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Commentary Search Paper

Hebrews 6:1-8

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Hebrews 6:1-8: Introduction

Hebrews 6 contains one of the most problematic passages in all the Bible, at least for those who hold to perseverance of the saints. Particularly, the writer seems to state that it is impossible to restore those Christians who have fallen into sin (Heb. 6:4-6). If this is so, many who claim to know and walk with Christ could be fooling themselves, still guilty in their sin. Worse yet, at face value, this passage forces those who come to this realization to also affirm that they have no hope of forgiveness. How is this loaded language to be understood? First, while the author utilizes language and practices familiar to the modern Christian audience, good exegesis should begin with authorial intent to his ancient audience. It is evident that the recipients were experiencing turmoil which tempted them to return to familiar, less divisive traditions, which was only a ‘copy’ and a ‘shadow’ (Heb. 8:5; 10:1) of the real substance found only in Jesus. Second, the contemporary reader is wise to interpret what is *unclear* in light of what *is clear*. So, if most New Testament passages clearly communicate that Christians who sin *can* repent and be forgiven after willful disobedience, and all writings are inspired by the Spirit, the *less clear* must yield to the *more clear* (as it is impossible to comprehend a divinely inspired contradiction). The interpreter must do the hard work to seek the reasonable significance for the author to implement such harsh and potentially ambiguous language for his original recipients. Finally, the modern audience must learn to both appreciate the ancient intention of the text and faithfully apply the eternal principals of the text in the here and now. To that end, this paper will demonstrate why this text was so *compelling* for the ancient audience, as well as so *pertinent* for the modern audience.

Hebrews 6:1-3: Moving Toward Maturity

After the disciplinary diatribe in Hebrews 5:11-14, the author of Hebrews turns his attention toward challenging his audience to leave their childish highchairs and approach the ‘adult table’ in an effort to move to maturity.¹ Specifically, it is time to leave **the elementary doctrine of Christ**.² First, it is time to move from the “initial step of Christian commitment,” the foundational doctrine **of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God**.³ Here Morris, Guthrie, and Bruce agree that the author’s call to **repentance** was the foundational teaching of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles, rather than simply adherence to Jewish law.⁴

Next the author communicates his desire to move away from the ‘elementary’ **instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment**. At first glance, the modern reader might do a double-take as these instructions seem more advanced than elementary, at least within this contemporary Christian community. First, regarding the **instruction about washings**, the commentators caution against translating βαπτισμῶν (baptismōn) as ‘baptisms’ (as in the NIV), since its other NT occurrences refer to Jewish ceremonial washings.⁵ As the NT reports confusion over ritual washings (John 3:25ff.; Acts 19:1–5), this would likely be one of the first points of clarification when the clashes

¹ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 204.

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³ Guthrie, 205.

⁴ Frank E. Gaebelin, Leon Morris, Donald W. Burdick et al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews Through Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 53. * Note: Leon Morris is the commentator in the Hebrews commentary. Further notation will be marked as “Morris”.

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 141. * Morris notes that the word for Christian baptism is βάπτισμα (baptisma), but we have βαπτισμός (baptismos) in this text. While the latter is used of Christian baptism in some MSS at Col 2:12, elsewhere it is only used only of other ritual washings.

between OT purification types and the NT personification antitype (i.e. Jesus, the unblemished lamb) inevitably intersected.⁶ Indeed, this passing from shadows to substance is one of the primary points for the entirety of this writing in the first place.

Similarly, Bruce points out that **the laying on of hands** too “was inherited from the Old Testament, where it is used especially in commissioning someone for public office, or as part of the sacrificial ritual.”⁷ Morris focuses his attention on the NT practice of laying hands on new converts (Acts 8:17) and commissioning for ministry (e.g. Timothy in 1 Tim 4:14 and 2 Tim 1:6).⁸ Both Morris and Guthrie see the laying of hands in conjunction with the coming of the Spirit to be significant.

Finally, the writer mentions the ‘elementary’ doctrine about **the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment**. Both Morris and Bruce highlight the significance of this future reality for both Jews and Christians. The Jewish belief of future resurrection “was closely associated with the expectation of judgment to come.”⁹ While the author intends to move from these elementary teachings, he further emphasizes this element of future judgment to remind his audience that today’s decisions should focus on what is eternally significant rather than what is temporarily comfortable.

⁶ Morris, 53.

⁷ Bruce, 142.

⁸ Morris, 53.

⁹ Bruce, 143.

Hebrews 6:4-8: A Harsh Word of Warning

Here the modern reader finds himself in the middle of one of the most difficult and controversial passages in all of Scripture. Guthrie sums this section up well when he writes, “In 6:4-8 the writer presents a well-crafted and harsh caution meant to put fear into the hearts of those drifting from the faith.”¹⁰ The critical concern is embedded in the text’s claim that it is **impossible** for those who **have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance**. At face value, the term translated ‘impossible’ (*adynaton*) clearly means something that cannot happen.¹¹ In other words, a person cannot be restored after falling away. Bruce takes exception as he submits the author intends to point to practical rarity of restoration rather than the theoretical possibility.¹² He reasons, “We know, of course, that nothing of this sort is ultimately impossible for the grace of God, but as a matter of human experience the reclamation of such people is, practically speaking, impossible.”¹³ Morris adds that had the audience really fallen away without a chance of restoration, “there would be no point in talking to them.”¹⁴ Of course, the reason for the warning is to compel them to be faithful to Christ.

The problematic lynch pin is in determining what the writer means by ‘fall away.’ Some commentators spend significant time maneuvering through the words **enlightened**, **tasted**, and **shared**, either to defend or denounce whether these people experienced genuine faith in Christ. The problem is quickly ‘solved’ if these people are just spectators of God’s work rather than

¹⁰ Guthrie, 216.

¹¹ Ibid., 218. cf. Hebrews 6:18, 10:4, 11:6 where it is “impossible for God to lie”, “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin”, and “impossible to please God apart from faith”.

¹² Bruce, 144.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Morris, 54-55.

participants, if they have only ‘tasted’ versus truly “consumed’ the word of God. However, if these people have been in Christ, then those who cling to the doctrine of perseverance of the saints are in deep water. Or is it possible that these people have simply played the game well, having been outwardly conformed without being inwardly transformed? To this end, Bruce wisely points to the biblical example of Simon the magician. Indeed Simon “believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip” (Acts 8:13). After bribing the apostles with money to control the Spirit, Simon is then told to “repent” of his wickedness and “pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” (8:22) Simon had sinned, even after saying he trusted Christ, however the apostles disciplined him and challenged him to repent. Whether a true believer before the bribe or not, it seems as though forgiveness was still available to him and his restoration was still “possible” (8:22). The apostle John writes, that while God doesn’t want his child to sin, the atonement has been made in full and those who trust Christ have Him as their advocate (1 John 2:1-2).

So what is the contrast between those who fall away and those who do not, as neither has completely ceased sinning? Clearly, there is a distinguishable difference. Guthrie notes that this verb (*parapipto*) can mean “to go astray,” but submits that the harsh descriptions (i.e. **crucifying once again the Son of God and holding him up to contempt**) demand that *parapipto* to be understood as an outright rejection of Jesus.¹⁵ Morris agrees and notes that those who once pointed to the cross as the only means of salvation have now switched teams, having metaphorically taken their stand among those who crucified Jesus.¹⁶ Further, the present participles in ‘crucifying’ and ‘holding him up to contempt’ may point to the idea that these

¹⁵ Guthrie, 219.

¹⁶ Morris, 55.

actions are still in progress.¹⁷ Hence, the person will never seek to repent in this state, as he no longer trusts the cross of Christ for salvation. Instead, it is likely that those who do not heed this warning will go back to the OT types and shadows rather than returning to the Lamb of God.

So what is the point of this warning? Simply, the author is alerting those who are drifting away from the dock to secure their hope of eternity before all is lost, as “those who repudiate the salvation procured by Christ will find none anywhere else.”¹⁸ This is more than a theoretical warning shot across a fictitious vessel’s bow. While the readers may not have yet drifted away, “unless the writer is speaking of something that could really happen, it is not a warning about anything.”¹⁹ So it is that each commentator agrees, this apostasy is possible, and yet the opportunity for preemptive repentance has not yet been repealed. Rather than allow these Jews to drift into both doctrinal and practical slumber, the writer righteously redirects his recipients from their destructive destination and compels them to seek the forgiveness that Christ’s cross indeed offers.

Finally, the author utilizes a agricultural illustration to exhort his audience to check the gauges in their lives. Reminiscent of the parable of the sower and seed, and Isaiah’s vineyard song (Is. 5:1-7). Though rain falls on all **land**, some is **useful** and some is **worthless**. In both cases it could be said that the same seed or rain fell, but it was the land that did not respond to cultivation.²⁰ So it is not the beginning product that proves a reliable test (e.g. the seed that quickly sprang up in Mark 4:16-17), but the final harvest. Wisely, Guthrie challenges the

¹⁷ Guthrie, 220.

¹⁸ Ibid., 231.

¹⁹ Morris, 56.

²⁰ Bruce, 149.

contemporary reader to not overlook the “omniscience factor,” the reality that no one can see into another’s heart and intentions.²¹ Bruce similarly recognizes that, “A credible profession of faith must be accepted as genuine, but ultimately it is only the Lord who knows those who are his.”²² Hence, it is the fruit of one’s lifestyle rather than the fruit of his lips that demonstrate genuine faith with eternal worth. Professing Christians who are producing only **thorns and thistles** are warned of the consequences, while productive Christians can expect to receive **a blessing from God** in this life and the life yet to come!

Conclusion

The contemporary question that most long to see answered is, “Are these people, those who fall away, genuinely saved in the first place?” Ultimately, Guthrie suggests that “the phenomenological unbeliever view,” a favorite among Calvinists, is the most reasonable position to answer this question; while some participate among the Christian community, their rejection of Christ ultimately reveals their lack of genuine faith (e.g. Judas).²³ Thus, the writer is not questioning the perseverance of the saints, but, as he consistently insists, “only those who continue in the Christian way are the saints.”²⁴ Indeed, this is what is supported by an overwhelming amount of biblical evidence as it is he who continues (cf. Rom. 11:22; Php. 2:12; Col. 1:23; 1 Jn. 2:19), overcomes (1 Jn. 5:4-5; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17; 2:26; 3:5, ect.), and produces fruit (cf. Matt. 7:16-20; Mk. 4:20; Jn. 15:2-5; Col. 1:10) that proves to be a follower of Jesus.

²¹ Guthrie, 231.

²² Bruce, 147.

²³ Guthrie, 230.

²⁴ Morris, 54.

Rather than dodge this troublesome text, I have concluded that this passage is so very pertinent for our modern audience. Certainly there are many *familiar with* or *comfortable within* the American church who care nothing about denying themselves, taking up the cross, or following Jesus. Yet many disobedient people are quick to claim they have been “saved,” all the while dragging the name of Jesus through the mud. As such, I am changing my tactics. Instead of asking others, “Have you *been* [previously] saved?”, I am now asking, “Are you [currently] *following* Jesus?”. Further, I look forward to taking young believers to this passage (along with several others including ‘the sower and soil’ of Mark 2), to warn them of the great danger of forsaking Jesus. The truth is, there is little fear of God in the American church, and it is time to develop disciples who understand that we must sell out rather than just show up. While some who have claimed Christ will undoubtedly choose to crucify Him again, genuine Christians will choose to trust Him, and bear fruit that will last.

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