?), each with texts, explication and application. It is striking that a book that is so tightly structured produces such little agreement among commentators as to exactly what the structure is and how many sections there are. The reason is that the sections unfold seamlessly. The sermon flows as a whole. It is one

¹⁷ For an analysis of Hebrews as five sections, see Voorwinde, “How Hebrews Works,” 26.

sustained argument. One long, passionate appeal.

One section therefore merges into the next and we find that the Preacher is a master of transitions. At the end of chapter 2, for example, he concludes his discussion of Jesus as the true man of Psalm 8. That leads him to view Christ as perfectly suited to be a compassionate high priest (a theme he introduces here and will develop much more fully later). Chapter 3 begins a new section, but it begins with “therefore” (ὁθεν). It begins with application from the previous section: fix your thoughts on Jesus. But then it transitions by adding: “he was faithful, just as Moses was.” And there begins the next section in which Jesus’ superiority to Moses is developed, just as his superiority to the angels was the focus of chapters 1 and 2.

Not only does he use brilliant transitions, the Preacher also uses hundreds of conjunctions. For example, in chapter 9 just about every verse begins with a conjunction. In translating this chapter the ESV uses (in order): *now, for, but, by this, but, but, but, for, therefore, for, for, therefore, for, and, indeed, thus, for, nor, and, and so*. The result is one, long, sustained argument as the message is driven forward, each thought leading to the next. For the Preacher, there was no break at the end of the chapter either. Chapter 10 begins with another conjunction. The result is that, while there are sections, the reader/hearer is not so much aware of the sections but of the message as a whole. Structure is but a tool in his rhetorical tool box.

His sustained argument builds to a climax. By chapter 11 we are reaching the crest of the wave. It is a stirring chapter that builds progressively to the great call of 12:1. But the apex is yet to come. It is the final contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion that pulls together all he has been saying about the contrast between the old and new covenants and that drives the message home in graphic picture language. Then, as a good homiletician, he ties the end in with the beginning. Having begun by saying that God has spoken finally and ultimately in his Son (1:1-2), he now ends by urging his hearers to be careful that they do not refuse him who has spoken (12:25).

Finally he lands on one grand and a penetrating statement that can be either comfort or warning, depending on the heart-state of the hearer: “Our God is a consuming fire!”

Clearly this message was carefully shaped and well crafted. It unfolds logically and compellingly. It takes you somewhere. Structure, transitions,

conjunctions, logic and climax are essential ingredients of a well-shaped message.

Secondly, we may note that this well-structured message is also well-illustrated. Often the illustrations are brief word pictures. Short analogies, similes and metaphors are the Bible's most common way of illustrating. In 5:11-6:12, for example, we find the analogy of milk and solid food for spiritual immaturity and maturity, a brief picture of building ("not laying again a foundation" of elementary truths) and a picture of two fields, one producing a crop, one producing only thorns and thistles.

Such images can be found everywhere. But the illustrative highlight of the book is chapter 11. There the preacher illustrates his principle of persevering faith from the lives of dozens of old covenant saints. There is a certain energy and momentum as he heaps name upon name, calling one biblical story to mind after another. The catalogue of examples is followed by the image of a race, with a great cloud of witnesses and athletes in the stadium stripping off their clothes, ready to run unhindered toward the finishing line.

Word pictures help impress truth on the mind and more expanded illustrations assist in driving it home to the heart. Such aids are neglected to the congregations' loss.

A third source of rhetorical power is the employment of a number of well-established rhetorical devices.¹⁸ He uses, for example, at least sixteen rhetorical questions, the first ones being found in 1:5, 13, 14, 2:3. These help create a sense of dialogue, engaging the hearers and drawing them into the conversation. He makes effective use of double negatives (e.g. 4:15 – "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize..."; and 6:10 – "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work..."). He uses words with energy, often using brief phrases in parallel construction, without conjunctions, so as to add momentum to his words. Melchizedek, for example, is said to be "Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life..." (7:3), and the heroes of faith are described in the animated words of 11:32-24.

The Preacher also uses alliteration. For example, the very first verse of the sermon contains no less than five words beginning with the letter "p"

¹⁸ Several of the devices mentioned here are identified by Fred B. Craddock, *Hebrews*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 15.

(π). He is particularly fond of the use of contrast, be it the contrast of the past days and the last days, of the former and the latter, of the priests of the old covenant and the priest of the new, or of Sinai and Zion. This is highlighted by his repeated use of the word “better”. Frequently, he uses verbs in their present tense, conveying an immediacy, energy and forward momentum.

Clearly, this preacher knew how to preach. Words are his tools and he goes to work wanting to use sharp tools, the right tools, the best tools for the job. Such rhetorical power is a great challenge to contemporary preachers. We should not regard it as wasted time to think hard about how to put things, how to structure a message, how to illustrate it, how to join the sections or how to make our language vivid, graphic, lively and fresh.

We have seen, then, that Hebrews is an effective and powerful sermon. As such, it helps inform our preaching methods and challenges us to diligence in sermon preparation. While not providing a normative model for preachers, it is an encouragement to study the lives of those to whom we preach so as to address real needs; to preach substantial biblical truth as the chief remedy for maladies of the soul; to shape varied and penetrating application throughout a message; and to work hard at developing rhetorical power so that the messages we preach are communicated with clarity and force.