

The Homiletical Style of J. Sidlow Baxter

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Any sign of eloquence in public speaking is apt to be regarded with deep suspicion. As a result, many preachers have become lazy, and neglectful of even the basics of oral communication. The mood of the day may be very much against rhetorical skill. But it is disrespectful both to our message and to our audience to fail to communicate as clearly, interestingly, and persuasively as we can.

But perhaps there are a few signs today of a renewed interest in rhetorical skill. After all, Barack Obama has often been praised for his eloquence. Interesting, too, that the [BBC has launched a search to find Britain's best young speaker](#).

It was with these thoughts in mind that I have recently been listening to some recordings of an old-school preacher, J. Sidlow Baxter (1903-1999). I never heard him live (although my parents and my wife did), but tapes of some of his messages made an impression on me when I was a young Christian in the 1970s, and it has been instructive to listen to some of these again. A set of 13 of Baxter's messages are available for free download [here](#).

I would not say that Sidlow Baxter was in the front rank of biblical expositors. Like so many preachers of the past, he dealt too much in isolated texts and paid too little attention to the flow or argument of a passage of Scripture. Nor would I regard him as a totally reliable guide in some matters of theology.

But Baxter's preaching had some notable strengths that today's preachers might learn from:-

- 1. He was true to himself.** His personality had, evidently, considerable grace and charm, and these qualities came through in his preaching. He would, for example, typically begin a message with, "My dear friends...", and you felt that he meant it. And when he spoke of his own Christian experience, that rang true too.
- 2. He really communicated with his audience.** He would say things like, "Have you got your Bibles with you?"; "Do you see what it says in verse 3?"; "Is there someone here this morning who feels like that?" In his use of humour, he would sometimes tease his audience, but never insult them. (One example of teasing: "This morning I am going to speak about three seconds...[pause for effect]...the second birth, the second blessing, and the second coming!")
- 3. He loved working with words.** He often used expressions that were striking

and euphonous, rather than those that were the merely obvious and simple. He could get away with words such as ‘vapid’, ‘propensity’, ‘conglomeration’ and (yes) ‘euphoneously’ (so now you know where I got that from). But you don’t get the impression that he was trying to show off; his motive, I think, was a mixture of respect for his audience’s intelligence, mild self-mockery, and (as I’ve said) delight in the ‘bon mot’.

4. He took his time. A common problem for present-day preachers, where we may only have 20 minutes available to us, is that we try to cram too much material in. Baxter said that in evangelistic preaching he would rarely preach for more than 30 minutes – he would make out his case and press for a verdict. But in other kinds of preaching he liked to take his time, explaining things carefully and illustrating thoroughly.

5. He used his voice well. His voice was a flexible, expressive instrument. He spoke with warmth, passion, and conviction. Baxter certainly did not brow-beat his audience. But the volume, tone, and animation of his voice would closely match the subject in hand. Of course, each of us has, to a large extent, to work with the voice we have been given. But we can at least observe some very basic rules of elocution in order to ensure that we can be heard.

6. He structured his messages carefully. You knew whether you were listening to 3 points, or 5 points, or 7 points. And you knew which point he was on at any particular time. This is simple, but important. The skeleton of a sermon can often be clearer in the preacher’s mind than it is in the hearers’ minds. The preacher needs to work hard to let the bones of the discourse show through.

7. He spoke about the Christian’s experience. This may seem a surprising thing to say: do not all preachers speak about Christian experience? Well, perhaps, but often in a way that is too detached and impersonal. Baxter spoke at length about the experience of prayer, of temptation, and so on.