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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

A New Testament Pattern for Preachers

by John Wood

Mr. Wood, who is Head of Religious Education in Impington Village College, Cambridge, will be remembered by some of our readers as the author of a paper on "The Purpose of Romans" which appeared in our pages seven years ago. Here he turns his attention to the Epistle to the Hebrews, and invites us to look at it from a fresh point of view.

TOWARDS the end of his book, the unknown writer of Hebrews describes his work as a "word of exhortation".¹ The description could hardly be bettered. In many ways his book is quite different from the New Testament epistles. It reads more like a series of expositions showing how Christ has fulfilled all the latent longings of the Jewish faith. The book is clearly the work of an outstanding preacher.

In the first place, the writer uses the typical preacher's use of appeal and exhortation: "let us draw near", "let us hold fast", and "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (10: 22-24).

Occasionally he indicates that he would like to continue a particular line he is pursuing, but his hearers are unable to take any more new truth for the time being (5: 11) or else time has run out (11: 32)!

Then too, he has the preacher's gift of saying the same things over and over again in a fresh and arresting way so that his theme is fixed in his hearer's memory. C. H. Spurgeon once parodied the preacher who had only one theme by saying that "ten thousand thousand are his texts, but all his sermons one"! But Spurgeon knew better than anyone that constant repetition is part of the art in all great preaching—provided the changes can be rung with variety and skill. Think of the way in which Hebrews heaps up references to Christ's supremacy in chapter 1, stresses again and again the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice on the cross in chapters 9 and 10, and multiplies examples of faith in chapters 11 and 12. Here is a preacher who could burn his message into his hearer's heart.

The author of Hebrews has a preacher's "feel" for the striking phrase. His book must be one of the most preached-from books of the Bible, simply because it is full of quotable texts and memorable

¹ Heb. 13: 22. It is only the last three verses of the book which justify the title "epistle".

sentences. In his magnificent opening paragraph, for example, the writer extolls the supremacy of Jesus Christ who fulfills the prophets, reflects the shekinah glory, bears God's nature, governs the universe, and outshines the angels (1: 1-4). Then, in drawing out the implications of this truth for faith, he warns against any rejection of God's last word which is brought to man in Jesus Christ. If God has judged those who have disobeyed angels, "how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation" which centres in such a great person and has been accompanied with tremendous spiritual power (2: 3, 4)? Even in a chapter so superficially unattractive as the seventh chapter with its Melchizedek typology, there is the shining sentence which simply begs to be preached:

Wherefore, he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them (v. 25, A.V.).

Jesus is not the kind of high priest whose ministry is terminated by death. He ever saves because he ever lives and ever intercedes.

There are whole paragraphs of this kind of preach-worthy material. The striking sentence at the close of chapter 2 reminds us that Christ is able to succour the tempted because he has suffered victoriously. He has tasted death (v. 9), defeated Satan (v. 14), obliterated fear (v. 15) and expiated sin (v. 17). What possible circumstance of life or death cannot be countered by such an all-embracing victory?

Any Biblical preacher worth his salt would want to preach a series of sermons on the heroes of faith listed in chapter 11 of this book. Practically every sentence contains some vivid phrase to illuminate the meaning of "faith". And the entire chapter, culminating in Christ as "pioneer and perfecter of our faith", abounds in ready-made sermon material. Those two words "by faith" punctuate the chapter like a recurring decimal. It is "by faith" that we gain acceptance with God (v. 2), discover the true meaning of life (v. 3), and overcome the enemies of righteousness (vv. 32 ff.).

Here then is a preacher's book, full of the telling word and phrase. But there is another aspect of the writing which betrays its origin and sets an example. When we study it in a good modern version, or with the aid of a commentary, we notice that there is a familiar pattern of quotation and comment on page after page. And when we follow this up, we see that the author of Hebrews uses a fairly uniform method of exposition throughout the book. After making a general statement of principle, he usually goes on to provide a number of quotations from the Old Testament, on which he then comments. And he concludes his exposition, like all good preachers, with a brief exhortation or appeal. In fact the "epistle" to the Hebrews reads more like a summarized series of sermons on the superiority of the new covenant, than an occasional letter. The following chart, though

only approximate, shows how consistently this pattern of statement—quotation—comment—application, is followed throughout the book:

Statement	1: 1-4	2: 5	3: 1-6	4: 14-5:4	8: 1-7	10: 1-4	12: 1-5
Quotation	1: 5-13	2: 6-8	3: 7-11	5: 5, 6	8: 8-12	10: 5-7	12: 5, 6
Comment	1: 14	2: 9-17	3: 12-19	5: 7-7: 28	8: 13-9:26	10: 8-18	12: 7-11
Application	2: 1-4	2: 18	4: 1-13	7: 25	9: 27, 28	10: 19-25	12: 12ff.

Clearly the writer of Hebrews does not write so spontaneously as Paul did. Nor does he make the sort of personal allusions which light up the Pauline correspondence. He uses the preacher's familiar format: he states his theme, expounds his subject, and applies his message.

Here and there throughout Hebrews we meet the writer's concern with the Church at large—in spite of what some commentators may say to the contrary!² In chapters 2 and 3 he urges the "holy brothers" to become the true Israel of God by pressing on into the prized possession God intends them to enjoy. The Church has a greater leader than Moses, and a fuller "rest" than Canaan. But, like ancient Israel, it is threatened with unbelief and hardness of heart. In chapter 12 he reminds his readers that, like all true sons of God, they must expect to suffer certain disciplines. But he calls them to practise mutual encouragement, and to remember that they are privileged to enjoy a personal access to God which was denied the people of God who could only stand at a distance while God talked with their leader Moses. The description of christian worship given in chapter 12 is one of the most exalted pieces of spiritual literature in the entire New Testament. It is also worth noting that at least two of the greatest texts in Hebrews which refer to Jesus Christ as being unceasingly present with his people, and as being "the same yesterday, today and for ever", occur in a section of the book which deals with the practical implications of churchmanship (13: 1-16).

But the writer of Hebrews is primarily concerned with the central verities of the kerygma and with the inner significance of the new covenant. He is a gospel preacher *par excellence*. He believes that the hope of the gospel is the one sure anchor to which the Church must hold. Because Jesus is God's last word to man, we dare not drift away from the gospel like a ship drifting downstream past the landing stage. Griffith Thomas pithily summarized the five warnings against apostasy in this book as: "do not drift" (2: 1-4); "do not disobey" (3: 17, 18); "do not degenerate" (6: 1-9); "do not despise

² E.g. Thomas Hewitt: "There are only two brief references, however, to the Church and one of these is a quotation from the Old Testament" (*Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, 1960, p. 9).

God's word" (10: 26-31); and "do not depart from the living God" (12: 25-29). The author of Hebrews perceives with unerring insight what all church history has since confirmed, that it is spiritual suicide for the Church to loose from its moorings in the gospel of Christ. Such an apostate church is "near to being cursed" (6: 8).

Furthermore, he believes that the word of the gospel is the most searching sword a man could ever face, piercing his defences, and exposing his inner life—like a wrestler bending back his opponent's head, or a priest baring the sacrificial victim's throat (4: 12, 13).

In the fifth century B.C., two famous painters were tested to see which of them was the greater. The older man (Zeuxis) painted his picture first, and put it on show. It was a painting of a bunch of grapes, and it looked so real that the birds flew at his picture and pecked the fruit! Thereupon Zeuxis told his young rival to draw back the curtain from his canvas and to show the world what he had painted. But the "curtain" was in fact the picture his young rival had painted, and the older man had to confess that the young Parrhesius had won the contest. "I only deceived the *birds*", he said, "but you have deceived another *artist*."

There are many people who pass muster as christians among their fellow church members. They may even deceive their pastors and elders. But the word of the gospel finds them out at the depths of their being and unmask their true character.

At root it is sin which the searchlight of God's word reveals. And it is with sin—its nature and its cure—that the writer of Hebrews is concerned. He uses four different word-pictures in the Greek to describe what sin is and how Jesus Christ has dealt with it. "Sin is here presented as a defilement which clings to man, a force which separates him from God, a burden which he bears, and a robe of habit in which he is arrayed", Bishop Westcott wrote. And this being so, Hebrews shows how Christ has cleansed sin's stain (1: 3), ended man's alienation (2: 17), lifted the burden of guilt (10: 4, 11, 12), and stripped away the clinging habits of sinful practices (10: 11). By his atoning death, Jesus has done what all the sacrifices of Old Testament times signally failed to do. He has dealt with the root problem of human sinfulness, and opened up a new and living way into the presence of God for every sinful man to tread "by faith."

In one of his little books on the New Testament,³ A. M. Hunter describes the picture at Catterick Camp in Yorkshire, which shows a signaller lying dead in no-man's land. He had been sent out to

³ A. M. Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament* (S.C.M., 1954), p. 94.

repair a cable which had been broken by shell fire. And there he lies, cold in death, but with his task accomplished, for in his stiffened hands he holds the broken ends together. Beneath the picture is the one word "through". So too, by his once-for-all death on Calvary, Christ has brought God and man together in reconciliation and fellowship. Moreover, by his living presence at God's right hand, he lives to make that death a potent reality in every worshipper.

Five bleeding wounds he bears,
Received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers,
They strongly speak for me: . . .
With confidence I now draw nigh,
And 'Father, Abba, Father!' cry.

(C. WESLEY)

Cambridge