

Hold Fast by Drawing Near (Heb. 4.14-16)

WestminsterReformedChurch.org

Pastor Ostella

6-1-2008

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Introduction

There are two duties set before us in Hebrews 4.14-16: let us hold fast our confession and let us draw near to the throne. The first duty (to hold fast) has the support of two things (the person and position of Jesus *and* His ability to sympathize with our weaknesses). The second duty (to draw near) has the same support; it further has a result (or fruit): that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. That is a promise. In fact, in a fundamental sense the two duties become one when we hold fast *by* drawing near. Thus, we have two main points to cover: the duty of holding fast and the duty of drawing near with the latter as a case in point of the former.

1A. The duty of holding fast

1B. What is this duty?

How do we fulfill this *confession* oriented duty?

As an apostle, God sent Jesus with a prophetic message and that is why He is the apostle of our confession (Heb. 3.1). What we confess in a subjective sense (what we speak and confess with our lips) comes from the confession that Jesus gave us in an objective sense: the confession as a body of prophetic truth that Jesus gave us as our Apostle. He gave it to us through the apostles by the Spirit (Heb. 2.1-4): **the message...was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.** The duty is to listen to the Lord Jesus (God the Father tells us to “listen to Him,” Mat. 17.5) by paying *close attention* to the gospel: **we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard** (2.1). As we have seen, it involves careful study of the word *through mutual exhortation* (**But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, 3.13**). That is the case because of the deceitfulness of sin about which we must always be alert.

“Holding fast” contains the basic idea of owning something. Here it interfaces with our confession as both belief and speech. Thus, this duty means that we own truth (by very careful study) and we own up to it (by remaining faithful in professing what we believe to be true). We might say that the vertical direction here focuses on Christ (consider the apostle of our confession) and the horizontal direction includes conversation about the gospel first within the family by one anothering mutuality and second to those outside the family in Christian witness. As we leave this point, we might note that it is both difficult and definitely inconsistent to try to converse with unbelievers about the gospel if we do not make it a habit to converse with believers about the gospel.

The duty is to own the gospel close to your heart by owning up to it in how you live, especially in how you converse and profess what you believe. There is an inseparable bond between belief in the heart and confession with the mouth, as Paul writes in Romans: **if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** ¹⁰ **For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved** (Rom. 10.9-10). Thus, how we begin is how we continue the Christian life: by owning Christ in our hearts and on our lips, by both!

2B. What reasons support the duty to hold fast?

As I read the text, notice how one reason comes before the exhortation and another comes after it:

Before the exhortation: ¹⁴ **Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God**

The exhortation proper: **let us hold fast our confession.**

After the exhortation: ¹⁵ **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.**

Both of the reasons center on the apostle of our confession.

1C. First, He is our great high priest

The writer compounds the idea of greatness by literally speaking of the great great-priest; he is not simply a great priest but the greatest of all priests; He is “the high priest *par excellence*, unique in his power and supremacy” (Hughes, 169).

What makes Him so unusually great is His exalted status as incarnate God. In other words, this *man* who is God the Son **has passed through the heavens**. “Passing through the heavens” refers to His resurrection-ascension to the throne. You will recall that the day that Jesus was begotten is resurrection day (Heb. 1.5, **You are my Son, today I have begotten you**; Acts 13.33, **raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'**). Isaiah 66 tells us that when God completed His work of creation (Gen. 2.2-3), He sat down on the throne of the heavens and propped His feet on the footstool of the earth. The seventh day inaugurated His rule as Lord of the Sabbath. According to Hebrews 1.3, Jesus “sat down” having completed His redemptive work assigned to Him by the Father. John’s Gospel speaks of this accomplishment as well: **he [Jesus] lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do (Jn. 17:1-4).** Therefore, to Him it was said, **“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (Heb.1:8),** and thus God gave Him a footstool for His feet (Heb.1:13, **Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet**).

Now Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath as the second Adam under whose feet everything is put in subjection for He is crowned with glory and honor (Heb.2:5-9). As the Dutch theologian, Abraham Kuyper once said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” Thus, by death and resurrection the incarnate God, who is Jesus in the fullness of His humanity, is the source of eternal salvation (5:5-9), and is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (8:1). He rules from the throne of the universe and His rule is redemptive and saving.

Therefore, His uniqueness and greatness as universal sovereign is a reason for us to take ownership of His word and to own up to it in our speech as the vital core of all we say and do.

2C. Second, He is our sympathetic high priest

He is able to sympathize with us in our weakness because of the temptations He experienced as a man truly, fully, and flawlessly: **For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (4.15).**

Jesus became flesh to die *by suffering in temptation* to gain the ability to be a merciful and faithful high priest. He did that for us. He did all of that in order to help those who are being tempted as they journey through the wilderness toward the heavenly Canaan (**he is able to help those who are being tempted, 2.18**). Temptation means testing; it is not something evil in itself; to be tempted is not to be sinful. God put Jesus to the test throughout His entire life and especially in the priestly offering of Himself on the cross. Facing temptation (being put to the test), Jesus suffered unspeakably. That is a profound fact of the incarnation; again note the words, He **suffered**

when tempted (2.18). Even more profound is the fact that His suffering of death has the marvelous goal of not only delivering us from eternal death, but it also has the goal of equipping *Him* to help *us* through our trials, temptations, and sufferings in our journey over the pathway He blazed in front of us: **because he ...suffered ... he is able to help those who are being tempted** (2.18). What a marvelous chain of purposes! Now He can help His children through temptation because He went through the fire, blazing the trail ahead of them (**because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted**).

His suffering as a man, as God incarnate, not only made Him our able Savior, but it also made Him our tender mediator and advocate because He is the one **who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin**. Philip Hughes has some helpful comments here:

Our high priest's experience of temptation corresponded *in every respect* to ours. From first to last he was being put to the test, whether by enticements to self-concern, popular acclaim, and ambition for power when assailed by Satan in the wilderness (Mt. 4.1ff), or by the temptation in the garden to draw back rather than go through the dreadful ordeal that lay before him (Mat. 26.38ff.), or by the taunt hurled at him even as he hung in agony on the cross...he led the way to victory...in doing so he has gained the profoundest fellow feeling for our weaknesses...(172).

Thus, Jesus identifies with us with profound "fellow feeling."

Finally, He is able to identify with us in our suffering because He endured all the temptations *without succumbing to them*. If we at first wonder how a sinless man could sympathize with sinners such as we are, we should remember that His sinlessness made His experience of temptation deeply intense, strikingly real, and fully human. Moreover, we need to remember that if we, in our dullness as a sinful people, know the sharpness of temptation, then how much more Jesus in His holiness must know temptation's sharpness. Let us not forget that He *learned* obedience *through suffering*. We are on that same journey of learning.

Therefore, we have another reason to take ownership of His word and to own up to it in our speech as the vital core of all we say and do. It is because our great great-priest is not only clothed in majesty on a throne in the heavenly sanctuary, but He is also a sinless and sympathetic Savior. It is such good news to find out that the sinless one is tender and sympathetic with us. He is able to be both the greatest of all priests as Sabbath king at the same time that He is able to be the most sympathetic mediator between us and God. He bridges the gap. He is Jacob's ladder that ascends from earth to heaven connecting sinful people with the holy God of the covenant (Gen. 28.10-22; Jn. 1.51). Therefore, we have the command to hold fast to our confession.

2A. The duty of drawing near

What is this duty? How do we fulfill it? He says, **Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need** (Heb. 4.16). We should see the connection between holding fast and drawing near. The latter is a case in point of the former because drawing near involves speech. We are to hold fast in conversation with God through our great high priest alone. This is the duty of prayer and it has three aspects to it: the place, attitude, and blessing.

1) There is the place to which we go

We approach the throne of the universal Sabbath king. So we think we cannot possibly belong here, but He bids us come to the throne, which He describes as the throne of grace. We know that we stand condemned in the presence of Christ and His holiness. However, we have hope because this judgment throne is not described as the place of radical and ultimate exposure of the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. There is no sword in view that cuts to the division of

bone and marrow; Christ is not the ultimate critic that sees and knows our sins with nothing hidden (Heb. 4. 12-13). This is the throne not of judgment but of grace.

2) Another aspect is the attitude with which we go

We go to the throne of grace and knowing that the Sabbath king who sits there is Jesus, the Son of God, the great great-priest, and the sympathetic Savior. Therefore, we can go with confidence. This not in self-confidence for we know that on our own we stand condemned. No, this is with confidence *in Christ*. It is a wonder and a comfort to know that Jesus is our advocate at the throne of judgment making it a throne of His grace. He took our place in death and judgment so He could be our mediator and answer for us at the bar of divine scrutiny. Therefore, you can say, "I have confidence."

3) Then there is the blessing we find

This is a promise: **that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need**. He promises to give us mercy in our suffering and grace despite our failings and sins. We can be sure that He hears our prayers and will answer them according to His will for our good and His glory.

Concluding applications

1) Consider Jesus

He is competent to meet all your needs whatever they may be in a fallen world. He is incarnate God, one person with two natures. He continues to be God and man forever for our salvation. He alone is qualified to bridge the gap between God and sinners. He alone is able to be Jacob's ladder. No phantom ascended to the right hand of the majesty on high. Jesus is truly human, the son of Mary, and transcendent Lord. God raised this man from the dead and made Him Lord and Christ on the day of His resurrection: **You are my Son, today I have begotten you** (Heb.1.5). So, consider your great great-high priest. Keep your eyes on Him.

2) In light of who Jesus is, therefore, hold fast your confession

Be diligent to learn the truth even to learn obedience through suffering. Do not be surprised by difficulties; do not fight with your circumstances; do not oppose the communion of the saints and the communion of the Spirit; and do not quench and grieve the Spirit by turning away from the church family. Instead, be earnest in owning the truth of the apostolic gospel and in owning up to it in prayer and in your conversations with those inside and outside the church.

3) Take others with you

You have access to the throne of the majesty on high, to the throne of the universal sovereign, the Sabbath king, and marvelously sympathetic Savior. Therefore, go to Him with confidence because you know His loving-kindness.

And here is a wonderful thought: take others with you to the throne. Let me tell you of a prayer on my heart that arose from reflection on this text while in Indiana with my ailing sister in law: "Lord, you have said, come with confidence, come boldly. So I come bringing Lola with me into your presence at the throne. For her, I beg your grace and mercy for this is a time of great need. Lord Jesus, she needs the great high priest; she needs you. Grant her and her family a deep taste of your mercy and true knowledge of your grace."

May we fall down before our sovereign Savior at the right hand of the majesty on high; may the Holy Spirit teach us of His loving-kindness so that we may always come boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy and grace to find help in times of need. To the Lord Jesus be all glory, amen.