

Hebrews on Liturgical Leadership.

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In the last two decades we have heard much about the need for leadership in the world and in the church.¹ As is usually the case with any similar intellectual fashion, the popularity of a topic shows how much we lack good leaders and how confused we are about leadership. Yet the discussion about the characteristics of good leaders in the church seldom appreciates how spiritual leadership differs from leadership in a secular organisation or business or politics. Even though church leaders may have the same set of skills as other leaders, they differ from them in their authorisation and the way that they exercise their authority. God appoints leaders in the church and authorises them to act on His behalf as His ministers. He equips them with His Word to work with Him in the administration of His grace. Thus in 13:7 the author of Hebrews reminds the church of all ages that its leaders speak God's Word to them. That's how they lead. And the better they speak His Word, the better they lead the church.

That may seem to be far too simple to cover the knowledge and expertise that is needed to lead a congregation, let alone a denomination. Yet that simple task is far more complex and demanding than it appears at first glance. It goes way beyond Biblical knowledge and theological understanding. Any pastor who teaches God's Word must do much more than just tell what the Bible says and explain what the church confesses. Everything that a pastor does teaches something. A good pastor does everything with the Word. He enacts God's word for His people

¹ See the two influential handbooks of Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Principle-centred Leadership*.

aply in the divine service and in the pastoral care of their souls. He does the work of God by saying what God is saying and giving what God is giving to them; he offers God's grace to people pastorally as "timely help" (Heb 4:16). He does not offer the whole Bible to people all at once, but speaks the right word from it that meets their need. No one can learn that from a textbook. It is a matter of wisdom that is gained from experience and given as needed.

Like a good physician who is equally skilled in the diagnosis and treatment of his patients, a wise church leader knows what to say, to whom, when, where, and how, so that it has the right effect on its hearers. For that to be done well, three things are required. First, he needs to steep himself in God's Word in meditation and prayer, so that as it speaks to his own conscience, he himself is fed and led by it. Second, he needs to use God's Word to diagnose the spiritual state of his people, the state of their souls as is evident from the behaviour of their conscience in reaction to God's Word. Third, guided by God's own diagnosis of His people, he needs to speak the relevant Word of God as law or gospel to their conscience. That requires much spiritual skill, the expertise that God's Spirit provides from case to case and situation to situation.

The letter to the Hebrews shows us how that can be done. Here we have a good pastor, a wise leader, who uses God's Word to lead his people in worship and holy living. He leads them pastorally and winsomely from the pulpit in the divine service. Despite his erudition and eloquence, the most remarkable thing about him is his deliberate self-effacement. He deliberately encourages the congregation to join with him in listening to the voice of God rather than his own voice (2:1). He does not share his own views but gets them to hear what God is saying to them there and then from His Word. He adopts this stance because God himself gives them a good conscience and ushers them into His presence in the heavenly sanctuary through His Word. He leads them with God's Word as he himself is led by it. He leads them in their reception of God's heavenly gifts, "the better things that belong to their salvation" (6:9).²

² The Son is the first of twelve "better gifts" that belong to the eschatological inheritance of the congregation (1:4). Since God's Son has purified the heavenly things with the blood from

My dear friend, soul mate, and brother in ministry, Hal Senkbeil, has been such a leader. While he has eschewed high office as a district president or church official, he has shown wise pastoral leadership to the members of the congregations that he has served, the students that he has taught at Concordia Theological Seminary, and the pastors that he has mentored so ably in Doxology. He has used God's Word to diagnose their spiritual maladies and provide healing for them in their souls. He has used it liturgically to deliver a good conscience and usher them from earth to heaven in the divine service. He has led God's people with God's Word.

On the anniversary of his ordination I am very pleased to present this essay on preaching in Hebrews to honor him for leading so many people so wisely and well with God's Word. It is my thank offering to God the Father through His Son for his ministry and his fraternal friendship. He has led God's people by speaking God's timely word to them and me in season and out of season. I can offer no higher praise than that!

Hebrews as a Written Sermon

In 13:22 the author of Hebrews describes his letter as "a word of encouragement".³ While this description indicates the purpose of this written discourse, it also designates its genre. It is now commonly agreed that Hebrews is a written sermon, a homily to an unnamed congregation.⁴

"better sacrifices" than in the old covenant (9:23), he is much "better" than the angels (1:4) and Abraham (7:7). He is the mediator of a "better covenant" (7:22; 8:6), ordained by "better promises" (8:6) which offer "the better things that belong to salvation" (6:9) and the "better hope" (7:19) for a "better resurrection" (11:23) and a "better possession" (10:34) in a "better fatherland" (11:16). In this new covenant the Son speaks "something better" than the blood of Abel (12:24), "the better thing" that God has foreseen for the congregation (11:40).

³ Much of what follows come from the introduction to my commentary on *Hebrews* which will be published by Concordia Publishing House in 2017.

⁴ Lane, *Hebrews 1-9*, ix1v-lxxv; Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 20; deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 57-58; Koester, *Hebrews*, 80-81; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 10-11; Witherington, "The

The same term is used in Acts 13:15 to describe Paul's address to the assembled congregation in the synagogue on the Sabbath at Pisidian Antioch.⁵ Both this noun and its verbal stem are used elsewhere in the New Testament for expository preaching that culminates in an appeal to the congregation for an appropriate response to what has been said.⁶ Hebrews is, in fact, "the only example in the New Testament of a homily that has come down to us in its entirety."⁷

This word of encouragement was most likely meant to be read out aloud, in the place of the usual sermon, to a congregation that had assembled for the divine service. Its liturgical character is evident in the inclusion of a formal benediction and doxology at end of the main discourse in 13:20-21. The covering note in the final verses shows that the sermon was sent as a letter to the congregation. As it was read in the assembly, the author addressed his hearers directly as if he were himself present with them both as a member of that community and as its teacher.⁸

In itself the proposal that Hebrews is a written sermon is not new. But there are two things that are new about it. On the one hand, the work of some scholars over the last fifty years has set it on much more certain foundations than ever before. On the other hand, much work has been done over the last sixty years to draw out the far-reaching implications of this claim.

Sermon to the Hebrews, 20-21; O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 20-21; Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 12-14; Vanhoye, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 1-2. Other commentators, such as Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3-4, and Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 59-62, regard it as a letter with homiletical characteristics.

⁵ This kind of preaching assumes that through the Scriptures God gives hopeful encouragement to His people (1 Macc 12:9; Rom 15:4).

⁶ See Acts 2:40; Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 4:13; 6:2; 2 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:9; 2:15.

⁷ Vanhoye, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 238.

⁸ See O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 21.

The first scholar to investigate how Hebrews resembled the homilies that were given in the synagogues of the Jewish Hellenistic diaspora was Thyen in 1955.⁹ He noted the following main similarities: the direct address of the audience as “you” in its plural form as well as with the inclusive “we”, the citation of texts from the Septuagint as the foundation for the discourse, the use of inferential particles to mark the flow of the argument, and the frequent recourse to admonition.¹⁰

After a lapse of thirty years Wills corroborated, deepened, and extended his analysis.¹¹ He argued that Hebrews adapted a pattern that was commonly used in Jewish Hellenistic and early Christian liturgical discourses. That pattern had three parts to it. It uses authoritative examples from the Old Testament with Biblical quotations and their exposition to provide the foundation for its argument; it explains their present relevance to those who are addressed; it culminates in an exhortation based on the conclusions of its exposition.

Thus Hebrews is a sermon that was addressed by an unnamed teacher to an unnamed congregation. Even though it has been turned into a letter by the covering note in 13:22-25, the final benediction with its doxology in 13:20-2 shows that it, like Paul’s ecclesiastical letters,¹² was obviously meant to be read as a sermon in the liturgical assembly of the community to which it was sent. It therefore functions, primarily, as an oral communication that is meant to be read out aloud in an assembly and heard by its audience in its liturgical context.¹³

⁹ *Der Stil der Jüdisch-Hellenistischen Homilie.*

¹⁰ Swetnam has summarised and assessed this ground breaking research in “On the Literary Genre of the ‘Epistle’ to the Hebrews.”

¹¹ “The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity.”

¹² See Winger, *Ephesians*, 10-12, 53-54.

¹³ See Witherington, *The Sermon to the Hebrews*, 38; Vanhoye, *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 40; Just, “Entering Holiness: The High Priestly Christology of Hebrews,” 78.

Preaching Encouragement

In Hebrews the verb παρακαλέω, “encourage” or “comfort,” and its noun παράκλησις, which means both “encouragement” and “comfort,” derive their meaning and function from the LXX. There it is a key term in prophecies about God’s final judgment and the role of the Messiah in the last times.

That term first takes on an eschatological nuance in the prophetic Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:1-43 whose use in the Greek speaking synagogues led to its inclusion as the second of the Odes in the LXX. The author of Hebrews and his congregation seem to be so familiar with this song that it is quoted in 1:6 and 10:30 as something that they both “know” (10:30). There in Deut 32:36 Moses speaks about God’s Day of Judgment when He would vindicate His people and “encourage” them by taking vengeance on His enemies.¹⁴ Their encouragement comes from God’s vindication of them, His justification of them.

That promise of eschatological encouragement for God’s people is developed by the prophecies of Isaiah where it takes on the extra nuance of comfort in grief and pain. There God’s grief-stricken people are comforted by a word or act that alleviates their pain by dealing with its cause, such as death, destruction, and captivity. Encouragement provides a wide range of emotional comfort apart from vindication and restoration, such as consolation in bereavement and freedom from guilt, cheer in unhappiness and relief from pain, solace in discomfort and release from anxiety, courage in weakness and liberation from despair. The result of encouragement is a change of emotional state, a change of mood, from sadness to joy, from fear to hope, from grief to jubilation, from uncertainty to confidence. Its purpose is peace (Is 57:18-19).

That note of comforting encouragement is first sounded in the great prophecy of Isaiah 35, part of which is paraphrased in Hebrews 12:12. After promising that God’s people would

¹⁴ The LXX translates the Hithpael form יִתְנַחֵם in Deut 32:36 with a future passive: “and He will gain comfort for His servants.”

see the Lord's glory in the city of Zion in 35:1-2, the LXX introduces the theme of encouragement in its translation of 35:3-4:

^{3b}Be strong, you listless hands and weakened knees!

Give encouragement,¹⁵ you faint-minded people:

“Be strong! Don't be afraid!

See your God renders justice and he will render it.

He will come to save you.”

The LXX therefore construes 35:4^{b-d} as the word of encouragement that is to be spoken by the demoralized citizens of Zion to each other, a word that announces that God will come to vindicate and save them. On that day of salvation they will be healed, so that they will be no longer blind and deaf to God, no longer lame and dumb. Rather, redeemed and purified, they will rejoice as they walk on the holy way into God's presence in Zion, city now transformed from a desert into a fertile oasis by God's glorious presence in it.

That theme of comforting encouragement reappears in Isaiah 40:1-11. There in the LXX God Himself thrice gives the command to “encourage” His people and their city Jerusalem,¹⁶ because their time of humiliation is over and their sin has been undone. While the Hebrew text does not say who should speak that word, the LXX addresses it to the priests or God's people as priests. God commissions them to speak His message of encouragement to His people. This prophecy adds two things to what has already been promised. On the one hand, the holy way which in 35:8-10 had been depicted as the route by which God's people would return to Him in Zion, is now described as the way by which the Lord would come to reveal His glory and salvation to all people on earth. On the other hand, the message of good news that announces Lord's return with His people to Zion includes the promise in 40: 11 that, like a shepherd who

¹⁵ The Greek verb is παρακαλέσατε. The Hebrew text has the far weaker verb “say.” It also takes the fainted hearted people as its object rather than its subject.

¹⁶ The LXX translates the Hebrew imperative phrase “Cry to her” as “Comfort her.”

carries the lambs in his arms and cares for the pregnant ewes, He would “encourage” them by bringing them back with Him.

The subsequent prophecies of Isaiah expand on that theme in four ways. First, God is the only the one who “comforts” His people in captivity (51:12). The comfort that they speak to each other comes from Him. In 41:27 the LXX reinforces this point by construing God’s promise of good news, His gospel to Jerusalem, as His comforting encouragement of her on her journey back to God.¹⁷

Second, the prophecies explain the nature of God’s comfort. In 49:10 and 13 God promises to “comfort” His people by gathering them from distant places, travelling with them on their return from exile and providing for them on their journey. In 57:18-19 God makes this promise each penitent person:

I have seen his ways and I will heal him;
I will comfort him and give him true comfort,
peace upon peace to those who are far and near...
I will heal them.

Even though His people have grieved Him by their sin, He pledges to provide true comfort for them by healing them and granting them ever-increasing peace.

Third, God promises to rebuild Zion, the holy city, and make it a place for comfort. Thus in 51:3 we have His word that He would “comfort” Zion by turning the ruined city into His garden, a new garden of Eden, a place of joy and gladness, thanksgiving and praise.¹⁸ And more than that! In 66: 10-13 He declares that in His new creation He would use Zion, like a mother nursing her child at her comforting breast and holding it on her lap, to “comfort” those who mourn over her desolation.

¹⁷ The LXX gives this translation of 41:27: “I will give Zion a beginning and comfort Jerusalem for the journey.”

¹⁸ See also Jer 31:13; Zech 1:17.

Fourth, God would commission the Messiah, His anointed servant, to comfort His mourning people in Zion. The first allusion to this is in 49:7-11 where God promises to comfort His people by appointing His servant to free the people from captivity and restore their inheritance from Him in the land. That theme is developed more fully in 61:1-3, the Song of the Messiah. In that song the Messiah himself declares that he was anointed and sent to “comfort” those who mourn over Zion by announcing God’s amnesty to His people, their release from captivity (cf. Heb 9:22; 10:18).

Given the nature and extent of these prophecies of eschatological comfort, it is no wonder that the hope for the consolation of Zion figured so prominently in the expectation of the Messiah. Thus Luke does not need to explain what he means when in 2:25-26 he notes that Simeon was waiting in Jerusalem for the “consolation of Israel” at the coming of the Messiah. Likewise, Jesus assumes that his audience is familiar with that hope when he declares in Matthew 5:4: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

The fulfilment of those prophecies by Jesus led to a new kind of preaching in the Early Church, a way of teaching that expounded the LXX in terms of its fulfilment by Christ and used it to encourage the congregation as an eschatological community that already now in faith enjoyed the blessings of the age to come.¹⁹ Thus when Paul addressed the synagogue in Antioch in Acts 13, Luke describes it as “a word of encouragement” (Acts 13:15).

The letter to the Hebrews builds on that tradition in two ways. On the one hand, the author calls his sermon “a word of encouragement” (13:23). On the other hand, he develops this theme in his sermon. Most significantly, in 6:18 he teaches that through God’s sworn promises the congregation “has strong encouragement” to take hold of what they hope for, their entry into the inner shrine in the heavenly sanctuary together with Jesus as their high priest. Already now they, by faith, can approach the throne of grace with freedom and

¹⁹ See 1 Tim 4:13; 6:2; 2 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:9 for use of this verb and its noun for that kind of preaching.

confidence to receive God's mercy and grace (4:16). That encouragement, that comfort, is an eschatological gifts that they already now possess. Like a father with his sons, God provides "a word of encouragement" for His royal sons (12:5), so they may share in His holiness and produce the harvest of peace as they are healed by Him (12:7-13). Since they have that comfort, the author instructs them to "encourage" each other to hear God's voice (3:13) and to gather together to provide mutual encouragement to live together as a holy, heavenly community on earth (10:24). He himself also "encourages" the congregation to bear with what he says (13:22) and pray for his reunion with them (13:19). So the author speaks his message of comfort and encouragement in a liturgical context. There they receive God's eschatological comfort as they participate in the divine service.

The Liturgical Context of Hebrews: the Service of God

While there has been an ongoing and inconclusive debate on whether Hebrews either mentions or alludes to the Lord's Supper,²⁰ little attention has been given to its nature and purpose as a sermon in its liturgical context . Witherington sums up this issue well:

Since this homily is meant to be read in the context of worship, we should evaluate it in that light. In worship we praise God for what he has done and is, and we draw near to him, as the letter exhorts us to do, but in worship we also hear and learn what we must go forth and do. Hebrews then is a vehicle for worship that leads to the right sort of service.²¹

It is, however, hard to follow his advice because we are so severely hampered by disagreement on the nature, content, and purpose of worship, both then for that congregation in the ancient world and now in our modern ecumenical context.

²⁰ The following seven passages most likely allude to the participation of the congregation in the Lord's Supper: Heb 6:4-5; 9:20; 10:19-22, 29; 12:24; 13:9-12, 15.

²¹ "The Sermon to the Hebrews," 38.

While the sermon speaks only about the “worship” of the angels in the sense of their prostration before the exalted Lord Jesus in 1:6, it lays great weight on the “service” of the congregation (9:9, 14; 12:28) in contrast with the “service” of God’s people in the old covenant (8:5; 9:1, 6; 10:2; 13:10). In fact, the sermon sets out to encourage the congregation to “serve” the living God in a well-pleasing way with a clean conscience (9:14; 12:28). In their service they, by faith, are able to “come near” to God, in order to present their offerings to Him and receive gifts from Him (4:16; 7:19, 25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:22). Thus this sermon promotes the faithful service of God in the divine service.

The liturgical character of the sermon corresponds with the theological purpose of the service. It revolves around the presence of Christ Jesus as their great high priest and their possession of him (4:14; 8:1; 10:21). He is available and accessible to them in their service. Through him they have access to God’s presence in heaven (10:19-22). Because they “have” him as their high priest, they “have” the other eschatological gifts that come from God: strong encouragement to enter God’s presence (6:18) and free speaking access to God (10:19), the hope of God’s blessing (6:19) and a great reward (10:35), a cloud of witnesses all around them (12:1), God’s grace (12:26), and an altar that provides them with heavenly food (13:10).

He, their great high priest, serves the congregation as its mediator (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). He is faithful in serving God and merciful in ministering to them (2:17). As their liturgical minister he, like the priests in the old covenant, brings them to God and God to them (8:2, 6). On the one hand, he now appears on their behalf with his blood before God in heaven (9:11-12, 24). There he stands in for them and intercedes for them (7:25). There he presents them with himself to God (2:13). Through him they come near to God and present their offerings to Him (7:25; 13:15). On the other hand, he also now speaks God’s word to them on earth (1:2; 12:25). He proclaims God’s name to them as he sings God’s praises (2:10). He pardons their sins (2:17); he purifies them (9:14) and makes them holy (2:11; 13:12). Through his speaking blood he offers them the better things that come from God (12:24), the better things that belong to their salvation (6:9). As they listen to him, they receive grace and mercy from God (4:16). Through

Jesus the great high priest God equips them with every good thing for them do what pleases Him (13:21).

What, then, is the liturgical context of this liturgical homily? Was it a charismatic service in which the gifts of the Spirit were distributed and exercised? Yes, but that occurred as they heard message of salvation (2:1-4) and shared a holy meal (6:4-5)! Was it a service of prayer and praise? Yes, but that was done in connection with hearing God's Word (4:12-16) and eating the holy food that came from the Lord's altar (13:8-15)! Was it a service of the Word with readings from the Septuagint and teaching that was much like what happened in the Greek-speaking synagogues of the Jewish diaspora? Yes, but that was associated with the celebration of the Lord's Supper as a communal meal!

While we do not know exactly what was done, when and how, the service, most likely, had the following components.

- Leaders who spoke God's word to the congregation (13:7, 17)
- The confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, God's Son, and Lord (3:1; 4:14; 10:23)
- The presentation of psalms and hymns of praise together with the angels as a thank offering to God through Jesus (2:11-12; 12:22; 13:15)
- Readings from the Old Testament by which God spoke to the congregation through the prophets and by His Son (1:1-2)
- The exposition and application of the readings from the Old Testament by a teacher in a word of encouragement to the congregation (13:22)
- The presentation of offerings (13:16)
- Petitions for help from God (4:16; cf. 7:25)
- Intercessions for others (4:16; 13:18)
- Reception of Christ's body and blood in a sacrificial meal (13:9-12)
- The performance of a benediction (13:20-21^b)
- The performance of doxology to Jesus (13:21^c)
- A liturgical greeting for the bestowal of God's grace (13:25)

Thus Vanhoye accurately sketches out the liturgical context of Hebrews:

The Priestly Sermon (Heb 1,1-13,31) has been composed to be read aloud before a Christian assembly, doubtless like the one which St. Luke describes in Acts 20,7-8 or St. Paul in 1 Cor 14,26. The Christians have come together to hear the Word of God, to sing, to pray, and also, quite likely, to celebrate the Eucharist (cf. Acts 20, 7; 1 Cor 11,20).²²

It is therefore most likely that Hebrews was meant to be read as a sermon in the context of a service that began with the reading of the Old Testament and culminated in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. If that is so, then its liturgical setting is, in fact, much more significant for its interpretation than the social, cultural, and political context of the congregation.

The liturgical setting of this sermon colours how it is heard and understood both in its original context and in its present context. So, for example, if the congregation heard the words of Christ in the Lord's Supper: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you," this would, no doubt, have influenced how it understood the mention of "the new covenant" in 8:8; 9:15; 12:24, the phrase "in the blood" in 10:19 and 13:20, and other similar references to the blood of Jesus in 9:12, 14; 10:29; 12:24; 13:12. Likewise, the mention of attention to what had been heard in 2:1 and tasting the heavenly gift in 6:6 would also have been considered by the congregation in the light of its liturgical context. Thus Art Just rightly notes that the issue for debate is not just whether Hebrews refers, explicitly or implicitly, to the Lord's Supper in a few isolated verses, but whether this homily was addressed to a congregation that regularly celebrated the Lord's Supper. He argues that this was most likely the case. He therefore concludes:

As a homily, Hebrews...is intended to be preached as a performative word in the context of a worshipping assembly where Christ is present bodily as he comes to the hearers in their ears through the word and in their mouths through the Lord's Supper.²³

²² *Structure and Message of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 40.

²³ "Entering Holiness: The High Priestly Christology of Hebrews," 78.

The liturgical context of the sermon determines how it is heard by the congregation.

The Liturgical Purpose of Hebrews: Communal Access to God

The issue of liturgical context is closely connected with the liturgical purpose of the sermon. If the hearing of this sermon prepared the congregation for the reception of the Lord's Supper, and if the risen Lord Jesus was regarded as the priestly host of that celebration, that colours how the congregation considered its involvement with Jesus in the divine service and its approach of God through him. So too the exhortations in this sermon to hold onto its confession, to serve the living God, and present their offering of praise to God through him!²⁴

The teaching on God's provision of access to Himself through Jesus shows us the liturgical purpose of the sermon.²⁵ The author of Hebrews clearly regards that as communal undertaking, something that is done publicly and corporately (4:15; 7:19, 25; 10:19-22; 12:22-24). Mackie therefore rightly critiques those who, like Scholer in *Proleptic Priests*,²⁶ hold that this is a subjective spiritual experience rather than a communal activity, a provisional anticipation of our eventual participation in the eschatological heavenly cultus.²⁷ He argues that "the author's entry exhortations must reflect the actual experience of unhindered, substantial, and life-changing access to God and his Son" (208).

²⁴ See the twelve inclusive hortatory appeals in 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:22, 23, 24; 12:1, 28; 13:13, 15.

²⁵ See Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, for a careful examination of this theme in Hebrews.

²⁶ See his stress on the inner spiritual service of God in prayer (11, 108, 142, 149). In a similar vein Lane maintains that access to the heavenly realm is available in prayer (*Hebrews 1-8*, 115) and in an act of faith and commitment (Hebrews 9-13, 100), while for Peterson (*Hebrews and Perfection*, 160-61) and O'Brien (*The Letter to the Hebrews*, 184-85, 249) it is given by a new personal relationship with God.

²⁷ *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 201-11.

Well how can that be? Hebrews, says Mackie, is an eschatological exhortation for those upon whom the end of the ages has come through the sacrificial self-offering and manifestation of Jesus as high priest in the heavenly sanctuary (9:26). There he provides them with access to God by interceding for them (7:25), cleansing (9:14), consecrating (2:11; 10:10 29; 13:12), and perfecting them as members of God's household, which is the new sacral sphere (10:14). Through Jesus they enjoy the heavenly gift of the Spirit and the powers of the age to come for their earthly existence (6:4-5). So the teaching of Hebrews about the provision of access to God through Jesus as the great high priest culminates in exhortation to "come near" to God and His throne of grace (4:16; 10:19-22; 12:22-24; cf. 7:25).

Two answers have been given on how the congregation has access to God in the heavenly realm. The first is that this refers to a mystical, visionary experience.²⁸ It is argued that the author is a mystagogue who leads the congregation into a mystical encounter with the exalted Lord Jesus. His sermon stems from his own visionary meditation on certain key passages from the Old Testament. In his sermon he engages the congregation imaginatively with the same texts to produce a similar mystical experience. Yet despite its commendable attention to the importance of vision in Hebrews, this interpretation rests on uncertain foundations. The main problem with it is that visionary experiences, such as Paul's revelation in 2 Cor 12:1-10, are not public and communal but intensely private and personal. In contrast with that, Hebrews presupposes that the congregation shares a common vision of Jesus as their exalted priest and king (2:9; 3:1; 12:2).

The second much more traditional interpretation is that communal access to God is

²⁸ See Mackie, *Heavenly Sanctuary Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, and Barnard, *The Mysticism of Hebrews*. Both of these scholars hold that Hebrews was profoundly influenced by Jewish apocalyptic mysticism.

given liturgically in the divine service.²⁹ There the whole congregation participates in Christ and his priestly activity (3:14). So access to God comes from the common involvement of the congregation in the liturgical ministry of Jesus as their high priest (8:2, 6). As they hear the voice of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the members of the congregation become enlightened, so that, like Moses (11:27), they all see what is otherwise unseen and hidden from human sight (6:4; 10:32).³⁰ As they hear God's word, they, by faith, "see" Jesus as God's Son and themselves as his holy brothers (2:9-13; 3:1; 12:1-2). Thus the sermon in Hebrews teaches a kind of sacramental, liturgical "mysticism". It discloses the presence of Christ, divinely anointed Priest and King, with his brothers in the divine service.

If that is so, then how does this happen in the congregation? It occurs by way of a liturgical theophany for the congregation (12:22-25). As it participates in the divine service in heavenly Jerusalem, it experiences the new theophany of God, His gracious manifestation to His people, just as the Israelites had once experienced His theophany at Mount Sinai. In the divine service they hear Jesus "speaking" God's word to them from heaven (12:25).³¹ There God the Father speaks to them (1:6-12; 5:6); there Jesus speaks to them (2:12; 10:5-7); there the

²⁹ See Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 415; Dahl, "A New and Living Way," 408-11; Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 461; Hegermann, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, 258; Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 678; Pfitzner, *Hebrews*, 187.

³⁰ For a discussion on the role of vision in Hebrews see Treier, "Speech Acts, Hearing Hearts, and Other Senses: The Doctrine of Scripture Practiced in Hebrews," and Mackie, "Heavenly Sanctuary Mysticism in the Epistle to the Hebrews," 104-17.

³¹ While "him who speaks" could refer to the Lord God, the mention of the speaking blood of Jesus in the previous verse indicates that this is Jesus.

Holy Spirit speaks to them (3:7; cf. 10:15-17).³² There they hear the voice of God “today” (3:7, 13, 15; 4:7).

In the divine service God’s glory is revealed to them in and through Jesus (1:1-4), just as it was manifest to the congregation of Israel at the tabernacle in the daily services (Lev 9:6, 23-24).³³ He is the radiance of God’s glory (1:3). There and then, those who confess Jesus as Lord, have access to the heavenly realm and the heavenly gifts by faith in God’s Word. His Word shows them what they cannot otherwise see. Yet they do not merely hope for what will be given on the last day; they already now receive what they hope for from God. By faith they perceive what is otherwise unseen (11:1); they “see” what will be visibly shown to them only in the final theophany of our Lord (9:28).

Yet these heavenly gifts are already now given and disclosed verbally through God’s Word in the divine service as an unusual kind of theophany. In its worship the earthly congregation straddles two worlds. As it participates in Christ, he involves them in his priestly ministry. He engages them in the service which is both earthly and heavenly, the service in which he officiates as high priest and is himself the radiance of God’s glory (1:3), the service in which God the Father speaks to the congregation in His Son. By speaking to them through His Son He discloses His glorious presence and delivers His heavenly gifts to His enlightened people.

In sum: the sermon in Hebrews is an example of liturgical preaching and teaching. In it, and by it, the teacher aims to lead his congregation into deeper and fuller participation in the divine service as he himself is led by God (6:1).

Conclusion: Speaking What Is Heard

The author of Hebrews begins his written sermon by claiming that God “has spoken to us by His Son” (1:2). That “us” can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, it functions as an inclusive

³² Tellingly, the author uses the prophetic present tense “he says,” as in 8:8, 9, 10, to introduce a divine oracle from the Old Testament as a word that God now speaks to his people.

³³ See Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 217-22.

pronoun which refers to the whole congregation and the whole people of God in the new age. Thus as he teaches he stands with all those who hear what God has to say to them in His Son. That hearing stance is reinforced in 2:1 by his claim that “we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard.” His identification with them continues for the duration of his sermon (1:3; 2:3; 4:13; 6:20; 7:14, 26; 9:14; 10:15, 20, 26; 11:40; 12:1, 9, 25; 13:21, 23). On the other hand, it also functions as an exclusive pronoun which refers to all other teachers of God’s word (2:5; 5:11; 6:9, 11; 8:1^a; 9:5; 13:18, 23). He therefore also stands with other pastors who have also received the message of salvation from the apostles (2:3).

It is often said that a good leader is a good listener, a person who uses both ears to pay equal attention to both points of view in a discussion or dispute. That applies even more to pastors as leaders in the church. Yet two things are different for them from other secular leaders. They do not stand at the head of a community of people here on earth; they stand before God the Judge of all and Jesus the mediator together with all the people of God in the heavenly assembly (12:22-24). They speak God’s word as they hear it from Him; they pass on the good things that they receive from Him; they do what He gives them to do. They also listen to their people as they react and respond to His Word.

As they hear, so they speak. The better they hear, the better they speak God’s Word. The better they speak God’s Word, the better they lead their people as they come near to the throne of grace with free-speaking confidence, so that they may receive God’s mercy and find His grace that provides timely help for them (4:16).

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