

The Homiletics of Hebrews: Preaching Pointers from a Superior Sermon

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Abstract

The epistle to the Hebrews is the New Testament's sermon *par excellence*. It distinguishes itself from other NT books by being both an epistle and a sermon. This makes it a fruitful study in homiletics and a rich source of insight for Christian preachers today. This article investigates some of the preacher's homiletic strategies including his exegesis, illustrations, and rhetorical style. It demonstrates that our preacher skilfully marshals all three tools to advance his paraenetic purpose: the spiritual endurance of his hearers. In this respect, Hebrews models not a typical expository sermon but an occasional sermon that seeks not merely to communicate biblical truth but to achieve a pastoral outcome. It sharpens this pastoral purpose of preaching and invites modern preachers to preach not merely to inform the mind but to transform the whole person, and it encourages as much investment in thoughtful delivery as in careful exegesis.

For many years, preachers have modelled their homiletic practice on various sermons in various ways. But in the New Testament, God has provided a model sermon for us in Hebrews. Hebrews is the NT's sermon *par excellence*. It is to the NT what Deuteronomy is to the OT—the only book that can claim to be a sermon from beginning to end. Its rhetoric is persuasive, its theology profound, and its application penetrating. In this article we highlight some insights that modern preachers can learn from this superior sermon. We particularly outline three homiletic strategies the preacher skilfully employs: exegesis, illustration, and rhetoric. Our observations build on the insights offered by Murray Capill (2008) in his article “Hebrews as a Sermon” and integrate his homiletic approach of “holistic application” which ensures that “the entire message is applicatory in thrust”:

The entire sermon must be shaped as a message for God's people today. All the explanation of the text, of which there may be a considerable amount, is done with a view to this. The structure will be chosen to serve this end. The illustrations and examples are to aid this. The level and depth of instruction is determined by this. (Capill 2014, 25)

This aptly describes the homiletics of Hebrews. Hebrews is a sermon primarily driven not by exegesis but by paraenesis: an exhortation for the hearers to *respond* to the sermon; what many of us refer to as “application.” The author describes this sermon not as a word of information but as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22; cf. Acts 13:14-15) and his exegesis, illustrations and rhetoric are all purposefully marshalled to advance this hortatory goal: the spiritual endurance of his hearers. The preacher is writing to an audience of Jewish Christians who face the real threat of apostasy. In the face of internal spiritual laxity (5:11-12) and external social persecution (10:32-34), they are at risk of dying in the ditch of obsolete old-covenant traditions. So, the preacher writes this sermon with the specific goal of motivating their endurance: “do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded” (10:35). Morna Hooker neatly summarises the preacher’s plea: “It is time to *move on*, and to *leave behind* your former understanding of Judaism.”¹

Adopting Capill’s approach of “holistic application,” this article demonstrates that Hebrews is a sermon occasioned, shaped and driven by this concern for paraenetic application. It investigates how the preacher shapes biblical exegesis, crafts contemporary illustrations, and harnesses powerful rhetorical styles to purposefully advance his pastoral agenda. In this respect, Hebrews is not strictly an expository sermon by contemporary standards but a pastoral sermon that uses exposition as one among many homiletic tools. The letter highlights the inadequacy of “mere exposition” and of sermons that are blind to the pastoral needs of hearers. It elevates application as not just a relevant *element* but as the actual *goal* of good preaching.

Exegesis shaped by application

One of the foundational commitments of expository preaching is to start with the biblical text. In his seminal work *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Haddon Robinson writes ...

First, and above all, the thought of the biblical writer determines the substance of an expository sermon (Robinson 2014, 5).

Yet the preacher of Hebrews appears to adopt a different approach. The substance of his sermon is not determined by the writers of the OT texts he exegetes but by his predetermined paraenetic purpose. Instead of his exegesis directing his application, his application structures and shapes his exegesis—and certainly his choice of preaching passages. The Bible thus models for us a sermon that moves beyond many standard views of expository preaching.

Many contemporary sermons mirror the basic structure of a Pauline epistle: extended exposition (Rom. 1–11; Eph. 1–3) followed by direct application (Rom. 12–16; Eph. 4–6). However, the preacher of Hebrews arranges his sermon such that it constantly moves between exegesis and paraenesis, always keeping application at the forefront of his hearers’ minds. Dennis Johnson joins many in

¹ Hooker 2009, 197, italics original. Bible quotations are taken from the NIV.

identifying six sets of exposition-exhortation that structure the sermon (Johnson 2018, 2).² We should not interpret these six sections as primarily expositions with some practical implications (Lane 1991, cxiv–cxv), nor even as expositions and exhortations that are equal in measure and “reciprocal and fully interactive” (Capill 2008, 47; cf. Guthrie 1994, 9–10). In Hebrews the exhortations are primary, and the expositions are supportive. Indeed, the preacher’s paraenetic goal determines the OT texts selected for exposition. The preacher does not simply exegete six different texts to equitably represent the Law, Prophets and Writings, although all three divisions do receive a fair hearing. Instead, he carefully selects six OT texts that specifically identify the old-covenant persons, places and practices his hearers are at risk of settling for instead of Jesus. These include:

- i. angels (Ps. 8:4-6)
- ii. Moses (Ps. 95:7-11; Num. 12:7)
- iii. the Aaronic priesthood (Ps. 110:1,4; Gen. 14:17-20)
- iv. the old-covenant sacrificial system (Jer. 31:31-34; Ps. 40:6-8)
- v. a geographical promised land (Hab. 2:2-4), and
- vi. Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16-23; Deut. 4:11).

Instead of beginning with the exegesis of a single text and allowing this exegesis to suggest an application, our preacher begins by setting a paraenetic goal and then selects and exegetes certain texts to serve that pastoral outcome.

When we inspect specific examples, we see this paraenetically-driven structure even within the first set of exposition and exhortation (Heb. 1:5–2:4). If the preacher adopted the typical structure of many contemporary sermons, we might expect him to quote a single OT text before proceeding to exegete it and apply it to his hearers. Instead, our preacher commits a cardinal sin of expository preaching by cherry-picking phrases and paragraphs from a range of different texts and arranging them into a structure that serves a predetermined agenda! The preacher artfully fuses Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 into a rhetorical question to demonstrate the superiority of the Son (Heb. 1:5). He then extracts Psalm 97:7 to show that the angels worship the Son (1:6) before comparing their fleeting form in Psalm 104:4 with the Son’s enduring throne in Psalms 45:6-7 and 102:25-27 (1:7-12). The preacher finally cites Psalm 110:1 not only to round out his curated list of OT texts but to marshal their cumulative force to advance his first exhortation: don’t neglect God’s message spoken by his Son (2:1-4).

The preacher’s paraenetic goal extends beyond determining the structure of his sermon; it also shapes the manner and style of his exegesis. It is common to hear contemporary sermons dispassionately exegete a biblical text and, at the very end, bolt on five minutes of application. Exposition and exhortation become estranged from one another and such sermons can be little more than a lecture with a few garnishes of application. Capill rightly warns:

² We observe that Johnson is contributing to a series overtly titled for its *Expository* focus.

It is not adequate to view preaching as explanation plus some application ...
Biblical exposition itself must be applicatory in thrust (Capill 2014, 19).

The pastoral goal of Hebrews—to motivate endurance—is not confined to the paraenetic sections of the sermon as if there were a sudden gearshift between discrete sections of pure exposition and exhortation. Rather, the pastoral goal is the lens through which the preacher casts all his exegesis. We might even go so far as to claim that the preacher “massages” his exegesis to advance his paraenetic agenda. We can see this through his repeated use of *synkrisis*: an argument from “lesser” to “greater” (Moore 2015, 97–98). In the exposition of each OT text, the preacher frames his exegesis as a comparison between the “lesser” old-covenant tradition and the “greater” new-covenant salvation. Whether the original text is Psalm 110 about Israel’s priestly king, Jeremiah 31:31-34 about the new covenant, or Exodus 19 about approaching Mount Sinai, the preacher’s exegetical outcome is always the same: the superiority of the salvation proclaimed and effected through the Son. Even though each OT text addresses a different matter in its original context, the preacher redeploys these texts for his own singular paraenetic goal. The preacher is not engaging in eisegesis nor is he hijacking the OT texts for a contrary purpose. But he *is* purposefully framing his exposition of such texts in order to highlight the supremacy of the Son and to motivate continuing faithfulness to him.³

This homiletic goal also drives the preacher sometimes to directly identify his hearers with the original audience of the OT text he is exegeting. Instead of progressing like many contemporary preachers from quoting the OT text to exegeting it and then to applying it, he speaks the exhortation of Psalm 95:7-11 directly to his contemporary hearers as if they were among the original recipients (Heb. 3:7–4:13). He largely bypasses any discrete exposition, and he simultaneously quotes, exposit and applies the psalm in the one speech event: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (3:7-8,15; 4:7). Even though the psalm was originally written to a different audience at a different time, our preacher introduces it as words presently spoken by the Holy Spirit to his contemporary hearers (3:7,15). He even applies the “today” of the psalm, which, in its original context, was a day in the distant past) directly to the “today” of his present hearers (3:7,13,15). And, while the wilderness generation failed to enter God’s “rest” because of unbelief, he now appropriates and extends the promise to enter that very same “rest” to his present hearers (3:11,18-19; cf. 4:1,11). Our preacher is not misapplying the psalm or taking it out of context; he is intentionally compressing the situation of the original audience with the situation of his own hearers. In doing so, he is reapplying its ancient exhortation to their present situation in order to drive them toward his paraenetic goal: “make every effort to enter [God’s] rest” (4:11).

The prevalent approach to modern expository preaching begins with the exegesis of a single text which then sets the paraenetic agenda. However, in Hebrews, the exegesis of several texts actually serves a predetermined agenda. Hebrews again invites us to consider the merits—perhaps even the primacy—of an “occasional” sermon that uses various methods, including exposition, to achieve a

³ We acknowledge the complexities of first-century, Jewish-oriented exegesis. Some of the techniques that Hebrews employs are not obviously what we might consider contemporary “exposition.”

pastoral goal. This requires a deep familiarity with both the Bible and our hearers to select those texts which will have maximum applicatory impact. For Hebrews, application is the queen of the pulpit and exposition is her handmaid. This biblical sermon's approach to expository preaching is not "merely exegetical." Application is the goal of exposition. Hebrews encourages us to structure our sermons according to a clearly defined paraenetic goal. While some preachers may backload their application at the end of a sermon, Hebrews models the value of alternating exposition and exhortation to keep the applicatory agenda front and centre. Whatever sermon structure we adopt, it ought to give due priority to our pastoral agenda. The structure should clearly communicate not just what the text is *saying* but also what the text is *doing* and what it invites hearers to do in response. Preachers are challenged to avoid dividing sermons into discrete sections of pure exposition and exhortation but instead to saturate the former with the latter. Both our exegesis and application should be addressed to the situation of our hearers—not just our application. In fact, our paraenetic agenda ought to be the filter through which we determine how to frame and present our exegesis, how we decide which exegetical details make it into the sermon. Anything that does not directly advance our homiletic goal ought to be left on the cutting-room floor.⁴

Illustrations drawn from contemporary life and culture

While Capill (2014, 17) claims that application is "the weakest link" of expository preaching, illustrations may be weaker still. A preacher will generally feel duty-bound to bolt application onto the end of a sermon, but it is possible to hear some sermons featuring no illustrations at all. When illustrations are included, they often draw from the preacher's personal life but fail to connect with the lives of hearers. Stories that are told can bear no relationship with the point they are seeking to illustrate and, most concerningly, it is not clear that some preachers even know the homiletic purpose of illustrations. Illustrations can become only a rhetorical reprieve in the exegesis—an entertainment 'half-time break' to retain hearers' attention, as valuable as such pacing can be in itself. The preacher of Hebrews, however, deploys illustrations with a clear purpose. He draws from contemporary life and culture to instil his warnings against spiritual regress and his motivations towards spiritual progress. These illustrations are designed to insinuate themselves and elicit an active response.

Accessible everyday illustrations

Many congregations endure sermons with endless illustrations about the preacher's family. Whatever the text and whatever the point, everything comes back to the preacher's spouse and children. Curiously, beyond a single participle which identifies him as a man (11:32), the preacher of Hebrews makes scant reference to himself (cf. 13:18-19). His illustrations are drawn not from personal experiences in his own life but almost entirely from the common experiences of his congregants or of all people. In 5:11–6:3, he reminds his hearers of childhood by describing them as an "infant" who "lives on milk" when they should be "mature" and consuming "solid food." This illustration appeals to a

⁴ Although our article has been shaped independently, it is startling to see close parallels with Paul Barker's treatment of Moses's preaching in Deut. 1–4 (Barker 2011): Moses is highly selective in his choice of scriptural passages; he creates immediacy between past and present generations; and he does so for transformation and "not merely for information" (33). Barker also proceeds to study the oral rhetoric used in Deuteronomy, as we will shortly with Hebrews.

stage of life which all people without exception experience: the process of maturing from an infant to an adult. The preacher contrasts his hearers' physical maturity with their spiritual immaturity by portraying them as "babies still suckling at a mother's breast, unconcerned with the rich, hearty foods of the adults' table" (Guthrie 1998, 202). Towards the conclusion of his sermon, the preacher crafts a similarly accessible illustration of a son who endures discipline from his father (12:5-11). This illustration would have a deep resonance with all hearers, particularly because, in that culture, everyone would have experienced correction as a child: "For what children are not disciplined by their father?" (12:7). The illustration is doubly effective because it reflects the hearers' experience and empathises with their emotional fragility. The preacher acknowledges the pain of discipline and even the imperfect judgement of fathers who "disciplined us for a little while as they thought best" (12:10-11). By crafting an illustration that is broad if not universal in its experience, the preacher successfully engages not just some, but all of his hearers.

In contrast to preachers who refer only to more specialised experiences from their own lives, the preacher of Hebrews appeals to experiences accessible to all people. Indeed, by utilising the universal experience of childhood in both illustrations, he avoids excluding unmarried hearers who cannot personally identify with the experience of marriage or parenthood (a common complaint about illustrations told from the perspective of a spouse or parent). Of course, hearers can comprehend marriage and parenting to aid being informed, but our preacher chooses illustrations that connect directly with hearers' experience to aid being transformed.

Anticipating our discussion of rhetoric below, the notion of inclusive illustrations is further reinforced by this preacher's regular use of inclusive, first-person plural language. As much as he commands "*You* must ..." he inclusively acknowledges "*We* must ..." or "*Let us* ..." Such inclusive identification is especially found in 4:14-16 and 10:19-25, the two most prominent applicatory highlights of the entire sermon. Likewise, his illustrations serve not merely to connect with hearers but to foment desired behaviours. Comparison with a suckling baby is no endearing portrait of innocence; it seeks to provoke an indignant response and a resurgent maturity (Cockerill 2012, 254-60). Empathetic reflections on parental formation reinforce the desired persistence in hard circumstances:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children (12:7).

Cultural illustrations

Other illustrations throughout Hebrews draw heavily from contemporary culture. They appeal to various aspects of first-century Graeco-Roman life that would have been thoroughly familiar to the hearers: nautical (2:1-4; 6:19-20), military (4:12), agricultural (6:7-8), legal (9:16-17) and athletic arenas (12:1-3,12-13). According to Craig Koester the use of such familiar imagery is particularly effective because "ideas that were commonly accepted were difficult for listeners to reject when applied to their situation" (Koester 2001, 323). A clear example of this is the preacher's use of the agricultural metaphor to warn against apostasy. In 6:7-8, he paints the picture of a field which in one case "drinks in the rain often falling on it" and "produces a crop [that is] useful" but in another case "produces thorns and thistles" and "in the end, it will be burned." This illustration may have minimal

impact on modern city-dwellers, but it would have resonated at a very personal level for members of a first-century agrarian society. “A bad crop had implications both for the farmer and his family and for those who depended on his supply of food in the markets” (Guthrie 1998, 221). It is safe to infer that our preacher’s hearers would either belong to a farming household or depend for survival on the farmers’ production. The social and economic impact of a field that fails to produce useful vegetation was widely recognised as a matter of life and death. Indeed, an unfruitful field would often be burned for destruction. The preacher appeals to this instinctive appreciation for the fatal consequences of a field being unfruitful. It is therefore a remarkably vivid and appropriate image to illustrate the fate of the “unfruitful” apostate—and to evoke an alternative and desirable persistence. We see the same in some of Jesus’s illustrated exhortations, a point we perhaps miss in calling them ‘parables’.⁵ The illustration in Hebrews 6 does not merely clarify the preacher’s argument, it *emotionally connects* his paraenetic goal with the personal lives of his hearers by appealing to their shared world, even doing this as much at a subconscious level as at a conscious one.

Homiletic purpose

This again exemplifies the homiletic purpose of illustrations. Far from being merely a rhetorical reprieve in a heavy exposition or mid-game entertainment to retain hearers’ attention, illustrations create a personal and emotional connection with hearers in order to achieve the sermon’s pastoral goal. It is curious that most illustrations in Hebrews, though not all, are interspersed among the paraenetic sections of the sermon. Instead of using illustrations to clarify his exposition (to aid information), the preacher uses them to enhance his application (to aid transformation).

Furthermore, the preacher’s illustrations consistently focus on the dynamic of regress or progress; this personalises the effect of his paraenetic warnings and exhortations. So, in 2:1-4, the preacher warns his hearers against spiritual regress by describing them as a boat adrift at sea. The verb “to drift” is used to describe a sea vessel veering off course. This is the consequence of his hearers failing to “hold fast” to the message of the Son—a verb elsewhere used for holding a ship on course to port. The preacher warns that his hearers are at risk of spiritually drifting away just like an unanchored boat; “the movement may be subtle and even undetected by those who are on board” (Koester 2001, 208).

In 6:19-20, the preacher revives this nautical metaphor not to warn against spiritual regress but to positively motivate spiritual progress. He describes the hope of Jesus’s high-priestly ministry as “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” The earlier passage warns hearers against the dangers of spiritually drifting like an unanchored ship; this later image assures them that, just as the “firm grip of the anchor’s teeth holds the ship fast” (Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.3-5), Jesus’s ministry is the firm and secure anchor for their soul which enables their spiritual endurance. The preacher purposefully draws from the contemporary world of sailing to illustrate both his warnings against regress and his exhortations towards progress. We see this same paraenetic use of contrasting illustrations expressed in:

⁵ For instance we note the agricultural measures of spiritual vitality in Mark 4:1–20. Parables studies are also alert to how Jesus is not merely finding some contemporary way to illustrate information but is seeking to insinuate a surprising notion and to elicit an active response.

- his warning against drinking milk as an immature infant, and his exhortation to eating solids as a mature adult (5:11-14),
- his warning against being an unfruitful field that is cursed, and his exhortation to being a fruitful field that is blessed (6:7-8), and
- his warning against being an athlete restrained by sin, and his exhortation to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (12:1-3).

Hebrews warns contemporary preachers against using illustrations that bear no connection with hearers' lives and exhorts us to craft illustrations that purposefully advance our paraenetic goal. This is not to say that we cannot use illustrations to clarify our exegesis. Indeed, our preacher explains the validity of the new covenant by comparing it with a legal will (9:16-17). This explanatory illustration is particularly effective because the preacher deliberately uses the word “will” as a pun on the same Greek word for “covenant.” But Hebrews better models the use of illustrations to personalise and connect our application with the hearts of our hearers. Just as application structures and shapes a preacher's exegesis, it should also direct a preacher's illustrations.

Rhetoric engaging the affections

Few elements of preaching are as divisive as the use of persuasive speech. Too many smooth-speaking charlatans have used eloquence not just to persuade but to manipulate and deceive their hearers. Similar to the “super-apostles” of 2 Corinthians, they use their speech to “peddle the word of God for profit” (2 Cor. 2:17). Understandably, some preachers have become suspicious of sermons that are rhetorically appealing. After all, Paul writes: “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power” (1 Cor. 2:4-5; cf. 1 Thess. 1:4-5). This gives rise to a theological conviction in some circles that a preacher's task is simply to recount the truth, acknowledging that the task of persuading the hearer belongs to the Holy Spirit. The use of persuasive speech undermines the ordinary means of the word and prayer, and ‘rhetoric’ resorts to extraordinary means to emotionally induce a response. Of course, this view fails to appreciate that the Spirit works through means including a preacher's style of speech. The preacher of Hebrews models and authenticates the use of powerful rhetoric as a valuable tool to advance his paraenetic goal—and presumably God's—by engaging the affections of his hearers.

The preacher's rhetorical strategy in Hebrews is so deliberate that it shapes the overall structure of his sermon. Right from the beginning, the preacher lays his cards on the table and declares the primary point of his sermon. He begins not with a casual welcome or opening joke but with a grandiose paean of praise that proclaims the supremacy of the Son in epochal and cosmic proportions (Heb. 1:1-4). His opening words largely all begin in Greek with a “p” sound; their alliteration poetically and persuasively presents these prominent points. His elevated rhetoric in these opening verses elevates the Son “over all things” before the eyes of his hearers who are tempted to

exalt the Old Covenant “ancestors” and “prophets.” This powerful oratory ensures that his hearers do not simply know but deeply feel the supremacy of God’s revelation through Jesus.⁶

The preacher then structures his sermon around two rhetorical climaxes each comprising a set of exhortations:

Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess ... [and] *let us* then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence. (4:14-16)

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, ... *let us* hold unswervingly to the hope we profess ... and *let us* consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. (10:19-25)

In these two carefully placed rhetorical climaxes, the preacher couples his paraenetic agenda with a rhetorical structure that repeatedly invites his hearers to persevere spiritually. He not only adopts a sermon structure that alternates between primary exhortations and supporting expositions, he also arranges surrounding chapters so to highlight these two climaxes of concentrated exhortation. The preacher’s rhetorical strategy may even involve a chiasmic macro-structure, with his sermon centring on Hebrews 8 and “Jesus’ role as the great high priest and the function of his everlasting sacrifice in the heavenly tabernacle” (Heath 2011, 352). If such a structure should prove accurate, we have another example of the preacher purposefully arranging whole sections of his sermon for maximum rhetorical effect.

The impact of the preacher’s rhetorical strategy can be felt palpably in his use of tempo and pace. The encomium of the faithful in 11:1–12:3 is a clear example of this. In 10:32-39, the preacher directly addresses the situation of his hearers. This again personalises the sermon, reinforces the preacher’s empathy, and prepares his hearers for the recurring exhortations and supporting expositions that follow. Chapter 10 closes with his assurance of their faith and salvation, even as he launches into the ‘roll-call’ of those whose faith is worthy of imitation. The repeated phrase “by faith” is then a rhythmic marker to introduce each exemplar of faith which harks back to the hearers’ own persistent faith under trial. The roll call begins in 11:3-12 at a steady pace, before slowing in 11:13-16 to reflect on all those who died “in faith” without attaining earthly gratification. In 11:17-22 and 11:23-29, the preacher zooms in and stretches out his focus on the patriarchs and Moses—heroes particularly revered by this congregation (cf. 3:2-5, 16-19; 6:13-15; 7:1-10). But then the pace suddenly increases from 11:32 as the preacher declares that “time is too short” (CSB). In just three verses he rattles off six heroes and nine acts of faithfulness. His sentences become shorter; the acts of faithfulness shift from success to suffering; the rapid-fire inventory in 11:37 of persistent persecutions increases the intensity of these examples of faithful perseverance. The variation in tempo throughout chapter 11, and especially the rapid *accelerando* towards the end, builds anticipation among the hearers. As the roll-call crescendos and expectations are raised to a fever pitch, the preacher introduces *Jesus* as the prime exemplar of faithful endurance (12:1-3). The climactic exhortation to “run with perseverance” bears the full weight

⁶ Commentaries and specialist studies identify ever finer gradations of careful rhetoric, down to the order of the phrases in 1:1-4 or the sequence of the OT citations employed in 1:5-14 (e.g. Wallace 2003).

of momentum gathered throughout the preceding chapter. Varying the tempo of speech, not least in a longer stretch, is an effective rhetorical tool to create tension and increase the emotional intensity of a sermon section—and its applicatory detonation.⁷

Another means by which the preacher rhetorically intensifies his paraenesis is through the use of loaded words and phrases. In two of the warning passages, he describes apostasy as “crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace” (6:6), an atrocity committed by someone

“... who has trampled the Son of God underfoot ... and who has insulted the Spirit of grace” (10:29).

Such vivid and violent imagery has a strong shock factor and forces the hearers to imagine themselves personally hammering nails into the Son and stomping upon his corpse. The preacher uses these provocative notions not merely to communicate a warning message against apostasy but to help effect that warning by terrifying his hearers. One prominent study suggests that “God uses warning and consolation or threat and promise together to secure us in the way of salvation” (Schreiner and Caneday 2001, 203). The rhetorical power of the warning is one means by which the hearers are spiritually secured, and the fear it instils emotionally jolts the congregation into “leav[ing] the elementary teaching about Christ and go[ing] on to maturity” (6:1 CSB). Rhetoric and tone are helpful tools which preachers should use not only to teach the meaning of the biblical text (exposition) but to accomplish the function of that text (exhortation). By implication, then, it is also possible for our poor rhetoric to undermine the effectiveness of our preaching if our tone and manner of speech fail to emotionally reflect a passage’s purpose.

The preacher uses several other rhetorical strategies. Rhetorical questions lead hearers to articulate and own a specific answer (1:5,13-14; 9:14; 10:2,29; 12:7,9). In asking “how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?”, he leaves them no alternative but to answer in the negative (2:2-3). He makes effective use of repetition to frame sermon sections around a repeated phrase, such as “today, if you hear his voice” (3:7–4:13) or “in the order of Melchizedek” (5:10; 6:20). Signposting is used to focus hearers’ attention on the key argument: “Now the main point of what we are saying is this” (8:1). The preacher does not shy away from breaking stride to ‘thump the pulpit’ and express disappointment in those not keeping up (5:11-14). Many other rhetorical devices can be catalogued. Koester (2001, 94–96) includes anaphora, polysyndeton, asyndeton, assonance, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole and antonomasia—and our ignorance of such categories further betrays our own disinterest in the effectiveness of rhetoric. Whatever reservations modern preachers may have about persuasive language, Hebrews is replete with it. The sheer variety of verbal rhetorical strategies corroborates that Hebrews is not a letter to be read but a sermon to be heard (Canoy 2005, 282).⁸

⁷ Chapter breaks in English Bibles are perhaps more noticeably mis-located in Hebrews than in other biblical books. Beheading the climactic exhortation and the example of Jesus in 12:1-3 from the cumulative exemplars in ch. 11 may be the most lamentable, and we commend the NIV’s relocation of the heading.

⁸ Such a point is already clear from many references to the author “speaking”; e.g. 2:5; 3:7; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32; 13:6.

This once more elevates Hebrews as an important study of how we might preach effectively and affectively. Spoken words communicate more than the content of a sermon; we are challenged to discern the tone and emotion of a biblical passage and, in turn, to use our own tones and emotions to aid congregants in vivid aural comprehension and response.

Corollaries

Haddon Robinson famously urges preachers to construct a “big idea”: “a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture” (Robinson 2014, 17). This is sound homiletic practice. As a biblical model of a sermon, Hebrews affirms the necessity of a big idea, which in its case is the supremacy of the Son over every old-covenant precursor. However, Hebrews also demonstrates the inadequacy of constructing only a big *idea*—an unfortunate but seemingly common misconception of Robinson’s homiletic. Preachers ought not to think that their task starts and stops with identifying and restating a core idea or proposition. Such sermons are rarely distinguishable from an exegetical or doctrinal lecture, and they too easily settle for informing hearers’ minds rather than transforming hearers’ lives. The paraenetic project of Hebrews challenges preachers to develop not only a big idea but a big *purpose*. It is not enough to discern and preach what the text is saying; we must also discern and preach what the text is doing. Indeed, the very act of preaching is a speech-act that actualises the purpose and function of the biblical text (Chan 2016).⁹

Hebrews is a sermon driven by such a main impact: to ensure the spiritual endurance of its hearers. The book is saturated in application and purposefully uses exegesis, illustrations, and rhetoric as tools to achieve this homiletic goal. Thus, we find that Hebrews, like Deuteronomy, is a pastoral sermon that is thoroughly *biblical* even though it might not pass for what today we would call *expository*. Hebrews warns contemporary preachers against preaching only to the mind or assuming that exposition alone is sufficient. And it exhorts us that preaching is not a contextless performance but an exercise in pastoral care for hearers who do not need raw information but who need real transformation. May these insights strengthen and equip us to preach the word with greater purpose and power.

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⁹ So Michael Quicke prefers the term “main impact” over “big idea” because “both head and heart are involved, for Scripture both says and does through its focus and function” (Quicke 2003, 156).

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