

THE SIN OF HEBREWS 6:

CARNALITY

HERESY

OR APOSTASY

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EXPOSITION OF HEBREWS SIX

"I know how this passage has made the heart of many a good man tremble" are the words with which Dr. R. W. Dale begins his commentary on this passage. He then continues, "It rises up in the New Testament with a gloomy grandeur, stern, portentous, awful, sublime, as Mount Sinai when the Lord descended upon it in fire, and threatening stormclouds were around Him, and thunders and lightnings and unearthly voices told that He was there." These words convey some idea of the awe and hesitancy with which commentators have approached this scripture.

I. The postulates of exposition:

- A. A necessary postulate in all Bible exegesis is that any interpretation is unscriptural if it conflicts with scripture. A verbally inspired Bible precludes any type of contradictory statement.
- B. A second important postulate is that no passage can be properly interpreted without a careful consideration of the immediate and remote context. The Bible is no mere collection of good texts put together without any relation to one another. Barrows aptly states that "To interpret without regard to the context is to interpret at random; to interpret contrary to the context is to teach falsehood for truth." Companion to the Bible, p. 531.

II. The plan of the book of Hebrews.

Ramm rightly observes that "the interpreter notes the general intent of a book as a clue to the meaning of the particular passages within the book." Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 2nd ed., p. 137.

A. The purpose of Hebrews.

Considerable time had already elapsed since Christ was on earth (2:3-4). The early expectation of His speedy return had begun to wane. Persecution and loss of possessions had tested the believers' patience. These Jews who had so eagerly accepted the Messiah and had separated themselves from Judaism which crucified Jesus were now beginning to waver in their loyalty to Christ, even forsaking Christian fellowship (10:25). Many of these Jewish Christians were being seriously tempted to disown Jesus as the Messiah and to go back and re-embrace the visible good which Judaism still seemed to offer to them. The purpose of the epistle is therefore to establish the supremacy of Christ and Christianity. The key word is "better" (used 13 times). The writer further reveals the character of the blessings which are appropriated by faith, shows the place of suffering in the Christian walk and warns against apostasy from Christ.

B. The plan of the book:

The writer builds his structure around the concept "better." Christ is better than the (1) angels, (2) Moses, and (3) Aaron. It is a book of comparison interspersed with exhortations ("let us" is used 13 times). The book contains six warning passages or parentheses. The progressive warnings found throughout the book each give a more radical step away from the faith than the one preceding it. Added information is given as to who is involved and what the ultimate destiny will be. No warning passage can be fully understood

without a careful consideration of the other warning passages. The solemn warnings are given in order to test the reality of the professed faith.

Each warning passage builds upon the preceding one. This is crucial for an understanding of Hebrews 6! The successive warning passages are these:

1. The warning against drifting (2:1-4).

"How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" The passage does not reveal what will be escaped but it does indicate that the warning relates to the possession of salvation, not to growth in the spiritual life.

2. The warning against doubting (3:7-19).

Someone with "a wicked heart of unbelief" is warned against "apostatizing from the living God." (v. 12). We are not told, however, what apostatizing involves. Is it a danger for believers or unbelievers? Who falls from what?

3. The warning against disobedience (4:11-13).

The exhortation is (v. 11) to either enter into rest or fall after the example of unbelief, or disobedience. Instructive is the reference to the word of God (v. 12) which alone can discern the true nature of a person--whether he is a carnal believer or an unsaved individual. This is crucial for our passage.

4. The warning against degeneration (5:11-6:12).

The writer exhorts the Hebrews to go on (6:1) because those who have fallen away can never be restored (6:6). The falling away is apparently identical, however, to the neglecting of salvation, the apostatizing from the living God, and the falling as a result of unbelief. A full explanation is not given until ch. 10.

5. The warning against despising (10:26-29).

This is actually the KEY to the warning passages. The negative alternative to receiving salvation, believing, going on, is not a loss of rewards but eternal perdition. Judgment and fiery indignation (v. 27) and eternal perdition (v. 39) are the portion of those who have apostatized (3:12) and fallen away (6:6). The correct understanding of ch. 6 depends on ch. 10. The sin in view is that of apostasy, for no believer will ever be devoured by fiery indignation nor can he ever draw back unto perdition. John 10:28-30 and Rom. 8:38-39 are abundantly clear on this point.

6. The warning against departing (12:25-29).

God, as a consuming fire, is pictured as destroying the apostates as He had destroyed the unbelieving rebels by fire in the wilderness.

III. The context of Hebrews 6:

A. The change in person:

The rebuke and exhortation of this warning passage are prompted by the writer's subject and by his awareness of the readers' backward condition. The author desires to tell them about Melchizedek, which he eventually does in ch. 7. But for now he is arrested by difficulties. His hearers have become stagnated. Two possibilities exist: (1) They may never have really believed unto salvation, although they professed to be Christians. (2) They may simply be in a carnal state. The author feels they are in a carnal state (6:9-10), knows they have produced Christian works, but also knows of the possibility of apostasy. He realizes that each church is really comprised of three groups of individuals: (1) a nucleus of spiritual believers, (2) a large section of carnal believers, (3) and some who profess salvation but are actually unsaved. He assumes that they are (2) but fears some may be in group (3). The difference between these two groups is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

In 5:11-14 the second person is used, "you," "we," "us," and this is continued in 6:1-3: "let us go on."

In 6:4-6 the third person is used, "those," "they."

In 6:9-10 the author comes back to the second person. He believes the Hebrews are Christians, for the most part, but he is concerned about some individuals.

B. The illustration from nature:

In 6:7-8 two plots of ground are mentioned. Both receive the same amount of rain (and sunshine). One plot bears fruit and is blessed by God. The unfruitful plot, producing only thorns and thistles, is burned.

By way of illustration the writer speaks of two groups of individuals, both of whom have received equal blessing from God (6:4-6) but blessings do not necessarily entail true salvation. What will be the result of the unproductive life? The writer, in referring to these individuals, says that THEIR end is burning. It is not merely the thorns and thistles which are consumed, but the "whose" is feminine in gender and must refer to the earth or ground. So there is no reference here to the works of the carnal believer which will be consumed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Rather, if the illustration teaches anything it is this:

- (1) these men and their works will be destroyed and
- (2) they are near a curse. This latter assertion can hardly be made concerning believers for whom there is no condemnation (Rom 8:1). . . Even the most carnal, unfruitful believer will receive praise from God at the Bema Seat (1 Cor. 4:5).

IV. The grammar of Hebrews 6:

A. The principles of Christ:

1. Repentance from dead works:

Dead works refer to a reliance upon ineffective Levitical sacrifices, 9:14.

2. Faith in God:

This was an O.T. concept as well as a N.T. truth. Hab. 2:4,

3. Teaching of baptisms: lit.: "instructions about ablutions."

The ceremonial washings of the Levitical economy, 9:10, cf. Mk. 7:8.

4. The laying on of hands:

Primarily an O.T. activity, the conferring of solemm blessings.

5. Resurrection of the dead:

This doctrine was no innovation in the N.T., Is. 26:19; Dan. 7:9-10; 12:2.

6. Eternal judgments:

The O.T. had a vivid expectation of judgment to come, Gen. 18:25; Isa. 33:22.

These O.T. preparatory steps which brought many to Christ are similar to N.T. activities, but similarity does not prove identity. The differences are important: dead works, lustrations or washings.

B. The participles of 6:4-6:

1. Their meaning:

- a. "Once enlightened": Heb. 10:32--to be enlightened is to receive knowledge of the truth. The context is the O.T. levitical system. The ones the writer has in mind have grasped the general significance of the Levitical system, understand that Christ fulfills this ritual. At a point in time (aorist) they understood.
- b. "Tasted the heavenly gift": "tasted" is to thoroughly partake, not merely to sample. In ch. 2 v. 9 the word is used of Christ's death. In a certain sense they were intimately acquainted with Christ's priestly ministry.
- c. "Became partakers of the Holy Spirit": The "Holy Spirit" without the definite article probably stresses His activity rather than His personality. The readers had observed at first-hand the ministry of the Spirit in attesting the Messianic age. For example, even Judas cast out demons and cleansed the lepers and healed the sick--all in the power of the Spirit (Mt. 10:5-8).
- d. "Tasted the good word of God": The "good word of God" is the promise of the new dispensation. Jer. 29:10: "confirm my good word." "Good" contrasts with the severity of the Mosaic law. The readers had enjoyed the advantages of a new dispensation.
- e. "Tasted the powers of the age to come": This is the external of which c. is the internal. The writer refers undoubtedly to the special signs of attestation of 2:3-4. Like the Hebrew spies who returned with visible tokens of the new land in their hand, so these Hebrews have visible tokens of the new age. Their privileges were
 - (1) to see the new age coming,
 - (2) to be recipients of God's attestation of the age to come, including the experiencing of the Spirit,
 - (3) to see the new age as Messianic and attested to by special signs.

These things may apply to a believer and to an apostate. The author could have cleared up the difficulty, if Christians had been in view, by simply saying: they were justified, have life, are saved, are indwelt by God, have produced good works.

- f. "Have fallen away": This aorist participle does not refer to a possibility of them falling away but the author assumes that they have fallen away. The "if they shall fall away" of the KJV is very misleading.

2. Their construction:

The participles are all aorist and look to a past event. The parapesontas (have fallen away) is not a conditional participle, common interpretation notwithstanding. All participles belong in a series, have the same tense, and are connected by kai or te. The tous (those) of 6:4a applies to all participles. Conditional participles are usually anarthrous and adverbial. Therefore, the sixth participle must be taken like the previous five. Those who have been enlightened etc. have actually fallen away. This is what the author assumes. The sin he has in mind is that of apostasy and he exhorts the opposite, trust and faith.

The two present participles which follow, "crucifying" and "exposing" give the result of this falling away and the reason why no renewal is possible. There is the possibility that rebellious man reaches a point, as in the case of Zedekiah and Israel, when "there is no remedy." (2 Chron. 36:14-16).

V. The interpretations of the passage:

A. The Saved and Lost Theory.

They were true Christians who fell away and were lost.

1. Representatives:

R. W. Dale, in The Jewish Temple and the Christian Church, says of the writer of Hebrews, "I know not how he could have chosen expressions which more forcibly describe the possession of a real and genuine Christian life. Phrase is heaped upon phrase that there may be no misapprehension."

R. Govett, in his book Christ Superior to Moses, sees a reference to a true believer who was "once for all enlightened" but who "died spiritually." "Then the scheme which supposes the 'mere professor' unpossessed of spiritual life, is here wrecked. The person described was 'once for all renewed in repentance.' He was alive, but has died spiritually. Life will not again visit him." (P. 158).

2. Reply:

- a. There is little scriptural support for this. No more than five or six passages appear to teach the damnation of a saved person: Mt. 24:13; Mk. 3:29; Lk. 9:62; Heb. 10:26; 1 Jn. 5:16.
- b. This view conflicts with many other passages:
Jn. 5:24; 6:37; 10:28-30; Rom. 8:1; Heb. 8:12.
2 Tim. 2:13: "though we believe not, he abideth faithful."

- c. This view involves the impossibility of repentance.
If this passage teaches that a saved person can be lost, then we must maintain once lost, always lost, instead of once saved, always saved.

B. The Not-for-Today Theory.

1. Representative:

K. S. Wuest writes in Bibliotheca Sacra (Jan. 1962), "Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament," p. 52, that "having fallen away" is "a conditional participle here presenting a hypothetical case, a straw man" and that the sin in question "cannot be committed today since no temple and no sacrifices are in existence, and no transition period obtains." Thus, no application for today.

2. Reply:

The participle is not a conditional participle. The biblical writers are not given to setting up of straw men. Such an interpretation emasculates the warning passages. These were real warnings against real dangers.

C. The Hypothetical Theory.

1. Representatives:

Westcott, Hebrews, p. 165: "The case is hypothetical. There is nothing to shew that the conditions of fatal apostasy had been fulfilled, still less that they had been fulfilled in the case of any of those addressed. Indeed the contrary is assumed: vv. 9ff."

Hewitt, Hebrews, p. 111, approves of Westcott's view. The catastrophe predicted was hypothetical rather than real.

Ryrie holds to a variation of this view. In his Biblical Theology of the New Testament, he writes that the author warns "these people that they must go on in the Christian life because they cannot retreat. If you cannot go back, you must go on....You cannot fall away, retreat is impossible, therefore 'let us go on unto perfection.'" P. 256f.

An illustration of the view would be (as given by Dr. Ryrie in class):

For it is impossible for those of you,
having failed to study
and having gotten an F on the exam,
by turning back the clock (if that were possible, but it is not)
to take the exam over.
Since this is impossible, study harder the next time.

2. Reply:

The point of the passage is not that "the Hebrews must go on because they cannot retreat," but rather, if they retreat, they cannot go on. Not that it is impossible to go back, but it is impossible to bring them back after they have fallen away.

D. The Carnal Christian Theory.

1. Representatives:

J. B. Rowell, in Bibliotheca Sacra (July 1937), "Exposition of Hebrews Six," p. 323, suggests "That the question is not one of salvation, but of rewards, relating, as the context shows, to 'the better things which accompany' or are connected with salvation, (sic) viz., fruitage, or good works which are the result of a vital Christian experience."

More recently, this view has been championed by Dr. DeHaan in his Hebrews. According to Dr. DeHaan, the key to the correct interpretation of Hebrews is 5:12-14. "The background of Hebrews is the Judgment Seat of Christ." The readers are "admonished to 'go on to perfection' (maturity), lest they harden their hearts and come to a place where it is impossible for them to be renewed again unto repentance, but become unfruitful castaways to suffer loss at the Judgment Seat of Christ." (Preface). Of Heb. 6:4-5 he writes, "If that is not a description of true, born-again believers, then language means nothing and we cannot understand anything in the Word of God." (p. 104). According to Dr. DeHaan, those who sin willfully in Heb. 10:26 are "Christians who deliberately continue in a life of willful, presumptuous disobedience to God," p. 140. But most damaging for his view is the disconcerting fact that he fails to complete the quotation by omitting v. 27. When he does mention the judgment and fiery indignation which devours the adversaries (p. 141), he robs it of any meaning by asserting that it does not destroy the carnal sinner but merely Satan's plan.

2. Reply:

Dr. DeHaan fails to give due weight to the warning passages. They are the key for the interpretation of Heb. 6, not Heb. 5:11ff. He also fails to distinguish between the groups addressed. He only sees one group throughout the epistle. Furthermore, he fails to give a proper exegesis of the key passage, 10:26-27. The point of the passage is that the fiery judgment of God destroys the willful sinner, not that it "does not destroy the impenitent prodigal, but it destroys the adversary's plan, while it corrects the erring one" (p. 151). Finally, he fails to understand the true nature of the Judgment Seat of Christ. Rather than being a Protestant purgatory, it is a time of blessed rewards where every man will receive praise of God.

E. The Apostasy View

The above views appear to be untenable because they violate one or both of the basic postulates mentioned earlier. Furthermore, that interpretation is always to be preferred, which fits the facts of the case and leaves the least number of problems unanswered. The final view seems to answer most of the questions while doing violence to none. To briefly summarize the view;

The group in Heb. 6 has made a profession of faith in the Messiah. They have accepted the newness of the Messianic period, having witnessed its accompanying miraculous signs. Sporadic but severe persecution made many disenchanted with Christianity. There is a danger of a lapse into Judaism. The author, however, is persuaded that a great majority of them are Christians. But they are in a backslidden condition. These he admonishes in 5:11-6:3 and addresses in 6:9-10. But concerning some the writer is not sure. Certain ones may have come almost up to the point of salvation but now were in danger

of falling away. Their continued rejection of the "better" way of salvation which Christianity had to offer would bring about a hardening. They were on the verge of committing the sin of apostasy.

A Postscript on Apostasy

Apostasy, the sin of Hebrews 6, is a subject more often discussed than defined these days. The definition and distinctions of apostasy are of great importance.

The words involved: Apostasia, the substantive, occurs twice in the N.T. (Acts 21:21; 2 Thess. 2:3). Liddell and Scott give the meaning as follows: "defection, revolt, especially in a religious sense, rebellion against God, apostasy...2. departure, disappearance..." The primary meaning is apostasy or rebellion. Apostasis is an older substantive from which apostasia is derived and is used interchangeably with that word in the LXX. Its meaning is likewise apostasy and excludes the meaning of departure. Aphistemi, the verb, means to stand off, withdraw from, fall away, apostatize and occurs 14 or 15 times in the N.T. It may mean (1) a personal or physical departure and (2) apostasy or departure from the faith (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12).

The meaning of the concept: While the context of each passage indicates from what the departure is, the question that is of crucial importance is, Can a Christian apostasize? The usage of the word demands a negative answer to the question. (Cf. Lk. 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1 and Jude 19, Heb. 3:12, 2 Thess. 2:3).

In Luke 8, the parable of the soils, the individuals are said to have believed but this was not a fruit-bearing faith and therefore not a saving faith. The false teachers of 1 Tim. 4:1 who are said to "depart from the faith" are described by Jude and adjudged by him as being unsaved. They are without the Holy Spirit (v. 19 cf. Rom. 8:9b). Those addressed in Heb. 3:12 are not yet apostates but they are warned against this sin which stems from "an evil heart of unbelief." The reference in 2 Thess. 2:3 shows that the departure will be from God and it will be by unbelievers (vs. 12).

Dr. Ryrie defines apostasy in this manner:

Apostasy is a departure from truth previously accepted and it involves the breaking of a professed relationship with God.

The characteristics. Several other characteristics of apostasy are evident in these passages.

There is an objective, well-understood, and previously believed standard of truth from which the apostates depart. This is evident in the three references where religious apostasy is involved.

The departure is willful. The very word implies it and the actions and life of apostates show it (particularly 1 Tim. 4). Thus apostasy involves both the mind and the will.

The distinctions. An apostate is distinguished from a professed believer who upon discovery of further truth accepts it. The apostate would reject it, rather than accept it. The volitional element is not present in the professed believer such as those of Acts 19:1-6.

An apostate is not the same as a New Testament heretic. The noun heretic is used only one time in the New Testament (Titus 3:10), but the adjective is used two times (1 Cor. 11:19 and Gal. 5:20). The word means a willful choosing for one's self which results in a party division.

Heresy belongs to the works of the flesh which can and often are performed by carnal Christians (Gal. 5:20). Sometimes this may be used for good so that those who are not involved in heresy will stand out in the churches (1 Cor. 11:19). Toward a heretic the Scriptures really command a surprisingly lenient attitude--admonish twice, then ignore (Titus 3:11). Apparently, then, in New Testament times the heretic was a carnal Christian who espoused error which brought factions into the church. Thus he was distinguished from an apostate who is not a Christian and whose departure was from the complete body of Christian truth which put him outside the church, rather than leaving him part of a faction within the church.

(G. C. Ryrie, "Apostasy in the Church," Bibliotheca Sacra (January 1964), pp. 46-47. Dr. Ryrie's excellent discussion of apostasy applies this doctrine to the contemporary church situation. Read it!)

The brief discussion of apostasy has indicated that while heresy is a sin committed by carnal believers, apostasy, by meaning and usage, can only be ascribed to professing believers, never truly regenerated, who willfully renounce that which they formerly professed.

HEBREWS 6:1-6

1 Therefore

 having left the principles of the doctrine of Christ
let us go on unto perfection
not laying again the foundation of

 repentance from dead works and of
 faith towards God, Of the
2 doctrine of baptisms, and of
 laying on of hands, and of
 resurrection of the dead, and of
 eternal judgment.

3 And this we will do, if God permit.

4 For it is impossible. . .

 for those who were once enlightened, and
 have tasted of the heavenly gift, and
 were made partakers of the Holy Ghost,

5 And have tasted the good word of God and

 the powers of the world to come,

6 And who fell away

 . . . to renew them again to repentance,
 crucifying to themselves the Son of God and
 exposing Him publicly. . .

THE WARNING PASSAGES OF HEBREWS

“Word of Exhortation” – 13:22

Dr. Manfred E. Kober

WARNING	SCRIPTURE	KEY PASSAGE	CAUSE	CONSEQUENCE	ALTERNATIVE
1. Drifting	2:1-4	<i>How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation? (2:3)</i>	Neglect	No escape	Give heed (2:1)
2. Doubting	3:7-19	<i>Take heed lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God. (3:12)</i>	Unbelief	Apostatizing	Take heed and believe (3:13)
3. Disobedience	4:11-13	<i>Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (4:11)</i>	Hardened hearts	Failure to enter into rest	Believe and enter into rest (4:11)
4. Degeneration	5:11-6:12	<i>For it is impossible for those who...have fallen away to renew them again unto repentance. (6:4-6)</i>	Refusal to go on	Impossibility of repentance	Go on (6:1)
5. Despising	10:26-29	<i>For if we sin wilfully...there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation...But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul. (10:26-27,39)</i>	Willful sinning	Fiery indignation, Perdition	Believe unto salvation (10:39)
6. Departing	12:25-29	<i>Refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven...For our God is a consuming fire. (12:25,29)</i>	Turning away	Consumed by fire at second coming	Listen (12:25)